



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. Arampatzi, 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 (Arampatzi, 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.

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