



Contentious spatialities in an era of austerity: Everyday politics and 'struggle communities' in Athens, Greece



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ABSTRACT

Opposition to austerity politics manifested through mass mobilizations and the 'squares' movement' in Athens over the past few years constitute key 'moments' in contemporary social movement debates. Nevertheless, the dispersal and grounding of an emergent bottom-up democratic politics in everyday life contexts and across neighbourhoods in the following period still remain analytically nascent. This paper addresses the key role of everyday politics in broader contestation and articulations of alternatives to austerity through the notion of 'struggle communities'. First, it shifts the analysis of social movement, from 'moment' to 'process' and the quotidian, constructed at the neighbourhood level. Second, through a case study of a local campaign in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, it locates the spatiality of struggle communities and their processual, often contradictory, constitution. Third, it discusses the possibilities and limitations for an alternative community politics to emerge and potential links to broader struggles in an era of deepening austerity in Europe and beyond. The paper methodologically draws on participatory ethnographic research conducted in Athens, Greece between 2012 and 2013.

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Introduction

On the almost stagnant waters of everyday life there have been mirages, phosphorescent ripples. These illusions were not without results, since to achieve results was their very raison d'être. And yet, where is genuine reality to be found? Where do the genuine changes take place? In the unmysterious depths of everyday life!

Lefebvre, H. (2014: 157) *The Knowledge of Everyday Life*

The past few years have witnessed a series of mass mobilizations across the world in response to the global financial crisis and austerity politics. From public spaces' occupations in European cities, to the 'Occupy' movement in the US, emergent contentious politics have drawn public attention and triggered heated debates amongst scholars and media analysts. Most of relevant scholarship focused on the designated spatial practices and temporalities within occupations, encampments and mass protests. Arguably, however, little attention has been so far to the development of this dynamic in the period following the end of occupations and mass protests. In other words, whatever happened to "the new ways of

being, saying and acting in common" (Karaliotas, 2016) that emerged out of the occupations? This paper contends that a discussion on the 'post-squares/Occupy' period of political activity and, in particular, on the dispersal and grounding of activist practices developed since, becomes crucial in furthering interpretations of contemporary social movements. I suggest that a focus on the everyday practices of activism, drawing on the sphere of social reproduction and grounded in neighbourhood/community contexts, offers for renewed understandings of the spatialities of struggle and potential alternatives to austerity. Subsequently, it is within this analytical shift-from seeing social movement as 'event' or 'spectacle' to understanding social movement as a 'process' grounded in the 'everyday' and 'quotidian'- that theoretical nuance can be produced.

Through the case of Athens, Greece I aim to show that the neighbourhood serves as a key site of struggle, hence becomes a key spatial unit of analysis for contemporary social movement scholarship. Moreover, drawing on the case of Exarcheia, an Athens city center neighbourhood historically prominent for the development of social movements, the grounding of struggle and the production of alternatives to austerity in everyday practices of activism requires a re-thinking of 'politics and place/community', developed here through the notion of 'struggle communities'. In doing so, the paper contributes to recent debates on re-thinking

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crises, by focusing on subversive practices and contestation articulated 'from below' (e.g. Arampatzis, 2016a; Featherstone, Strauss, & MacKinnon, 2015; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014). In this respect, the city of Athens offers crucial insights into the construction of 'disruptive subjectivities' (Bailey, Clua-Losada, Huke, Rimeria Almandoz, & Rogers, 2016) vis-à-vis a more than an economic crisis and deepening austerity. The paper also aims to methodologically extend such approaches, through reflecting on the active participation of the researcher in struggles *on the ground*, solidarity-building and collaboration with activist others.

The arguments raised in the paper draw on ethnographic fieldwork and data gathering in the 'Athens of crisis' between 2012 and 2013. The key research objectives included an analysis of emergent forms of contestation during and due to austerity in Greece and Athens, by especially considering the everyday forms of struggle and solidarity-making that developed in urban space (Arampatzis, 2014). Ethnographic fieldwork involved my participation *in* and collaboration *with* 2 neighbourhood-based groups in Exarcheia, Athens city center, namely the Residents committee and their Time bank project- and the Solidarity network of Exarcheia.¹ Participant observation, field notes, archival research and 53 semi-structured personal interviews in total with activist-members of the two groups, as well as participants in other Exarcheia initiatives, residents, artists and activists from distant Athenian neighbourhoods were the main data gathering methods during my 8-month stay in Athens. Following these groups' weekly assembly meetings, public events, regular actions in and beyond the neighbourhood and participation in city-wide and broader campaigns, I gained a significant in-depth knowledge of their day-to-day workings and practices of activism. This in turn provided for analytical insights into the articulations of contestation to the crisis and austerity 'from below' and the everyday embodied practices of struggle and solidarity that were constitutive of broader social mobilizations occurring at the time in Athens.

'Place' and 'community' as re-emergent sites of struggle

Drawing on key contributions on the spatial practices of contestation and the 'politics of place'- or a politics developing 'in', 'out of' and 'across' places (e.g. Agnew, 1987; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1996), a re-conceptualization of 'place' and 'community' as emergent sites of contemporary struggles is considered crucial in order to locate the unit of analysis of contemporary struggles in contexts of austerity.

The spatialized dimensions of socio-political processes, hegemonic power, resistance and subversion offer grounds for developing an account of 'spatiality' as, first, the modality through which contradictions are normalized and naturalized, space being the medium and the message within processes of domination and subordination; and, second, 'spatiality' as site of resistance and struggle, imbued with meanings, symbols, identities and people's contingent experiences (Pile & Keith, 1997). In particular, the notion of a 'spatiality of resistance' (Pile & Keith, 1997; Routledge, 1997) involves the everyday spatial practices of resistance grounded in places; new meanings, alternative knowledges, identities and symbolisms of place produced through these practices; and the possibilities for such practices to occupy, subvert and create alternative spaces from those defined by oppression and exploitation.

Arguably, this account opened up nuanced understandings of power relations situated in places and introduced a framework for looking into the agency of subaltern struggles. In this respect, everyday practices of resistance and their multiplicities hold an empowering potential within broader social processes and ought to be treated as such, rather than thinking of struggles as unified abstractions. At the same time, it calls for a re-thinking of 'place' as a site of struggle, hence potentially crucial for investigating the dynamics of contemporary contentious politics, as well as broader political alternatives. In turn, this links to current debates on the role of 'the local' in articulating counter narratives and progressive politics, or what Featherstone, Ince, Mackinnon, Strauss, and Cumbers (2012) termed 'progressive localisms', in the face of deepening austerity across Europe and beyond.

The above become highly relevant for looking into the post-Occupy phase that social movements entered since 2012. Several scholars have discussed the waves of mass mobilizations in cities around the world-from Spain, to Greece, the USA and the UK- that articulated opposition to the ways the financial crisis has been managed by the political elites and articulated demands around 'real democracy', enacting at the same time direct democratic practices in occupied squares (Caffentzis, 2012; Kaika & Karaliotas, 2016; Leontidou, 2012; Merrifield, 2013). Notably, however, little attention has been paid so far to the ways in which the prevalent democratic bottom-up politics that emerged out of these occupations were later diffused across space and became grounded in local contexts and everyday practices of activism-e.g. neighbourhood-based initiatives, local assemblies and networks of mutual aid and solidarity. As Wills (2013) notes, there has been a tendency towards the re-territorialisation of politics in the contemporary world. She goes on to stress the need to rethink the importance of 'place' in the formation of face-to-face social relations and the vitality of political life; as well as analytical tools to look into the *practising* of place, as a grounded process of negotiating intersecting trajectories, identities, commonalities and differences (Wills, 2013).

This paper contributes to this debate by providing an understanding of contentious spatialities grounded in everyday practices in contexts of austerity. Through the case of Exarcheia, Athens, I aim to re-conceptualize place and community as re-emergent sites of struggle, everyday activism and alternative practices vis-à-vis crisis and austerity. It is important to note here that such emergent forms of re-territorialized struggle are themselves re-defining the concept of 'territory', less of a bounded unit or signifier of state sovereignty and power embedded in state structures and towards an account of 'territoriality', or the ground upon which struggle unfolds, namely the physical 'terrain of resistance' (Routledge, 1993); as well as the multiple meanings, symbols, identities and representations of 'place' and 'community' that are formative of the social practice of struggle. As Zibechi (2012) noted, contemporary movements and their practices in the everyday, call for the development of new analytical tools, vocabularies and 'languages', empirically grounded and informed by neighbourhood-based struggles.

Subsequently, looking into notions of 'community' in relevant scholarship, several implications arise that prompt a re-thinking and 'opening up' of the idea itself; as well as of the ways in which it becomes re-constituted through struggle in contexts of austerity. In this sense, it is crucial to de-mystify the ideal of community as a pure, unified entity, identity and belonging. Drawing on the seminal work of Iris-Marion Young (1990), the ideal of community has been often juxtaposed as an alternative to individualism and the politics of atomism and competitiveness. In this respect, 'community' represents an affirmation of a sociality/ social subject constituted through sets of relations and interactions that involve commonality, mutuality, bonding, sharing, reciprocity and solidarity. The politics of community that stem from this ideal

¹ While the former's activity dates back to 2007, the formation of the Time bank in 2012 came as a direct response to austerity, creating a local network of exchanges among residents. At the same time, the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, also formed in 2012, is a direct outcome of the post-squares dispersal of activism in neighbourhood assemblies and solidarity initiatives.

proclaim the immediacy of face-to-face, unmediated social relations, and direct democracy participation and control, based on transparent interactions secured through co-presence in space and time. Nevertheless, according to Young (1990), this politics of community can also denote the silencing and denial of difference within this 'comfort of a self-enclosed whole'. In other words, this politics becomes a denial of politics itself, as it obscures antagonisms and normalizes relations of exclusion and oppression.

Thinking of urban communities in contexts of austerity and intensified commodification and control of urban space, what Stavrides (2015) terms 'the urban ordering of a city of enclaves', signifies a similar to the above spatial 'enclosure' of communities highlighted by Young (1990). This type of enclosure is imposed by mechanisms of normalisation that permeate socio-spatial everyday practices, developed simultaneously by forms of state power but also from below and beyond its reach, in and out of community politics that might even proclaim to be against it (Stavrides, 2015). In a similar vein, in their framing statement of the 'Kilburn Manifesto', Hall et al. (2015) draw the attention to the prevalence of the neoliberal project as a hegemonic 'common sense' that managed to embed itself, not only through 'hard' forms of power, such as legal systems, but also- and highly relevant for the construction of bottom-up community agency-through 'soft' forms of power that can be as effective in shifting social attitudes, identities and cultural representations. Nevertheless, common sense needs to be produced as well as maintained, hence it is a project as much as it is always at stake (Hall et al., 2015; Stavrides, 2015). In this sense, the analytical task of re-thinking a progressive community politics and broader political alternatives is to bring forward those subversive mechanisms that challenge the dominant, 'common sense' identity construction, and sustain cross-articulations of difference, both spatially and discursively.

Based on the above arguments, I suggest thinking of a community politics *relationally* constructed and outwards-expansive, rather than inwards-looking. This not only brings forward the complex power relations, antagonisms and contradictions underlying the constitution of communities, based on differences *among* and *within* collectivities and social groups; but also opens up a potential affirmation of identity based on inclusion, difference and heterogeneity. Key to this re-conceptualization is Nancy's (1991) and Agamben's (1993) complementary accounts of the 'inoperative community' and the 'coming community' respectively. In the first instance, thinking of a 'community without community' (Nancy, 1991) destabilizes nostalgic and romanticized notions of community as something lost and sought to be re-gained. Similarly to Young (1990), Nancy (1991) produces a critique by focusing on conceptions of community as an 'essence', a type of 'common sense' that constitutes a unified entity. In this sense, inclusion, belonging, or 'being-in', presuppose exclusion or 'being outside'. Rather, thinking of 'community without community', without an essence, or a blurring of the inside-outside binary, suggests the opening up of the notion of community, outwards expansive, through relations that cross-cut categories and identities of social groups and collectivities. As Devadas and Mummery (2007) argue, this re-constitutes community as 'active', meaning not already pre-existing, and 'activity', by emphasizing the practice of 'being-with' rather than one of 'being-in'. In this sense, community is conceived as a *process* of living and *being with* others, hence opens up to the possibility of outwards expansive relations, connections and networks.

Similarly, Agamben's (1993) 'coming community' is based on the idea of an 'inessential commonality', a 'common' that does not constitute an essence- or as Nancy (1991, p. 33) puts it 'the like (that) is not the same'. According to Whyte (2010), Agamben's (1993) 'coming community' sees the possibility in a

transformative community politics, in the 'here and now', as a new form of 'singularity' (Agamben's 'whatever being') and a 'new use of the self' emerges, distanced from commodified means of reproduction and naturalized identities and mechanisms of inclusive exclusion. Again, this key conceptualization of community points towards a less fixed and more open community politics, rid of essentialist notions of belonging and based on a 'being together'. Nevertheless, as Whyte (2010) stresses, such re-thinking of transformative community politics, open to difference and contradictions, needs be contextualized and attentive to the ways in which forms of identity, e.g. social class, race, gender, sexuality etc., continue to signify differential and contested power relations.

Finally, looking into contemporary struggles and the ways in which they develop new forms of territorial organization, Zibechi (2010, 2012) draws on Latin American contexts to re-work an approach to place-based community politics. In respect to Bolivia in particular, Zibechi (2010) shows how the geographical dispersal of state power into community-based struggles, which played a key role in resisting and countering the outcomes of neoliberal policies during the 1980's, made it difficult for the state to exert control over these. At the same time, this dispersal produced renewed openings, social imaginaries and ways of collective living that employed and developed non-capitalist economic, social and cultural relations (e.g. informal, reciprocal, solidarity, family and 'human economies'). This view of 'communities-in-movement' departs from its anachronistic version of claiming back what is taken from the capitalist state and opens up to internal contradiction and ambivalences to inform a radical community politics, in co-operation to other modes of social organization (Zibechi, 2010, p. 138). Crucial in this account is an understanding of the possibility of fluidity and 'transversal connection' that lies in the dispersal and bottom-up re-constitution of state power into multiple communities. Regarding this, Zibechi (2010: 137, 138) notes that a 'community without the common', meaning against the dominant common sense, becomes a step forward, a 'coming-about' and produces dispersal of power, which combats its alienation into fixed and closed forms, into 'pure communities'. This conception of a bottom-up community politics based on simultaneous dispersal and cooperation resonates the arguments raised earlier, as it poses a critique and creative negation of that which fixes and shapes community as identity and belonging, namely neoliberal 'common sense', state power and institutions.

Re-thinking contestation to crisis from 'moment' to 'process': everyday practices of activism in Athens and Exarcheia

Seven years into the post-crisis period, triggered by the global collapse of financial markets in 2008, its repercussions are still more than evident on national and regional economies across Europe. Austerity has acted as the bitter medicine forced upon people to swallow, in order to deal with growing national and private debt, the collapse of housing markets and the absorption of banks' losses into fiscal budgets. The working and middle-classes in Spain, Portugal, Greece and the UK to name a few, have been caught up in a process of continuous impoverishment and dispossession of crucial public resources and social welfare that secured their social reproduction, especially in cities and metropolitan areas (Harvey, 2012; Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013). During this period, hegemonic rule, as per Gramsci, by and large broke with post-war consensus and, as Laskos and Tsakalotos (2013) pointed out, maintained its coercive power, by furthering the gains of those at the top and enforcing austerity on those at the bottom. The case of Greece, as regards the above processes, has been far from an exception to the rule of capitalist crises. The spiralling down of the economy and the rapid rise of the sovereign debt that followed the

2008 economic crash, the consequent austerity measures and a vicious circle of ‘debt-servicing through debt-generation’ not only deconstructed the mainstream rhetoric around a particularly ‘Greek crisis’, but also revealed the deeply uneven ways through which the Eurozone has been constructed (Arampatzis, 2016b; Hadjimichalis & Hudson, 2014; Laskos & Tsakalotos, 2013). The subsequent outcomes of austerity not only deprived already vulnerable groups from basic means of survival, such as public services and welfare, coupled with a housing crisis currently unfolding, but also created the grounds upon which precarity in work employment is considered a ‘blessing’ [sic] amongst the thousands unemployed (the youth unemployment rate exceeded 52% in 2016).

Arguably however, the above did not develop smoothly, rather the crisis triggered multiple resistances and contestation that managed to open up broader debates around social transformation and emancipation. A key ‘moment’ within such trajectories of urban contestation developing in Athens was the occupation of Syntagma square in the spring of 2011, alongside other ‘Occupy’ movements emerging at the time in Spain, the UK and the US. The occupation and encampment set up in front of the Parliament building in Athens city center raised issues of democratic representation, while, at the same time, became a laboratory of experimenting with collective self-organization, mutual aid and solidarity, practices of ‘direct democracy’ in assemblies and participatory decision-making. As Stavrides (2011) pointed out, Syntagma instigated a bottom-up process of collective emancipation through ‘praxis’ that became directly linked to the emergence of new political subjectivities. The everyday practices that sustained the Syntagma occupation (e.g. the distribution of tasks and responsibilities, the contribution of resources, time and effort to organize actions and public talks, the dissemination of information and communication with distant activists in Greece and beyond, solidarity-building among participants etc.) have gained the analytical attention of scholarship that sought to interpret the emergence of this ‘bottom-up democratic politics’ (Hadjimichalis, 2013; Kaika & Karaliotas, 2016; Karaliotas, 2016; Leontidou, 2012). I aim here to expand such approaches to include the dispersal of such everyday practices in neighbourhoods across Athens, a process that emerged out of and followed the forced eviction of the Syntagma occupation. Subsequently, I seek to shift the analysis of social movement as a ‘moment’ of intensified ‘spectacular’ mobilization and enhanced visibility in public space, towards an account that nuances the underlying ‘process’ of social movement (re-)construction, by grounding it in the quotidian and everyday practice of activism. Drawing on Lefebvre’s (2014: 645) dialectics, “the moment is born of the everyday and *within* the everyday (emphasis added). From here it draws its nourishment and its substance; and this is the only way it can deny the everyday”.

The convergence of activism at the Syntagma occupation was followed by the emergence of multiple neighbourhood-based groups—from ‘popular assemblies’² and various local initiatives, to solidarity networks and experiments with alternative means of

social and economic conduct, for example time banks and alternative currency networks, community cooking collectives, social clinics and several types of cooperatives. This type of intensified activity marked a new period of grounding certain practices of solidarity-building and mutual aid in local contexts and, at the same time, re-modelling ways of being and acting collectively in the everyday in order to deal with pragmatic social reproduction issues, such as unemployment, homelessness and poverisation. Such ‘common spaces’ (Stavrides, 2014), emerging in the Athens of crisis have crucially contributed to the building of new forms of collective struggle and social bonds among participants. Moreover, I suggest that such emergent activist spaces serve as laboratories for grounding, re-working and negotiating broader political alternatives in everyday life contexts (Arampatzis, 2016a). These involve alternative forms of social and economic activity, social/solidarity economy experiments, the development of reciprocal types of ‘human economy’ and non-commodified means of social reproduction (Graeber, 2011; Rakopoulos, 2014). Hence we can think of a ‘pragmatically prefigurative subjectivity’ (Huke, Clua-Losada, & Bailey, 2015) emerging *in and out of* such spaces that seeks to counter austerity and re-insert emancipatory practices and imaginaries into the everyday of the neighbourhood. These emergent spaces, which count for more than 400 locally based initiatives in 2016,³ are mainly concentrated in central metropolitan areas of Athens, as well as expand across suburbs and peripheral neighbourhoods.

Several of these are concentrated in the city center neighbourhood of Exarcheia, which served as a key methodological entry point of this research into the multiple initiatives that have emerged in Athens during the past few years. Besides being a hub for newly emergent activist spaces, Exarcheia holds its own distinct neighbourhood characteristics and a key symbolism within trajectories of social movements that have developed historically in Athens. Serving as a spatial reference of activism historically and an ‘incubator’ of political identities, Exarcheia holds a prominent role in the post-war collective imaginary of resistance and representations of social movements—from the Greek civil war battles between the government and the left-wing guerrillas, to the Polytechnic school occupation and the popular uprising against the military junta in 1973. The residential character of the area, combined with small-scale retail, the presence of University schools, publishing houses, intellectuals, artists, students and cultural hubs have contributed over the years to the development of an ‘alternative milieu’ in the area. The historical convergence of social movements in Athens city center areas, the cultivation of a disobedient alternative culture and the key geographical location of Exarcheia rendered this area a privileged site for activism to flourish. The physical and social spaces of the neighbourhood are daily inhabited by political activity, open assemblies and social events, taking place in the central square and pedestrian walks, in social centers, in rented, abandoned or occupied buildings. The time-spaces of this vibrant social and political activity are revealed through this excerpt from my field notes:

A walk around Exarcheia: despite the closing down of several small businesses due to the crisis, local meeting spots such as popular cafes concentrate most of the local social life ... The heart of all meeting spots on a Saturday morning is the open-air market on Kallidromiou street, a place where local activists choose to hang out, shop, give out leaflets, promote their campaigns and chat with passers-by on various issues. Surrounding cafes and local hangouts host afternoon discussions, often

² The term ‘popular assemblies’ refers to local neighbourhood groups formed in the period following the Syntagma occupation in the fall of 2011. These local assemblies in multiple neighbourhoods across Athens became directly linked to the Syntagma occupation as they were formed in order to transpose and disperse the meaning and practice of the occupation in local contexts. Several of these assemblies were soon transformed to solidarity initiatives, such as the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, dealing with the outcomes of austerity at the local level, for example collecting and distributing basic survival goods, as well as participating in housing related activism (campaigns resisting new housing taxation, blocking evictions and foreclosures etc.).

³ Source: ‘Solidarity for All’, solidarity4all.gr.

interrupted by people asking to know the specifics of upcoming social events and political actions. On Saturday evenings the neighbourhood is transformed to an alternative entertainment hub for Athens. The pavements, pedestrian walks and street corners of Exarcheia become meeting points for youth, who seek alternative hangouts and attend fundraiser concerts. Busy, vibrant, often overwhelmingly loud, Exarcheia often contrasts the decaying nearby city center areas, where withdrawal from public spaces due to the displacement of residents or fear of xenophobic racist attacks creates a sense of human absence. At the same time, this vibrant social and political lifestyle and the multiple events occurring on a weekly basis offer the opportunity of ongoing interactions among locals and visitors who spend time in the neighbourhood (field notes, Athens 2013).

At the same time, Exarcheia has been often portrayed in the media and mainstream public discourse as a 'no-go area', a place of 'social unrest' and an infamous stronghold of militant leftist politics. From clashes between anarchist groups and the police in the 1980's, to the 'flying anarchist species' [sic] discovered by a Greek television journalist reporting live on recent protests occurring in the area and black-hooded youth having a 'Molotov cocktail blast' (on top of a few rocks) on a Saturday night-out, Exarcheia has been repeatedly exemplified in media-produced imagery of activism as a 'bedazzling spectacle' for the public to consume. Arguably, this depiction has been perpetuated by certain activist practices that seek to reclaim an enclosed defensive territoriality *against* and *rid* of state power-often through violent means- and produce counter-narratives of Exarcheia as a 'liberated zone' and an 'anti-authoritarian enclave'. In this sense, the identity of Exarcheia has been historically constituted upon the interplay between domination and resistance and symbiotic, 'entangled' enclosures, which in turn produced hybrid, overlapping activist spatialities and modalities of the everyday rhythms of the neighbourhood, or what a local artist termed, a 'vineyard of activism' (personal interview, Athens, April 2013). I would argue however that this historically produced 'ordered space of vines' of Exarcheia and its binary representations of domination and resistance has been, to a significant extent, undergone a key transformative process over the past few years, through two key 'moments' of intense social mobilizations.

First, the riots of December 2008 erupted in Exarcheia following the killing of a teenager and spread across Athens, while protests took place in other Greek cities and in international solidarity events organized in several cities in Europe and beyond. According to Stavrides (2010) and Kallianos (2013) protestors in 2008 not only reclaimed public space, as both the site and subject-matter of urban contestation (e.g. streets, squares, public buildings and universities), but also contributed to the emergence of new political practices in the aftermath of the events, evident in multiple new activist spaces formed, squats and occupations of open and public spaces in Exarcheia and beyond. Subsequently, this 'eruptive' process triggered by the riots managed to create a rupture within the historically constructed identity of Exarcheia. As Stavrides (2010: 3, 4) noted, "most of December's collective acts escaped the enclosure characteristic of many previous struggles and spread out all over the city ... During the December days, the fantasy of a liberated enclave, which dominated and still dominates many urban struggles, lost most of its power. What kind of motivating image has replaced this fantasy?"

Before attempting to respond to this crucial question in the following section, the second key moment that further destabilized the enclosed identity and place-specific 'exceptionality' of Exarcheia was the Syntagma occupation and the squares' movement that spread across Athens and Greece. If the 2008 protests managed to

introduce practices that reclaimed urban space, in a way that *implicitly* [emphasis added] criticised established or situated identities (Stavrides, 2010), I would suggest that the squares' movement took this process, at least, one step further. Since we cannot interpret these two events in isolation from each other and the broader austerity context, I would also point out that potentially the latter would not have been made possible without the former. The occupation of Syntagma square and struggles that emerged since in Exarcheia and across Athenian neighbourhoods in response to the crisis and austerity, challenged and *explicitly* criticized established collective identities and historically entrenched means of representation and organizing. This transformative process, constituted during broader rapid societal developments under austerity, not only engaged previously passive subjects and spectacle consumers into a struggle *in* and *over* urban space, but also managed to refashion collective identities and introduce 'porous' subjectivities and practices (Stavrides, 2010), rendering in this way the 'exceptionality' of Exarcheia a parochial banality-in political and analytical terms.

Within the multiplicities of groups active in the area, the Residents' committee and the Solidarity network of Exarcheia represent the above crucial transformations within urban struggles that occurred during and due to austerity. The former being active since 2007 over local issues shifted its goals and function since 2012 and created a time bank project in order to form a type of local 'social' economy network of exchanges of services among residents. In this sense, already existing neighbourhood activism responded to pragmatic immediate social needs produced under austerity, such as loss of income and unemployment, and has managed so far to set in motion and deploy resources and social capital available in the neighbourhood. At the same time, the Solidarity network of Exarcheia was formed in 2012 as a successor of the popular assembly of the neighbourhood and being a newly formed initiative directly linked to the post-squares dynamic has focused on both ameliorative activities, for example solidarity to impoverished groups, and direct action linked to broader campaigns against housing evictions and confiscations. Hence, these groups signify representative cases of the post-squares period of activism, namely the grounding of struggle in everyday life practices of mutual aid and solidarity, in local contexts across Athens. Through solidarity-in-practice and cooperation with other activists and groups in Exarcheia, these initiatives managed to create mechanisms for the social reproduction of vulnerable individuals, enhancing in this way community bonds and securing social cohesion among residents. Additionally, these types of initiatives have created spaces where alternative, often non-commodified, types of social relations are cultivated, aiming to empower participants.

Over the past few years these groups, among several others across Athens, initiated campaigns and collective action that countered the many faces of austerity and built on narratives and practices as seeds for the constitution of an alternative politics, grounded in the everyday life of the neighbourhood. These not only problematized and subverted the historically configured enclosed identity of Exarcheia, but also, drawing on the local community and the immediacy of the everyday, strategically opened up to a scalar perception of struggle expanding outwards, materially and discursively.

Constituting 'struggle communities': the 'Exarcheia-in-movement' campaign

The idea of 'struggle communities' originates in a broader discussion around emergent contentious politics in Greece during the crisis, developed within the Autonomous social center assembly of Exarcheia and debated with activists from other groups in public

events and discussions organized in the area. In particular, a 'struggle community' ('koinotita agona' in Greek) refers to individuals and collectivities, i.e. activist groups, solidarity initiatives, social centers, non-aligned activists and residents etc., that seek to build on place-based collective forms of (self)-organization, co-operation and solidarity relations so as to enhance social ties and effect struggle. Crucial within this conceptualization are the connections pursued among groups at the neighbourhood level, as well as links and networking to distant local and non-local actors.

The idea of struggle communities is employed and developed here through the 'Exarcheia-in-movement' campaign in order to further the discussions that took place among activists in Exarcheia. Subsequently, it acts as a way to open up an ongoing dialogue between academic research and alternative knowledge produced *in the field*; and to contribute to these ideas through producing constructive critique and insights. Moreover, it becomes useful in conceptual terms, as it examines the agency and the processual constitution of an alternative community politics, grounded through everyday practices of activism at the neighbourhood level; and expanding outwards, through networks of solidarity and experiments with alternatives to austerity (Arampatzi, 2016a). In this sense, while grounded territorially, struggle and solidarity are constructed relationally and become connected to broader counter-austerity politics, through expansive action. Hence this idea nuances both an essentialist approach of a 'community of struggle' and a functionalist one of a 'community for struggle'. Also, it resonates scholarship debates discussed earlier and, particularly, Agamben's (1993) 'whatever being', or 'being as such' and 'being-with', as opposed to 'being-in'.

The 'Exarcheia-in-movement' campaign took place in Exarcheia, between the spring and autumn of 2013 and was later transformed through further actions in the spring of 2014. Starting as a local response of re-appropriating public space in the face of aggravating issues caused due to austerity, such as growing unemployment and poverty, neighbourhood decay, 'social cannibalism', police repression and drug trafficking, 'Exarcheia-in-movement' sought to bring together local groups, non-aligned activists and residents and build on solidarity relations and reciprocal communitarian bonds. In the past, these issues have been contested through local campaigns that sought to re-appropriate public spaces, organize and reclaim the central square and pedestrian walks from urban redevelopment policy, repressive tactics of police raids and substance trafficking.

Following these, in March 2013 the Residents' Committee of Exarcheia initiated a new round of in-group discussions, which led to the re-launch of a campaign in April 2013. This campaign focused on reclaiming and re-signifying the use of public spaces in the neighbourhood from exclusionary practices, towards opening up new material and discursive spaces for collective organizing, such as open-air markets organized in the central Exarcheia square, as well as open discussions and social events. In order to launch the campaign, initial contacts were made through personal networks of activists, overlapping members in more than one group and established relations to groups and individuals from past actions. This concentrated experience and know-how on setting up actions made possible the first contacts and a small network of groups was initially formed through an open assembly. This network involved the Residents Committee, the Solidarity Network, the Autonomous social center and activists from the Navarinou occupied park assembly. In the following period, more individual and group participants joined in the open assemblies, such as residents and several shop-owners of the area and activists from other local groups. Most of the actions organized at the time involved local demonstrations, dissemination of material and information and the organization of populated activities in public spaces e.g. concerts,

theatrical plays, bazaars, exhibitions, discussions etc. These actions had a two-fold goal: first, to reclaim public spaces and open access to the central square and pedestrian walks through physical presence; and, second, enhance community bonds among locals, groups, activists and other actors, such as social and professional clubs active in the area, through regular interactions and encounter during meetings and events.

The main goals and outcomes of this campaign in relation to the constitution of an alternative community politics 'in-the-making', inclusive and outwards expansive can be located in the following three areas: firstly, the production of narratives that re-signified the role of the neighbourhood relationally constituted through broader struggle. In this sense, local issues such as degradation and decay of public spaces in the area, unemployment and poverty among locals etc. were perceived and problematized through a broader political critique of the conjuncture and austerity politics. Discussing these, a member of the residents' committee highlighted that

Our task is to treat local issues as outcomes of the crisis and central government policies. For example, the decay of many city center areas, the collapse of several small businesses due to debt, violence, drugs etc.... all these do exist in our neighbourhood but are not place-specific necessarily ... our [the residents' committee] agenda has changed because we realize how the crisis has affected Exarcheia, as well as other areas. In this sense, new questions emerged as to how to work with other people in order to overcome the generalized fear and create resistance spaces across the city (personal interview, Athens, March 2013).

This spatial imaginary of the neighbourhood and the 'local' as more than particular and mutually constituted with broader processes (Massey, 1994) became a starting point for subverting the enclosed identity of Exarcheia. Additionally, it acted as a key discursive mechanism, or 'scalar frame' (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2008) that linked local issues to broader processes and introduced an expansive politics, through the multiplication of resistance spaces, beyond the spatiality of the neighbourhood. Therefore, we can conceptually grasp this as an attempt to form an expansive, alternative community politics and a process of 'scaling spatial politics' (MacKinnon, 2010).

A second key goal of this campaign was the effort to enhance encounters and interactions among local groups in order to effect cooperation and reclaim public spaces from exclusive practices, such as drug trafficking. This practice of building on communal bonds and cultivating reciprocal relations was spatially expressed in regular actions and open events organized in public spaces, such as the central Exarcheia square, the pedestrian walks of Tsamadou and Themistokleous and the Navarinou occupied park, as noted in my field diary:

Earlier this evening, instead of the weekly 'Exarcheia in movement' open assembly, a joint action was organized by the residents' committee, the solidarity network, the Autonomous social center and individual activists from the park and other groups in the area ... Themistokleous [the pedestrian walk adjacent to the central Exarcheia square] was populated for a few hours by activists, residents and musicians sharing food, drinks and ideas on how to re-inhabit the public spaces of the neighbourhood. This action, being part of the broader campaign around the re-appropriation of public space vis-à-vis commodification, police repression, drug trafficking and decay, managed to oust traffickers from the pedestrian walk in a non-violent way. The physical presence of people, the intensity of socialization and the spirit of reclaiming these spaces to the benefit and use of locals rendered this action highly successful in

unsettling the territorialities of exclusive practices and, consequently, the established identity of Exarcheia, as an exceptional place of social unrest (field notes, 'Exarcheia in movement', Athens, April 2013).

The types of spatial practices employed in this campaign, such as social events, open discussions, movie screenings, bazaars etc., opened up new spaces for locals and activists to re-appropriate certain areas of the neighbourhood from exclusion and repressive tactics and promoted a culture of collective organizing and cooperation from below, which involved the development of solidarity and trusting relations among participants. Subsequently, several local initiatives gained recognition, support and legitimacy from residents and participants in the campaign, while cooperation between groups was enhanced and further developed, for example the exchange of services between the Time bank and community cooking collectives for the unemployed and the poor and joint actions of solidarity, such as fundraisers and the collection of goods among the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, the Autonomous social center, the Residents' Committee and individual activists.

These practices that became grounded in the everyday through constant interactions in the neighbourhood contributed significantly to the development of a politics of solidarity, mutual aid and cooperation to deal with practical issues that arose due to austerity; as well to the development of new activist spaces as laboratories of experimentation with alternative types of social relations and human economy. As regards the latter, an activist highlighted the key role of the territorial level of the neighbourhood in attempts to prefigure and ground broader social change in everyday life practices:

Collective action takes places locally, but the organizational means we propose can act as a model on a broader level ... It is a different way of decision-making through horizontal structures, a different way of collective organizing of the social and the economy ... they are glimpses of another society we want to build ... All these [experiments] aim to cover for our needs but they are at the same time part of a struggle for emancipation! (personal interview, Athens, November 2012).

In this sense, we can think of such a community politics holding a double role in the austerity conjuncture, namely as both survival means that responds to social reproduction needs and an enabling mechanism for alternatives to emerge in the realms of social and economic relations. This suggests that everyday practices developed at the territorial neighbourhood level become entwined with the social and material (economic) levels of societal organization (Chatterton, 2005) and are mutually constituted with alternative practices and knowledge developed on the ground around cooperative types of social economy and the collective organization of social life. As noted by another campaign participant,

we try to set up local initiatives and multiply them ... a diaspora could create many pathways to social change and there cannot be just one solution ... I think that many answers to the same question can be more effective (personal interview, Athens, March 2013).

This account of cooperation towards social change acknowledges multiplicity and difference as 'missing links' between initiatives and individuals, and as a complementarity among various political frames and practices. Hence, it departs from a notion of a community politics based on homogeneity and essential similarity among subjects involved, rather it locates the strength of

cooperation and solidarity among the multiple responses that can emerge to the same issue.

The above lead to the third key issue raised through the Exarcheia-in-movement campaign, namely the type of organizational means and structure employed in such initiatives and the ways in which these contribute to an egalitarian community politics. Through this campaign, the development of a culture of horizontal networking 'from below', encounter and participation in bottom-up initiatives brought forward the strengths and weaknesses of engaging with horizontalism and participatory politics. Horizontal decision-making and connections among groups and distant actors were based on informal links and non-traditional means of representation (such as elected officials, membership and hierarchical structures). In lack of a formal structure, according to an activist, the building of horizontal connections requires constant interactions based on face-to-face encounters:

Horizontal networking, 'from below', requires the physical presence of the people; not contacts among political offices, leaders, through closed doors and telephone calls (personal interview, Athens, April 2013).

This suggests an empowering process of acquiring control over decisions made and a process of deepening the democratization of participation in networking. Additionally, it is important to note that, while face-to-face interactions and physical presence were key, activists employed digital and social media to communicate actions and events, disseminate information and publicize this campaign. In this sense, a process of re-territorialisation of politics in everyday contexts of activism is taking place simultaneously with the increasing use of technological means and the creation of types of 'virtual publics' (Leontidou, 2012).

Nevertheless, disputes and contradictions in the development of this campaign brought forward the limits to horizontalism as an alternative type of coordinating structure. These involved a fear of co-optation and 'labelling' of autonomous, independent projects by party politics and official structures, which was mainly expressed by non-aligned activists participating in the assemblies. In the end, activists decided that collaboration with official party actors and organizations would become a barrier for people to step in and participate and that bottom-up organization would better serve their goals, as this campaign aimed to be inclusive of participants of various backgrounds. This extract from my field diary notes summarizes the heated debate in the assemblies of the campaign:

In today's 'Exarcheia in movement' open assembly, participants discussed ways of enhancing the campaign, bring in more participants and organize effective actions. Activists affiliated to parties and organizations of the Left, i.e. Syriza (radical left coalition party currently in office) and Antarsya (extra-parliamentary anti-capitalist left), proposed that the contribution of these political actors and their municipal elected officials could contribute to, firstly, bringing in more resources and mobilizing more people and, secondly, gaining legitimacy and publicity around the key issues of this campaign, such as the use of public spaces, police repression incidents in Exarcheia etc.... Tensions arose when non-aligned activists disagreed with these suggestions, arguing that the contribution of official political actors as such (as opposed to the participation of affiliated individuals in local campaigns, which is rather common among local groups) would possibly result in the 'labelling' of this campaign and place it under the influence of specific actors, as opposed to remaining an autonomous, grassroots endeavour among local groups and individual activists. According to an activist who spoke in the assembly, this labelling could easily become a step

towards the adoption of specific interests and agendas, which, in turn, would exclude some people from participating. This discussion revealed once again a generalized mistrust in representational politics, co-optation and manipulation tactics often pursued by elected officials. However, according to other activists, the reluctance to bring in political actors and demand their active engagement in local politics has been a controversial issue for a long time and, in instances, weakened the ability of grassroots movements to render non-local actors accountable for their politics or even instrumentalise their resources in order to be more effective (field notes, 'Exarcheia in movement', Athens, April 2013).

Such tensions are not new in collective action and grassroots organizing and, in several occasions, reveal the limits to horizontalism, as they require a constant re-negotiation of different 'political methodologies', identities and practices, what Freeman (1970) termed the 'tyranny of structurelessness'. As in this campaign, tensions in horizontal structures and broader campaigns that involve several groups often pose barriers to effective action and discourage participation, as they are formative of a process of re-modelling frames, goals and the function of such projects. Horizontal relations, such as the ones articulated in the Exarcheia-in-movement campaign, seek to forge an inclusive community politics. At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that thinking of horizontality and egalitarianism as prerequisites or outcomes of such processes, obstruct understandings of informal or 'hidden hierarchies' (Freeman, 1970) and the power relations that inhabit such projects, in terms of the background, social and cultural capital of participating individuals, their resources and other social characteristics of age, class, gender etc. Therefore, horizontality cannot be understood as an end-state, a pre-existing 'essence' that unites groups and individuals, or a modelled structure that has achieved fixity. Rather, thinking of these projects and the horizontal relations they create as generative of 'messy' and 'incomplete' horizontalities, points to an open-ended process of forging 'struggle communities' that in becoming inclusive of difference, acknowledge the contradictions of 'being-with' as constitutive of their formation and development.

Based on the 'Exarcheia in movement' campaign, key considerations and new understandings of emergent contentious spatialities can be conceptualized through the idea of 'struggle communities'. Reflecting the new culture of bottom-up democratic politics that emerged out of urban struggles over the past few years, localized initiatives across Athens became key agents of grassroots collective organizing. These rendered the neighbourhood level a key site of struggle in the context of austerity. At the same time, everyday practices and spatialities of activism grounded in neighbourhood-based struggles emerged as an analytical focus for contemporary scholarship on contentious politics. The case of Exarcheia and the historicity of the neighbourhood within the development of social movements provided for analytical nuance into the multiple everyday practices, subversive narratives and spatial imaginaries of struggle, as well as into the possibilities and limits to articulations of alternative community politics. The Exarcheia-in-movement campaign, shifted the analytical focus, from conceptions of the neighbourhood as a 'liberated enclave' and media representations of 'spectacular' activism, to the opening up of emergent spatialities of activism towards encounter, solidarity and mutual aid. According to Stavrides (2010), this becomes a key signifier of spaces of emancipation vis-à-vis identity-imposing or identity-reproducing ones. The everyday politics of this campaign, manifested in the multiple material and social spaces of the neighbourhood actively contested self-enclosed meanings of

community, as identity or place-bound, and initiated a process of re-thinking community politics as 'being-with', relationally constituted with broader counter-austerity struggle. Quoting a local activist, the process of constituting such 'struggle communities' relates to the following metaphor:

Imagine that we are seeds and plants ... in order to grow and sustain the wind, we need some kind of support, a type of backbone. If formal unions provide this backbone it is rotten. If a political party imposes it, then it will sustain us up until the party decides so Hence, the way into it is to change how we develop as plants ... to throw our twigs at each other and grab, sustain each other. This metaphor in practicing politics, means creating a collective consciousness ... however, this process is not necessarily peaceful ... it does not happen without arguments ... as it can become a violation to the next person you reach to ... but [as opposed to this] a sense of self-sufficiency bears pride and prejudice, which is a major threat for all those new radical dynamic projects (personal interview, Athens, April 2013).

This eloquent metaphor of the process of constructing an alternative community politics explicitly prioritizes social change over political change (through traditional means of political representation that are often corrupt and hierarchically structured, hence less democratic). It also acknowledges that the process of re-negotiating an inclusive community politics beyond a fixed identity can be unsettling and challenging, hence requires constant effort and perseverance. In this regard, Stavrides (2011) noted that a community politics that is inclusive of difference can only be built upon the in-between, ambiguous, hybrid spaces that emerge out of the 'cracks' of identities.

Additionally, the above metaphor of community politics seeks to locate the ground upon which a new 'collective agency' can flourish, neither individualistic nor enclosed into a pure form of collectivity. Hence we can think of the material and discursive spatiality of struggle communities as grounded in the neighbourhood, but 'spilling out' of its spatial scale, towards a broader social and political space of struggle. This point was repeatedly articulated in an open discussion in the Autonomous social center in March 2013 in Exarcheia. For example, one activist summarized the key role of the territoriality of community as follows:

the constitution of struggle communities needs a 'terrain' but also a political space for building on common material interests ... within this [space] our practices are both the medium and the outcomes through which we fulfill our existence and reproduction ... these practices create a new agency, which is not an individualistic or a narcissistic one, but a collective agency instead ... one that encompasses a creative relationship between *my* needs and *our* needs ... one that originates in the needs of a community and serves those needs (personal interview, Athens, April 2013).

Hence the ground upon which a struggle community is constructed is conducive of cooperation and solidarity among local initiatives, which are based on necessity and sustain their social reproduction, and formative of a new collective agency and a broader emancipatory socio-political space. Key to this type of community politics driven by necessity and articulated at the sphere of social reproduction is, according to Federici (2008) the processual construction of a collective identity, by acknowledging divisions and differences and by devising tools to overcome these. In constructing struggle communities, solidarity and mutual aid

become such tools, devised and experimented with on a daily basis and aimed at mobilizing material and non-material resources, social relations, ideas and alternative knowledges. Struggle communities are communities set 'in-movement' (Zibechi, 2010), their constitution involving a contradictory process of re-fashioning their distinct parts through cooperation and constant negotiation of different identities. They do not adhere to an overarching paradigm that is conducive of a normative ideal of pure, self-enclosed communities. Rather, drawing on Stavrides (2011), I suggest that discrepancies, ambiguity, hybrid and 'porous' relations are constitutive of struggle communities, whereas different participating identities engage in the production of a common space 'in-the-making'. Subsequently, thinking of struggle communities not only brings forward the emergent agency of collective struggle, but also reveals the possibilities and exposes the contradictions and limits to the construction of an alternative community politics in austerity-ridden contexts.

Conclusions

How do we think of emergent contentious spatialities in contexts of austerity, in politically and analytically meaningful terms? How can engaged scholarship contribute to ongoing debates and knowledge production in the field of activism and to solidarity-making with activist others? This paper suggested a re-thinking of social movements from 'moments' of intense social mobilizations in occupied urban squares as the first mass responses to the global financial crisis, to social movement as a 'process' and everyday practice of activism developing in the post-squares period and becoming grounded in local contexts across Athens, Greece. This process rendered the neighbourhood and notions of community as re-emergent sites of struggle vis-à-vis the many faces of crisis and deepening austerity; hence posed crucial questions on how to produce a renewed account of community politics through a lens that doesn't reify (political) identity as domineering over urban space and beyond a fixity that obscures the multiplicities of activist narratives, practices and spatial imaginaries. Rather, in introducing the notion of 'struggle communities', the goal of the paper was to move towards an analysis that achieves to bring forward the emancipatory potential that lies within the emergence and development of an alternative community politics, as well as the contradictions, divisions and tensions that underlie this complex process and its, often fragile, outcomes.

Through the case of Exarcheia, an Athens city center neighbourhood historically enshrined in the collective memory of social movements, I traced the process of the geographical dispersal of activism across Athenian neighbourhoods in the post-Syntagma period. Given its historical specificity within activist cultures and its established identity of a 'stronghold' or 'enclave' of political activism, Exarcheia represents a case of a neighbourhood that has often been portrayed in media and public discourse as an 'exceptionality'. Arguably however, I suggested that the multiple spatialities of activism in the neighbourhood that emerged during and due to austerity revealed a 'rupturing' of its historical 'ordering' of activism and its subsequent discursive enclosure, by especially considering the December 2008 riots that erupted in the area and the local initiatives that were formed since, as well as in the aftermath of the squares movement in 2011. The multiplication of local groups and activist practices in the neighbourhood that sought to respond to the pressing outcomes of austerity and the qualitative transformations of already existing ones in order to address social reproduction needs of locals, unsettled the boundaries of a historically delineated activist geography and opened up to broader counter-austerity struggle. I would also suggest that, more recently, the new activist spaces that were created in the

neighbourhood as a response to the housing needs of thousands of refugees arriving in Athens since the summer of 2015 potentially signify another break with the activist geography of Exarcheia. Furthermore, the emergent activist spaces formed during the past few years produce types of alternative practices, as regards social and economic relations that can be understood as a type of grassroots creativity and creative agency that managed to break with past forms of social movement organization.

The above became evident during the conduct of participatory ethnographic fieldwork in Athens and by following a campaign initiated by the Residents' committee and the Solidarity network of Exarcheia that involved other local groups and activists. The 'Exarcheia-in-movement' campaign, as illustrated earlier, revealed the possibilities and limits to the articulation of an alternative community politics and the construction of 'struggle communities'. In linking local issues to broader ones and political alternatives at stake, it managed to expand its goals and reach outwards and its relational constitution to broader struggles, materially and discursively. Moreover, through the campaign, solidarity and mutual aid became mechanisms and relations of a politics of necessity produced by a type of a 'self-reproducing' community. Finally, the campaign brought forward the messy horizontalities created by informal hierarchies within the network of participants and the 'essentially non-essential' character of horizontalism as an open-ended, hybrid process of 'structuring the structureless'.

Struggle communities set in-movement, by both necessity and desire to inscribe multiple pathways towards an emancipatory politics, are filled with contradictions and ambiguity. Far from articulating a normative ideal, they are constructed upon tensions and challenges that make them vulnerable and often threaten their sustainability in the long term. Nevertheless, the grounding of alternatives, no matter how fragile, contradictory, hybrid or limited, produce new ways of praxis, new vocabularies that subvert the neoliberal 'common sense' and open up to changing the way things are 'said and done'.

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