Abstract

While crisis has been a recurrent situation in several periods and places around the world, the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed a surge in the occurrence of crises as well as in the strategies concerning their governance. Although its economic dimension has dominated the recent discussions, this crisis is multifaceted, entailing political, cultural, economic and even moral aspects. Simultaneously, cities have been a prevalent terrain of its manifestations resulting – in some cases – to what has been described as a 'humanitarian crisis'.

Through the lens of 'crisis' and focusing on the 'crisis of the centre' of Athens, this presentation examines a number of intertwined tactics of urban governance that have emerged during the past years (albeit not only as a result of the latest crisis). These tactics, that work in tandem, include politics of fear that occasionally transform into geographies of fear, processes of defining 'enemies', creating divisions among deserving or 'average' citizens and 'Others' and of altering (or violating) legal frameworks. The pretext of the crisis-associated 'emergency' is often employed, not only for passing legislative changes, but also for advocating and mainstreaming extreme measures in the urban context, and for delimiting acceptable behaviours and what is perceived as illegal. Yet, tactics as such tend to mask other, critical issues, such as the rising inequalities and injustices as well as the structural causes behind crises.

Although such tactics inspire counter-tactics and actions, this analysis focuses on how they are employed through dominant public discourses, legal changes and institutional practices. Following Bailey’s (1984) notion of ‘crisis regimes’ it questions the relevance of this term for the particular context, while it also explores the impact that these tactics, measures and transformations have on people and places.

Being at the forefront of news for the past years, the case of Athens might be a particular case, yet not a unique one. Rather, along with its contextual characteristics, the crisis of the centre of Athens and its associated governmentalities reflect the multidimensional aspects of 'urban crises'.
1. Debating crises and the missing dimension of the urban

While crisis has been a recurrent situation in several periods and places around the world, the beginning of the 21st century has witnessed a surge in the occurrence of crises (Harvey, 2012).

In the case of the recent crisis, the prevalent dimension of analysing it has been the economic-financial one. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand the current situation without questioning the notion of crisis or crises and their economic-ness which, as Clarke (2010) observes is both assumed and reproduced through this specific analytical lens. This dominance of the economic-financial nexus has set the frame, not only of analysis, but also of plausible measures to resolve the crisis and its consequences. Thus, other, equally important dimensions of the crisis are left on the background or obscured (such as its political, moral and social dimensions; see Hall and Massey, 2010; Touraine, 2010; Clarke, 2010) while different approaches or priorities are ignored or suspended until the economic situation is resolved.

Moreover, another crucial but often missing aspect of the recent crisis discussion is that of the urban. Along with the economic dimension, the dominant debates about the recent crisis were also predominantly focused on the national (or in some cases at the regional) level as the scale where economic – and other – decisions concerning the ‘public’ as a whole are taken. Yet, cities have been a prevalent terrain for the manifestations of this crisis and for the implementation of associated measures (Peck, 2012; Peck et al, 2009; Harvey 2012), thus bearing the brunt of both and resulting – in some cases – to what has been described as a ‘humanitarian crisis’ (Medecins Du Monde, 2010). The increase of wealth disparities (OECD, 2013), the reduction or dismantling of welfare states and support mechanisms, the mistrust towards politicians and towards government systems, as well as the adverse consequences of the crisis (such as poverty, unemployment and homelessness to mention some) have been particularly evident in cities. As Peck (2012:651) notes when describing what he terms “austerity urbanism” “[I]n the course of just a few years, the financial crisis has been transformed into a state crisis, and now that state crisis is being transformed into an urban crisis”. At the same time, cities have become both the terrain and the laboratory for social movements and mobilisations as well as for bottom-up initiatives working against the consequences of the crisis and trying to come up with different organisational forms. As such, cities enter the current ‘crisis debate’ both as the locus of power (governmental and bottom-up) and as places where the effects of the crisis are more evidently manifested and experienced (in some cases providing a ‘spectacle’ of fear and insecurity).

Nevertheless, the current crisis is not the only condition that shapes urban realities. Within its broader context, cities faced or are facing their own ‘crises’; crises that are not solely the...
reflections of the broader financial crisis but also of critical situations relating both to the particular urban context and to broader processes at play (see for example Peck 2012; Peck et al 2009; Mayer, 2013 on neoliberal urbanism).

As Hall et al (1978) have presented concerning another crisis, crises are rarely single-issue situations but rather multiplicities of moments or “multiple temporalities” that unfold in parallel and in different scales. According to Clarke, 2010:341) these “(m)ultiple temporalities” are central to this view of a conjuncture as a site in which they become condensed, entangled and constitutive of the crisis. The idea of conjuncture marks this moment of condensation: an accumulation of tendencies, forces, antagonisms and contradictions”.

As such, urban crises could also be perceived as multiplicities or conjunctures of crises that evolve through critical moments and are influenced from interlinked processes taking place in different scales. Or even, as Hall and Massey (2010:38) put it, as conjunctural crises “when these “relatively autonomous” sites – which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities – are nevertheless “convened” or condensed in the same moment.”

2. Governmentalities of urban crises

The crisis debates are mainly structured around two primary questions – (a) why the crisis happened and (b) how can the crisis be resolved – and a secondary one about what are the consequences of the crisis and its resolution. By delimiting the notion of the crisis along certain lines allows for certain issues to be on the agenda while excluding others, deems certain problems as urgent and others not, and even frames people’s ability to think beyond the given limits (Lukes, 2005; Veneklasen and Miller, 2002; Bourdieu). In other words, it set the rules of the game.

In this case, the lens of governance becomes a useful analytical viewpoint in exploring not so much the reasons behind the unfolding of an urban crisis but the processes and strategies involved in crisis-resolution and the extent that the crisis itself becomes a mechanism (or a technology) for socio-political changes.

As Rose (1999:19) argues,

“(Studies of governmentality) are studies of a particular ‘stratum’ of knowing and acting. Of the emergence of particular ‘regimes of truth’ concerning the conduct of conduct, ways of speaking the truth, persons authorized to speak truths, ways of enacting truths and the costs of so doing.”
Governance, in this sense, includes both processes and strategies of power relations, decision-making and exercise of power (Rose and Miller, 1992) but also the technologies of managing the conduct of people or groups and the construction of ‘governable subjects’ (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Rose 1999, 2000).

In this context, crisis becomes simultaneously a situation that needs to be governed and as such involves an array of governance technologies, and strategy through which governance arrangements are introduced or enforced. Or, it might even become an instrumental means for establishing meta-governance apparatuses that set the rules of the game and steer the overall process (Jessop, 2000; Kooiman, 2003). For example, commenting on the recent crisis and the imposed austerity measures Krugman (2012:27) notes that it “isn’t really about debt and deficits at all; it’s about using deficit panic to as an excuse to dismantle social programs … (E)conomic recovery was never the point; the drive for austerity [is] about using the crisis, not solving it” (cited in Peck, 2012:628).

From this perspective, four inter-related elements can be identified regarding the governmentalities of urban crises:

(a) Emergency and its permanence
(b) Fear and politics of fear
(c) Public, ‘public interest’ and its ‘enemies’
(d) Defining (il)legalities

These elements constitute simultaneously core notions within the processes of an (urban) crisis and tactics that facilitate (or upon which is built) its governance.

(a) Emergency

The concept of emergency is central to the discussion about crises, both in terms of illustrating the urgency and critical-ness of the situation and for introducing – often emergency – measures for addressing the identified problem. Thus emergency becomes simultaneously the condition of the crisis, the excuse for exceptional measures, a governance technique and at times a management and governance regime that tends to be more permanent that temporary (Agamben, 2007; Bigo, 2006; Peck, 2012).

The pretext of the crisis-associated ‘emergency’ is more than frequently employed, not only for passing legislative changes, but also for advocating and mainstreaming extreme measures in the urban context, as well as for delimiting acceptable behaviours and what is perceived as illegal. As
such, critically analysing public discourses is crucial for understanding the ‘constructions of undisputable truths’ and the public consent given to contested measures and practices.

Writing about the state of exception, Agamben (2007) argues that rather than been a response to an objective need, it is actually a significantly subjective situation, that aims to produce a new set of rules or a new legal order. The temporarily and exceptionality implied by emergencies or even crises (presented as ruptures within a working system) rarely remains temporary or exceptional but, more often that not, is transformed into permanent practices and policies concerning people and places (while not challenging the system within which it is performed since it is considered as a rupture). Or into the “normalization of the “exceptional state” (Clarke 2010:342)

(b) Politics of fear

Tightly associated to the discourses, experiences and measures concerning crises is the notion of fear; fear that can take many forms (including threats, insecurity, risks) and have various causes. What has been termed as politics of fear often become an intrinsic part of the governance of crises. ‘Politics of fear’ imply that fear becomes a governance tactic of political power. Or as Furedi (2006) writes, that “politicians self-consciously manipulate people’s anxieties in order to realise their objectives”. And in doing so, politics of fear provide a ‘tool’ for influencing public discourses perceptions and policies.

As Shirlow and Pain (2003) note, “fear is a term that is controlled via processes of legitimisation, exclusion and prescribed interpretation”. Politics of fear legitimise certain fears claims reflecting the legitimisation of specific groups of people. On the other hand, whoever Other is perceived as a threat, is targeted and excluded from public discourse, from voicing their claims and their fears and often from being spatially. Furthermore, processes of interpretation influence or ‘construct’ realities, name the particular threats and as such prescribe the resolution of problems (Koutrolikou, 2012).

Influencing public opinion towards a preferred path is only one aspect of ‘politics of fear’, since they may also construct moral orders, panics and ‘truths’ (Altheide, 2003; Shirlow and Pain, 2003), “immobilise public dissent” (Furedi, 2006), and ‘normalise’ exceptional measures through crises (Ramoneda, 2011). ‘Moral panics’ (Cohen, 2011) are particularly relevant to the interplay of politics of fear with crises. Hall et al (1978: 221) built on that and argue that “[t]he moral panic appears to us to be one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a
'silent minority' is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lends its legitimacy to a 'more than usual' exercise of control.”

As a tactic of power, politics of fear do not only construct, reproduce or magnify fears, but they also point to and/or construct the threat. ‘Constructing’ the Other that is to be feared (i.e. the dangerous, the violent, the criminal) is critical to such politics (Ramoneda, 2011; Altheide, 2003; Shirlow and Pain, 2003), while this processes of ‘othering’ also distinguishes those whose fears are heard and justified and also construct the boundary that distinguishes the rightful from the ‘Others’.

In the context of urban crises a further aspect of the politics of fear can be identified; that of the geographies of fear. Although ‘places of fear’ are commonplace throughout the world (as are the measures to make them safer), geographies of fear at times become the visible manifestation of the urban crisis or its causes. There, the politics of fear play an additional role: the processes of ‘naming’ and ‘othering’ resulting to the stigmatisation of both neighbourhoods and people (Wacquant, 2008; Tissot, 2008) and to the introduction of measures focusing primarily on the criminalisation of Others and on increased security through control (and often repression), while often failing to resolve the actual problems of people and places (ibid).

Politics of fear have a double effect: they concern the everyday, the mundane, as much as they concern the exceptional. Altheide (2003) writes that the constant use of fear becomes ‘normality’ of everyday life. Yet the politics of fear are also crucial in ‘exceptional’ periods, since fear magnifies the possible consequences of any crisis – which in turns magnifies fear – and thus justifies any measures that aim to resolve or avert that crisis; ‘exceptional measures’ if one wishes to draw on Agamben (2007).

Yet, as will be discussed further on, there is another aspect of fear as a political mechanism. That of punishment, repression or even state violence, which aims to discipline by making an example of those who transgress certain normative boundaries. This ‘spectacle of violence’ can also be seen as an incorporation technique whereby the public becomes a signatory of the repressive measures while the biopower of state-induced fear can work as a deterrence mechanism for muting public dissent.

The politics of fear approach does not aim to delegitimize people’s fears and insecurities or to claim that problems are fictional. Rather, it wishes to point out that fears can be manipulated in a way that doesn’t allow for an in-depth understanding (and resolution) of existing problems while it risks of having serious adverse consequences through the othering and the stigmatisation projected on people and/or places.
(c) Public, ‘public interest’ and its ‘enemies’

Although public might mean diverse things in different places, in the context of a crisis the notion of the public is commonly equated to that of the public interest (which tends to remain abstract). As such, actions taken often evoke the ‘public’ for their justification and legitimisation (i.e. for public safety, public health, or well-being) and become a frequent feature of the presented emergency of the crisis, usually entailing increased controlling and restrictions.

During periods of crisis, employing the notion “for the public interest” (which is often a constitutional value) correlates to pre-decided approaches for resolving the crisis irrespective of their impact on the broader society. For example, during the current crisis, countries under Troika ‘supervision’ (i.e. Greece and Portugal) have interpreted public interest as the repayment of debt irrespective of the impoverishment and suffering it causes to significant parts of the public.

Public is a contested concept (Mitchell, 2003; Benhabib, 1996) and this becomes evident in the context of the crisis. This evocation of the public interest entails internal divisions and exclusions among ‘winners and losers’ or among deserving citizens and social treats whose needs and claims are – at least – ignored. In parallel to ‘defending’ or ‘acting for’ the public interest, a process of defining ‘enemies’ takes place. Similarly to the process of Othering within politics of fear, the generic public is often juxtaposed to people and/or social groups that are perceived as a threat to the public. Either as ‘threatening Others’ or as ‘enemies of the public interest’ (or both) a social group becomes targeted as the cause of the crisis or of its deepening.

It might be the ‘terrorist’, the migrant, the ‘rioter’ or else, but in any form it becomes associated with the events associated with the emergency while it simultaneously becomes clearly disassociated from the ‘deserving’, law-abiding citizen by being presented as a threat or as a criminal (or both). Legal aspects and ethical/moral representations form the foundations of this process (Clarke, 2010). In this way, we have a differentiation, a de-familiarisation and an enemy-formation tactic, dividing the citizenry between us and them (Bianchi, 2001), between good, ‘good’ citizens and their interests and (criminal or disengaged or ill) ‘others’.

Besides the apparent scapegoating of specific social groups, at the core of this divisive / exclusionary process is the ‘construction of a governable subject’ (Rose 1999). In political terms, and especially under the lens of governance discourse, the construction of the ‘other’ is essential to the construction of the subject (citizen) not through legislative mechanisms and punishment but essentially through defining a terrain of acceptable actions and behaviours (Bannister et al, 2006); through defining the “conduct of conducts” (Rose, 1999).
(e) Legalities, illegalities and ‘crisis regimes’

During urban (and not only) crises, an array of policies and new legislations are introduced, often in the form of ‘emergency measures’ which are passed through the respective body rapidly and in a climate of (imminent) threat. As it was discussed during the introduction or amendment of anti-terrorist laws around the world after 9/11, such emergency legislative changes often challenge constitutional priorities or other rights and freedoms. This has also been the case during the debates concerning the constitutionality or not of the agreed Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) during the recent crisis.

The increased security measures that accompanies crises may or does legitimise structural violations and injustices in the name of greater safety (Ramoneda, 2011; Marcuse, 2006); violations of political rights and restrictions of freedoms (i.e. the right to demonstrate, labour rights or through increased stop-and-search practices), or even acceptance of ‘legal’ violence (as in the case of police brutality). And these multiple processes of defining (il)legalities also occasionally include collective or individual behaviours.

There is another aspect of the (il)legality question; that of emergency managers and supervising authorities. Quite visibly in urban crises but also in other ones, resolving the crisis goes hand in hand with the transfer of executive and decision-making powers into non-elected emergency managers and institutions as well as to external institutions that monitor, control and – in practice – often set the rules of the game. This has been commonplace in cities that became bankrupt (or were at the verge of it) in the USA (Bailey, 1984; Peck, 2012; Mayer, 2013), but also in countries under International debt assistance. Writing about the crisis of New York City, Bailey (1984) describes this ‘crisis regime’ (as he defines it) that was put in place in order to decide upon and deliver the crisis-resolution, and which, as a ‘successful’ regime outlived the leadership.

As DeSantos mentioned (2013), what is legal and illegal is not static but rather a relative process who is define (and decided upon) by those who have the power to do it.
3. Conjunctures of urban crises in the city of Athens (defining the crisis of the centre of Athens)¹

“In the arrangement of themes we hope the reader will be able to discern what are, in fact, the overlapping of different periodisations, of structurally different forces developing at different tempos and rhythms of, in fact, different “histories”. The depth of crisis, in this sense, is to be seen in the accumulation of contradictions and breaks, rather than in their net sequential or chronological identity,”


Although the paragraph above refers to another crisis analysed in the ‘Policing the crisis’ book, it echoes the narrative for the different “histories” that constitute the conjunctures of crisis in the centre of Athens. Through the lens of ‘crisis’, this part explores the “condensing” of urban issues, discourses, practices and governance tactics that have shaped what has been termed as “the crisis of the centre of Athens”. Although this ‘crisis of the centre of Athens’ has unfolded within the broader context of the recent crisis (which either way brought Greece to the global spotlight), three critical moments and emergencies that have shaped the conjunctures of urban crises in Athens can be identified²:

(a) Crisis of the centre of Athens I: “Anarchists burning and looting” in December’s insurgencies (2008 – 2009)
(b) Crisis of the centre of Athens II: The “crime-ridden ghetto” (2007 – 2012)
(c) Crisis of the centre of Athens III: Between “reforms to save the country” and a “humanitarian crisis” (2010 – present)

Of course, even before these specific situations, certain processes and transformations were already underway (for example legal transformations concerning exceptional events such as the Olympic Games of 2004 or processes of neoliberal urbanisation). However, through these examples (hopefully) the processes and tactics of ‘crisis-governance’ become more apparent as does the way crisis is employed as a governance technique.

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¹ A great part of this paper involves analyses of discourses and media. As such, it includes representations and stereotypes that reflect the dominant public discourses of the time and not the views of the author.

² The phrases used here concerning the ‘crisis of the centre of Athens’ refer to how each ‘crisis’ was represented in the dominant public discourses.
(a) Crisis of the centre of Athens I: “Anarchists burning and looting” in December’s insurgencies (2008 - 2009)

After the murder of a teenager (Alexis Grigoropoulos) by the police in the central neighbourhood of Exarchia (Athens) on the 6th of December 2008, riots / insurgencies erupted throughout the city and soon after also in other Greek cities. People’s participation in the demos was extensive (including people of all ages and a large number of teenagers) and so was the anger that many people felt. From that point on and for several weeks, there were ongoing demonstrations and political discussions, occupations of university departments, acts of disobedience, violent clashes with the police and a destructive urge that was predominantly directed – apart from the police – to state buildings and to symbols of the capitalist economy (such as banks, large department stores and chain stores). The centre of Athens was the main territory of these actions, with Exarchia being one of the main points of reference.

The state’s initial response was to try to justify the event (“the teenager was among a group which attacked the police”), then to present the policeman who murdered him as “being afraid of him life in this ‘avaton’ area” and then as someone that had psychological problems and was badly trained.

During the first 2-3 days, the then government didn’t dare to follow an extremely hard line fearful of further ‘accidents’ and reaction (Vima, 14/12/2008). However, political pressure mounted (“something needs to be done”; “Athens cannot be left in chaos”) as did pressure from the media. The prime minister and his key ministers needed to seem able to take control of the situation, “to be tough on rioting” and rumours about the possible deployment of the army for ensuring social order started circulating (Koutrolikou, 2009).

So, at this point, it is useful to see the diverse actions that were taken in order to manage this crisis.

Politics and geographies of fear:

“If you think about it, who and what is going to protect us from the expanding threat of violence?”

Papaxelas, 2009

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3 The causes of this anger are multiple and beyond the scope of this paper but briefly they include (among others) anger due to the unjust death of this teenager but also of others for which no one was ever found guilty, towards the police and the state apparatus who instigated it and tried to cover it up and against the existing system as a whole in a climate of growing discontent.

4 Avaton, literally means no-go area and this characterisation was often used for the neighbourhood of Exarchia even before these events and was increasingly used during this period.
For several days, images of burning cars and buildings and of clashes with the police were on constant display by national and occasionally by international media, constituting a ‘spectacle’ of violence. This portrayal of Athens’ centre as a destruction zone, played significantly with the people’s fears about the extent of violence and destruction (which was exaggerated by the media) and about people’s fear caused by the disruption of their everyday lives or routines.

Under this spectre, harder measures “for public safety”, “because you [the public] asked for it”, were called for and thus, with assumed public consent, increased presence of riot police and excessive use of tear-gas, stun-grenades, intimidation and brutality became wide-spread (Amnesty International, 2009)\(^5\). In addition, this reproduction of clashes and police repression by the media was also directed to potential demonstrators instilling fear about what could happen to them if they took part (“even if it is not their fault”).

As such, the exercised politics of fear had a triple address: to the law-abiding citizens whose public consent was needed for exceptional measures to be taken and for excessive police repression to be legitimised; to the protesters in order to obstruct their actions and punish them, and to the potential protesters or sympathisers to obstruct them from participating.

An additional feature of such politics has been the establishment of geographies of fear centred primarily on Exarchia. The neighbourhood was depicted as a no-go area, an “avaton” as it was termed, and bore the brunt of continuous and excessive police repression (Koutrolikou, 2011). Moreover, the locally based Technical University was presented as a rioters’ stronghold and many voiced urged its relocations.

**Public interest and its ‘enemies’**

The media, and the politicians through them, tried to distinguish among the ‘good’, law-abiding citizens whose urge to demonstrate was understood and the ‘hood-wearing rioters’ who seek only to destroy. They placed particular emphasis on the destruction of private property (shops and cars), thus inducing feelings of public sympathy to people “just like you”. Moreover, by referring to the Christmas period as an opportunity for small-scale businesses to make profit, they also associated the demonstrations with attacks to both private and public interest and called for the ‘right’ of law-abiding citizens to exercise their consumer citizenship (Bannister et al, 2006).

\(^5\) Characteristic of this was the fact that the national supplies of tear-gas run out by the end of December 2008 and new order of ‘enhanced’ chemicals were ordered and expected to arrive from Israel and Germany.
“in this Christmas period, when shop owners are trying to make some money in order to get by in this period of economic crisis these rioters are destroying the shops and are turning citizens away from Athens’ shopping district, convicting these shops to bankruptcy”

Coupled with arguments concerning the damage also inflicted on the country’s image and on its tourism industry, a dividing line was established distinguishing among ‘citizens’ and ‘rioting hoodies’ – the latter often presented as enemies of the public or the state.

“In addition, national reasons urge the immediate reversal of the phenomenon, because the hood-wearers’ riots are used by enemies of our country as arguments that prove the existence of terrorism in Greece or for the distraction of citizens’ attention from more serious notional matters”

Ios, 2009:41 quoting the introducer of the proposed legislation regarding ‘hood-wearers’

This ‘enemy’ image was further reinforced with accusations of looting (from the side of the protesters) which also incorporated (with particular emphasis) migrant demonstrators, resulting in a dominant representation of demonstrators as ‘violent thugs’.

Another process that gained popularity (in media terms) during this period, was the rise of ‘frustrated citizens’ who were presented as angry citizens that were there “to defend theirs and others properties by the thugs that only wanted to loot and destroy” and to obstruct them in doing so (Koutrolikou, 2009). Namely, to take the law in their own hands, which they in some ways they did since they had the – overt or covert – support by the police (which further reflects the different ‘publics’).

“This is that [the movement] of active citizens against arbitrariness and criminality and the raw violence of marginalized thugs. Ag. Panteleimonas, Patra, Larisa and now Komotini show the way. To be continued!”

REF

Although the formation of groups of ‘frustrated citizens’ pre-existed this period, it left a significant legacy and preferential relations with the dominant media who portrayed their members as concerned citizens; a legacy that was to play a crucial role in another crisis.

Legalities and illegalities

Even as early as the end of December 2008, efforts were made to criminalise participants. ‘Koukoulonomos’ (hood-law) was prepared and discussed in parliament in March 2009, followed a
speech by the prime Minister regarding the economic and security crisis (in Greece and worldwide) and connecting ‘hood-wearing rioters’ and migration with increased criminality while also blaming the university asylum for facilitating such acts (Vouli, April 2009). Briefly, the new legislation for “ensuring social peace” argued, among other issues, for increased punishment of violent (including against property) crimes that happened in public gatherings when the one doing them is covering or altering its features (the ‘hood’ issue) and criminalised the use of facial cover in demos.

Many other legal changes were discussed, but few were actually passed in that period. Several of them though, were passed in the next years after the change of government (such as extensive pre-demonstration stop-and-search and pro-active detainment (with no reason) that were introduced in 2010 and became commonplace practices and the law abolishing university asylum, both of which passed in the context of another crisis).

As in many cases, the media played a crucial role in the whole situation. Their vivid representations together with political commentary established “unquestionable truths” regarding the extent of the damages and costs as well as about the “rioters / thugs” that were a threat to the public. Moreover, it also became apparent that definitions legality and illegality became relative notions. The illegality of police brutality and violence were justified via the presented public consent and became ‘legal’ as did the threats of ‘frustrated citizens’. On the other hand, defending oneself from such violence as well as the right to be able to freely participate in demonstrations was obstructed or treated as illegality.
(b) Crisis of the centre of Athens II: The “crime-ridden ghetto” (2007 – 2012)

Already from 2007 articles in the press started discussing about the ghetto(es) of the centre of Athens (Koutrolikou, 2012). However, December’s 2008 events diverted this discussion into other concerns. Nevertheless this representation did not wither and from 2009 onwards regained momentum and gained extreme popularity (DATA) in the media and in political discussions. From 2009 onwards, the crisis of the centre of Athens (as it was termed) dominated the media and political discussions and became one of the ‘hottest’, controversial and ‘urgent’ issues.

This dominant narrative presented the centre of Athens (in general) and specific neighbourhoods as ghettos dominated by thousands of migrants (“illegal” migrants as they were described), ridden by criminality also caused by the migrants, dilapidated and unhealthy (again primarily due to the number of migrants living there and their “cultural habits”), where “natives” were afraid to venture out of their house’s and “where even the police could not enter”. At the same time the media headlines and commentators urged the authorities to take action.

Particularly significant in this discourse has been the preferential TV presence of ‘frustrated citizens’ (see above) who were once again presented as concerned and desperate citizens while any relation to the (already rising) far-right was obscured. The continuous stigmatisation of migrants, particularly of Southeast-Asian and African migrants, as the main cause of the problems enhanced the anti-migrant climate. The consequences of this crisis discourse and its governance were particularly acute and their repercussions are still felt. For example this climate was capitalised by the far-right which established its strongholds in central areas, achieved particular electoral gains in local and national elections and established significant political influence in policy-making.

A lot can be said about migration and integration in Greece (REF) and about the problems the centre of Athens and specific neighbourhoods were facing (problems that were actual and serious) and the present analysis of the ‘crisis of the centre of Athens’ does not wish to undervalue people’s fear and sense of insecurity, neither to claim that these neighbourhoods didn’t face serious problems. On the contrary it argues that by this discourse, actual problems remain unresolved while certain social groups end up suffering even more. The primary concern here is to analyse the different processes at play during the unfolding and the governance of urban crisis and their adverse consequences.

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6 Far right here means not solely the party of Golden Dawn but also the broader political – ideological spectrum that gained legitimisation and support in influencing decisions and policies.
Politics and geographies of fear

Only a brief reference to the news headlines and the images that accompanied them is very telling about how fear was used in this case.

“They push us towards civil war” (2010)

“Centre… of terror and fear” (2011)

“Faces and tragedies in the Centre of fear” (2011)

Representing the centre of Athens as a ghetto (a contested and irrelevant term in this case) brought to mind narratives of the Black ghettos of the USA or the Brazilian favelas as they were transferred from the movies. Coupled with constant reference to the allegedly huge number (millions) of “illegal migrants”, to crime statistics and crimes committed by migrants and to ‘residents’ voices describing their neighbourhoods with bleak colours, a dramaturgy concerning the centre of Athens was established as was its perception as a place of fear (even terror). This fear was reproduced not only among residents or workers in these neighbourhoods but also to the population as a whole – even if they never visited these neighbourhoods. And, as presented, the main perpetrators for this crisis were the “illegal immigrants”.

Few voices challenged this “undisputable truth” about the ghetto of Athens or the causes of the crisis, and those that did were quickly criticised as privileged outsiders. Rather, calls for action to deal with this crisis were constantly voiced, providing the necessary ‘public consent’ for exceptional measures to be introduced by the central government (with the compliance of the local government). Since the primary voiced concern was that of “too many illegal immigrants and criminality”, the majority of the introduced measures concerned migrants and increased policing. Massive sweep operations (including stop-and-search) took place in the centre of Athens, providing another spectacle of violence and strengthening the assumed public consent, while the rights of migrants were frequently and blatantly violated (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNCHR).

Other publicised measures focused on area redevelopment, primarily through redesigning of squares and providing incentives for new residents to move to the centre. Yet, as will be presented further on, additional and significant legal changes were introduced with the pretext of this crisis.

The politics of fear employed in this case have been particularly spatial, with geographies of fear becoming a dominant and undisputed reality. While fear and its ‘object’ was constructed and
public discussions were taking place on these terms, other issues remained marginalised; issues such as poverty, migrant rights and integration or neighbourhood decline and needs.

**Public and its ‘enemies’**

As already mentioned, early on, the main perpetrators for the critical situation in the centre of Athens were the migrants, and mainly the Southeast-Asian and African migrants. Their housing conditions, overcrowding and relative concentration in specific neighbourhoods were presented as a threat for the neighbourhood in terms of both public safety and public health (despite the fact that those who mostly profited from it were Greek). Their criminality was publicised and taken for granted and accompanied their illegality (yet another crime), transforming them to ‘criminal Others’ (Koutrolikou, 2012).

While the problems the centre of Athens faced were (and are) serious, the dangers posed by such stigmatisation has been far from fictional. The number of violent attacks against migrants has risen dramatically, their exclusion from public spaces was frequent in some areas, while even an anti-migrant pogrom that took place in May 2011, which although condemned never resulted in arrests or actual convictions. Migrants, again with emphasis placed on their illegality, became the dominant political playing card for electoral purposes (even in 2012), while their accepted ‘criminal Otherness’ allowed for increased racist and far-right influence. For example, the current (2013) Prime Minister, A. Samaras stated in his pre-election campaign (2012) that:

“we are going to re-occupy our cities” [from migrants] or even that “we are going to clean our cities” [from migrants]

Prostitutes (again with particular emphasis on migrant women) and drug addicts became the secondary perpetrators of this crisis. Already from December 2011 the then Minister of Health (Loverdos) stated that “the immigrant prostitute women are a health bomb to the foundations of Greek society and family”, while arguing that “it is necessary to deport the prostitutes that are HIV positive, in order to stop consisting a threat to the greek family”. In their case, even more than before, the defence of the public interest and of the danger they posed to public health (due to ‘their’ HIV) turned them to prevalent ‘enemies’ – especially when criticism concerning far-right and anti-migrant violence was internationally voiced.

The case of the persecution and prosecution of HIV positive prostitutes (including their forceful medical tests and the publication of their personal data and photos) is very telling about how a group of people is transformed into a ‘public enemy’ whose rights are suspended due to the
emergency. Similar operations also affected drug-addicts (also forced to have medical test done, operation THETIS) but received less publicity.

Once again, the construction of ‘enemies’ and the defence of the public – its safety, its health, its way of life – allowed for exceptional measures to be introduced; measures and policies that are rather lasting.

Legalities, illegalities and crisis regimes

The role of the media and their ‘manufacturing of truths’ has been pivotal in this crisis too. Not only did they establish an unchallenged representation of urban reality, they also delineated the problems and their causes and as such they delimited the approaches for their resolution. The public consent that was established, often based on mis- or dis-information, legitimised questionable measures and policies looking for quick gains, while it also limited the opportunities for demanding different approaches to resolving existing problems. Even more so, it facilitated the influence of the far-right in both ideology and action.

What also became evident was the differential treatment regarding whose rights and interests were defended and whose were ignored or violated – especially when a threat to the public was evoked. The violations and violence suffered by migrants in this period as a result of both their stigmatisation and the introduced measures are well documented. Equally blatant violations involve the far-right Golden Dawn and its practices (and the lack of condemnation of its practices) and the case of the 8 HIV positive women and – both cases again receiving international criticism.

Moreover, while there was a legislative effort to modernise the naturalisation and asylum legislation, the broader climate within which it was introduced triggered judicial reaction resulting in the suspension of most of its policies and in leaving thousands of migrants in limbo.

Even concerning spatial issues, the incentives provided for particular neighbourhoods clearly illustrated the desire for – forceful or not – population change, while they also raised questions about speculative practices tied to them and to the fearful representations of specific areas.7

7 «Τα γκέτο του σήμερα, φιλέτα του αύριο», Τα Νέα, 27/06/2009
«Παιχνίδια κερδοσκόπων στα γκέτο της Αθήνας», Ελευθεροτυπία, 31/10/2010
http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=218778
«Μπιζνες, κραυγές και ψίθυροι στον Αγ. Παντελεήμονα», 08/11/2010 Κουτί της Πανδώρας
http://www.koutipandoras.gr/?p=1554
However, besides these evident (il)legalities, other changes were also introduced; changes that received limited to no attention and which are have lasting effects. For example, as emerged from a research conducted by Zarafonitou (2013), a significant percentage of shop-owners were willing to have certain rights limited in exchange for greater sense of safety. Or, as added in a recent amendment concerning factors justifying ‘isolation’ (namely arrest and detainment) of migrants or their administrative deportation (Amended Article 76 N.3386/2005):

“d. His presence on Greek territory consist danger to public health because he is ill of an infectious disease or belongs to a group vulnerable to infectious diseases, particularly due to his country of origin or to the use of needle-injected drugs or to prostituting, according to L.2734/1999 (…) or due to the fact that he lives in conditions that do not comply with the minimum health regulations as defined by health legislation”.

Act for “Regulation of Electronic Communications, Transport, Public works and other articles’ (March 2012)

Similar amendments were added to health legislation.
(c) Crisis of the centre of Athens III: Between “structural adjustment programmes” and a “humanitarian crisis” (2010 – present)

The most famous – and infamous – crisis of Athens (and of Greece in general) is the one associated with the debt crisis. Although already discussed in the parliament since 2008, its starting point is defined as 2010 and specifically when the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Troika was signed. The emergency of the public debt and the alienation from / speculation of the ‘markets’ was clearly announced by the then government along with the trilateral ‘assistance’ programme. Thus the first agreement was passed by the parliament along with its associated measures and austerity programmes while large scale public gatherings at Syntagma (and elsewhere) were once again faced with harsh police repression.

With the highest percentage of the country’s population residing in Attica region, Athens experienced early on the consequences of the crisis and the as well as the power struggles for implementing the enforced reforms and the reactions against them. Syntagma mobilisations gathered people at the city centre and, at times, managed also to spread to other neighbourhoods.

At the same time and to this day, the city is facing increased shop closures, increasing drop in house prices and rents (to the point of collapse in some cases), soaring unemployment and poverty rates while homelessness is acute and access to welfare services gets continuously minimised. Already from 2010, the local office of Medicins du Monde was warning about a humanitarian crisis in Athens, where more and more people are supported by food rations, charities and solidarity networks.

By now, everyday realities in the city have been documented extensively, both internationally and nationally. Despite the acknowledgement of the critical-ness of this unfolding social crisis, the emphasis remains on economic and public sector reforms and on the deepening neoliberalisation (if that is the correct term any longer; Mayer, 2013).

Politics of fear

Fear has been a fundamental element of the governance of this crisis, even before the MoU was debated. The threat of bankruptcy and the subsequent collapse of the banking systems, and the inability of the state to pay salaries and pensions were constantly mentioned, while the decision to adhere to the MoU was presented as the only way out in order to ensure that this threat would not be actualised. In this context, a large percentage of the population was influenced by that fear and by the possibility of its lifeworld being radically changed to the worse in the near future. The
old TINA (There Is No Alternative) argument, strengthened the imposed politics of fear and coupled with the already increased mistrust to the government system and to politicians, also decreased people’s trust on possible alternatives.

The rallies and demonstrations that took place in the beginning did manage to attract a large number of people and to open debates about possible different approaches (REF). In some cases, they managed to scale-down to the local level and built on December’s legacy of local mobilisations and neighbourhood organising. Yet, at the same time, either due to successful ‘divide-and-rule’ tactics, or due to the lack of seeing short-term gains in regards to political change or even because the international representation of Greece and its residents relied heavily on stigmatisation of the population (thus increasing feelings of self-guilt), the power of these large-scale rallies started to diminish. As always, the extensive police repression also played role in this, albeit possibly not as significant as in other cases since the diversity of people attending them didn’t facilitate their representation as thugs, rioters or else (at least in the beginning). Two other events (in 2010 and 2012) though, seem to have contributed to this decrease in participation: a demonstration in 2010 (5/5/2010) during which 3 people died trapped in a bank on fire and a demonstration in 2012 (12/2/2012) when a landmark building was burned down. Both events sparked strong criticism against the violence and those that used it, but particularly after the latter (2012) negative perceptions (and reactions) against the demonstrations were intensified, dividing lines became more rooted while consent for increased police presence (and repression) was granted by a significant part of the public (or at least this is how it was represented by numerous articles and announcements in the media).8

For a significant amount of time, a significant percentage of people felt numb and reacted as such. If Klein’s observations regarding the ‘shock doctrine’ are accurate, then the rapid pace of the introduced measures, along with the fear that was continuously evoked, the divisive tactics affecting numerous social groups, the mistrust of politicians and the ‘glocal’ stigmatisation of the population may provide partial explanations to the lack of greater reactions or public dissent and to the silent consent given to the government for pushing forward the MoU’s measures and austerity. Possibly, seeing the impact of such measures on the population (a ‘spectacle of

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8 There have been numerous discussions about who were behind these two events. Immediately after, the blame was put on ‘anarchists rioters’ and the public accusations were very harsh. Yet, other voices raised questions about who really was behind these events and if they facilitated particular paths of action for the then government. A trial concerning the deaths of the 3 people in 2010, although initially trying to accuse individuals belonging to the anti-authoritarian political sphere, recently found the bank’s director, the branch’s manager and building’s safety officer guilty for the deaths.
impoverishment’) may be an additional factor enhancing fears and urging people to act in order to safeguard what they still have (albeit with questionable outcomes).

Public and its enemies

Being the first country in the EU to enter this process, its citizens were the first to suffer from a large scale vilification by international actors who condemned everyone alike for ending up in this crisis. These accusations and self-guilt were also reproduced by local stakeholders, who argued that everyone had some responsibility for the crisis and building on the known problems of the Greek system.

At the same time, extensive tactics of ‘divide-and-rule’ were employed, whereby presenting one social or professional group as corrupt, ineffective, lazy or ridden with clientilism they managed to turn one group against another or against the public. As a result, the ‘public’ was slandering the group in question while the intended measures were easier to be accepted. By now, and after targeting several groups, both the employment of this tactic and its impact has been evident while possibilities of cross-groups alliances on a greater scale have been reduced. In this process, not only the specific groups but anyone who resisted the reforms was presented as an enemy of the public interest who doesn’t want to lose one’s privileges.

The notion of the public and of the public interest has been central in this process where the public interest has been equated with the repayment of debt (and with adhering to the reforms) irrespective of the consequences. In these terms and for the sake of the public interest, exceptional measures, policies and reforms ‘need’ to take place – including highly contested or illegal ones. Moreover, this public interest is disconnected from the well-being (or even liveability) of those consisting the public and is related only to financial-economic benefits for some.

(II)legalities

Defending the public interest is a constitutional value (not only in the case of Greece). Yet, the above-mentioned transformations of its meaning challenge both the inclusivity of the public and its constitutional significance. From the beginning, there were extensive debates about the constitutionality of the MoUs. Despite several experts highlighting its unconstitutional elements, in the end all of the MoUs were judged as constitutional, mainly due to the critical-ness of this emergency (and for the sake of the public interest). In terms of other legislative concerns, the large number of proposed legislation and the “necessary” speed of preparing and passing them
through the parliament has allowed for numerous amendments to be incorporated in irrelevant legislation and approved through the general Acts. As was illustrated before, this makes it inherently difficult to be aware or even find of all the legal changes, and thus to monitor them.

Similar to Bailey’s description of the ‘crisis regime’ established during the crisis in NYC, a number of institutions were established and unelected managers were put in place to ensure the implementation of the austerity measures and reforms (for example the institution responsible for the privatisation of public/state assets TAIPED). The Troika itself constitutes a prime example, an apparatus that challenges traditional notions of sovereignty. Yet another example has been the appointment of unelected ‘experts’ as ministers or even as the Prime Minister; a recipe replicated in other countries in crisis as well.

Besides this, what has also become evident by now is the far-reaching reduction of numerous hard-fought rights (i.e. labour rights or welfare) and liberties as a result of the enforced reforms (along with the already introduced repressive and control measures). In a context of increasing unemployment, poverty and homelessness (and stigmatisation) coupled with the minimisation of welfare and public services, several well-established rights are challenged and re-emerge as claims (see for example Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000 or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1966) while they also raise the question if enforced poverty / impoverishment constitutes a violation of human and/or other rights.

4. Conclusion

Crisis has been a recurrent description of the situation experienced by many cities and countries around the world; albeit attributed to different causes. Perceived as a ‘rupture’ of an otherwise working system, the evocation of crisis rarely challenges in depth assumptions or ‘truths’ about a given system and its modus operandi. This has been evident also in the latest – financial-economic – crisis which, despite voices discussing or demanding structural changes, has limited reference to the inherent problems of the broader system. Moreover, the prevalent economic-ness of this crisis, predefines the terrain of plausible crisis-resolution approaches.

The emergency inherent in the notion of the crisis, besides describing the critical-ness of the problems, transforms the crisis into an excuse for ‘exceptional’ measures whereby emergency management and governance regime that tends to be more permanent that temporary are established. Thus crisis in both embedded and employed as a governance technique since, as Krugman (2012) argued, the point is “using the crisis not resolving it”.


Within the interplay of governance and urban (but not only) crises, four elements can be identified that constitute both notions that are mobilised and tactics or processes of governance: (a) emergency, (b) fear and its politics, (c) public and its enemies and (d) defining (il)legalities. This paper tried to illustrate how these notions become governance tactics of what has been termed as ‘the crisis of the centre of Athens’ and to point out some of the risks they entail as these have been manifested in the case of Athens.

The point of this analysis is not to delegitimize personal, collective or public insecurities and fears but to disentangle the processes that built on them and shape the framework of governing urban crisis. Moreover, as Shirlow and Pain (2003) wrote concerning politics of fear, there is a need to politicise crisis and its politics in order to unveil the consequences that such politics entail for people and places; consequences that may lead to increased problems and more extreme situations.
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