

Urban space and anti-neoliberal social movements: the case of Exarchia neighborhood in Athens, Greece

By Monia Cappuccini - PhD student in Urban Planning, Faculty of Engineering, University La Sapienza (Rome, Italy) in partnership with The National Center for Social Research (EKKE, Athens, Greece)

Urban space and social movements, please let me start from this tight couple of concepts since my whole PhD research steps from it to focus on the social relationships stemmed in the cities of neoliberal era. Moving to a socio-anthropological background, my PhD thesis in Urban Planning has based on a qualitative approach, actually a field research lasted three months in Exarcheia neighborhood in the city of Athens. I'm going to attend my third PhD year, so in this paper I'll tell you about the ethnographic path conducted until now.

Originally my research subject was inspired by the recent social risings connected to the financial and economical crisis, i.e. all those urban movements appeared on global scale after American company Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy and the subprime mortgages bubble burst in 2008, dragging the entire planet – not only the Western world – in an endless spiral of economic recession. I'm referring to those "square movements", born in some public spaces and named by them. Specifically that trans-national curve originated from Tahrir square crossed through the American Occupy movement, the Spanish Indignados, the Greek anarchists until the latest uprising in Taksim Square in Turkey, finally to come back again in Egypt, where the Arabic Spring doesn't seem to be over¹.

Totally framed in the space of the present day, my PhD moves inside the global-local dialectic seen as another crucial couple of concepts kept in mind in order to explain the relationships between the social micro and the macro dimensions in the new economic neoliberal order. In such a view I restricted my fieldwork area to Europe, particularly shortened in the Mediterranean suburb, placing my research in Greece and exactly in Exarcheia neighbourhood in the city of Athens.

¹ In addition to their strong relationship with the urban space and the coincidence with the economic crisis, these social insurgencies even share some common elements and several innovations, such as the heterogeneous social and political composition; the management of the protest space as a camp where a communitarian life style is reproduced on a small scale; the increasingly symbiotic relationship between the square corporeality and the virtual presence on the web, especially propelled by the social network platforms and 2.0 connection tools; the criticism to representative democracy although this insurgencies didn't entail a concrete political shift on a national electoral level.

Athens, "a story of failure"

Athens is doubtless the European city most affected by the economic crisis, harshly paying the austerity consequences in terms of social inequality and spatial injustice. As we can't consider the crisis a historicized process yet, equally we can try to outline a first short-medium period analysis on the social and urban impact of the measures imposed by the financial Troika to the Greek government, in order to avert the risk of the country being expelled from Eurozone. The labour market collapsing and the welfare state being dismantled erupted in an exponential increase of poverty, social exclusion, urban marginality and a sudden decline of the quality of life. Unemployment rate verges on 30%, but in young population it touches peaks of 60%. Please let me say you don't need statistics to estimate the impact of the recession in the city, such is the state of desolation and neglect. Hundreds of "for rent" notices exposed on closed shops, people living in the streets and rummaging in the rubbish while the monthly standard level dropped to 400 euro for a family, it is awful how many heroin junkies get lost as zombies in a city marked by a general economic and social brutalization.

Recently Troika regretted for Greece, admitting guilty for the inadequate remedy given to the GDP insolvent patient. Even if the medicine had worked out, the pressure exerted on national political economy by the international financial institutions has disclosed a sovereignty issue. One could wonder: who is appointed to govern and to rule a country? The Parliament constitutionally elected by citizens or an illegitimate alliance between IMF/EU/ECB? While concretely invalidated, and buried by chance in its own birthplace, the word 'democracy' is being re-thought in the light of the square movements experience. The Greek case reveals clearly the political nature of the crisis as well as the failure of the great political European union project. Greece had to be punished cause it didn't do its duty in the past, squandering national money resources and exceeding in the public expenditure. Appealing to a sense of guilty carried to the extreme of a criminalization act, in Greece has been implemented "the neoliberal government of social insecurity" (Loïc Wacquant), thus providing a precedent to the other European countries.

European political contradiction, neoliberal disgrace, social guinea PIGS? Looking to its recent urban history, Athens seems to be used to collecting failures. It expanded quickly without an overall view and the capitalist and neoliberal development proved to be a "story of failure" (Maloutas, Arapoglou, Kandylis, Sayas), starting from an urban growth in the 50's based on an informal low scale building construction system (*antiparochi*) not sustained by a real Industrial Revolution neither by an appropriate institutional urban planning. Permanently

disputed between a (weak) central state control and an (inadequate) local administration autonomy, Athens is a Mediterranean city in nature².

Not even the recent attempt made in the Nineties to convert the weak industrial capability into a globalised economy based on the tertiary sector seemed to succeed. In their analysis based on some data about the privatization of energy and telecommunication in that period, Alex Afouxenidis and Manto Lampropoulou confirm “the hypothesis that (neo)liberal privatization policies have largely deepened the existing democratic, accountability and equity deficit and, perhaps much more importantly, widened social inequality”. Fruitless even the effort to redirect the national economy modernization into a cultural business strategy associated with “great events”: such as the case of the Olympic Games in 2004, which proved to another debacle “to the degree that it did not contribute to the implementation of a durable, neoliberal urban strategy for Athens” (Maloutas, Souliotis, Sayas).

Nowadays Athens is as a tangle and ungovernable territory, a city of one thousands looks but without a unique face, showing more similarities with Cairo, Tunis and Damascus rather than London, Paris and Berlin. By its tight reticulum of narrow streets far away about 70 meters one from another, Athens doesn't adhere to a zoning or a Hausmann's urban pattern. Unlike other European cities nowadays the Greek capital appears just faintly defaced by gentrification and branding processes, while it is strongly polarized in terms of space and identity. Please let me use the term *polarization* as a suitable key to introduce another research block. It regards Athens as the theatre of huge square movements started up as a reaction to poverty, social inequality and exclusion during the last five years. Paradoxically we might say that in Europe exists a piazza where two opposite ideal concepts are displayed: one of the spread and financial markets, one of the urban practises, social relationships and political conflicts. It's the best and the worst overlapped at the same place, that inclination for life and death originated by *eros* and *thanatos* in the highlight Greek philosophy tradition. On closer view this particularly ambivalent attitude seems to surface both urban scale sizes, micro and macro. For instance, the idea of a polarized city prevails even in my case study, as I tried to represent in my video on Exarcheia.

² Although such typology is lacking of a specific model, some shared elements among the different urban sprawls in Europe and Africa are still recognizable: intensive building, lack of green areas, infrastructures and services, unlimited ground exploitation, inadequate economic competitiveness, urban planning lawlessness and primacy of the family in the social organization.

Syntagma piazza movement

Five years later a strong opposition to Troika's austerity measures, actually the urban movements seem to have reached a deadlock and to be far from reinventing themselves. Presumably past the huge demonstrations and the riots asserting the centrality of the Parliament, a new phase started, made of different and spontaneous social networks, local assemblies and political activities scattered in quite all the districts of Athens and intensified by the end of *aganakstismenoi* (indignados)'s movement in July 2011.

"Syntagma square developed into a network of connected micro-squares, each one with a distinct character and spatial arrangement, all contained or, rather, territorialized in the area of what was known to be 'the' central Athens' public square" (Stavros Stavrides). It was May the 25th when hundreds of Athenians met in the central square of the Parliament in order to occupy it. In just two months almost three million people passed through Syntagma; among them a lot of young people involved for the first time in a political experience and many people in their fifty who indeed re-entered in it after a long period away. Nobody would have expected a so large participation as well as the experimentation of innovative and pacific protest forms.

"The Greek 'movement of piazzas' in Syntagma seems to have been incubated in the new century and to have its roots in cosmopolitan networks, as well as the violence of previous uprising since December 2008; but it was peaceful" (Lila Leontindou). Emphasizing the global character of the movement, the Greek urban geographer elects *piazza* concept rather than *square* "in order to denote the open and the nodal centre of material and virtual communication rather than an enclosed square and its defined landscape".

Inspired by the Spanish Indignados mass action, Syntagma movement has been expelled and evicted by police with the same violence and brutality used in Genoa 2001, coincidentally on the end of July but ten years later. Similarly such event seems to have marked a point-break in the political movement arena, marking thereby the beginning for Greece of the "post memorandum era".

Welcome to the civilization of fear³

Actually what is seems to work in Greece is "a welfear state that went beyond the 'shock doctrine' and beyond the fear induced by sheer police force, too. A type of fear epitomised in the formation of a social Other – or even, of multiple, successive Others that were to be immediately vilified and torn apart" (Antonis Vradis). Gradually Athens seems to have dropped from the space of the conflict to the terrain for bio-politics, where institutional and power control on bodies informs a low-intensity multi-tactics warfare aimed at exasperating the existence

³ Graffiti painted on a wall close to the Polytechnic by NDA Exarcheia crew

in order to eradicate any social community bonds and to neutralize the potential political conflict. “Fear and state of terror are the only means to control rebellious or simply outraged and disappointed people” (Stavros Stavrides). The new doctrine discourse sounds like a call to arms under the imperative “everyone against one at a time. More than ‘dog-eat-dog’, think here ‘pack-eat-dog, after dog, after dog’” (Antonis Vradis).

Still one of the most effective remedies to social atomization could be found in those sacks of resistance and solidarity that Athens continues to feed in a reactive and creative way. Like a Chinese box, by now Athens is the square of the crisis, which includes other piazzas of movements. Surely Platia Exarcheia, that takes its name from the local district, is the most radical of all, holding a strong tradition as an alternative and anarchist area.

Exarcheia square of “exception”

Based in the city centre of Athens, framed by Patision Street, Panepistimiou Street and Alexandra Avenue, bordered on the east by upper-class neighborhood Kolonaki, Exarcheia shapes an urban triangle area extended in the city center of Athens for one square kilometer, barely 0,21% of the entire metropolitan surface. On a total amount of 5 millions people living in Athens, 22.000 inhabit in Exarcheia; in particular this 0,6% is mainly composed by middle-class citizens and a lot of students, being the neighborhood close to the National Technical University of Athens and the University of Athens. Although since the Eighties most of them moved gradually to the eastern suburb campus built in Zografou, the distinctive student and intellectual mood characterizing Exarcheia didn't fade at all. Coherently with its symbolical relevance as the cradle of resistance against the Junta broken on November 17th 1973, still the Polytechnic keeps playing a guidance role for the most radical political groups, mainly as a network place for public discussions and cultural initiatives, eventually as a refuge during the surrounding riots and clashes with the police (though the Asylum has been reviewed and revised in the latest years precisely in the light of the recent urban riots frequency, still the special post-dictatorship law forbids the entrance to the police in the University area).

In contrast with the idea of piazza as an open and porous arena as suggested by Lila Leontidou, Exarcheia looks much more similar to an enclosed square, specifically framed inside the city plan and crossed or inhabited by a wide multiplicity of political and cultural identities⁴.

⁴ Just to give an example: a local resident I interviewed ironically referred that when Syntagma was occupied by the Greek *aganakstismenoi*, most of the anarchists from Exarcheia didn't move to the square immediately but reached it later, initially careless of what happened just

“A space of exception, of *exceptional unrest*” Antonis Vradis affirms, adopting and adapting the philosophical concept of “state of exception” originally coined by Carl Schmitt and further extended by Giorgio Agamben, to stress that “the crucial differentiation of the neighborhood is that instead of ‘confirming the rule’, Exarcheia *defies* the rule and by doing so, it legitimizes it”. This specific Otherness acknowledgement process was expressly enforced during the *metapolitefsi* – the transitional period from the fall of the military Junta to the democratic era – when Exarcheia turned into a raising space for political dissent, urban marginality and alternative cultures coherently with its previous radical tradition. But that “social contract” definitely expired on 2010 in conformity with the IMF/EU/ECB agreement. The policy and political abdication in favor of the economical and the financial powers supremacy disclosed a new spatial order, more polarized which does no longer include a dialogue arena.

Through this lapse of time indeed, borrowing again Antonis Vradis’ thesis: “Exarcheia outlines the limits of the Democratic regime, therefore proving it *does, indeed, have a limit*”. Limit virulently exceeded firstly on 6th December 2008 and then on a regular basis with the crisis’ explosion shortly after. Though the relationship between the riots scattered from Exarcheia to all around Greece after the murder by police of the 15 years old boy Alexandros Grigoropoulos with the new violent protest wave matching the austerity measures seems far to be accepted unanimously, nevertheless those circumstances entailed a definitive alteration of the “equilibrium of violence” translating “a turbulent Exarcheia into a largely peaceful Greece” (Antonis Vradis).

The right to the identities

“Exarcheia has changed, the neighborhood is no longer the same” promptly some local residents declare, witnesses in the last decades of the transformation of the area in an alternative entertainment and commercial brand, such it is recommended even by many city touristic guides. Despite the attempt to gentrify and to “kolonakize”⁵ Exarcheia, its strong anarchist tradition still survives thanks to different political and social groups whose activities got a new impetus starting from December 2008. A mix of several groups (anarchists, autonomous, leftists)

one kilometre in a distance. This fact sounds a little odd if we consider that while thousands of people were experiencing and experimenting a spontaneous form of protest properly close to the anarchist ideology, instead they preferred to spend their time in the neighbourhood perhaps in some bars smoothly drinking a beer.

⁵ A pun, namely a mix of two words (the verb “colonize” with “Kolonaki”, the upper-class neighborhood immediately adjacent to Exarcheia) indicates the efforts put in to make homogeneous the central urban area of Athens.

reflecting several underground styles (street art, music bands, hooligans) mark Exarcheia as a political, social and cultural environment.

Preferably acting in a separated way, on the whole these different identities promote a common use of the space materialized in a widespread range of urban practices. The faint acceptance and the strong resistance to the strict law neoliberal enforcement makes Exarcheia a unique urban space in the Athenian metropolitan context as well as in the urban European scenario. In spite of its small urban size Exarcheia hosts plenty of *steki* (στεκι), i.e. a well-located and familiar place where people use to meet. Among them it's worth mentioning several social centers (Vox, Nosotros, Steki Metanaston and Autonomous Steki the most meaningful), an occupied park (it is in Navarinou street where three years ago some of the locals broke the blacktop of a lot destined to a parking replacing it with trees and plants) and different participatory processes (the Residential committee of Exarcheia, the Solidarity Network born after Syntagma against the electricity tax imposed by the austerity measures, the Network for migrants and one for the social and political rights to name a few).

According with the etymology of the word Exarcheia, that "could plausibly be of [ex] (beyond) + [archè] (authority)" (Antonis Vradis) we might look at the neighborhood as a tautology and a contradiction framed in the local urban context. Exarcheia is Exarcheia is Exarcheia: a place for sociability and political resistance as well as a space of conflict and violence. One or another without mediation, the best and the worst overlapped in the same place. In its ambivalence Exarcheia complies with the metaphor of piazza I've used above to portrait Athens. The downside of urban polarization is the ordinary eruption of violence, mostly touched off by riots against the police, as a well-trying model to rule the territory. Historically held as an off limits area to "authority", Exarcheia is regularly patrolled along its external boundaries. Beyond the sensationalistic representation proposed by media and some ritualistic aspects incidental to the molotov spectacle, undeniably police uses to step into the neighborhood acting exclusively as anti-riot and indiscriminately for repressive and/or intimidation aims.

Since January 2013 I spent three months in Athens to conduct my ethnographic investigation in Exarcheia, originally looking for that famous "cry and demand" as Lefebvre puts it. But I neatly perceived and listened something different from what Henri Lefebvre intended. In Exarcheia case the claim for the "right to the city" faded, got harder and wicked, speeded up in a punk rhythm more similar to "a riot of my own"⁶ than a broad urban revolution song. Remarking its radical character and otherness through a wide variety of urban practices, Exarcheia releases a chorus of "territorial identities" adhering to Manuel Castells's

⁶ *White Riot*, The Clash, 1977

statement: “People resist the process of individualization and social atomization, and tend to cluster in community organizations that, over time, generate a feeling of belonging, and ultimately, in many cases, a communal, cultural identity”. This sense of community belonging got strengthened with Alexandros Grigoropoulos’s murder in 2008, while a little later the crisis extended Exarcheia’s ungovernability in many disappointed and rebellious territories disseminated all over Greece.

Ethnographic (semi)conclusive notes

Urban polarization and spatialization of conflict: both approaches have risen out of my research over the first three months of ethnographic investigation initially focused on the right to the city. I tried to represent my ambivalent and dual idea of piazza in 11 minutes video I realized during my staying in Athens. It starts from Platia Exarcheia as a place for movements, sociability and urban practices to finally show it as the place for police repression and violence. In between it’ll tell you about my ethnographic path passing through Steki Metanaston, literally the migrant’ house, where I based myself attending a Greek course lessons with migrants and hanging out there. Steki Metanaston is a social center mainly for migrants located in Tsamadou Street, a pedestrian road starting from Platia Exarcheia. The Residential Committee, the Solidarity Network, The Network for Political and Social Rights, a small occupied garden and the Asteras office (the official Exarcheia football team) are based there too. Probably it is the only place not strictly anarchist in the neighborhood and for this reason even so approachable and open to academic “institutional” interests, and they welcomed me.

I made this short video using my iPhone as a visual unprofessional tool for ethnographic investigation. Given the new information technology possibilities, I consider it an experiment to represent the space, a way to capture the instant and the contemporaneity as well as to renovate the ethnographic toolbox especially in an era when nobody can afford anymore a long-term investigation. Once accomplished my fieldwork in Exarcheia, I’m going to launch into the conclusions of my research. Hazarding a guess, the fierce urban polarization brought about in Athens by the neoliberal economic system’s collapse could even be seen on broader scale: considering Greece as one of “the new territory of poverty” where “financialization, and especially the securitization of, and trade in, debt, is a now a key mechanism of regulation” (Ananya Roy). According to the idea of a double-face piazza – one for the movements, the other for the bio-politic practicing – we can look both Athens and Exarcheia as social laboratories for austerity, inequality, injustice, police control experimentation, providing at the same time a government model to other European countries threatened by the

same dreaded destiny of collapse. Prematurely I might guess that this kind of polarization is provoking a global scale shift. I might cautiously put forward the hypothesis that the new asset is dropping Greece from the periphery of Europe into the Global South, accordingly with Matt Sparke's claim that "(it) is everywhere, but it is also somewhere". At the same time I decidedly accept and propose to social science his call "that somewhere, located at the intersection of entangled political geographies of dispossession and repossession, has to be mapped with persistent geographical responsibility".

References:

Afouxenidis Alex, Lampropoulou Manto *State Reform & Privatization Policies in Greece: Questions of Democracy, Accountability and Equity* in "GSTF Journal of Law and Social Sciences", 3, 1 (forthcoming)

Castells Manuel *Il potere delle identità* Egea 2003

Dalakoglou Dimitris *Beyond Spontaneity* in "City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action", vol. 16 n. 5, Routledge October 2012

Graeber David *Critica della democrazia occidentale* Elèuthera 2012

Harvey David *Rebel cities* Verso 2012

Leontidou Lila *Urban Social Movements in 'Weak' Civil Societies: the Right to the City and Cosmopolitan Activism in Southern Europe* in "Urban Studies", Sage, London 2010

Leontidou Lila *Athens in the Mediterranean 'movement of the piazzas'. Spontaneity in material and virtual spaces* in "City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action", vol. 16 n.3, Routledge June 2012

Maloutas Thomas, Arapoglou Vassilis, Kandyli George, Sayas John *Social Polarization and De-segregation in Athens* in "Residential Segregation in Comparative Perspective. Making Sense of Contextual Diversity" edited by Thomas Maloutas and Kuniko Fujita, Ashgate, Farnham (England) 2012

Maloutas Thomas, Souliotis Nicolas, Sayas John *Mega-projects, neoliberalization and state capacities: assessing the medium-term impact of the 2004 Olympic Games on Athenian urban policies* in "Environment and Planning C", Pion, London (Forthcoming)

Stavrides Stavros *Communities of crisis, Square in movement*, 2011

Vradis Antonis *The Day after the Day After Tomorrow* in "City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action", vol. 16 n.5, Routledge June 2012

Vradis Antonis *The Right Against the City* posted in Antipode Foundation (A Radical Journal of Geography), London 2012

Vradis Antonis, Dalakoglou Dimitris (edited by) *Revolt and Crisis in Greece. Between a present yet to pass and a future still to come* AK Press & Occupied London 2011