In 1970s New York, an age of austerity led to a rise in graffiti. So it is in Greece, 40 years later.

FOR FOUR MONTHS IN 2014, I taught at Greece's Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, a school and community gripped by the austerity crisis. What I noticed first was the vibrancy of political protest, a foreign jolt to someone familiar with the political complacency of modern American college campuses. Greek students were alive with ideas. Gone was the sedate, American consumer model of education.

In March 2014, our campus became a staging ground for students canvassing ahead of the May elections. As the vote approached and my Fulbright lectureship ended, a student I came to know explained why all manner of political speech was sacrosanct on Greek college campuses (where tuition, incidentally, is free). In 1973, six years into Greece's brutal military dictatorship, the campus of Athens Polytechnic saw a massive student demonstration against the junta, ending with bloodshed three days into the protests, when a tank crashed through the school's front gates, soldiers entered, and civilians and students were killed (the exact number of fatalities is the subject of some dispute). November 17, the anniversary of the tragedy, is marked each year by Greece's educational system: universities are closed, commemorations are held, and students are imbued with the sense that they are the spiritual heirs of those students, lest they take their rights for granted.

In Thessaloniki, the activist tendencies are most visible in the everyday reminders of unrest and clashing ideas: graffiti was everywhere. The building next to where I taught was a stunning yellow structure with a black anarchist sign defacing one of the walls. Large red banners streamed from cement blocks in a 1960s brutalist-style structure. Makeshift tables with books on Chairman Mao lined the hallways, and long-haired students reminiscent of Vietnam-era America emerged from classrooms like ghosts of my childhood. Surrounded by graffiti, I felt like a New York subway rider in 1974, when Norman Mailer published his essay "The Faith of Graffiti" in Esquire. "We are at the possible end of civilization," he wrote, "and our instinct, battered, all polluted, dreams of some cleansing we have not found."

Throughout the 1970s, New York City teetered on the brink of financial calamity. By October 1975, Mayor Abe Beame was readying an official bankruptcy...