

FROM EXARCHIA TO SYNTAGMA SQUARE AND BACK

The City as a Hub for Strategies of Resistance against Austerity

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This article will examine the relationships between urban space and social movements in times of economic crisis in Athens, Greece. I will focus my attention on the impact that the Syntagma square movement had on those grassroots mobilizations, which precipitated at a local level as soon as the occupation of the Parliament's square ended in summer 2011. Accordingly, the anti-authoritarian neighbourhood of Exarchia will provide the spatial setting for pointing out how, starting from "the origin of the conflict," which occurred in December 2008, *joie de vivre* (Leontidou 2014) is reflected in practices of resistance. I will briefly depict two empirical cases, the time-banking system and the Social Solidarity Network, in order to finally recount Athens as a relevant hub for incubating social movements.

Keywords: urban anthropology, ethnography, urban social movements, Greece, Exarchia

In 2008 the burst of the subprime mortgage bubble and the bankruptcy of the American holding Lehman Brothers dragged the entire planet in an endless spiral of political volatility and fiscal austerity. At the same time, however, a wave of transnational anti-capitalist protests spread spontaneously across the world's major cities, which appeared in various square movements: Tahrir in Egypt, the Occupy movement in the USA, the Indignados' *acampadas* in Spain, Syntagma Square in Greece, Taksim Square and Gezi Park in Turkey. Locally organized as protest camps, these movements firstly created the conditions for giving a new meaning to urban space. Secondly, identifying themselves as the 99% against the 1% of finance capital, they succeeded in giving a spatial form to an increasing scepticism as

to neoliberal globalization (Miller & Nicholls 2013). Thirdly, by gaining experience of and experimenting with direct democracy and innovative ways of communal life, they brought to light the issue of sovereignty within current financial austerity (Lopes de Sousa & Lipietz 2011; Martínez Roldán 2011; Kanna 2012; Occupy Wall Street 2012; Schrader & Wachsmuth 2012; Taddio 2012). As a whole, all these global insurgencies of the crisis have developed a bottom-up antagonism that has effectively formulated a contestation of the mechanism of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2012).

Far from representing an isolated case, Greece stands out as one of the most acute debt contexts seen internationally. Accordingly, the thousands of *aganaktismenoi* (*Indignados* in Greek) who in May

2011 gathered in Syntagma Square in Athens can be understood as an extreme response to the attempts being made by international financial institutions to restructure their lives. In this article, I will examine the impact that this urban macro-scale protest had on those grassroots mobilizations that precipitated at a local level as soon as the occupation of the Greek Parliament's square ended some months after its very beginning. The spatial setting is provided by the district of Exarchia, which since its origins in the late nineteenth century has stood out as a historical space for radical politics in Athens, and still continues to act as one of the city's most vibrant areas. In December 2008 its antagonistic character once again came into the global spotlight with the revolts sparked off by the murder of the young man Alexandros Grigoropoulos.

In this article I will point out how, starting from that "origin of the conflict", the *joie de vivre* (Leontidou 2014) expressed by Greek *aganaktismenoi* fundamentally provided a source of inspiration and training for the local realm of political activism. The arguments discussed draw on almost two years of ethnographic investigation in the neighbourhood; accordingly I will shortly depict two different initiatives that emerged from my empirical fieldwork, the time-banking system and the Social Solidarity Network. Based on first-hand interviews with the social actors involved, both of these "urban solidarity spaces" (Arampatzi 2017) are amply instructive as to how their local practices are connected within a broader scenario of urban struggles, thus contributing to configuring the city as a hub for strategies of resistance against austerity politics.

Europe, the Shock Must Go On: The Age of Austerity and Resistance in Greece

After the initial burst of the Spanish speculative housing bubble, the moment that truly brought Southern Europe to the centre of the world's financial map arrived in October 2009, when Greek government made a shocking announcement: the country's real budget deficit was four times higher than the EU's specified limit, while its national debt was calculated at nearly twice the reference rate

(over 112% of GDP). From that moment on "the prospect of a Southern sovereign debt default had entered the agenda [so much as that] in April 2010, Greece became the first eurozone member to have its sovereign credit rating downgraded to junk status, effectively pricing it out of the markets" (Bosco & Verney 2012: 134).

The rest is no more and no less than a chronicle of our times. Well before the third tranche of assistance was agreed upon during the summer of 2015, on February 12, 2012, the Greek government ratified the second Memorandum of Understanding, thus securing an International Monetary Fund/European Union/European Central Bank (IMF/EU/ECB) bailout amounting to 130bn euro, largely aimed at supporting debt restructuring negotiations with Greece's private sector creditors and recapitalizing domestic banks. In much the same way as the former 110bn euro agreement, signed in May 2010, this second package of financial support was provided on the condition that a new round of austerity and privatization measures be pursued. Although Greece's poverty rate was already the worst in the eurozone prior to 2009, the implementation of austerity measures aggravated the recession in the country, dramatically leading to side effects consisting in a sudden increase of social inequality and spatial injustice. Under the rescue programme, the unemployment rate skyrocketed from 7.3% in 2008 to 27.9% in 2013 (UN Human Rights Council 2013: 12–13), even more people were pushed into poverty, with an approximate 11% of the population living under extremely difficult conditions (*ibid.*: 20), while the statistics concerning suicides showed a 37% rise (from 677 in 2009 to 927 in 2011), largely ascribable to the financial and social strain imposed on individuals by the economic crisis (*ibid.*: 18).

At the same time, however, Greek society developed mass mobilizations throughout the period of the European sovereign debt crisis. The urban space of Athens, above all, played a strategic role in this long-lasting round of anti-neoliberal struggles. Simply to provide a few numbers, from May 8, 2010, until the end of March 2014, out of a total 20,210

demonstrations that came to pass in Greece, 6,266 took place in the region of Attica, most of which in the centre of Athens. These figures could be translated into 5,100 protests per year, or approximately 14 marches and/or rallies on a daily basis, including Sundays (Stangos 2014). Moreover, no historical account of the four-year Memoranda period can avoid considering the escalation of self-organized urban assemblies and networks that spread throughout Athens's many neighbourhoods, especially during the post-Syntagma period. As is well illustrated by two different maps drawn up by Omikron Project (2012), by 2014 grassroots practices in Greece had covered a large number of different topics, with involvement encompassing solidarity initiatives responding to social needs (food, health, education), experimentation of alternative economies (exchange systems and cooperatives), local participatory processes (neighbourhood assemblies and democracy projects) and political creativity (artistic and cultural environments, social media activism). Overall, "the age of resistance" (Douzinas 2013: 8) has been characterized by centralized mass mobilizations that stood alongside more dispersed and interconnected forms of small-scale opposition. On the whole, they have no doubt succeeded in spatializing the anti-austerity discourse within and throughout the city of Athens.

Investigating the Times of Crisis in Athens: An Empirical Approach

In the lapse of time from November 2012 to early 2015, the neighbourhood of Exarchia provided the spatial setting for my Ph.D. research in engineering-based architecture and urban planning; according to my socio-anthropological background, essentially I developed an ethnography of the grassroots mobilizations that emerged in the area as a response to the economic crisis. Even though this central neighbourhood in Athens is amply recognized as a hub for anarchist and anti-authoritarian activism, its distinctiveness has attracted a variety of passing comments that, however, generally pay more attention to the phenomenology of its alternative lifestyle. On the contrary, I strived to experience Exarchia's social

and political everyday life, thus offering a detailed examination of its conflictual nature.

A well-pondered theoretical framework, together with adequate ethnographic research tools, contributed to achieving this latter aim. Investigating "ordinary" living in such a peculiar territoriality called for the analytical discernments focused on urban grassroots and social movements provided by the social sciences. The insights offered in particular by scholars such as David Graeber and Manuel Castells helped develop the empirical research according to a perspective as critical as possible. Actually stepping into and gazing at the neighbourhood, understood as an "area of cultural improvisation" (Graeber 2007: 19), proved to be a well-oriented take on fieldwork. Firstly, using this key concept favoured interaction with those social figures whose interplay reinvents tactics and strategies of opposition, aimed at consolidating and reinforcing reciprocal communitarian bonds. Secondly, and as a consequence, it allowed the qualitative observation to go within those "trenches of resistance and survival" where social actors build and strengthen their sense of belonging, thus revealing the production of Exarchia's "resistance identity" (Castells 2010). Lastly, and even more importantly for this contribution, the social usage of the neighbourhood has also been related to the "age of resistance" in Athens, in order to emphasize the relations between forms of protest that precipitated on a local level, and the narratives and desires of transformation scattered over the cityscape as a response to the neoliberal restructuring of social and urban life. This spatial transfer was made possible by giving a more extensive sense to Henri Lefebvre's original concept of "the right to the city" (1968), that is, by conceiving the city as a means through which specific political goals can be pursued, rather than an end unto itself. Hence, referring to the "right through the city" (Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012), the case of Exarchia was used as a strategically key space, or as a main actor, aimed at recounting Athens as a relevant hub for incubating social movements during the IMF/EU/ECB era.

Spatially speaking, my fieldwork primarily unfolded along a small pedestrian street found quite

close to Exarchia Square, Tsamadou Street, where various social centres and political activities are located. One of these is the Steki Metanaston, literally the “migrants’ house”, which provides support for refugees and irregular migrants. During two consecutive sessions, I attended courses in modern Greek for migrants at Piso Thrania, the teachers’ collective that participates in the Steki; the latter gradually became the operational base for my fieldwork in Exarchia. Basically, I unfolded my research according to a sort of road trip through the neighbourhood; in particular, I went into the details of each social space that are found along Tsamadou Street, describing their usages and initiatives while interacting with their protagonists. Among them are the Residents’ Initiative and the Social Solidarity Network, whose political activism takes place in (or is tied to) the occupied building located at number 15, right next door to the Steki. With the aim of recounting the environment of sociability and reciprocity that permeates Tsamadou Street, at least 40 semi-structured interviews were carried out with the social actors concentrated along there, in addition to other relevant persons (e.g., writers, researchers, anarchists), who had gained affinity with the area of Exarchia. Most of them also shared their experiences of urban anti-austerity mobilizations in Athens, for example Syntagma movement and “the day of Marfin Bank”, providing evidence as to these events.

On a more general level, my empirical investigation was inspired by “the method of crack (as) the method of crisis [in order] to understand the wall not from its solidity [...] but from the perspective of its crisis, its contradictions, its weaknesses” (Holloway 2010: 9). Paradoxically, the “crisis” reflexively shaped my ethnography via different meanings and perspectives: as a topic, a method and a concrete interaction with Exarchia. With the aim of gaining a close and intimate acquaintance with the neighbourhood, the ethnographic technique of participant observation furthermore turned into a participatory research-action in Piso Thrania. Indeed, this experience marked my entire approach to the fieldwork: essentially, since the difficulty of the language called for a demanding and perhaps even daring ef-

fort, Piso Thrania eventually became a remarkable, pivotal point through which my moments of powerlessness and discouragement gave way to a more constructive attitude (Cappuccini 2017).

A Neighbourhood for a Clash of Urban Identities

Set in the heart of the Greek capital, Exarchia covers a triangular-shaped area corresponding to only 0.21% of the entire metropolitan surface. As regards to its social composition, it is not known as a place for the elderly: almost half of the inhabitants (45.3%) are between 15 and 44 years of age, and the largest group is between 25 and 34 (19.4%). In terms of occupational status, even three years after the outbreak of the economic crisis in Greece, 43.1% of the district’s residents had proved able to hold down a job: at least a good third of them are professionals (35%), followed by technicians and assistants (9.6%), office clerks (7.8%) and managers (4%). On the whole it is a predominantly low- and middle-class district that, by way of its proximity with the Polytechnic and a few Faculties of the University of Athens, also comes across as an enclave for students (Panorama Statistics 2012).

Having substantially maintained its high urban land value, Exarchia has been less struck by the processes of urban depopulation and depreciation of property that have generally afflicted Athens’ city centre. Actually, one should not forget that the neighbourhood is also widely recognized as an entertainment hotspot mainly intended for young people and alternative city-users. Although its fashionable atmosphere would seem to make it well-suited for attempts at social eradication, however, the complete transformation of Exarchia into a bohemian quarter, lively but harmless, does not yet seem to have fully succeeded.

On the contrary, if “the city air makes us free,” in Exarchia one breathes a tradition of libertarianism. Its political identity can actually be depicted as a mixture of different experiences, at least as many as there are groups who all conceive of it as a true *steki*, the Greek term commonly used to indicate a familiar place in which one socializes. The life of the neighbourhood largely revolves around its main



Ill. 1: Memorial for Alexis in the corner of Tzavela and Mesologgiou, Exarchia. (Photo: Monia Cappuccini, 2014)

piazza, Exarchia Square, found in the centre of the district; passing through one can find anarchist and autonomous collectives, activists of the extra-parliamentary left, tribes of various underground cultures, socially marginalized people, migrants, young rebels and mavericks. At the same time, a swarm of social activities and urban practices give the entire area strong political connotations, with Exarchia's clear ACAB (acronym for All Cops Are Bastards) matrix largely contributing to portraying the place as an anti-authoritarian enclave.

Given the high concentration of all these different features, it would be difficult to single out, in other European capitals, a neighbourhood found in such a central urban position whose political identity is still equally entrenched. Similarly, Exarchia can hardly be tied down to a single representation, except perhaps the one unanimously provided by public opinion and the mainstream media, which has historically depicted the district as a place of widespread lawlessness and rebellion. More recently,

a comparative content analysis conducted by Vradis (2012) clearly indicates how the media coverage of issues involving Exarchia is still extremely at the service of its perception and stigmatization as a sort of "enemy within".¹

With a quick glance at the country's modern history, the neighbourhood played a prominent role both during the student opposition against the Junta dictatorship, which culminated in the 17 November 1973 popular uprising in the nearby Polytechnic, and during the riots that beginning on December 6, 2008, spread throughout Athens and all over Greece, sparked off by the murder of Alexandros Grigoriopoulos, a fifteen-year-old high-school student from an upper-class family, killed by the police in Exarchia.

The Days of Alexis, an Origin of Conflict

This fateful date was a Saturday night like any other, with the usual lively assortment of people hanging out in taverns, bars and cafés, or along the neigh-

bourhood's many pedestrian streets. Alexandros Grigoropoulos was with his friends at the corner between Mesologgiou and Tzavela streets, when two policemen approached them during a patrol in the area. Following a minor verbal argument, while the officers were leaving the spot, however, for no specific reason one of them turned around, drew out his gun, aimed at the youths and shot Alexis dead. Without even having the time to think, Exarchia had already exploded. All of Athens and other major Greek cities were soon involved in violent clashes when the news of the murder quickly spread out from the neighbourhood (Vradis & Dalakoglou 2011).

During those days of revolt, for the first time in Greece's contemporary history the key actors were young high-school students, unmistakably associated with Alexis. Migrants, especially from the second generation, similarly flanked their peers on the barricades. An unprecedented combination of "unusual suspects" irrupted onto the scene of the protest, thus concretely marking December 2008 as a generational transition. Dubbed by the media as "generation 700" (meaning "euro per month", as an average wage) and commonly referred to as *koukoulofori* (hoodies) or even with the epithet of *bachali* (an expression that roughly corresponds to 'hooligan', 'troublemaker'), they represented those whose expectations for a better future had been disappointed ahead of time, betrayed by an economic perspective of growth and wealth never delivered (ibid. 2011).

Largely dominated by anti-police and anti-capitalist sentiments, the days of Alexis went on for three consecutive weeks, with a sharp peak during the first. Occupations of public buildings and universities, demonstrations and open assemblies on a large scale stood alongside one another, in a climate characterized by "an acceptance and tolerance of violence even by those who did not engage in it" (Mentinis 2010: 199). The daily newspaper *Kathimerini* labelled those days of unrest as "the worst rioting that Greece has seen since the restoration of democracy in 1974" (2008), and in a similar vein the international media broadcast images of the fierce violence that broke out in the streets in country's major cities.

Due to its immediate and deep impact on society, a large number of researchers have described December 2008 as a breakdown rather than proposing a simplistic interpretation of the phenomenology of the riots. Overall they have stressed that, although the explosion of a formerly peaceful Greece was mostly age-related, it was not in the least restricted to the actions of *koukoulofori* teenagers. That eruption, in fact, brought together "sections of the working class that expressed their dissatisfaction with the culture of consumerism, individualism and indebtedness," continuing to maintain not simply that "we don't like you", but also that "we don't like what we have become" (Mentinis 2010: 200). Essentially, those events arose as a generalized challenge of the structural basis of neoliberal society *tout court* and later developed into "a new common collective identity" (Psimitis 2011: 130). Not by chance, December 2008 influenced the urban anti-austerity movements to come in their "exercise of free expression in open spaces at the level of everyday life" (Petropoulou 2010: 221). Therefore, from that moment on, "the city was not simply the setting of collective actions and initiatives but became, more and more, a potential collective claim" (Stavrides 2010: 133). Intermingled with each other, ultimately the "origin of the conflict" signalled "the beginning of massive movements and protests against accumulation by dispossession as the debt crisis was deepening" (Leontidou 2012: 303).

From Exarchia to Syntagma Square and Back

In the wake of the appeal launched by the citizen grassroots organization Direct Democracy Now! on social networks, on May 25, 2011, hundreds of Athenians found themselves in the Parliament's central square and began to create a permanent occupation. Over a period of three months, thousands of demonstrators passed through Syntagma Square, including both young adults who were novices to street protests and fifty-year-olds who returned to this kind of experience after a long period of disenchantment. Surely, no one would ever have imagined such a huge level of collective involvement, nor that new methods of self-organization would have been peacefully

invented. As has been established by various scholars (e.g., Leontidou 2012; Stavrides 2011; Douzinas 2013; Massarelli 2013; Mavrommatis 2015), the Syntagma occupation stood out for its spontaneity and introduced an absolute novelty within the realm of social opposition against austerity in Greece. Rooted in cosmopolitan networks as well as in the previous uprisings witnessed after December 2008, in particular, Leontidou developed the concept of *piazza* “in order to denote [Syntagma] as an openness and a nodal centre of material and virtual communication, rather than an enclosed square and its defined landscape” (2012: 302).

From a spatial point of view, occupied Syntagma Square was divided into two areas, upper and lower, each of which with its own distinct atmosphere. In the first, located just under the stretch of Vasilissis Amalias Avenue that runs in front of the Parliament, the “apolitical” *Indignados* had come together, animated by feelings of rage and exasperation against the establishment, expressed with slogans such as “Thieves, thieves”, accompanied by the *mountza*, a traditional offensive gesture consisting in extending one’s hand with the palm open. Moreover, part of them waved Greek flags and sung the national anthem, in a sort of rediscovered patriotic pride that partly signalled the presence of right-wing forces, not including however the extremist party of Golden Dawn. Much larger than the first, the pedestrian area of Syntagma Square was dominated instead by an openly left-wing approach to politics and brought together people with different backgrounds and belongings, who experimented with no-stop assemblies, participatory ways of living, daily workshops, open debates, information stands and spaces for discussions on issues ranging from debt to forms of direct democracy.

Evacuated and reoccupied on a number of occasions, Syntagma Square was definitively dismantled in early August. Above all on June 29, while the Parliament was voting on the second Memorandum, the demonstrators were subjected to a brutal violence unleashed by the police. Thereafter, anti-austerity movements survived on a local level in more fragmented and decentralized forms. Their spontaneity

reemerged in Syntagma one year later, to honour Dimitris Christoulas – a retired Greek pharmacist who, due to severe difficulties in paying for his medications, shot himself in Syntagma Square in April 2012 (Kitsantonis 2012) – and yet received the very same repressive treatment. A further and more vigorous episode appeared in June 2013 when the Greek government targeted the public state-owned radio and television company, ERT, labelling it “a haven of waste” (*The Guardian* 2013) and announcing its immediate closure by an overnight legislative decree.² As a response, journalists, technicians, employees and protesters got together and took over the network’s offices, thus continuing to go on air on a volunteer basis via a cooperative online TV station. Throughout five months, ERT’s courtyard was packed with an atmosphere of vibrant cultural resistance that actively reproduced the same *joie de vivre* (Leontidou 2014) expressed and experienced by the *aganaktismenoi* in the Syntagma occupation. However, during the following November, riot police stormed the occupied building, forcing the demonstrators to leave.

On a general view, in contrast with a scenario of social control, Greek urban movements have given origin to an opposite portrait of vitality and desire in the context of the debt crisis. In fact, if on the one hand austerity activated a rhetoric of security aimed at disciplining the citizens’ discontent, on the contrary spontaneity, participation and self-organization were stimulated as singular features of political resistance and social solidarity. The case of Exarchia is illuminating as to this movement, as if the “origin of the conflict” in December 2008 had scattered enough seeds of rebellion to support a long-standing collective action. From that uprising on, social struggles in Athens actually continued without pause at least until the second Memorandum agreement in February 2012, both on a micro- and a macro-scale. Urban anti-austerity mobilizations and local grassroots organizations both influenced and were influenced by this spatial inter-changeability, thereby strengthening their own affinities, alliances and networks. The Syntagma Square movement in 2011 above all encouraged this relation of

reciprocity, mostly nurtured by an interaction with the city intended as a means through which different political goals could be pursued.

It is in fact noteworthy that the Greek piazza movement marked, after December 2008, another crucial step for urban protest in Athens. In particular, Douzinas has summarized the main differences as follow: “December was characterized by time, Syntagma by place, December by transience, Syntagma by permanence, December by (limited) violence, Syntagma by a repudiation of violence, December by mobility, Syntagma by a static presence” (2013: 150). However, examining more deeply their common traits, the final result is more a product rather than the sum of a series of distinctive features. Fundamentally, both of these insurgencies were made possible by the gradual emergence of “new subjectivities committed to resistance, justice and equality”; in getting rid of the dominant trian-

gle of “desire-consumption-frustration” (Douzinas 2013: 143), they were able to emancipate themselves and break away from the body of social passivity. This new-found political awareness was rooted in, and bonded through, “collective experiences” which took place and were radically shared within public urban spaces, conceived and lived “as a potentially liberating environment” (Stravrides in Brekke et al. 2014: 209). Furthermore, with regard to another series of events, not insignificantly this last self-empowerment process came after “the day of Marfin Bank”, which regrettably spread a wide sense of collective guilt in the movement.³ This paralysis of massive common actions finally came to an end as soon as the Greek citizens gathered in front of the Parliament. Just as in December 2008, all at once, thousands of “unusual suspects” started once again to get out of their homes and take back the square.



Ill. 2: Graffiti in Exarchia. (Photo: Monia Cappuccini, 2014)

Time-banking, New Ideas in Motion

As soon as the Syntagma occupation ended in August 2011, a time-banking system was “exported” in Exarchia by the Residents’ Initiative (Epitropì Protovoulías Katikon Exarchion). The latter is a local assembly formed in 2007 to counter the telephone company Vodafone’s attempts to install antennas in the neighbourhood. Their activities, as well as those promoted by the Social Solidarity Network, take place at the building located in 15 Tsamadou Street,⁴ that is a beautiful late-nineteenth century neoclassical villa with a single floor, occupied in November 2009 thanks to an initiative of the Steki Metanaston, located just next door. While formally belonging to the Dromokaitio (a hospital for people with psychological disorders), before becoming a social centre, 15 Tsamadou Street had been rented to a private businessman, who turned it into a bar. When this commercial activity ceased in 2005, the building remained abandoned for four years, soon becoming a refuge for the area’s drug addicts. The occupation came at the end of a series of fruitless negotiations between the Steki Metanaston, the Network for Social and Political Rights (Dyktio) and the ownership to put the space at the service of the public interest once again. New attempts were made after November 2009, with no less than three meetings dedicated to defining a reasonable rent for the building, taking into consideration the six thousand euro already spent in renovations and in creating a soup kitchen for irregular migrants. Unwilling to seek reconciliation, the Dromokaitio was quick to reply and three activists closely involved in the occupation later faced charges of appropriation of public property.

The Residents’ Initiative is a sizeable group, whose base of roughly twenty stable members operates within a collective that counts up to fifty members. It does not have a well-defined political label, and is open to any and all identities: it includes people who have been involved in the movements for many years, and those who have their first experiences of this kind in the neighbourhood. Like Olga, who has been a member in the assembly since not long after December 2008. Now forty-one years old, born

and raised in Crete, she moved to Athens at nineteen with the dream of living in Exarchia, which she has done since 1999. She tells me:

I liked it there because everyone knows everyone else. There are other areas of Athens where you can also breathe the atmosphere of living in a small community, but they are home to the middle-class. Not that I am saying that Exarchia is a working-class neighbourhood, but here you can meet interesting people and even the families are more emancipated compared to the average in Greece.

When I ask her about the Residents’ Initiative’s relations with the neighbourhood, she answers:

the assembly is very much respected, we don’t use the hard-core political language that you hear in other local organizations. Another one of our strong points is that we succeed in talking with everyone here in Exarchia. We don’t always collaborate, but we remain on good terms.

Since 2007 the local assembly has maintained a stable form. It was however soon faced with the need to confront one of the most critical periods, if not to say the worst, for Exarchia. Before they even had the time to celebrate their victory over the installation of the telephone antennas, two unexpected events occurred that accelerated the course of history: the homicide of Alexandros Grigoropoulos in December 2008, and the economic crisis that appeared soon thereafter. Olga explains to me that, not by chance, one of their first interventions took place in the area around Mesologgiou Street, exactly where Alexis was killed. Since 2008, adolescents from all over Athens had been gathering there, but at a certain point the atmosphere became so tense, that even just walking through could be dangerous. She points out:

It was now somewhere to be avoided, so we held two assemblies and a few happenings there to get the residents involved, because we didn’t want to come across like vigilantes or some kind of Zorro.

There was a more relaxed feeling, with lots of people in the street. Soon after, we started a campaign against petty crime in the square and called an open assembly in a theatre in Exarchia, precisely because we didn't like being labelled politically and give everyone the chance to speak up. The neighbourhood's other political groups also took part, and a few shopkeepers lent us some tables, acting on their own initiative. For a few months we set up a stand in the square and continually read announcements over the megaphone. In the meanwhile, we coordinated our efforts with the other stekia and once a month each of us was asked to organize activities. For our part, the Residents' Initiative set up a playground for children and a basketball hoop. For six or seven months it worked, the square changed its character and it was such a success that it was even reported in the media.

This all took place between 2010 and 2011 but then, as a consequence of the economic crisis, the number of homeless people and drug addicts sky-rocketed, and in 2014 the situation was even worse than before. She continues:

These days we still keep on proposing activities, but then reality strikes and our agenda priorities change. Lately, for example, we've been working on an initiative to keep the neighbourhood clean, but then two weeks ago someone was killed by a gunshot in Exarchia and we gave up on it. You can't do a campaign against littering when people are getting shot here! Not to mention the presence of the police!

However, an impartial view of the situation would likely be less catastrophic than one might imagine, at least for those who, like the members of the Residents' Initiative, have chosen to live in Exarchia to roll up their sleeves and to leave no room for feelings of powerlessness or resignation. One of the challenges they have overcome, for example, is the creation of a time-banking system. A few examples of this kind of free exchange based on hours "deposited"

or "withdrawn" might include helping someone clean their garden and receiving language lessons for one's children in return, or getting some work done on the house in exchange for cooking or looking after someone's dog. A network of mutual support, in these times of economic hardship, has become a precious resource that operates as a complementary trading system. According to the Residents' Initiative blog (2008), until December 2013 in Exarchia 159 people took part, with 115 offers and a total of 183 hours exchanged with an invaluable gain in terms of interpersonal bonds created in the neighbourhood. Olga clarifies that:

the time-bank is based on the quality of personal relations. We've really accomplished something in convincing one and all to trust one another. I had met at least ten people that I could leave my house keys with.

In Exarchia roughly fifty activists are now involved in operating the time-bank, which has recently expanded to include the soup kitchen of the Autonomous Steki.⁵ An offer of two free meals for each hour of time went very well. As Olga said:

new people, including sixty-year-olds, came inside the Autonomous for the first time, changing their minds about it as soon as they discovered that it's not a place where people go to make Molotov cocktails.

The idea of an alternative micro-economic environment grew out of a single seed: Syntagma Square. In no time at all, the concept of time-banking spread throughout the city of Athens and even contaminated areas and communities that had previously been immune to social experimentation, such as for example the rich neighbourhood of Kifissia. Olga explains that:

there are at least thirty-two initiatives similar to ours, plus about a hundred more that work on the same criteria of solidarity.

Then she comments by way of conclusion:

Syntagma was a very important moment. A huge amount of people participated that had never been out in the streets before. There was a change in mentality, in the sense that many began to understand that the time to think only about buying goods and spending money was over. In the current scenario of the crisis, the time-bank might seem like a drop in the ocean, a grain of sand in the desert, but it really does mean that it's possible to imagine another way of living. We ourselves don't believe that we can change the world, but things like this give us optimism and hope.

A Network for Social Solidarity

The Social Solidarity Network takes action against houses either having their electricity cut off or being forfeited to banks, both of which are possible consequences for not paying the *charatsi*. The latter is a property tax introduced in 2011 by the government as a "special" austerity measure; until 2014 it was charged directly on electricity bills, and later calculated as part of annual individual tax return statements. Due to situations of insolvency of this new fiscal charge, it has been estimated that at least thirty thousand homes had their electricity cut off each month (Elafros 2013), and the activists in Exarchia were looking for a way to stop this. Among them are Stratoula and Babis, who are members of the Social Solidarity Network. Stratoula is forty-two years old, has been living in Exarchia since 1988, she speaks fluent Italian and is a film director. Babis is a few years younger, has been living in Exarchia for a while and is a sociologist, even though when asked about his work situation he simply says that "this is not the best of times for research here in Greece." They are the ones who told me how the Social Solidarity Network works and how the idea was born. Babis introduces:

it is a local assembly created in September 2011, after the Syntagma movement, in the wake of which many other similar experiments were created all

over Greece. In the beginning we focused our activities on the electricity cuts in the area around Exarchia, but now we're trying to widen our agenda and our range of action. We get together once a week at 15 Tsamadou Street. Our assembly is free, officially speaking there are no political parties and whoever participates does so under their own name. At our strongest, there were 30 or 40 of us, now there are a few less. We keep in contact by way of a mailing list with about 120 members.

Stratoula continues explaining that they started up just after the *charatsi* was introduced, as their first reaction aimed at "defending ourselves, to unite and protect one another against this attack." The Social Solidarity Network began to get organized in a very simple way: a cell phone was assigned to one member, and every time the DEI (Δημόσια Επιχείρηση Ηλεκτρισμού, Public Electricity Company) sends someone out this activist texts everyone on the list, after which whoever is available goes to the location. Usually all they do is set up a picket line to stop the authorities from cutting off the electricity. Until now it has worked fairly well and they have never had to resort to violent resistance. Stratoula goes deeper into their motivations, saying that:

When the government announced the *charatsi*, they promised that it would be charged only for one year. But we all know this isn't true, and we're trying to tell people: "Don't believe these lies, this tax will be around forever and if you start paying it they'll keep applying it!" In the beginning they didn't believe us, but then they became aware of what was happening. Some people have been living without electricity for a year,⁶ even if they only owe the DEI 250 euro. When we don't succeed in preventing cuts, we try to find a way to hook it back up for those who are determined to do so. It's not legal, but it's ethically correct, it's our duty! These are families with small children, how can we ignore them? We've even had support from the DEI workers' union, in extreme cases they have helped us because they themselves realize how absurd all of this is. If we all stopped paying any kind of tax or anything outstanding that goes to the banks for a

month or two, maybe the government would start to understand that what they are doing is completely insane.

This last statement leads us to a long digression on the anti-austerity movements, their phases and recent evolution, caught between waves of innovation and retreat. One of the first thought goes naturally to the “origin of the conflict”. As Babis points out:

it was an amazing insurrection that strengthened political mentality in Exarchia. December 2008 was not an answer, but a question: what could we do against this system that after having ruined our dreams and destroyed our future, now kills our people? A kind of response was the Syntagma movement. Even our assembly came out from the necessity to reflect upon the political situation all over again.

Then, we briefly skim the sequence of the following events, passing through the Greece’s mass demonstrations, its endless general strikes, its heavy social conflict and the violent riots that even held the Parliament under siege. Since all of this has had little or no effect, how is it possible, I asked, to invert this tendency using local practices of civil and fiscal disobedience? I don’t even have time to finish formulating my question as to future developments when Babis lashes back:

Future? What do you mean, future? At the moment we can’t see one. The movement is at point zero, and in terms of our own economic or employment stability we can’t predict anything. All I can see is a multitude of troubled people who still try to react, and continue to fail. The future might be even worse than the present, but the real problem is that we have nothing at all to look forward to, and many feel frustrated. There has been a rise in mental illnesses, widespread depression, and suicide and the use of drugs have also increased. This is the true impact that the crisis has had!

Stratoula adds, raising the tone of the discussion:

We went out on the streets every day, facing the tear gas, clashing with the police... and nothing has changed. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the next five years, but for me every day is a struggle. Personally, I try not to give in to fear, because that is exactly what they want to instil in us. It’s disgusting to think about how they’ve succeeded in creating this widespread feeling of guilt, convincing people that they’ve received too much and now it’s time to pay. I’m shocked! This world is not for everyone. Many here are so frightened that they have shut themselves off. Everyone tries to protect their own families and there’s a huge amount of despair, especially among people who are around fifty and have lost their jobs. It’s hard to fight back when you live under such psychological pressure, lots of people think that it’s impossible to change anything.

Babis concludes:

Everyone seems to be confused, they would like to respond but don’t know how. After Syntagma, we were defeated. Even though it seemed much too pacifistic or nationalistic, Exarchia sustained the *aganaktismenoi* movement,⁷ but we realized that we had lost our first battle and now we’re looking for more creative ways to promote new ideas. Of course, after Syntagma many solidarity networks were built, and initiatives that promote bottom-up social economy, but sometimes their range of action is so limited that it’s hard to see how much of an influence they have. It’s a continuous battle between two feelings, between hope and desperation.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the impact that the Syntagma Square movement had on those grassroots mobilizations that precipitated at a local level as soon as the occupation of the Parliament’s central square ended in August 2011. In particular, it has stressed how, starting from the “origin of the conflict” in December 2008, the *joie de vivre* (Leontidou 2014) expressed by the Greek *aganaktismenoi* fundamentally provided a source of inspiration in locally

spatializing the anti-austerity discourse within and throughout the city of Athens. The empirical cases reported, such as the time-banking system and the Social Solidarity Network, both of them based in the Exarchia district, gave evidence to this relation of affinity and reciprocity.

Even though an unequivocal relation between the days of Alexis and the anti-austerity mobilizations in the IMF/EU/ECB era is still hard to discern, these two events created such wide fractures that their common aspects cannot be considered merely coincidental. Retrospectively, underneath the spectacle of the riots, “the origin of the conflict” seems to have signalled a growing awareness of the turbulent future that the Greek country was forced to face immediately afterwards. Overall, it has been embodied by and in Exarchia to be extended to the entire city of Athens as soon as the economic crisis was officially declared in 2009.

As a consequence of this latter spatial opening, the Syntagma movement definitely helped broaden and bring forth “the right *through* the city” (Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012) as an urban strategy aimed at claiming the city rather than conceiving of struggle as an end unto itself, thus configuring Athens as a relevant hub for incubating social movements during the IMF/EU/ECB era.

If, as Leontidou has argued, spontaneity in urban movements has come closer to Gramsci’s definition but with new methods, including digital ones (Leontidou 2012), the Syntagma Square occupation well embodied this “revitalization”, that represented an unexpected novelty for the realm of Greek political conflict as well. Thereafter, on the account of the vibrant atmosphere that mixed indignation with creativity, particularly in the ERT occupations, *joie de vivre* appeared as a distinctive cultural feature in the renewal of the anti-austerity experience, acting furthermore as a counter-discursive response to the “Quasi-orientalist offensive” (Leontidou 2014) launched by austerity politics towards Greece as a corrupt Southern Europe country. Finally, the first-hand interviews with Exarchia’s activists proved how *joie de vivre* stands both as a trait of creativeness and as the expression of urban and social move-

ments, as well as an anti-hegemonic statement of dignity, pride and self-respect, therefore representing a counter-discourse of living in crisis-stricken Southern Europe.

Notes

- 1 Referring to a total of 108 articles selected in three nationally circulating Greek newspapers – specifically, *Eleftherotypia* (Freedom of the Press), *To Vima* (The Tribune) and *Ta Nea* (The News), having respectively a moderate left, moderate right and centrist political inclination – and published over two distinct time-spans of five years each (1981–1985 and 2001–2005), Vradis has detected to what extent the neighbourhood has been negatively targeted by keywords such as “violence, crime, chaos, anarchy, hoodie-wearers, drug-dealing/drug-dealers” (2012: 90).
- 2 A total of 2,780 people were put out of work. The Greek government established the New Hellenic Radio, Internet and Television (NERIT) as the ERT’s heir, which operated until June 2015, when the new Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, finally restored ERT as a national public broadcaster.
- 3 On May 5, 2010, only a few days after the approval of the first bailout program, thousands of people poured into the streets of Athens for the largest protest in the country’s history since the end of the dictatorship. In a social climate already put to the test by popular discontent, the situation worsened along Stadiou Avenue, a central business street between Omonia and Syntagma, in front of a branch of the Marfin Bank, which had remained open on the day of the strike. As the march passed by the building, the windows of the main entrance were shattered, drenched with petrol and then targeted by Molotov cocktails thrown by a group of protesters. A fire broke out, leading to a significant death toll: three employees, including a pregnant woman, died of asphyxiation, trapped inside the bank while attempting to rescue themselves by reaching the roof. The widespread feeling of rage turned into shock and, if on the one hand a considerable number of demonstrators retreated from the streets, the rest of the protest rapidly evolved into a series of fierce clashes in the centre of Athens (Kolb 2011). As the result of a trial, in July 2013, the administrator of the Marfin Bank, the branch’s manager and vice-manager, and the head of security, were sentenced to twenty-two years of prison for manslaughter. The reasons involved negligence and failure to comply with safety standards (*Kathimerini* 2013).
- 4 As of 2015, the Residents’ Initiative left 15 Tsamadou Street. Owing to internal divergences, the group split into two distinct collectives.

- 5 Located in the upper side of the neighbourhood, since 2001 this social space has been run by a communist collective, whose political background is rooted in the tradition of autonomous Marxism and, more specifically, in the Italian *operaismo* (workerism). Recently it took the name of Perasma, 'Passage', following changes in the group's internal organisation.
- 6 As highlighted by Lekakis and Kousis, these emergency situations have worsened due to the increase in the price of heating fuel as a state revenue-raising measure demanded by the second Memorandum package. This led "to a massive substitution of central heating oil with wood, other fuel and, by some, even dangerous but available materials including, for example, old furniture and plastics. The result has been a new smog over Greek cities on all cold nights, containing particulate matter (PM2.5), sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide and other harmful pollutants, at least five times higher than acceptable levels (National Observatory of Athens 2013), with considerable health and climate effects" (2013: 315).
- 7 In more than one informal discussion with other residents and activists, I was told that, the quarter's anarchists above all had snubbed Syntagma Square, because they felt it was naïve or not sufficiently radical and therefore politically irrelevant.

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