

Commoning Spaces of Social Reproduction

Citizen-led welfare infrastructures in crisis-ridden Athens

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Infrastructures of Caring Citizenship
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Abstract

The on-going crisis in Greece and the austerity project have brought about extensive transformations of the society and everyday people's lives. The state welfare structures and the family have been severely hit, resulting in the displacement of great segments of the population to the margins of society and the emergence of new forms of exclusion. This context of increasing precariousness and break down of social rights and welfare is indicative of a crisis of *social reproduction*, which today appears as specifically urban. Yet, as a response to the violent attacks on people's livelihoods, a myriad of citizen-led solidarity initiatives have emerged in the country's main cities, seeking to re-organise *social reproduction* on a self-managed and mutual help basis, outside (or alongside) the official structures of welfare and the family. This paper focuses on Athens, a city where the different aspects of this crisis concentrate and become more clearly patent. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork in two case studies; *O Allos Anthropolos Social Kitchen*, and *City Plaza Refugee Accommodation Centre*, it will be argued that these citizen-led welfare infrastructures are opening a possibility for a new urban paradigm driven by the politics and spatiality emerging in/through these *common spaces of social reproduction*.

Keywords

Greece - Athens - Social reproduction - Commoning - Citizen-led welfare infrastructures

The on-going crisis in Greece has brought about extensive transformations of the society and everyday people's lives. The way in which the crisis is being managed by the European institutions and the successive national governments hallmarks a process of expanding economic liberalisation, which has been unfolding in Europe over the last three decades. Under the premise of austerity as the only possible project for economic recovery, a long-term state of emergency has been set up to legitimise the enforcement of a series of market-driven policies, which devastating impacts on the main long-established institutions of welfare provision of the Greek society. The state welfare structures and the family have been severely hit, resulting in the displacement of great segments of the population to the margins of society and the emergence of new forms of exclusion.

This context of rising precariousness and break down of social rights and welfare is indicative of a crisis of *social reproduction*. Coming from the Marxist and feminist traditions¹, the notion of *social reproduction* refers widely to the material and social maintenance of a group of people and their social bonds on a daily basis, and the regeneration of that society generationally. Throughout the contemporary capitalist world, more and more people are facing growing difficulties to secure their means of living, as the main institutions bearing and organising the set of reproductive functions are today crumbling. Today, the crisis of *social reproduction* has acquired a global scale expanding along all capitalist societies, and enhancing those forms of organising the material and social sustenance of these societies grounded in gender, class and ethnic inequalities (Comas d'Argemir, 2016).

Cities, as spaces of proximity, constitute the principal settings where the organisation of *social reproduction* and care needs become materialised. Reproduction functions are articulated differently depending on the urban morphology, which also creates different dynamics in the everyday of urban life (Comas d'Argemir, 2016). The neoliberal drive that has guided urban development in many cities of Southern Europe since the 1990s, has profoundly transformed the cityscape, fragmenting, segregating and polarizing the urban geography both physically and socially. Meanwhile, the current crisis and austerity have stretched the inequalities derived from that model of city-making, leading to more polarization, social distress and spatial degradation. In addition, over the last two years, thousands of displaced people seeking asylum in Europe, have arrived in cities since it is there where reception networks of family, friends or compatriots are first established. This phenomenon has just added new major challenges for cities to provide for urgent needs of refugees as well as strategies to ensure a long-term social integration. The contemporary crisis of *social reproduction* is therefore specifically urban.

Yet, cities are also the principal scenarios where people are strongly contesting the effects of the multi-faceted crisis. In Greece's cities, a myriad of citizen-led solidarity initiatives have emerged, seeking to re-organise *social reproduction* on a self-managed and mutual help basis, outside (or alongside) the official structures of welfare and the family. *Social reproduction* has become also a central realm of political struggle and reorganisation of economic and social life (Zechner, 2015). Social kitchens, social clinics and pharmacies, networks of care services, and accommodation centres for/with immigrants and refugees, they all compose a growing grassroots urban movement

¹ Marxism was the first theory to address the notion of "reproduction" in acknowledging domestic work as an economic factor key to the reproduction of the workforce and the capitalist relations of production. Since the 1970s, feminism has sought to extend the Marxist critique to the market economy and the relations of exploitation upon which it develops to the family and the domestic sphere (also the "reproductive sphere"). Marxist feminists contend that the subordination of women is another form of oppression that serves the interest of capital, and it is maintained because of that. The burdens of labour and social reproduction rest fundamentally in the private domains of the family and the home, which are managed and maintained by women.

Recently, the feminist theory of social reproduction is being re-addressed and reviewed in part of a response to the critical challenges that the on-going austerity project is posing on the global North. The 2011 Historical Materialism Conference in London saw the launch of a Marxist-Feminist set of panels, laying the groundwork for a special issue on Social Reproduction Feminism (HM vol. 24-2) recently released in 2016.

providing practical solutions to meet basic daily needs, as well as local strategies to safeguard the means of living.

Among the extensive variety of solidarity initiatives, this paper draws specific attention to two of them in Athens: the social kitchen *O Allos Anthropos (The Other Person)* and the accommodation centre for refugees *City Plaza*.

O Allos Anthropos (The Other Person) Social Kitchen

The social kitchen *O Allos Anthropos (The Other Person)* was initiated in 2012 by a particular individual; Konstantinos Polychronopoulos. The primary aim was to provide free food for any person in need. The project started growing as some friends and new volunteers got engaged and decided to daily place the kitchen on different public spaces. They would cook there and eat the meal together with the people they served. Today, the initiative counts on twelve other kitchens across Greece and other countries, as well as a space set up in the area of Metaxourgeio (Central Athens). The space has a kitchen and a warehouse, and also serves as a shelter for homeless people, offering free baths and night accommodation.

Food distribution has been the most prominent solidarity activity since the start of the crisis. Social kitchens constitute the underpinning infrastructure of many other initiatives of solidarity, such as the distribution of clothing or medicines. Beyond their primary goal, initiatives like *O Allos Anthropos* foster a form of sociality that attempts to break social isolation, and the despair and embarrassment produced by the individualisation of the problems.

City Plaza Refugees Accommodation Centre

In April 2016, several groups of activists from the political Left and a group of refugees came together and squatted an abandoned hotel in the area of Victoria (Central Athens). Up until now, the hotel has been providing accommodation for around four hundred people who seek asylum in Europe, among them, one hundred and sixty children. The “squat” or the “house”, as residents refer to it, operates as a self-managed and self-funded housing community. Different working groups to meet daily needs and also organise political actions bring together local activists, international volunteers and refugees. The squat is self-sustained by economic and in-kind donations of food, hygiene and cleaning products, clothing, toys and other equipment for children.

Along with *City Plaza*, there are around a dozen buildings in Athens that have been occupied to shelter displaced people. These centres are a practical answer from the grassroots to the repressive UE border policies and the great deficiencies of a programme of refugees’ relocation, which entails multiple exclusions and human’s rights violations. In their day-to-day practice (and not exempted from multiple tensions and difficult challenges) they are seeking to construct and maintain spaces of solidarity, mutual help and common struggles among people from different origins and backgrounds.

The emergence of these citizen-led welfare infrastructures has gone hand in hand with the creation of *common spaces* (Stavrides, 2014), set up through spatial rearrangements and re-definitions of the urban space. By temporary and makeshift arrangements on the public space, some initiatives create spatial-temporal scenarios of encounter, exchange and deliberation. Everyday when *O Allos Athropos* collective sets up the “kitchen” on the square, they reactivate its function as a social space, intensifying the interactions and expanding them in time. The informal arrangement of just a table and a big casserole reinstates a space of conviviality that challenges the urban enclosures and privatisations emerged in the crisis.

This type of social practices shape a form of fluid spatiality, producing urban space in a non-planned and indeterminate fashion. The spaces created emerge always unstably and often in dispute, subjected to the permanent negotiation among the members of each group, newcomers and external agents. Ambivalent as they are, they become vulnerable to internal disagreements, as well as to external attempts of criminalisation or co-optation by either the public authorities or private (often commercial) interests.

The practices by these emerging organised groups usually overspill the physical borders of the original or primary setting of action, expanding, contracting and disseminating in the city space at different moments and in varying forms. The spatial contours of these new communities appear always in relentless fluctuation. In this manner, when the people of *City Plaza* take to the streets to demand rights for migrants and refugees, set up an assembly or a party in Exarchia square, or occupy a vacant site for children to play, their actions temporarily craft a new spatiality of diffuse borders which emerges only in motion. The same occurs as *O Allos Anthropos* kitchen migrates from square to square over the week, everyday setting up a new space which has no clear demarcation.

In reintegrating caring and reproductive activities (now collectivised or commonised) in the realm of the urban public, these usually privatised activities re-emerge as political, while conversely, the public space is rendered domestic. Kitchens and dining rooms re-emerge on the streets and squares, while those move to the living rooms and common spaces in the squatted accommodation spaces across the city. In the mornings, the reception hall at *City Plaza* becomes a barbershop. The staircase connecting the different floors of rooms turns into a playground in the afternoon when children arrive from school. And at night, the living room or the rooftop transforms into an open cinema. In the same changing fashion, the intimate spaces of the bedrooms transform also into improvised kitchens where meals and tea are shared with neighbours and visitors. As such, an extended and varying gradation from private to public and vice versa is established, challenging that discriminatory spatial separation of functions that the Modernist paradigm came to canonize.

In reinstating negotiation and decision-making practices as well as self-keeping and maintenance of an extended public space, these citizen-led welfare infrastructures expand the space of politics (Vaiou, 2014) and originate new political subjects. Through an active engagement in everyday matters of survival and resistance in the urban, these emerging non-homogeneous collectivities are laying the groundwork for

the potential emergence of a new urban culture that places solidarity, interdependence and self-organisation at the centre of urban social life. As spatial practices, their daily activities produce urban space through an undetermined, organic and permeable spatiality that challenges the long-established functional separations as well as the socio-spatial segregations and recent new urban enclosures created during the crisis. A possibility emerges thereby, although yet modestly and in a precarious manner, for a possible new urban paradigm stemming from an alternative form of organising *social reproduction* from the urban grassroots.

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