

The importance of space in photojournalists' accounts of the anti-austerity protests in Greece

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Abstract

Although it is widely recognised that images play a key role in contentious politics, there remains little research into the spatial factors that shape photojournalist practice during political protests. This paper explores the interactions between photojournalists, police and protesters during public demonstrations, with a specific focus on how space and the (physical) positioning of the former influences their practices. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach drawing on the literature on the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1967), Tilly's (2003) the spatial perspective on contentious politics, photography (Azoulay, 2012), and photojournalism, our research questions are addressed through an empirical study of photojournalists active in Greece since 2010. The chapter presents the results of a critical thematic analysis of 20 semi-structured interviews conducted with Greek photojournalists between 2015 and 2016. These perspectives are explored in this study due to the frequency with which Greek anti-austerity protests have led to violent confrontations between police and protesters. Our findings show that accessibility to protest spaces, the relationships between professional photographers and other actors involved in protests as well as space affordances constitute vital components of the final visual outcomes that are published and ignite political imaginations about such events.

Introduction

Although it is widely recognised that images play a key role in contentious politics (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2012; Perlmutter, 2004), photojournalism's role as telling the story of protests is underexplored. The few studies in this field demonstrate that the photographing of protests is a very idiosyncratic, active and inherently political process (Veneti, 2017; Faulkner, 2013; Jones, 2011; Sritharan, 2015). Hattingh and Gaede (2011) argued that photographers covering the anti-apartheid protests in South Africa during the 1980s adopted a more political and strategic approach when capturing images of resistance. In a similar way, other studies have found that photojournalists' personal values and ideologies have an impact on their practice (Veneti, Lilleker and Reilly, 2018), and in some cases that results in more 'humanized' images of protesters (Veneti, 2017). Indeed, a growing body of research on media representations of protests has offered new understandings which suggest a fair disruption from the protest paradigm (the demonization of protesters, for more see Chan and Lee, 1984), and subsequently the depiction of protest as a more nuanced phenomenon (Hall et al., 2018; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014).

These studies demonstrate the complexity of the image production process by focusing primarily on occupational standards, professional ideology, personal values, and aesthetic criteria. However, little has been said on the spatial factors that shape photojournalist practice during political protests. Tilly's spatial perspective on contentious politics highlights the importance and impact of the creation of 'safe' and controlled spaces by the police upon the interactions between various actors at the protest site. Additionally, researchers on photography (Azoulay, 2012) have demonstrated the importance of space and place in the composition of photography. Drawing upon such arguments, this chapter explores the ways in which the photojournalist seeks to gain the proximity to the protest and document events in order to construct a visual narrative. To do so, we examine the interactions between photojournalists, police and protesters during public demonstrations, with a specific focus on how space and the (physical) positioning of the former influences their practices.

Our case study is the anti-austerity protests in Greece, using in-depth interviews with photojournalists we explore the importance and impact of space and location in their approach to capturing the symbolic images that will have currency with media outlets while also conveying the significance of events. The article introduces the context prior to situating the work of photojournalism within the literature on the symbolism of space and place (Azoulay, 2012; Tilly, 2003,2000; Mathieu, 2008), after a brief explanation of our methodology we present the findings from our interviews.

Case study context

The Greek anti-austerity protests were a reaction to the social effects of the national debt crisis and subsequent financial bailout at the turn of the decade. In May 2010, the Greek government signed the first Memorandum of Understanding (mnimónio) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission (EC), and the European Central Bank (ECB). The 'bailout treaty' guaranteed loans to assuage the debt crisis, provided the Greek government implemented austerity measures and structural reforms which many argued would be socially 'destructive' and 'punitive' to the Greek people (Ramoglou, 2016).

The austerity measures had a significant negative impact upon the Greek economy (Douzinas, 2013). By 2016, Greek unemployment had reached 23.6 percent (ELSTAT, *Labour Force Surveys*, 2016), with an estimated 3.8 million citizens living in poverty (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2017). The punitive nature of these economic measures provided the impetus for the widespread anti-austerity protests seen across Greece during this period (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2017: 2). The protesters, drawn from a broad cross-section of Greek society independent of ideology, age, race or socio-economic status, took to the streets in unprecedented numbers despite the often violent reactions from the MAT [Order Restoration Units are the Greek riot police] (Douzinas, 2013;

Xenakis, 2012). Photojournalists such as Manolis Kipraios and Marios Lolos also found themselves victims of police violence, the latter having to undergo surgery for a cranial injury after being repeatedly beaten with batons during an anti-austerity protest in April 2012 (Daskalopoulou, 2014). These attacks were a manifestation of the close physical proximity between photojournalists, many of whom felt an affinity with the anti-austerity cause, and protesters during the violent clashes with police (Veneti et al, 2018).

Much of the media coverage of the protests focused on the destruction of property by protesters rather than the violence meted out by MAT towards photojournalists and bystanders. Douzinas (2013:89) asserted that news media organisations conflated the protests with 'illegality' and 'lawlessness,' creating a distorted and unrepresentative view of the protests. This arguably reflected the overlapping interests between Greek media tycoons and the political and economic elites in the country (Hallin & Papathanasopoulos, 2002). It also left photojournalists as 'observers' caught in between police and protesters in the 'conflict zone', facing accusations from both that they were taking sides during the protests (News Under Persecution, 2013). Nevertheless, the 'embedding' of photojournalists within groups of protesters meant that they were better able to capture the images they required (Veneti et al, 2018). It also enabled them to build connections between events, locations and the symbolism of the spaces which they co-inhabited with protesters.

The significance of space and place in contentious politics

There is already much evidence to suggest that mass media representations play a decisive role in shaping public opinion about protests (Corrigall-Brown and Wilkes 2012; Kharroub and Bas 2016). Protesters increasingly recognise the importance of 'theatrical politics' and performances, which create compelling photo opportunities for the media that help them get their message out to the public (Routledge, 2010; Schwartz, 2002; Truett-Anderson, 1990; Mohamed, et.al. 2015). Similarly, photojournalists deviate from 'traditional' forms of news images in order to produce more nuanced visual representations to protests events (Veneti, 2017). Since 2010, the wave of protests across the world has received extensive media coverage, more often than not illustrated by iconic news images of marching protesters, creative performances, protest camps, as well as the violent clashes between riot police and protesters. These images not only have the power to evoke emotional responses amongst viewers (Zelizer, 2010), but also serve as mnemonic devices influencing the cultural memory of these events (Lyford and Payne, 2005).

The starting point for this study was that photography is an event subject to its temporality which consists of the various encounters between the different people involved in such actions (Azoulay, 2012). As Debord (1983: Thesis 4) asserts, "it is a social relationship between people

that is mediated by images.” In the case of protests, the main agents involved are the protesters, the police and the photojournalists tasked to cover these events. It is their relationship and their actions in the protest field that affect the final visual output. Azoulay (2012: 64) suggests that photography facilitates the ‘emergence of a new kind of gaze’, not only in terms of the images produced but “also with respect to the way in which people view themselves and those around them” in these situations.

Such self-perceptions are to a large extent shaped by the spatial dynamics within the protest arena (van Leeuwen, Klandermans, and van Stekelenburg, 2014). Protests typically take place in contested spaces, such as public squares or university campuses, in which protesters perform their ‘theatrical politics’ in order to attract the attention of the news media. Clearly marked territories such as police barricades, protest camps, protesters’ theatrical politics are some pertinent examples that display the crucial importance of space in shaping the various encounters of these people and subsequently the potential images that can be produced and packaged for media audiences. In contrast, the lack of public spaces with sufficient capacity to hold large demonstrations may have a serious impact on the “moral messages” transmitted by mainstream media (Della Porta and Diani, 2009:176) and may provide fewer opportunities for alternative narratives on these events to emerge which give greater visibility to the protesters (McGahern, 2017: 92). Tilly (2003:222) emphasized the importance of accessibility through what he referred to as *proximity*, “the time-distance costs of intersection between social sites, with their attendant persons, activities, objects, relations, and representations”. Hence, the strategies used to occupy and control the protest space will be examined in this chapter.

The extensive literature on the political geography of protest offers valuable conceptual tools to interrogate the impact of space in protest photography (Tilly, 2000; Mathieu, 2008; Martin and Miller, 2003). Sewell (2001:54) conceptualises space as a social structure as “entrenched facts of social life that have their own autonomous (or at least relatively autonomous) logics that determine or at least tightly constrain social action.” Similarly, Mathieu (2008:84) treats space as both “constraining and enabling” on the grounds that “as with all social structures space places constraints on human agency, but it is also the product of human agency.” Our approach was to examine space which physically and symbolically shaped the experiences of those who participated in these protests. In doing so, we embrace the work of social scientists who studied space through more critical lenses which emphasize its status as a perceived and “lived space” (Lefebvre, 1967; Soja, 1996) as well one whose meaning is contested.

Such is the case with protests and demonstrations where the perceived importance of locations is based on their symbolic value, proximity and use (Mathieu, 2008). Protesters, police and photojournalists claim ‘ownership’ over the physical locations where they perform their

activities, and in certain cases transgressing these boundaries may result in conflict or disagreement. Moreover, the site of a protest may be of significant symbolic value to the participants; hence the tendency in recent years for protesters to occupy public squares near national Parliaments. As Soja (1989:6) suggested, under specific socio-political conditions, “relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life [...] human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.” Hence, photography of protest events may bring into view the spatial manifestation of power relations between the various groups present in the protest field. Azoulay (2012:15) is amongst those researchers to argue that the camera should be seen as an object creating “powerful forms of commotion and communion” rather than a mere tool used by eyewitnesses.

In her study of the spatial dimensions of political contention, McGahern (2017) asserts that the reality of the protest space is shaped by the movement of people around the physical location, as well as its spatial configurations. As discussed above, there is a clear link between factors such as space affordances and the relationships between the participants, and how protest events are reported by the news media. A growing body of literature has demonstrated how certain protests are rendered iconic by virtue of the extensive media coverage they achieve through their staging in well-known public spaces (Wallach, 2013; Harvey, 2012). Such was the case during the Tahrir Square demonstrations in Cairo during the ‘Arab Spring’ popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in January 2011 (Ramadan, 2013). The public squares across Spain occupied by the Los Indignados social movement would also serve as a global icon that embodied the universal values of democracy (Rovisco, 2017). These protests would strongly influence the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (September – December 2014), where protesters used public space to engage with bystanders through the co-creation of artwork (Patsiaouras et al, 2017). These protests were staged at key symbolic sites that not only allowed the protesters to communicate specific messages to members of the public and the press, but also allowed photojournalists to attribute symbolic meanings to the images they captured. While there is a burgeoning literature on the importance of space in relation to the policing of protests (Sewell, 2001; Tilly, 2003; Shaw, 2017; Kotef, 2015; della Porta, Peterson, and Reiter. 2006), there has been relatively little research exploring the spatial dimensions of photojournalism during these events.

Drawing on the above literature, there were two research objectives investigated in this study:

RO1: To explore how Greek photojournalists’ perspective is determined by permitted location and the role of its symbolic dimension.

RO2: To examine the way space affordances permit meeting aesthetic and professional requirements.

Method

In order to investigate these research objectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 Greek photojournalists between July 2014 and July 2016. These participants were selected due to their relevant experience in the field, with a snowball method used to increase the sample size for the study. Sample characteristics indicated that half of the interviewees (10) were employed by news media organisations on permanent contracts, with eight being in freelance positions and the other two being stringers for news agencies such as Agence France-Presse (AFP), Panos Pictures, and Reuters. The majority were male (14) and there was some variation in terms of the number of years in the profession; several had less than three years' experience, while there were a few photojournalists in the study who had been active for over two decades.

Data were primarily gathered via face-to-face semi-structured interviews, with the exception of four which were conducted via Skype. As this was part of a bigger project, the interview guide was designed to elicit responses about the aesthetic, ideological and professional factors influencing the practices of these photojournalists, their relationships and interactions with police and protesters, and the processes underpinning the selection of images for publication by the news media. For the scope of this chapter, we focused on the interview data that were closely linked to issues related to space. Each interview was recorded and transcribed prior to being translated from Greek into English for the purposes of analysis. A critical thematic analysis (TA), congruent with the six phases of TA elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2013), was conducted between March and April 2020. This involved close line-by-line reading of the interview transcripts and the identification of themes pertinent to the research questions in the study. It should be noted that none of the participants are identified by name in the following analysis. Due to the high number of threats received by photojournalists during the anti-austerity protests in Greece (Amnesty International, 2012), it was agreed that these interviewees would be fully anonymised in the study (pseudonyms have been used instead).

Space and perspective

Our interview data demonstrated how space affordances and interactions within the protest field not only shaped the experiences of participants but also influenced the type of images taken. Photojournalists' professional affiliation (or lack thereof) determined their ability to make choices about shooting locations during the anti-austerity protests. As discussed in previous research (Veneti, 2017: 286-87), big wire agencies possessed the resources to simultaneously shoot from different angles, hiring photographers to take photos of marching crowds from offices within tall buildings (hired for this purpose), as well as and close-ups obtained from walking

alongside the protesters). However, this was not the case for stringers or freelancers, who tended to work alone and could therefore only be in one place at a time. Furthermore, and congruent with previous studies (Tilly, 2003; Mathieu, 2008; Della Porta and Diani, 2009; Zajko and Béland, 2008) interaction with riot police and protesters in these locations invariably meant that photojournalists had to pick a side when it came to their shooting locations: “In many countries, you need to choose where to stand. You need to choose whether to stand on the protesters’ side or on the police one.” (Manos)

Our interviewees recounted how both protesters and the police blocked their access and made their work extremely difficult:

“But the police can block your way because they’ve received orders and they don’t stop to think rationally, to think this is not a protester, this is a professional, a photo-journalist. And all this when the Police Authorities themselves have given me authorisation to do this job.” (Nick)

“[...] you need to choose if you will stand behind the police or along with the protesters, if they [protesters] accept you. Because sometimes they do not. I remember that we used to have problems when they were looking at us with our cameras [...]” (Maria)

It was acknowledged that many of the safety concerns that had led photojournalists to position themselves behind police lines during previous large-scale demonstrations had been allayed in recent years. Whereas journalists had been fearful of being attacked by protesters for shooting footage close to their lines, the protests provoked by the death of Grigoropoulos¹ were said to have led to a thaw in relations between photojournalists and protesters. Photojournalists were now encouraged to ‘mingle’ with the protesters, presumably with a view to countering the news media framing of the demonstrations and to highlight the heavy-handed tactics of the police which were under-reported. Echoing Tilly’s (2003) notion of proximity, this level of access resulted in new forms of protest imagery being created by these photojournalists:

“ [...] from 2008-2009 onwards, this changed because the protesters started to see the photo-journalists as part of their game: the game in which they’re trying to be seen, to be exposed to the camera, and these people [the photo-journalists] are taking pictures of them and, whether in a negative or a positive light, they’re in the media. Their voice is heard. [...] we suddenly started mingling with the protester crowd, and so we moved behind the crowd, inside the crowd, and the picture itself changed: now photo-journalists were shooting the riot forces attacking the protesters.” (Nick)

¹ In December 2008, the shooting and subsequent death of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by police led to widespread rioting and looting in Athens.

The interviewees appeared to be aware of their complicity in this 'game' to enable the voices of Greek protesters to be heard, and to capture images of their often-brutal treatment at the hands of the MAT. They believed that protesters were less likely to view photojournalists with suspicion due to their commitment to covering protests from their vantage point, and so their perspective, sharing their space not that of the police. Nevertheless, the ability to walk between the lines of protesters in order to capture protest imagery did not mean that this was a safe working environment for Greek photojournalists. Interviewees suggested that they still received threats from some protesters as they attempted to shoot footage, to which they would frequently respond by withdrawing from the scene as soon as was possible. One interviewee reported that photojournalists were often singled out by the police for their coverage of incidents of alleged brutality: "Now photo-journalists were shooting the riot forces attacking the protesters. That's why we became a target of the MAT forces from 2009 onwards." (Nick)

The impact of space affordances on photojournalistic practice

All of the interviewees expressed their preference for being able to produce protest images in multiple locations that captured the perspectives of both the protesters and the police. This was vividly characterised by one participant as a desire to 'photograph everything,' ranging from a Molotov cocktail being thrown by a rioter to the police officer who was "subsequently set on fire" (Costas). There was a sense that photojournalists should 'ideally' look to position themselves in locations that would provide the right aesthetics for their images, but this inevitably led to compromises if they were freelancers and movement around protest sites was likely to antagonise certain groups:

"It depends on you and your style and on what exactly you want to shoot. For example, you might have somebody throwing a Molotov, and you are neither behind that person, nor behind the police, and he might not be exactly across you. In such a case, you need to make a fast decision where you want to focus. Which is going to be your focal point and which will be the blurred one. Will it be at the background where the police are standing or will it be on the person who holds the Molotov?" (Jim)

"And it's good if you shoot from both sides. That's the ideal, yeah? I mean, to be with the protesters when rocks are being thrown, or... to have, say, your focus on a protester throwing rocks and then the police in the back... Or, to be on the opposite side, to have a police officer trying to take cover from the rocks being thrown, that's ideal. But you can't be on both sides at the same time. So, you're going to be on this side now, that side later. It's obvious, I guess, but I guess they might not like that, yeah? Maybe they don't like the fact that you bring out their aggressiveness either." (Alex)

While photojournalists may have felt less threatened by protesters than in the past, the consensus amongst the interviewees was that the space afforded to them during protest events was contested and in flux. One participant noted that they had been attacked by both anarchists and the police while taking protest images:

“To take a picture of the police, you need to go behind the protesters. Not always, because you might get a stone thrown at you. That’s where I get upset with the anarchists. ‘Cause we’re being hit by the police, we’re being hit by the anarchists as well.” (Helen)

All reported that they had to think and act quickly in order to ensure that escaped injury when shooting images from different vantage points during these events. There was a sense that they could not control the civil unrest unfolding in front of them, and that they instinctively knew what images they could capture without compromising their personal safety:

“You always look for a hiding spot. Yes, you have this instinct. Of course, mistakes were always made, I have also made [...] and the situation changes so quickly. Therefore, you need to be fast and flexible and to have a good (broad) line of sight.” (Maria)

“The photojournalist’s job is sometimes at the edges and should be able to think calmly, logically, first of all for his safety, secondly about the photos and then about the aesthetics of the photos. After a point, your eyes capture the frames very quickly. I mean you capture the frame in your mind and at no time you shoot.” (Costas)

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we argue that accessibility to protest spaces, the relationships between professional photographers and other actors involved in protests as well as space affordances constitute vital components of the final visual outcomes that are published and ignite political imaginations about such events. As Azoulay (2012: 54) argues “once the presence of photographed subjects is brought into consideration, it is hard not to see that the space where the image is created, like the space from which it is viewed, is indeed a plural one.” As our findings demonstrate, the protest field constitutes a ‘live’ space, subject to continuous changes, co-created by protesters, (photo)journalists and the police as primary actors. In this context, access to the protest field for the photojournalists becomes of vital importance. The vicinity of camera to the event, and access to various areas of the protest field determine to a great extent the visual stories of protests and demonstrations.

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