

Καθεστώτα κρίσης και αναδύομενα κοινωνικά κινήματα στις πόλεις της Νότιας Ευρώπης

Crisis regimes and emerging social movements

Citizens Committee of Exarcheia

9 Φεβρουαρίου 2013

The neighborhood of Exarcheia has its own unique characteristics that set it apart from other areas. It is located two steps away from the commercial and administrative center of Athens, and it has a lot of public buildings, universities, and museums. Many forms of cultural, spiritual and recreational activities take place next to each other. It is a place for ideas, art, political thinking, and the development of radical social initiatives. Radical, revolutionary ideas form in the neighborhood. The four historical universities of Athens surround the neighborhood and make it a gathering place for students, artists and professionals. The area houses organizations, printing houses, publishing houses, musical instrument makers, and many spaces dedicated to the Arts & Letters. Over the last century, the area has been a benchmark for important events in the country's history.

But Exarcheia is a neighborhood that bothers some. Regimental media and political power units have called it a "ghetto" and an "anarchist centre". At any opportunity Exarcheia is used as a platform for practicing state terrorism. Riot police squads enforce authoritarianism by cutting off whole streets, throwing chemicals in this largely residential neighbourhood, chasing immigrants, persecuting peddlers instead of the empowered people behind them, and finally by unduly persecuting and harassing citizens and visitors of the neighbourhood.

On top of that, over the last years, the area is constantly undermined and threatened by individuals who take advantage of the local's spirit of tolerance and insult feelings of ethos and vicinity. The results of the current crisis came to strengthen the climate of fear and authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, the people of Exarcheia are equipped with willpower, and solidarity. Resisting collectives keep appearing. Similarly, in 2007, a neighbourhood collective was created, the citizens' committee of Exarcheia. The committee functions in an anti-hierarchic way, without predefined roles in management, with an open assembly where everyone has a right to expression and decisions are taken collectively.

In the 6 years of its existence, the committee has brought together active locals to analyze the problems that arise from living in Exarcheia. Besides that, it has also carried a lot of events, discussions, projections, plays, games for children, give-away bazaars and more. It supports and participates in movements supporting

immigrants, women, homeless, unemployed, and of diversity. The committee's slogans are "we take the neighbourhood into our own hands" and "we go on the streets to defeat fear".

The trigger for the starting of the committee was the neighborhood joining forces to remove cellular communication antennas from buildings around the area. In the summer of 2007, through direct action of its members, the committee managed to deactivate four antennas, relieving locals from their harmful radiation.

Since then, action begun towards multiple different issues. These have marked the committee's history as it is: the improvement of every-day life, answering to the issue of police authority, re-using the Exarcheia square and Messologiou Street, removal of drug dealing, violence and delinquency, the transformation of a parking lot in Navarinou square into a park, and the creation of "Syn Chrono", a time bank for exchanging services.

We've been dealing with issues like hygiene in one of Athens' most abandoned areas, and recycling, in a neighbourhood that besides household material it could also recycle valuable material wasted by restaurants, bars and cinemas. We investigate the problem of traffic and parking, the social and environmental dimension of the problem, and alternative policies. We've put on a large amount of events in free spaces, interventions in pedestrian streets, discussions, informative campaigns, and interventions in the City council, demonstrations with wheelchairs, baby carriages etc (to show the impossibility of access to pedestrian walks). There has been an attempt for the designing and piloting of a recycling system in collaboration with the council but it proved fruitless due to the council's negligence.

Another important issue for the committee has been the dereliction of the Strefis Hill. It is a uniquely beautiful green space that this highly populous area really needs. The hill/park is decaying, dirty and abandoned. We have been doing symbolic cleaning projects of the Strefis Hill. 60 big rubbish bags got filled with trash and a big cardboard box alone got filled with used syringes. Afterwards, with the accompaniment of the Polytechnic Universities percussion band, we marched towards the council where we left the collected debris. In a very similar condition are a lot of pedestrian walks and small parks.

What really caused intense frustration was the death of pedestrians like a woman with her 5 year-old child that were killed when they had to walk on the street due to a car parked on the pavement, or Iro who was killed by a motorcycle on a pedestrian street. That triggered accumulated frustration and pedestrian streets were blocked; symbolic prohibitive street markings were created, as well as the attempt of audio mapping/ the area.

Over the last years in Exarcheia, there is a methodical neglecting packing of drug addicts in central parts of the area, abandoning the citizens to live between gangs and mafias and the unstoppable use and trafficking of heroin in parks and pedestrian walks, resulting in the forming of ghettos, cars set on fire, bullying, robberies in small shops and kiosks. And the police state remains. In spite of continuous demonstrations of disapproval coming from the majority of locals, the police special

forces keep stationing themselves and move around various parts of our area, while the practical usage of chemicals continues to happen at every small occasion.

A few days after the murder of Aleksandros Grigoropoulos by a police man in Exarcheia, the committee re-circulated posters of its base demands for the polices immediate withdrawal. A memorial gathering/demonstration took place on the spot of the event, as well as a large protest of about a thousand people outside the Exarcheia police station.

We get further informed by lawyers about the usage of chemicals and proceed with formal law suits. More demonstrations from the square towards neighbourhood streets. Members of our committee give a press conference about police violence in the area and many locals give testimonials about their experience of police assault, even in their own houses. We organize a series of events with an aim to re-claim the Exarheia square, including theatrical plays, poetry night, games for children.

We also take action to remove drug dealing from the square, in co-operation with other collectives. That includes shadow theatre, table football tournament, workshops on composting and creating green city roofs, concerts, and a big interventional fiesta in the square. In collaboration with the Navarinou park.

Now about the parking-park!

On March 7th 2009 the parking owned by the States Technical Chamber, which was located on Z.Pigis and Navarinou corner, ceased to exist and in its place the park of Navarinou was born. We began the efforts and demonstrations that lead to this turnaround on February 21st 2009. A lot of happenings took place on the ex parking premises coupled with a large campaign in order to inform and alert the locals on in order for all of us to work towards reach a common goal. That was nothing more than for the neighborhood to have a park used by the residents, kids, a place for people to meet and spend time with each other and also for events to take place.

Finally on March 7th 2009 people, neighbours, families, residents and not took over the parking premises and modification work of turning the parking into a park started immediately by the people!.

We break the asphalt with drills and hammers, unload truck-fulls of soil, plant trees and flowers, and celebrate. People's participation and dynamic is exceeds all expectations, and the park is born.

Already beginning from the 2nd day of its operation the park was autonomous and self sufficient. Its general assembly set its character: self-managed, anti-hierarchic, anti-consumerist. committee continues to support the park and its operation up until today and many of its members also participate in the park's general assembly.

The park is constantly developing every day, it's a place of creativity, emancipation and resistance, open to political and cultural, anti-consumerist and other forms of activities. It ultimately claims to be a garden of the neighborhood, cancelling limits of

age, origin, educational level, social and financial status.

The conditions of the current crisis have affected the committee in various ways. For one thing they forced us to become stronger and more dynamic. Our chances for free expression have been constantly limiting, and the committee forms such a platform of expression. Due to unemployment, more people have the time to give to committee initiatives, and in such a way we decided to form our time bank, "Syn Chrono" which is our most recent initiative and the last one I'll be mentioning today. It is a network for exchanging services and it holds a very important practical role, since it can cover basic needs of every household without the mediation of money. At the same time, through this project, we can also discover and develop new skills, and most importantly communicate with each other and create bonds of solidarity. We've all come to understand that we can only get through, by being active together.

Our assembly for the committee and a self-managed café happen in the occupied building of 15 Tsamadou Street, and in the summertime it moves to the building's garden.

Before coming here to speak we asked ourselves again, why do we spend time and energy in this initiative? What do we gain from it?

Gaining a better neighborhood is more like a starting-point, and it's actually not always exactly the case. Maybe it would be more correct to say that we get to know each other and create bonds.

Living in an urban environment with almost non-existent social relations, deterioration of morals, seclusion and a strong consumerist norm, what the committee offers is not just support, like we would initially expect. We come to realize that we can build the road towards living the way we want, and start existing in a way that suits us better.