

Translation and Opposition

TRANSLATING EUROPE

Series Editors: Margaret Rogers, *University of Surrey, UK*, Gunilla Anderman[†] 2007

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Series Editors: Margaret Rogers and Gunilla Anderman† 2007

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Edited by

Dimitris Asimakoulas and Margaret Rogers

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Chapter 1

Systems and the Boundaries of Agency: Translation as a Site of Opposition

D. ASIMAKOULAS

Introduction

In December 2008 Athens became the centre of widespread protest, rioting and vandalism. With these dramatic events a motley crowd of angry youths, anarchists, anti-capitalist and anti-state groups, disenfranchised immigrants and politicized citizens in general shocked public opinion for the second time that month. The first poignant pang of shock arose with the event that triggered this unrest just after 9 am on 6 December 2008: after a verbal altercation with a group of young people in the restive Exarchia area in Athens, a policeman adopted a 'shoot-to-kill' approach when he randomly encountered a different group of youths, resulting in the death of Alexis Gregoropoulos, an unarmed 15-year-old high school pupil. Within hours, protest activities spiralled out of control in Athens, and over the next few days in every major Greek city. The source of such collective action can be traced back to pent-up discontent *vis-à-vis* crippling neoliberal policies, high-visibility financial scandals, widespread corruption, the lack of reform in 'free' public education (which actually comes with exorbitant costs), ideological splits, a very high unemployment rate among young people and 'party heteronomy' on all levels of life (see Mouzelis, 2009). More than 25 internet groups were formed immediately after Alexis' death, expressing reactions to the event, uploading reports 'from the ground', images and videos, while simultaneously coordinating action (Antoniade, 2010). Indeed, the orchestrated actions of this wave of acute resentment and the speed with which they rippled through the country can be attributed to the use of new technologies among young

people: text messaging, (video) blogging, and other internet applications, such as YouTube. These were acts of 'political swarming' (Rheingold, 2002: 161–162), where *ad hoc* alliances, knowledge pooling about police movements and action alignment became possible through the use of mobile technologies. The uncannily concerted efforts of these 'smart mobs' left the older generation perplexed, muttering about conspiracy theories of various kinds.

Interestingly, and from an *intersemiotic translation* (Jakobson, 1959/2000) perspective, the December riots and Gregoropoulos' death are currently being refashioned into a forthcoming film by director Gerasimos Regas; this technique recalls such animated films as *Persepolis* (2007) and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), both capturing political conflicts and conflicted identities in other contexts. Two years after December 2008, the stories of dramatic events surrounding the riots continue to be rewritten, all against the backdrop of the recent trials of the perpetrators.¹ At the time of the riots, however, accounts varied considerably, given the general confusion. The mass media struggled to keep up with the overload of information while simultaneously trying to offer their own analyses and evaluations of events. Mainstream television channels were unable to confirm immediately what had happened; the murder was first reported on the website of Indymedia Athens and a clearer image of the timeline then emerged. On 10 December 2008, the *Eleftheros Typos* broadsheet newspaper highlighted the gravity of the situation by using an outsize-font, black-background cover page which featured a translation. This translation 'had appeared' on the internet, in mailing lists and on blogs a few days earlier. The *Eleftheros Typos* cover text, which is an anonymously sourced translation of a quote by Isocrates into Modern Greek, is shown in Figure 1.1.

The text was subsequently commented upon on the personal website of Nikos Sarantakos² and in the IOS newspaper insert of the Sunday *Eleftherotypia* newspaper (20 December 2008).³ With over 90,000 hits, according to IOS, the 'mutated' quote constitutes a *locus communis*; until the time of the riots, it had been variously used by the Deputy Minister for Education (G. Anthopoulos), a university dean (I. Gryspolakis), regional political party organizations, Hellenic–American associations, authors of 'letters to the editor' and bloggers (IOS, 2008: online). Sarantakos, a Greek polymath with degrees in Chemical Engineering and English Studies, is a published linguist/author and a seasoned translator (working for the European Parliament), as well as an active blogger. On his website, he promptly noted that the front page text did not exactly match the original ancient Greek text. A close back-translation of the *Eleftheros Typos* version



Figure 1.1 Front page of *Eleftheros Typos*, 10 December 2008

into English follows (bold lettering indicates the use of a larger font size in the title, as seen above in Figure 1.1):

Our democracy is self-destructing, because it abused the rights of **freedom and equality**, because it taught citizens to consider **impertinence** as a right, lawlessness as freedom, **insolence in speech**