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The right to the city

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Introduction

The so-called migration crisis in Greece has been a major issue during 2015–16. According to the United Nations (UN 2016), in one year 851,319 people have entered and crossed the country. On 8 March 2016, following a gradual restriction of access to the Balkan route based on ethnic origin criteria, the border between Greece and Former Yugoslav Republic Of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.) was closed for all third-country migrants. In the aftermath of this closure, and following the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal (European Commission 2016), over 60,000 refugees are suddenly trapped in Greece, half of them in Athens and Thessaloniki (Coordination Centre for the Management of Refugee Crisis in Greece 2016). More than 10,000 refugees are settled in 14 state-run camps in the outskirts of Athens, 20,000 in 11 state-run camps in the outskirts of Thessaloniki and about 2,000 in self-organised occupied buildings in the urban core of both cities. Focused on this context, this paper examines the newcomers’ right to the city as it is expressed by Greek state policies and the solidarity practices of newly arrived refugees.

Specifically, in this paper I aim to examine the emerging spatial commoning practices of migrants and refugees. Although there is a vast literature (Gabiam 2012; Mountz et al. 2013; Ihlen et al. 2015) on social philanthropy, humanitarianism, Non-Governmental Organisations’ (NGOs’) activities and state immigration policies, there have been few attempts to research the ongoing refugees’ self-organised actions that produce seemingly anonymous, however highly personal and collective housing common spaces.

In the above context my basic argument is that despite the vivid and increasingly popular discussion on commons (De Angelis 2007; Hardt and Negri 2009), there have been few attempts to make the connection with the ongoing migrant crisis. In recent years, the discussion on urban commons has revolved mainly around critical geographers’ approaches that focus on accumulation by dispossession (Glassman 2006; Harvey 2012; Hodkinson 2012) and conceptualise commons as a new version of the right to the city (Brenner et al. 2009; Mayer 2009; Kuymulu 2013). At the same time, during the current migrant crisis, the newcomers are settled in inadequate housing facilities on the outskirts of cities, which gradually become ghettoised, and face discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. However, the previously described migrant urban policies do not stay uncontested. In the case of Athens and
Thessaloniki, the newcomers claim spatial justice and visibility as well as the right to city and adequate housing; and in collaboration with solidarity groups they occupy abandoned buildings in the urban core and tend to transform them into housing common spaces. Moreover, in their effort to survive, migrants do not only challenge the state-run camps, but seek to negotiate and go beyond cultural, class, gender, religious and political identities.

For the purposes of the paper the social data is collected from both qualitative and quantitative processes and a methodological tool, which is applied for the determination of these dynamic characteristics approved by participatory action research, ethnographic analysis, semi-structured interviews and the collection of articles of local presses and Web pages. It is clear that refugee research participants are a relatively vulnerable research population due to their legal status. During my research in 2016–2017, some participants felt uncomfortable discussing and reflecting on the conditions of their shelter. The anonymisation of data ensured that any potential uneasiness which may arise is addressed and no physical, psychological or social adversities affect the participants as a result of taking part in the study. Thus, it is necessary to mention that the names of most interviewed individuals have been changed, using culturally appropriate names, to protect their identity.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section engages with the theoretical discussion on open dialectics and a post-colonial approach to the production of the common space. The following section explores the features of the refugees’ right to the city and to adequate housing vis-à-vis state-run camps in Athens and Thessaloniki. The next one explores the socio-spatial features of the refugees’ common spaces in Athens and Thessaloniki. The final section draws some concluding remarks on the social relations and modes of communication, through which the communities of the refugee common space are formed.

Open dialectics and autonomy of migration on the production of common space

Several critical scholarly analyses (De Angelis 2007; Hardt and Negri 2009; Caffentzis 2010) conceptualise the commons using three things at the same time: common pool resource, community and commoning. The people who, through commoning, constitute communities that self-organise, sharing the common pool resources in non-commercial ways, are called ‘commoners’. According to Harvey (2012: 73), the commons are constructed as an unstable and malleable social relation between ‘a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment’. Furthermore, De Angelis (2010: 955) makes the point that ‘there are no commons without incessant activities of commoning’, it is through (re)production in common that ‘communities… decide for themselves the norms, values and measures of things’ (ibid.: 955). Moreover, several scholars (Caffentzis 2010; Mattei 2011) make the point that the commons have to be separated from the dipole of private or state management. In this brief review on the commons a point worth mentioning is Blomley’s (2008: 320) proposal that ‘the commons… is [sic] not so much found as produced… the commons is [sic] a form of place-making’. Finally, Stavrides (2014: 548) suggests that the spaces of common emerge as ‘thresholds’, which are ‘open to usage, open to newcomers’.

In order to contribute to a fuller understanding and accurate connection between the concepts of ‘commons’ and the ‘space’, I draw on Lefebvre’s open dialectic spatial approach. Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is not an empty container filled with actions, images, relationships and ideologies, but it constitutes a social product or a complex social construction based on social values and the social production of meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions.
Lefebvre’s main method is based on trialectic analysis, i.e. space is diversified into the spatial triad, i.e. perceived-conceived-lived space (ibid.: 11; 38; 39; 40; 50; 53; 68; 73). The perceived is materialised socially produced space, which can be determined empirically. It can be measured and described. Perceived space with spatial practice embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation (ibid.: 38). Conceived space is mentally constructed, it is tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs and to codes (ibid.: 33). Lived space is directly lived space; it is alive; it speaks. It is practically and directly experienced social space. It embraces the affective, bodily lived experience, the sense of passion, of action and lived situations; it is formatted from everyday life; this is the space of the everyday activities of inhabitants (ibid.: 39; 40).

In this theoretical framework, I propose to connect the Lefebvrian approach with the aforementioned analysis on commons, in order to conceptualise the concept of the ‘common space’. In the common space the physical-perceived space is the spatial practice of collective sharing of the means of (re)production and existence. The physical space of common pool resources is constituted, generated or reclaimed each time by social-commoning spatial practices. Finally, commoners, the users of common space, through commoning practices, establish their communities.

Moreover, in order to conceptualise the power relations in the production of the refugee common space, I build on the ‘autonomy of migration’ (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 184), which refers to a rapidly developing series of ideas that reflect a kind of ‘Copernican turn in migration studies’ (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 895). According to the autonomy of migration idea, the focus has to shift from the apparatuses of control to the multiple and diverse ways in which migration responds to, operates independently from, and in turn shapes those apparatuses and their corresponding institutions and practices.

From this point of view, contemporary refugee housing common spaces could be seen as open communities of commoners, which through their spatial practices of commoning destabilise the state-led policies and seek to (re)claim both the physical and the social space of the city producing unique collective common spaces. Such a framework seems helpful in explaining the spatialities of recent refugee common spaces.

**The refugees’ right to the city and to adequate housing vis-à-vis state-run camps in Athens and Thessaloniki**

In order to explore the refugees’ right to the city I draw attention to Lefebvre’s work *Right to the City* (1996). One of the basic theses and point of departure for Lefebvre was that:

> the city [is] a projection of society on the ground that is, not only on the actual site, but at a specific level, perceived and conceived by thought… the city [is] the place of confrontations and of (confictual) relations(…), the city [is] the ‘site of desire’… and site of revolutions.  
> (Ibid.: 109)

For Lefebvre the right to the city embodies and goes beyond:

> the rights of ages and sexes (the woman, the child and the elderly), rights of conditions (the proletarian, the peasant), rights to training and education, to work, to culture, to rest, to health, to housing.  
> (Ibid.: 157)
Finally, Lefebvre’s concept of the right to the city challenges the notion of citizen. In his thought, citizenship is not defined by membership in the nation-state but is based on membership in inhabitation. As Purcell (2003: 577) notes:

> everyday life is the central pivot of the right to the city: those who go about their daily routines in the city, both living in and creating space, are those who possess a legitimate right to the city.

After World War II the refugees’ right to the city and to adequate housing was recognised as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN 1966). Moreover, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has underlined that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly (UN 2009). Rather, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. Furthermore, the European Council (ECRE 2007) recognises that the living environment and conditions in terms of housing are key to the integration of refugees and migrants. Since 2007 Greece has adapted the Council Directive for the minimum standards for the reception of refugees (Presidential Decree 2007). The characteristics of the right to the city and to adequate housing are clarified mainly in the Committee’s general comments No. 4 (UN 1991) and must meet the following criteria: security of tenure, availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, affordability, habitability, accessibility and cultural adequacy. Finally, it is emphasised that housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if it is located in polluted or dangerous areas. In contrast to the above criteria, the state-run refugee camps in the case of Athens and Thessaloniki are overcrowded dilapidated former factories and old military bases, where there is a dire lack of basic necessities, such as running water. Such facilities include derelict warehouses in filthy conditions that appear unfit for habitation.

According to the Syrian refugee Ahmed, who is living in Oreokastro camp in Thessaloniki:

> The whole situation is disastrous. Immigrants’ rights have been totally destroyed. Camps are full of germs and diseases. There’s unbearable heat in the summer, unbelievable cold in the winter. The camps are all situated outside the city, none of them is anywhere near other people.

(Research interview, 4 November 2016)

Moreover, according to several NGOs’ reports (Amnesty International 2016; International Rescue Committee 2016; Médecins Sans Frontières 2016) and the report of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2016), the camps do not meet international standards. They are located in extremely polluted and dangerous environments, close to or inside industrial zones, oil refineries and pesticides facilities. Infrastructures, schools, supermarkets and social life are remote, and most of the camps are not connected with public transportation. The reports reveal dirt-strewn warehouses lined with tents pitched on filthy concrete floors. The tents have been placed too tightly together, the air circulation is poor, and supplies of food, water, toilets, showers and electricity are insufficient. Consequently, the refugees have to survive in appalling and precarious housing conditions, struggling against: cold or hot weather, illnesses, psychosocial distress, lack of food, energy and water supplies.
Refugee common spaces

In recent years Athens and Thessaloniki have been hit by an unprecedented turmoil that is expressed socially, economically and spatially (Hadjimichalis 2011; Koutrolikou 2016). One of the main consequences of the socio-spatial crisis was that several public (schools, hospitals) and private buildings (houses, hotels) were abandoned in the centre of these cities (Ministry of Environment and Energy 2014). From autumn 2015 to the summer of 2016 refugees’ solidarity groups occupied several of these empty buildings and turned them into housing projects for hundreds of newcomers. According to Moving Europe (2016), about 2,000 refugees are hosted in squats, which are run by both refugees and solidarity groups.

Each squat has a different level of political influence and a distinct character. For instance, in Thessaloniki, housing squat for immigrants Orfanotrofio is both a housing project and a social centre for refugees; Hürriya community squat provides solidarity-based housing for refugee families; and Nikis squat was an anti-authoritarian housing project that is transformed to a refugee shelter. In Athens, Notara 26 is a self-organised housing structure that accommodated approximately 3,500 people until summer 2016; School Squat 2 evokes boisterous, family-style living; School-5th Likio is currently housing 400 people; Strephi Squat is only for women and their children; Dervenion 56 functions as a hub for various activities, such as: a kitchen, food, clothes, hygiene and medicine supplies. City Plaza, the most publicised, is billed as the Best Hotel in Europe.

According to the Housing Squat for Refugees and Immigrants Notara 26, (2016: 2):

We are squatting an empty public building in Athens, 26 Notara Str, in order to territorialize our solidarity towards refugees/immigrants to cover their immediate needs. This project doesn’t stand for philanthropy, state or private, but rather for a self-organized solidarity project, wherein locals and refugees-immigrants decide together. The decisive body is the squat’s open assembly where everyone is welcome to participate.

As outlined by the Solidarity Initiative to Economic and Political Refugees (2016), refugee families from different nationalities, together with people of solidarity, are working collectively for the cleaning, repairing and organisation of several occupied spaces. They can be seen therefore as projects of self-organisation and solidarity, as centres of struggle against racism and exclusion, for the right to the city, decent living conditions and equal rights. Collective kitchens, kindergartens, medicine and clothes stores are set up in the self-managed and self-financed structures. Furthermore, according to Theodorou, lawyer and member of the occupied City Plaza Hotel:
It was a gesture to reclaim the right of the visibility of refugees because we feel that [the Greek government] is trying to hide them on the outskirts of the city.

(Strickland 2016: 3)

According to several reports, scholars and interviews (Haddad 2016; Kantor 2016; Karyotis 2016), the occupied refugee shelters are managed as commons through participatory processes. Locals and refugees cook together and eat around the same table; they take decisions together in horizontal assemblies; they recognise each other’s culture and customs and overcome preconceptions and stereotypes. In the words of two informants, Hassan and Gamal, two Palestinians in Notara squat, ‘Here, we are free. We decide on common matters together. It’s better than being locked up in military camps’ (research interview, 15 June 2016). Each squat is run by its own assembly, which usually takes decisions by consensus. According to the informant Murad:

Squats are run without government or NGOs’ influence and rely on donations and manpower from independent volunteers. Responsibility is divided among the residents.

(Research interview, 17 June 2016)

Moreover, in the words of the informant Alfarawan:

We manage to create a solid unity with the trustworthy people. Migrants and locals operate as a collective force. Every week we decide, together, about the operation of the house. Every resident is responsible for certain things, for the protection of the building, for the preparation of meals, for cleaning parts of the building, for maintenance. Of course, those who are more specialized in certain things got to work more on those things. But I must admit most people are trying to learn from [each] other so that they could best participate and act responsibly in the collective endeavor.

(Research interview, 16 December 2016)

Against the enforced segregation, solidarity initiatives create a common language and common spaces of action for locals and refugees. In contrast with the charitable and sometimes victim-centric ethos of many organisations working in the state-run camps, the aim is to build a culture of mutual respect. Hassan worked in information technology in Syria and now he is working to set up the Wi-Fi network in School-5th Likio squat in Athens; Fatima was an Arabic teacher in Syria and now she teaches class every day from 5–7 p.m. in Micropolis in Thessaloniki. Ahmed from Afghanistan started giving language classes to the other residents, and he says:

I like so much giving classes and it is very good to have something to do that makes sense. I would like to do more than this. Until now I was just surviving in Greece. Now I can say I am living.

(Welcome to Europe 2016)

Raha from Syria says about her experience in the occupied buildings:

Our everyday life is full of vitality, it is not about mere survival or about sticking to certain habits and routines, it is much more interesting and joyful than the usual everyday life of an ordinary person. First of all, we do not have a boss, we do not have to wake up every
morning and obey the orders of some superior. Nobody order [sic] us what to do or not to do, we make decisions about everything together. Every person has to develop a conscience and then to act according to their conscience. This is our life, it is not a life revolving around money and work, it is a life of friendship and sharing.

(Research interview, 27 December 2016)

Thus it can be argued that in the emerging common spaces, the refugees shape the sense of belonging, security and personal well-being, and along with the support of volunteers, they have access to food, healthcare, education and employment. For this to occur, the mode of communication, the characteristics and identities of the participants, both locals and refugees, are confronted with their limits, modified and troubled. The process of setting up the housing common spaces is based on collective practices, mutual aid and respect, horizontal organisation and emotional, communicative and aesthetic interactions.

The transformation of the physical space of the occupied buildings into a common space took place as the buildings started to acquire characteristics of the ‘threshold’. According to Stavrides (2012: 589):

Common spaces emerge as threshold spaces, spaces not demarcated by a defining perimeter. Whereas public space bears the mark of a prevailing authority that defines it, common space is opened space, space in a process of opening toward newcomers.

Thus common spaces are ‘porous, spaces in movement, space passages’ (ibid.). The mode of communication and the social relations of the participants, both locals and refugees, give the occupied buildings their porous, threshold character.

Until the day of the occupation, the aforementioned buildings had the typical characteristics of enclosed spaces, with clear borders between private and public space. Specifically, the majority of the buildings are state public spaces (i.e. schools or hospitals) or private hotels, where the government and municipal authorities authorized the permitted uses and functions. Conversely, following the occupation, the squatted buildings acquired the features of common space. The social relations and the commoning practices of the participants have destabilised and altered the boundaries between private and public, personal and political. The occupied buildings combine elements of collective space and personal space. For this reason, the multitude of participants who take the buildings in their hands passionately and consistently take care and defend them, as if they are their personal space, and simultaneously in collective ways protect them both from state power and the varied and constantly reproducing systems of domination.

Exemplary, inter alia, are the practices of improvisations and experimental modes of communication expressed by several groups. In each squat there is a: reception group, kitchen-cooking group, cleaning group, technical support group, education and childcare group, multimedia-communication–radio group, legal group, medical care group, guard–security group and translation group. Moreover, art groups, library groups and ‘composure’ groups have been established. In addition, lectures are organised as well as poetry, music, and theatre events. At the same time, the participants’ action repertoires, mode of communication and commoning practices included, among others, dance festivals, vegetable gardens, collective sleeping places and many more components of a self-sufficient commune life. Finally, the paintings, the photographs, the handmade t-shirts, the makeshift placards, the anti-government, anti-racist and anti-fascist slogans and the soundscape of the occupied buildings with the voices of the people, the percussion instruments, form an unpredictable and subversive common space.
According to the report of Kantor (2016: 4) in the School Squat 2 in Athens:

There is familiarity and freedom. As Mohammad prepares dinner, a cluster of Syrian and Lebanese guys in their 20s debate which music to play on the loudspeaker, finally deciding on an Arabic remix of Adele. A Syrian Kurdish woman peels through a large milk carton of onions, and inside the tiny toolshed, cucumbers are being cut lengthwise twice then sliced [for] Arabic-salad style. The smell of boiling eggplant carries out of the open door and past children playing obstacle games with Spanish volunteers.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the participants’ commoning, the various modes of communication and their social relations, have developed a culture of coexistence, in which the multiple identities are troubled and questioned, as the multitude of people is constantly confronted with their political, cultural, class, racial and gender identities. Rima, a young Syrian woman, says:

For the first time since I am in Greece we are living in an atmosphere that makes it possible to speak with our neighbors no matter where they come from. It is the first time that I found friends from Afghanistan and the first time that we start to understand that only united we can be strong.

(Welcome to Europe 2016)

Moreover, it is worth noting that in the occupied solidarity common spaces, volunteers and activists work to protect the basic dignity of vulnerable groups like women, children and disabled people, creating safe places. These spaces represent for many of the refugees the only opportunity to express their cultural practices and gender identities openly. It also allows for people of different faiths, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, ethnicities, ages and skin colours to converge.

When I asked Amena, who fled with her child from the threats of her violent ex-husband, what is most important for her in the occupied hotel City Plaza, she did not need to think one second about it:

For me the most important is that I found safety. I have for the first time since long ago a room with a door that I can lock if I need this. There is always someone at the entrance of the hotel [City Plaza], checking who is coming and going. And there are a lot of people here I can go to when I get afraid.

(Research interview, 2016)

Conclusions

In the previous sections, I have sought to show that in the case of Athens and Thessaloniki, the occupied buildings can be recognised as physical-perceived space. It becomes the common pool resource of the commoners’, both locals and refugees’ – their community. In fact, it has emerged not only as a perceived but also a lived space, as it has formed a fluid and open community with no boundaries, concerning its members, but with specific forms of commoning and communication practices between them; hence a nexus of micro-communities or mini-societies has emerged inside the urban core. The process of setting up the common space follows the Lefebvrian triad on perceived-conceived-lived space, as it is based on the multitude of solidarity gestures, the emotional, communicative, cultural and aesthetic interactions,
which seek to overcome the bipolar contrasts of native-immigrant, young-old, worker-unemployed, male-female, Greek speakers-Arabic speakers, Syrian-Afghan, Iraqi-Moroccan, Alevi-Sunni, Sunni-Shiite etc. In doing so, it constitutes intermediate commoning social relations and modes of communication, through which the communities of the common space are formed. Consequently, I argue that the study of the refugee common spaces enriches the Lefebvrian concept of production of space.

Moreover, the refugee housing commons enrich the concept of the Lefebvrian right to the city with the plethora of human rights represented. Against the segregation of state-led refugee policies the occupied refugee rights to the city are interdependent, indivisible and interrelated. In other words, the violation of the refugees’ right to the city may affect the enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights, including the rights to work, health, social security, privacy, transportation, sexual orientation or education. The right to the city does not just mean that the physical structure of the house itself must be adequate. There must also be sustainable and non-discriminatory access to facilities essential for health, security, comfort and nutrition. My research for the case studies in Athens and Thessaloniki reveals that the self-organised and occupied refugee common spaces could much better fulfil refugees’ needs rather than state-run camps.

Finally, I have to emphasise my argument that the refugees’ commoning practice of squatting is not necessarily related only to housing needs; it is also associated with the (re)claiming of right to the city, that is the right to the multiple aspects of the everyday life: like the public and political sphere, social and cultural relations or even the space of imagination and representation. Hence the idea behind the squatting common spaces is not just to provide shelter but also to provide tools for the refugees to help manage their own lives. The overarching aim is to help the newcomers regain their humanity by escaping social marginalisation and creating new social bonds. By actively participating in decision-making at the domestic and political level as well as fulfilling the everyday commoning tasks regarding the place where they live, migrants and refugees and locals develop avenues to take part in the social and political life of the city.

References


The ‘newcomers’ right to the city

