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**The Making of Modern Athens, 1830 - 1970**

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# A European City?

## The Making of Modern Athens, 1830-1970\*

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### Abstract

This article outlines the urban development of Athens between the 1830s and 1970s and by doing so questions the validity of the concept of the “European City” by concentrating on a Southern European example. It proposes a more inclusive view of European urbanisation by drawing attention to the social phenomenon of clientelism as an element of civil society and as a major factor in the development of the urban environment.

**Keywords:** Urbanisation, Athens, Europe, Clientelism, Migration

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Today's casual visitor to Athens sees a sprawling and vibrant metropolis being home to almost four million people in the Metro Area. The city is the unrivalled political, economic and cultural centre of Greece, where the second city, Thessaloniki, does not even come close in size and importance. However, at the onset of independent statehood of Greece in the late 1820s, this development was not a foregone conclusion. When Athens was made the nation's capital in 1834, it was little more than a third-rate market town with a few thousand inhabitants, many of them Muslims. There were a number of other, much more important urban centres in the country, such as Nafplion and Patras in the Peloponnese or Ermoupoli, the important commercial city on the Cycladic island of Siros. This article explores the mechanisms which in the course of about one and a half centuries led to the present condition of Athens. It charts its growth and gain in importance and asks the question whether this development fits into the model urban sociologists and historians have applied to the "European city".

### **1. Urban Development of Athens since the 1830s**

Greek independence came after a protracted and violent conflict to shake off Ottoman rule during the 1820s and was aided to a significant extent by Britain and France siding with the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> The situation of the newly established entity was highly precarious, since in the European power struggles none of the significant players wanted the Greeks to become attached to one particular side. The search for a form of government and to find a ruler finally settled on the seventeen year old Otto, son of King Ludwig I. of Bavaria. This highly philhellenic monarch, whose kingdom was too weak to be part of the European concert of powers, gladly provided his second son for the Greek cause. Otto arrived first in Nafplion in 1833, but moved his court to Athens a year later. In the entourage of the young king were a variety of Bavarian politicians, administrators and technical experts who during the coming years transformed not only the new country but also its new capital significantly. The layout of the city centre

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<sup>1</sup> Still probably the best account of the historical development of modern Athens is Lila Leontidou, *The Mediterranean city in transition. Social change and urban development*, Cambridge 1990.

today is still following the original plan, devised by the German architect Leo von Klenze and the German-trained Greek Stamatheos Kleantes, where the palace of the king (today the Parliament building) was the hub of a number of boulevards leading to the university and the Academy and from which – at the time – uninterrupted vistas to the Parthenon on the Acropolis existed.<sup>2</sup> Athens grew, albeit at a slow pace, to a city of approximately 40,000 inhabitants in the 1860s when Otto was finally deposed by his people who demanded less autocracy and more political participation for a growing indigenous upper middle and upper class. It was mainly the function of the capital which enticed civil servants, merchants but also all kind of supporting menial personnel to move to Athens which thus developed into an administrative city.<sup>3</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century was again a period of urban growth at a steady pace, but still around 1900 Athens was with approximately a quarter million inhabitants rather a second or third rate European capital city of an economically precarious and politically weak country. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century a certain degree of industrialisation could be observed, but this consisted mostly of small, family owned businesses with five or fewer employees. Like all of Southern and South Eastern Europe at the time, industrialisation in the classical North West European way had little to no impact on the economic development of Greece.<sup>4</sup> Athens continued to be dominated by trade, service and in particular administration. The port city of Piraeus, just a few kilometres away from the city centre, grew as well into a viable commercial entity with a sizeable working class labouring in its docks. In the early twentieth century it began to grow together with Athens into one urban conglomerate, although it was administratively independent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Adrian von Buttlar, Die Entwürfe Schinkels, Klenzes und Gärtners für das Athener Schloss 1833/1836, in Alexander Papageorgiou-Venetas (ed.), Das ottonische Griechenland. Aspekte der Staatswerdung, Athens 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Papageorgiou-Venetas, Hauptstadt Athen. Ein Stadtgedanke des Klassizismus, München 1994.

<sup>4</sup> M. A. Gevetsis, The Development of Greek Industry. Statistical Research (in Greek), Athens 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Eleni Bastea, The Creation of Modern Athens. Planning the Myth, Cambridge 2000.

The 1920s were the decade which changed the urban makeup of Athens decisively. The Balkan Wars of 1912/13 significantly enlarged the Greek State by adding, among other territories, the island of Crete and in the north as well as Thessaly, Epirus and Macedonia with its ancient commercial port Thessaloniki, which was quickly Hellenized and became the new “second city” of Greece. After the First World War Greece was on the side of the winners and attempted to use this momentum to attack the crumbling Ottoman Empire to (depending on the point of view) gain or regain large amounts of territory in Asia Minor, where strong contingents of ethnic Greeks lived. The military campaign, however, was a fiasco and ended with total defeat. In the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 which defined the borders of the newly emerging State of Turkey, Greece and Turkey agreed on a massive population exchange, ostentatiously to avoid the potential for further conflict. As a result about 1.2 Million “Greeks” and 400,000 “Turks” traded places. The defining criterion for being incorporated in this giant movement of people was not ethnicity but religion. It concerned Greek Orthodox on the one side and Muslims on the other, regardless of whether they saw themselves as “Greek” or “Turkish”, let alone speak the language.<sup>6</sup>

The Greek state was thus faced with integrating, in a very short period of time, a massive amount of new inhabitants, which also had a profound impact on urbanisation. The population of Athens doubled within scarcely more than a year. Many of the migrants from Asia Minor were originally city dwellers, which made it difficult for them to be settled in rural locations. Even if that happened in the beginning, many of them made their way into the Greek towns and cities soon after. The challenges for Athens, but also other cities, were enormous. City planning had no chance to keep up with the influx of people, therefore “illegally” constructed dwellings of low quality sprung up in many places.<sup>7</sup> Usually these newcomers preferred the company of each other, also because there was a certain degree of discrimination against them from the estab-

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<sup>6</sup> This development is explained in a number of contributions to Renée Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean. An Appraisal of the 1923 compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey*, New York and Oxford 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Carl V. Patton / Costas M. Sophoulis, *Unauthorized Suburban Housing Production in Greece*, in: *Urban Geography*, 10, 1989, pp. 139-56.

lished population. The immigrants, or rather refugees, not only competed for scarce economic resources and living space, they also reminded the Greeks of the abysmal failure of their military campaign. Frictions between both groups lasted for generations. The immigrants formed “new” quarters within Athens, often naming them after their previous places of residence in the old country. Thus Nea Smyrni, Nea Ionia, Nea Philadelphia and another half dozen “suburbs” emerged.<sup>8</sup>

The Second World War, during which Greece was occupied by German, Italian and Bulgarian troops, brought not only great hardship to the population of the country but again led to an accelerated influx of people into the cities. Although the supply situation was precarious for the entire country, Athens and other bigger cities provided a somewhat better chance to obtain food. More importantly, the cities were safer than the countryside where the Greek resistance fought against occupying troops. As a result, people crowded even more strongly in Athens.<sup>9</sup>

However, only after the Second World War and the ensuing Greek Civil War had ended in 1949, Athens grew into the huge and all-dominating centre of the country it is today. This has to do with the economic situation of Greece from the 1950s onwards. The finances, the anyhow minute industrial base and infrastructure of the country were shattered after years of an exploitative occupation and a bloody civil war. The majority of the population was still engaged in agriculture and fishing in the 1950s, eking out meagre livings. Greeks reacted in two ways to this quandary: In search of opportunities many emigrated to Western Europe, North America, Australia and, to a lesser extent, South Africa. Their remittances to relatives left behind kept the country financially afloat.<sup>10</sup> Many of those who did not leave moved to the cities in search for jobs, medical care, cultural institutions and better education. As a result, the population of

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<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Marmaras, *The urban Apartment Building in interwar Athens* (in Greek), unpublished dissertation, National Technical University of Athens, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece. The Experience of Occupation 1941-44*, New Haven 1993

<sup>10</sup> R. Fakiolas / R. King, *Emigration, Return, Immigration: A Review and Evaluation of Greece's Experience of International Migration*, in: *International Journal of Population Geography*, Vol. 2, 1996, pp. 171-190.

Greater Athens between 1950 and the early 1970s increased from one to approximately 3.5 million people. In other words, between the 1920s and the late 1970s the population of the capital had increased tenfold. During the 1980s and 1990s the flight from rural areas continued, albeit at a somewhat less frantic pace, which also had to do with incoming financial aid from the European Union (Greece became a member of the then European Communities in 1981) which went partially to structurally disadvantaged parts of the country. Yet, this could not stop the general trend of depopulation of large parts of the Greek countryside. Only in recent years and due to the financial crisis starting in 2009, more people are leaving Athens (and other cities) than coming in. They do this because many still retain property in the country, where they hope to find a cheaper, more self-sustained living.

## **2. The Concept of the European City**

After this brief overview of Athenian development since Greek independence, I am asking the question how this pattern fits into the concept of the “European City”, which was developed about two decades ago by urban sociologists and has since gained considerable influence.<sup>11</sup> What is a “European City”? Certainly this is a very dynamic term which changes somewhat with the context it is used in, be it European integration, post Communism, the European financial crisis and so forth. Basically it postulates that “the European city” has a number of common characteristics it can be identified with: An efficient administration, staffed by skilled professionals and built up and carried by a self-conscious urban bourgeois society, an educated urban elite. A powerful infrastructure which creates strong public services and institutions, including water works, sewers, abattoirs, power grids etc. In such cities typically there are no

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<sup>11</sup> The concept is explained best in: Walter Siebel (ed.), *Die europäische Stadt*, Frankfurt 2004. Further elaborations can be found in: Friedrich Lenger / Dieter Schott (eds.), *Die europäische und die amerikanische Stadt. Themenheft, Informationen zur Modernen Stadtgeschichte*, 1 (2007). Friedrich Lenger / Klaus Tenfelde (eds.), *Die europäische Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert. Wahrnehmung, Entwicklung, Erosion*, Köln 2006; Hartmut Häußermann, *Die europäische Stadt*, in: *Leviathan*, 29 (2001), pp. 237-255. Hartmut Kaelble, *Die Besonderheiten der europäischen Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert*, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 256-274.

designated slum areas, only richer and poorer parts. A sharp divide exists between the urban city environment and its surrounding countryside. The city itself creates a number of identity-forming buildings and landmarks, including also squares and ring roads, which give it a specific and recognisable shape. Finally, there is a strong separation between public and private spheres in the “European city” where living and working areas – the latter typically being in the centre and in designated industrial zones – are set apart.<sup>12</sup>

If one applies such characteristics to the European urban reality it quickly becomes apparent that a fair share of cities fit this description quite closely, certainly in their urban history, sometimes even regarding their shape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, all these places can typically be found in the industrialised North West of the continent, ranging from the UK, via the Low Countries, the German-speaking lands, France and portions of Northern Italy. Even a cursory look at the European South<sup>13</sup> and South East, or – to an extent – the European East<sup>14</sup> demonstrates that most cities there do not fit at all into this pattern. In the following I will demonstrate this by looking at the way Athens urbanised in the twentieth century.

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<sup>12</sup> Max Webers concept of the „Occidental City” is in many ways the basis for setting apart the “European City” since the beginning of the twentieth century. See: Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, vol. 4: *Die Stadt*, ed. By Wilfried Nippel, Studienausgabe der Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe, vol 1/22-5, Tübingen 2000. For further explanation, see the introduction, pp. 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Only some cities in the industrialised North of Italy are contradicting this to an extent. See: Martin Baumeister, *Von der cento città zur postindustriellen urbanen Landschaft. Bemerkungen zur Rolle der Stadt in der Geschichte Italiens seit der nationalen Einigung*, in: *Informationen zur Modernen Stadtgeschichte*, 2 (2006), pp. 97-110.

<sup>14</sup> A little more attention has been paid to the “socialist city” of post-Second World War Eastern Europe, but only as another aberration of the “European City”. See the articles in Thomas M. Bohn (ed.), *Von der “europäischen Stadt” zur “sozialistischen Stadt” und zurück? Urbane Transformationen im östlichen Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 2009.



First of all, official city planning had a strong theoretical but rather weak practical impact on the development of the city. When the young Bavarian king brought architects with him to restructure the centre of the emerging Greek capital, their influence was considerable. However, in the later decades of the nineteenth and certainly in the twentieth centuries, city planning did not have that much of an impact.<sup>15</sup> There was also no large and dominating self-conscious urban elite in Athens, a bourgeoisie with a strong will to frame and design the urban environment and to give power to architects and engineers to implement such a policy. Instead there was a high degree of “informal planning” in particular due to a lot of illegal building activity. Out of sheer necessity, many houses were built without a permit and outside the development plans. This applies in particular to the 1920s and the post-Second World War period when, first, waves of Asia Minor refugees arrived in Athens and, second, large contingents of Greeks living in rural areas made their way to the metropolis. The city was in no way prepared for this enormous influx of people and “self regulation” among the citizens and newcomers had to be the order of the day. This also led to another characteristic of Athens which sets it apart from the archetypical “European city”: the absence of clear demarcations between “urban” and “rural”, and that in two ways. First, the city grew in particular on its fringes, thus blurring the distinction between what is “urban” and what at least used to be “rural”. Second, many of the newcomers of the 1950s-1970s successfully attempted at least for one generation to preserve many of their “rural ways” of living, their norms and values which were markedly different from that of an educated urban citizenry. Moreover, the frantic pace of development in the absence of stringent planning also strained urban resources to the limit and beyond. Public utilities such as water, electricity and gas but also the transport infrastructure could not keep up with urban development. Thus many inhabitants of Athens had to wait for years, sometimes decades, before their dwellings were connected to these networks. One more difference in development to the “European city” pattern needs to be pointed out. During its period of strong urban growth Athens never developed any real

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<sup>15</sup> Dimitris Philippidis, *About the Greek City. Developments in City Planning and future Perspectives* (in Greek), Athens 1990.

slum areas, something that puts it in line with the proposed European development. However, the assumed strong spatial differentiation between working and living environment does not apply at all. Many small and/or family owned businesses were run from private residences or in very close proximity to them. In the later twentieth century a few primarily commercial or industrial areas developed which housed some larger companies. But the general economic pattern of the city was that most business owners also lived very close to their premises. This created a very strong social diversity within neighbourhoods.

Quite apart from all these differing characteristics, urbanisation generally came at a much later stage to Athens, as well as to most other parts of Southern and South Eastern Europe. This had to do mainly, but not only, with the completely different path of industrialisation these regions have taken. Industrialisation did not simply come later here but diverged markedly from the established North Western path by focussing not on heavy but lighter industry, by preserving a large agricultural sector until well after the Second World War or creating primarily smaller and medium sized businesses.

This is regarded as an “irregular development”, something of an aberration of the “normal” pattern of (North Western) European urbanisation.<sup>16</sup> But it is not. It is a completely different way of urbanisation which creates different cities. I would like to draw attention to an aspect which, in my opinion, played a key role in the making of modern Athens and which is also characteristic for much of the Balkans and Southern Europe in general: Clientelism and Civic Society.

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<sup>16</sup> The „normal“ pattern of European urbanisation is underlined by the scarcity of research on cities outside the North West of the country. In the last ten to fifteen years, the situation has improved a little, but before the turn of the century, precious little research has been done on urbanities south of the Alps or Pyrenees. See, for example Richard Rodger (ed.), *A Consolidated Bibliography of Urban History*, Aldershot 1996. This monumental work includes over 20.000 English-language publications on urban history. Among the 50 most quoted cities, only Athens, Florence and Venice appear to represent Southern Europe, and this largely in studies focussing on the period before the nineteenth century.

“Clientelism” is a pervasive social phenomenon not only but particularly in Southern and South Eastern European societies. It means that there is a multitude of strong interpersonal relations between “patrons” and “clients”. The patron is someone with influence and power, often in the political realm and usually of higher economic standing. The client, who is lacking this influence, is seeking the “patronage” of the patron in order to secure, for example, a job, a building permit or any other short or long term benefit. In exchange the client promises support for the patron, for example by voting for him in elections or by providing some kind of service. This has to be distinguished from bribery or corruption.<sup>17</sup> Per se this transaction is not illegal and, most importantly, it is not a one-off transaction but based on a long-term, asymmetric relationship. In a way, patron and client become allies who can be useful to each other. The exchange of benefits does not need to be done simultaneously. If, for example, a building permit for the client is secured, he may be of service to the patron much later, among other things by canvassing votes in an election to political office at a much later point in time. Greek society was and is to a large extent governed by such relationships. Throughout the twentieth century many Greek citizens voted for candidates or parties not because of their political agendas but because they were a part of some sort of clientelist (network) relationships with individuals running for office.<sup>18</sup>

What is the impact of clientelist relations on the formation of modern Athens? First of all, clientelist relations are not limited to the urban sphere but they are equally strong in the countryside. So when large numbers of rural migrants entered Athens, in particular in the middle decades of the twentieth century, they transplanted existing clien-

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<sup>17</sup> Junichi Kawata, *Comparing Political Corruption and Clientelism*, Aldershot 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Apostolis Papakostas, *Why is there no Clientelism in Scandinavia? A comparison of the Swedish and Greek Sequences of Development*, in: Simona Piattoni (ed.), *Clientelism, Interests and Democratic Representation. The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 31-53; Georgos Manousakis, *Entstehung und Wandlung des Klientelsystems in Griechenland*, in: *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 33, 1993, pp. 61-71.

telist networks to the metropolis. It helped that many such people moved in larger groups, often relocating entire village communities. They then also attempted to settle in close proximity to each other. If newcomers, but also longer established city dwellers, had particular needs in order to establish themselves and get ahead in their urban surroundings, they could not rely very much on traditional administrative structures. City planning existed in Athens, but it was largely theoretical. Due to limited economic resources and the extreme growth of the city, official planning could in no way keep up with the needs to the city. Waiting for building permits, for being connected to the electricity grid, sewage system or water supply took far too long, if one had not means of circumventing official structures. Usage of clientelist networks usually yielded far better – and faster – results in this respect than relying on the weak and often chaotic city administration. Therefore clientelist patterns also determined to a large extent how the city was settled and how it functioned as an urban entity. Because clientelist networks function best when patrons and clients live in close proximity, many newly incoming migrants chose to settle together and stayed in their initial areas of settlement for a long time. Many small businesses emerged within such living quarters, something that was not least dictated by the absence of an efficient public transport network which could get people to and from work over longer distances. The entire process also favoured socially mixed areas where better off people lived in very close proximity to economically weaker members of such clientelist networks.

In recent years such networks have been challenged not only by the financial crisis which has beset Greece and a number of southern European countries since about 2007. There are also demographic challenges because family structures change with fewer children being born and more and more people choosing to stay single. The mobility of the younger generation, including many of them going abroad in search of jobs, is further eroding clientelist networks.

Finally, how should one view the impact of clientelist networks on the making of modern Athens? And what does this mean for an incorporation of Athens into the concept of the “European city” as well as for the concept itself? A city which has only partially developed according to a stringent planning concept is bound to have problems. Mod-

ern Athens has preciously few green spaces and an extremely high building density. Buildings of very different styles, size and quality can be found next to each other, reflecting the piecemeal pattern of settlement. The extremely diverse makeup of the urban building substance is, however, also grounded in the peculiar pattern of land ownership. Most land in Athens is not owned by the city or by a few larger land owners but rather by countless individuals who decide very independently about what to do with their properties.

Most importantly, the way modern Athens developed should be viewed as *one* path of European urban development, a path that is replicated in very similar ways in many other Southern and South Eastern European cities. It differs markedly from that of the established (North Western) European city, yet it should not be viewed as an aberration but as an independent and simply different path of development. It has been argued that “the European city” in its classic definition has thrived primarily because of the pride and energy its citizens have invested in building and running them. That it was the strength of urban civic society which has cared for the establishment of public works, sustainable urban planning, green spaces and so forth. So does that mean that any alternative urban development demonstrates a weakness of civic society? I strongly doubt that and I propose that clientelism, as it is expressed in the social functioning of Athens and a whole lot of other Mediterranean metropolises, is also a manifestation of civic society.<sup>19</sup> It originates from particularistic interests but in sum it has an enormous influence on the development of the urban fabric as a whole, on ways of urban life and on the shaping of the urban landscape. If one moves away from the overwhelmingly positive image of civic and civil society, as it is expressed in the North Western European sphere, this “southern” manifestation of civic society needs to be acknowledged as something that does not necessarily support the „common good“. If, as it is generally agreed, the city is the core of the development of European modernity,

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<sup>19</sup> This view is also supported by a recent study focussing primarily on the economic impact of clientelism in Greece: Aris Trantidis, *Clientelism and Economic Policy. Greece and the Crisis*, Abingdon 2016.

we therefore have to enlarge urban developmental concepts by the different South and South Eastern European experience. I am therefore strongly pleading for a much more regionalised discourse of European urbanisation.