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PhD THESES

URBAN SPACE AND SOCIAL NETWORKS IN TIMES OF CRISIS. A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EXARCHIA NEIGHBOURHOOD OF ATHENS

Monia Cappuccini[*]

Austerity versus democracy: the contemporary urban landscape increasingly seems to be determined by this opposition, which is redefining cities and undermining their future. On the one hand, public policies dictated by bailouts and economic programs planned, decided and managed by financial institutions at a supranational level; on the other, social movements emerging during the crisis across the globe at a local level in public spaces, embodied a significant critique of both the dominion of austerity and the model of representative democracy. The debate between these opposite factions is shaping urban space in terms of conflict, revealing at the same time the political nature of the crisis as a sovereignty issue.

Entirely framed in the present day, as well as in the sphere of global-local dynamics, this thesis had an in-depth look at the "age of resistance" in Greece. The spatial setting is provided by the neighbourhood of *Exarchia* which, since its origins in the late 19th century, has stood out as a historical space of political conflict, alternative culture and anarchist and anti-authoritarian activism within the capital of Greece. This research firstly identified the grassroots mobilizations that have recently emerged in it as a response to the economic crisis. With this purpose, I stepped into the neighbourhood looking at it as "an area of cultural improvisation" (Graeber, 2012), where social actors interplay and re-invent tactics and strategies of opposition aimed at consolidating and reinforcing reciprocal communitarian bonds.

*PhD thesis in Urban Planning, DICEA Universiy La Sapienza of Rome, in partnership with the National Centre for Social Research (EKKE), Athens.

Secondly, research portrayed how these urban processes have developed and in turn framed anti-neoliberal discourse in the neighbourhood, thereby renewing as a whole the pact between citizens and politics. With this aim, I adopted the concept of "resistance identity" as the main guideline for my investigation (Castells, 2010). Thirdly, emphasizing how the political and social use of Exarchia exposes the production of a conflictual and resistant urbanity, this case-study has been utilized as a strategically key space aimed at recounting Athens as a relevant hub for incubating social movements during the IMF/EU/ECB era. On the basis of this latter aim, I posited a more extensive meaning of the concept of "the right to the city" (Lefebvre, 1968); rather than its traditional usage, I turned to its larger meaning as "the right *through* the city" (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012).

By revisiting the urban space of Athens with an eye to the governance implemented during the Memorandum period, I argued that the Greek capital has been assigned a leading position by neoliberal power in the latter's attempts to reorganize itself. In particular, I named the enforcement of this project of dominion "auste-city", that is a model for governing the economic and urban crisis through the combination of privatization programs and bio-political processes.

Generally speaking, this thesis has been inspired by "the method of crack (as) the method of crisis" (Holloway, 2012). Due to my own socio-anthropological background, essentially I developed an ethnographic view of social movements in Exarchia on the basis of fieldwork which lasted over two years, from November 2012 to early 2015. In spatial terms, research primarily took place along a small pedestrian road found quite close to Exarchia Square, named Tsamadou Street, where various social centres and political activities are located. One of these centres is the "Steki Metanaston", literally the "migrants' house", which is involved in providing support for refugees and irregular migrants, that I regularly frequented during my period of research. During at least two consecutive sessions I attended courses in Modern Greek for migrants here, and for this reason the Steki gradually became the operational base for my investigations in Exarchia. Right next door, other social centres and locations involved in social activities are found: the building at number 15 is an occupied space used by the Residents' Initiative, the Social Solidarity Network and other local groups; right in front of it stands a small garden which is also self-managed by the various collective revolving around Tsamadou Street, while the basement at number 10/a is the headquarters of Asteras Exarchion, the local sports club, active since 1928. Within their own specifici-

ties, activities and identities, all these places give the distinct impression of an atmosphere of sociability and togetherness, which is palpable all around this small pedestrian street. Basically this thesis recounted this climate and its environment based on reciprocity, going into the details of each social space, describing their usage and activities while interacting with the social protagonists involved.

The main research methods utilized techniques such as participant observation (that in turn developed into participatory research-action in "Piso Thrania", the teachers' collective that organises courses for migrants at the "Steki Metanaston"); observations and data collection (at least thirty semi-structured interviews were carried out, above all with the activists from the various social spaces and political groups revolving around Tsamadou Street, in addition to social protagonists, e.g. writers, anarchists and researchers, who had gained experienced of and/or expressed knowledge of and affinity with the area of Exarchia); visual tools supporting the traditional ethnographic methods used in the investigation (firstly by photos taken during the period dedicated to fieldwork, and secondly an 11-minute video that I shot and edited, using my iPhone as a non-professional tool entitled: Wings of Exarchia (https://archive.org/details/Clip20130713230329).

The thesis is organized into nine chapters, which unfold according to a sort of road trip through the spatial layout of the neighbourhood. In the first chapter I framed Exarchia within the urban space of Athens and outlined how its 'distinct character' is due to its central urban position, its social composition and its historical relevance in the city's struggles, through to its current lively atmosphere, alternating between politics and 'entertainment'. In the second chapter I lingered for a while in one of the most symbolic places of Exarchia, the Polytechnic School, accompanied by members of the Encounters Athens researchers' collective. In chapter 3 I made my real entrance into the neighbourhood, through the main entrance of Exarchia Square, thus attempting to illuminate both its dark and bright side. In the fourth chapter I headed straight towards Tsamadou Street, to immerse my research in all the activities located in and around the "Steki Metanaston" (Network of Political and Social rights, El Chef, "Piso Thrania"). In their interviews, many activists also shared their experiences of urban anti-austerity mobilizations in Athens, e.g. Syntagma movement and 'the day of Marfin Bank', providing evidence as to these events. This central chapter also related my empirical work in Exarchia, subsequently describing the "joys and sorrows" of my research-action (largely concerning problem involving language) and the most notable issues that emerged from my con-

tact and relations with migrants (e.g. urban racist narratives in Ayios Panteleimonas based on the rise of Golden Dawn's presence in this neighbourhood, and the national politics of spatial exclusion in Athens and Greece in the age of the crisis). In the fifth chapter I stepped inside the 'occupied' building found adjacent to the "Steki", knocking at the doors of the Residents' Initiative, the Social Solidarity Network and Navarinou Park, whose social and political activism takes place in (or is tied to) this location. In chapter 6, I was welcomed to Asteras Exarchion's headquarters, discovering that their supporters have had some of the most grounded experiences of teamwork and affection for the neighbourhood. In chapter 7, I moved my attention from Tsamadou Street to the entire area of Exarchia, discovering the wild style of its underground culture by way of the graffiti flourishing on its walls. Chapter 8 focused on the events of December 2008, which I examined following the evolution of 'Greek fire' from its recent 'eruptions' through to the fatal 'rupture' that came about during those days of riots and revolts following Alexandros Grigoropoulos's murder. Lastly, chapter 9, I revisited the urban space of Athens on the basis of the policies implemented during the economic crisis, thus outlining and detailing the model of austecity. In addition, stressing the concept of spontaneity (Leontidou, 1990, 2012, 2014) I depicted the Greek anti-austerity mobilizations' *joie de vivre* as a counter-discourse to the stigmatization of Southern Europe.

I successfully defended this Thesis in June 2015 at University La Sapienza of Rome, earning the additional title of *Doctor Europaeus* as result of the international partnership established with EKKE. Some of these issues, however, I have already presented in various international conferences.

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