



Spaces of Crisis, Experiences and Challenges: Reflections on the 10th Aegean Seminar, Syros Island, 5th - 8th September 2012, Greece

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Something non-conventional is being “cooked” in the Aegean islands since 1983; radical geographers, planners and critical thinkers meet almost every 3 years and exchange ideas over their research, their work and their common interests. The ‘seminars of the Aegean’, as they are called, are unique in their kind as they provide a non-hierarchical, small scale, informal platform where geographical perceptions, planning proposals, theories and imaginations are discussed from a radical point of views. The whole seminar runs through round table plenaries, with no parallel sessions. The main idea to solely provide researchers with a round table is so as to deepen the discussion amongst diverge geographical issues, thus enhance the participant’s intellectual and personal interaction. Nonetheless, the seminars run by personal invitations, although travelling and the accommodation expenses are not covered by the organizers. Besides that, there are no fees attached! The only requirement is the researcher’s participation and her/his good will to listen and argue!



In September 2012 the 10th Seminar of the Aegean were held in Syros Island at Hermoupolis town. Hermoupolis is the administrative island of the Cyclades complex with a close proximity to the port of Piraeus. During 19th and 20th century, Hermoupolis related to the rise of yard and tannery industry, whilst its cultural growth can still be identified in the main piazza of the island, in Ernst Ziller's design of the City Hall, and the interaction of the catholic and the orthodox tradition. The afterthought Second World War economic decline led the island to a crisis, which was successively confronted by the local society. Nowadays, the everyday living of the island, following the national condition, is being challenged by the current neoliberal crisis.



Photo 1: Photos from the venue: where discussions emerge

Motivated by current socio-economic and political pitfalls, participants from 9 countries met in order to discuss over the “*Spaces of Crisis: Experiences and Challenges*”. Because of the timing that this seminar took place, we would thoroughly embrace Massey's affirmative argument that ‘geography matters!’; Not only the seminar's thematic was calling to reflect and conceptualise the crisis, the whole venue took place in a peripheral area -an Aegean island- of a peripheral country -Greece- that is projected as the current crisis melting point.

Consequently, the sessions dealt with the neoliberal crisis, whilst driving special attention to the challenges posed on Southern Europe and especially on the dismantling of the Greek society. In this context, issues of *uneven development* were laid on the table. Edward Soja emphasised the importance of spatial justice and called for a broader consideration of the concept. The rise of democratic movements, such as the Arab spring and the occupy movement, are strong examples of the social production of space. Hence, if collective work takes place, social geographies can change. From this perspective, Soja called for an agenda of politics for spatial justice at the global and the regional scale.

From a Mediterranean perspective, Diaz Cerarols and Garcia Ramon discussed the way crisis affected the Spanish context focusing on the consequences in the Basque country and the region of Andalusia. Whilst the local governments promote business plans which emphasise the importance of economic growth via the internalization of companies and employment enhancement for young people and women, the huge unemployment rates (33,92% the second semester of 2012) result in demonstrations and civil unrest.

Enzo Mignione describing the Italian case highlighted how the crisis affects welfare systems. As more pressure is put on the national budgets, there are vast cuts in resources, hence redistributive conflicts arise. From this perspective, a greater need for local welfare enhancement occurs, where vertical subsidiarity (getting closer to the heterogeneous personal needs) and horizontal subsidiarity (being able to mobilise private resources and empower active individuals) should be considered.

In the Syros' roundtable, regional development theories were revised! Costis Hadjimichalis and Ray Hudson challenged the New Economic Geography (NEG) and New Regionalism (NR) theories. They argue that although NEG and NR theories do not come from a neoliberal standpoint, their broader regional development conceptualisation by focusing on successful regions, agglomeration economies, clustering and networking thus neglect the fact that uneven development and crises are inherent in the capitalist system by depoliticizing the issue of regional development, actually paved the way for their absorption by neoliberal policies.



Photo 2: Inside the Seminar's room: exchange of ideas in a pleasant atmosphere

Diane Perrons underlined that in Europe regional and social disparities have augmented for most of the EU27 countries, especially for women and lower paid workers therein. She suggested a shift away from GDP as a measure for measuring economic and social wellbeing, and proposed a *human capabilities* approach for regional development theories. For a shift to a sustainable model of regional development, economic policies should be redistributive and social policies productive. A capabilities perspective that assesses the quality of life directly by assessing 'a person's capability to do things she /he has reason to value' than income alone, thus recognise the intrinsic value of the several 'beings and doings', may provide us with alternative rationales.

Michael Edwards and Pavlos Delladetsimas focused on the rent related aspect of the crisis in the European Union (EU). As EU policies are mostly infiltrated by neoliberal ideas, the regional disparities are growing. In this framework, for each member-state investments in real estate appear as a vital and competitive solution to attract capital. Mechanisms of rent in urban Europe have greater impacts as they produce shifts in urban and regional markets which are linked to a depression of

real wages, hence are part of intensified inequalities in class relations. The increased role of land in the current context highlights the essentiality of rent in the analysis of the crisis.

Driving attention to the *housing dynamics* in the city of Athens, Elena Patatuka contemplated over the transformation of the city's property market due to the crisis. Although the local context was, till recently, characterized by small construction capital and companies, land fragmentation and small landownership, present conditions are diversified. Real estate dynamics of the city stress that the crisis is both economic and geographical, as different geographies have emerged amongst multiple, old and new, actors. Additionally Patatuka reflected on the ownership statuses indicating that public properties are rather dysfunctional whilst the fragmentation in private properties stands both as a problem and as a hope of resistance.



Photo 3: Costis Hadjimichalis, revising regional theories

Dimitris Balampanidis and Iris Polyzou posed the question whether we should look at the crisis as a purely economic problem or whether we should think about it in its real time and space from the standpoint of those most affected. In their research of the immigrant populations in Kipseli, an Athenian central neighbourhood, they wondered whether immigrants are to blame for the urban and social decay, as the media frequently suggest, or whether the immigrants' presence constitutes a factor of urban social and economic cohesion. By analyzing immigrants' housing condition and their economic activities in the area, Balampanidis and Polyzou argue that immigrants act as a factor of social and economic cohesion and the anticipated urban deterioration is not related to their presence.

Dimitra Siatitsa focusing on the housing question examined related mobilizations in the USA, Spain and in Greece. Common background denominators is the liberalization of housing markets, which led to house price increases, hence the exclusion of the most vulnerable groups. In the USA the Occupy movement, and its descendant local Occupies, in Spain, the 15M movement in coalition with neighbourhood assemblies that developed a 'Stop

Foreclosures' campaign, and in Greece the Syntagma square movement and other activist groups, ask for commitments to the right to housing and engage in creation of networks of mutual support and solidarity. As Siatitsa argues, housing is a privileged field for understanding the roots of the crisis whilst developing an alternative vision based on the principles of housing as a collective right.

"Local bottom-up perspectives" were introduced in the Syros' round table. Rosa Cerarols, Fabia Diaz, Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon and Toni Luna highlighted the importance of the neighborhood scale in research to tackle with issues of daily life, cooperation and social cohesion. Focusing on a neighborhood in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, they discussed the realities of the residents, who had settled in the area during industrialisation in Franco's era and had developed self-maintenance practices in housing and everyday living. Their research based on audiovisual, qualitative methodologies and gender perspective examined issues dealing with place, sense of identity and belonging. Cerarols et al. remarks were that neighbourhood scale is very important to deal with crisis context, the gender analysis is compulsory and crisis is endemic, especially when talking about the suburbia of Barcelona.

Evangelia Athanassiou brought under consideration the current shifts in management of public spaces in Thessaloniki in Greece. Due to the crisis, top-down approaches insist on allocating the management of public squares to private organisations, while at the same time bottom-up responses reclaim public space. Local authorities by endorsing the argument of urban competitiveness promote a renovated image of the city so as to attract capital, investors and tourism. Collaborating with private enterprises, such as telecommunication companies and supermarkets, new perceptions on public space management emerge via the privatization and regulation of use of public spaces such as the inauguration of an activity park for the young population, urban redevelopment schemes or the restriction of political activities. On the other hand, local bottom-up approaches emerge via collective initiatives that reclaim public space by creating a collectively managed park in a former municipal plot or by promoting collective farming on abandoned military camps in the outskirts of the city.

Fereniki Vatavali and Maria Zifou adopted a critical approach on the changes in the spatial planning legislative framework that are promoted in the context of the debt crisis in Greece. By introducing the legislative changes in spatial planning framework and the new policy directions, they focused on a prime example of the promotion of neoliberal policies and practices in the area of the former airport of the city, the Hellinikon area. Vatavali and Zifou argued over the new regulatory framework on privatization and its interconnection with the promoted real-estate development of Hellinikon, as the current shift in spatial planning policies is in favour of the market and the facilitation of capital mobility. The promotion of policies projected as 'for a good and public purpose' is bound with the fulfillment of fiscal schemes, rather than social or environmental ones. Concomitantly, groups

of specialists and international experts have gathered most planning powers raising the question of the ‘democratic deficit’.

Discussion over the theories of ‘*otherness*’ and ‘*boundaries*’ highlighted the divergent socio-spatial realities in Europe. Lasse Koefoed and Kirsten Simonsen discussed the cultural and political crisis through the lenses of violence. Elaborating with violence as discussed by Slavoj Žižek, the discussants drew attention to its three dimensions (subjective, systemic and symbolic violence) arguing over their interconnection. They posed two contemporary examples of violence. The first one coming from a research study on neo-nationalism in Denmark, an example of ‘orientalisation’ of welfare state nationalism’, where the ‘other’ is projected as an explanation to the crisis of the welfare system, whilst simultaneously, the ‘others’ i.e. ethnic minorities feel such narratives as of symbolic violence opposed on them. The second example on subjective violence referred to the incident of 22nd of July 2011 in Norway, focusing on the ‘figure’ of Breivik, and its contradictory manifesto against Marxism, multiculturalism and Islamism.

From a Scandinavian context to a Greek one, Maria Kalantzopoulou, Penny Koutrolikou and Olga Lafazani focused on how dominant public discourses for the city center of Athens shape perceptions and influence political decisions concerning the ‘other’. They deployed narratives referring to the ‘other’ in the center of Athens from early 1990’s to date, highlighting the aggressive shift of dominant public discourse since the post-Olympic years, and especially, with the intensification of the economic crisis. The city centre is presented in a state of emergency, fear and insecurity, where ‘others’ become particular ‘subjects’ stigmatized and criminalized. Within this context, the re-emergence of far-right and racist arguments, over the influence of the Golden Dawn party (a neo-fascist Greek party) manipulate public discourses on fear, insecurity and disorder. Immigrants are projected as a ‘hygienic risk’ to the urban population whilst in the pre-electoral campaigns of May 2011 migration was conceived as a major problem of the capital city. Migration policies are related to the state, the political, social, economic and cultural context, which in Greek case, end up producing thus reproducing the politics of discrimination.



Photo 4: Presentations, notes, discussions, thoughts

Apostolos Papadopoulos and Loukia Fratsea, aimed to delineate the migration patterns of the African communities in Greece in terms to their integration prospects in Greek society. After discussing theories of mobility, they focused on the tentative findings of a current research project on sub-Saharan African migration to Greece. The whole integration prospect becomes jeopardized as it is affected by the public discourse on 'illegal' migration. Regarding educational levels, the members of the African communities are overqualified for the jobs they do: their educational level is significantly high and this somehow secures their employability. Especially, during the present economic crisis, unemployment and informal employment becomes racialised in such way, that African immigrants often find employability in marginalized jobs such as collecting garbage. In the current period, as racial incidents and negative stereotypes poison Greek public opinion the majority of African migrants feel insecure because of broader xenophobic and racial attitudes. Many end up experiencing a kind of a new psychological condition which they name "*hellenophobia*".

Thomas Maloutas challenged the dominant discourse (reproduced by politicians, business associations, frustrated residents, investors, extreme right groups etc.) over the decline of the city center of Athens, and the representation of immigrants as 'invaders', i.e. as the main obstacle to the city centre's improvement. His presentation unveiled the way that immigrant population has inhabited and settled in these parts of the inner city area, where housing stock was actually abandoned beforehand with the flight of more affluent Greek population to suburbs. Driving attention to five mystifications which become amenable to the socio-political agenda, he underlines that although urban decline is projected as a spatial, legal, aesthetic, economic and cultural problem it is predominantly a social issue.

Martin Lemberg-Pedersen discussed the increasing importance of Private Security Companies on the European Union's border structures and policies. After defining the notion of borderscape industry, and borders as dynamic landscapes of power where multiple actors intervene, he drew attention to the case of *Finmeccanica* and *G4S*, two private companies that exemplify two different kinds of borderscape contracts on the enforcement and infrastructure of border control. A kind of privatized militarization of European border management takes place, where debt, corruption and opaque relations have been transferred from the war industry to border control.

At the session focusing on '*public spaces and social resistances*', Robin Dunford discussed about the 'reclaiming power' and the role of anarchism within and against the state. He argued that anarchist movements and forms of organisation, like the Occupy movement, provide space for political activity, subjective change, and resistance, as citizens are not perceived as *private interests*.

However, if power is to be reclaimed on the basis of anarchist practices, then a cooperation of the movements outside and within the state borders should take place, in order to increase the pressure on the state, the local governments, thus the international politics.

Georgia Alexandri and Venetia Chatzi embracing the argument that neoliberalism plays out differently in the various societal and spatial contexts, discussed about the emergent protest cultures in Greece related to new direct ‘spatial’ tax that has been introduced on the household bill for power supply. This vast added tax, as it was not related to the actual amount of consumed power, it was another means of illegal appropriation of people’s income so as to augment the state revenues. The presentation focused on the local grassroots reactions calling for the non-payment of the taxes, the involvement of different actors that mainly have to do with the interplay of private and public spaces of action claiming for social justice.



Photo 5: Informal discussions and jokes can take place instead of the expected/ ‘imposed’ networking

Andrew Sayer gave us good reasons ‘why we can’t afford the rich’, by providing us with insights of his book in progress dealing with the crisis and usury. According to Sayer earned income is derived from work, i.e. the production of use values, while unearned income, is derived from ownership of assets via rent, interest, profits, dividends, capital gains and speculation. Interests are assets based on unearned income and can result in dispossession and debt peonage. And debt adds a non-productive cost to prices, deflates markets of purchasing power that otherwise would be spent on goods and services, discourages capital investments and employment to supply these markets and puts downward pressure on wages. The increasing governmental debts allow financial capital to discipline governments and privatise public sector. He concluded that we need a moral economic critique of usury to counter the popular illusion that lenders subsidise debtors, thus a social control of creation of debt, so as to pursue minimal rates, productive investments and limited purchasing property.

Discussions over the *liberating production of knowledge* took place as well. Lawrence Berg highlighted the fact that until the 1960s academic societies published most of the scholarly journals, but as the academy kept increasing in member, a mass pressure was put into journals; hence private capital stepped in to

fill in a need. As the time passed, many managerial techniques were adapted to cope with knowledge production. Since the 1980s particular forms of ‘success’, which are aligned with the capitalist criteria, have been promoted. Indicator of success for each academic is designated by the ability to attract external funding, to have a robust profile of international publications, to be able to transfer easily and adapt innovation and newness and generally to be characterized by quality and excellence. Along these lines, audit and ranking techniques, that were launched in order to differentiate markets and create competition, praised for a citational consciousness. While, most of the job is done by academics, paid by universities and research councils, the profits are accrued to publishers! This agenda however, is interrelation to the financialisation of higher education, the privatisation of universities and the commodification of scientific publication.

Olivier Kramsch, in his homage to academia, turned the analytical eye on himself and his peers. Academics, driven by fears of failure, act for themselves, get isolated from each other and everyday collegial relations are instrumentalised. The basic impetus whether to engage with someone else is ruled by the question ‘what’s in for me?’. So, although internalization is requested as an asset, academics actually manage to internationalise without internationalism. And as they accept ‘publishing’ dogmas and assessments as dogma, they end up high impact journalists. So, what can be done against the neoliberal machine in the academic field? Kramsch offered his quotidian agenda of struggling with the neoliberal production of knowledge and called for taking responsibility; radical geographers should re-appropriate voice, push the contradiction and seek allies of like-minded people to grow networks for the next scholarly generation.



Photo 6: The traditional ‘family’ photo

The seminar’s mode of organization left lots of space and time to the participants to continue the discussion not only during coffee breaks but in the actual free time after the seminar: over food, at the beach, during the late night hours accompanied with firmer more personal discussions. Research interests, agendas, futures worries over spaces of despair produced by the crisis, and

moments of hope provided by social struggles and radical geographical thoughts, funny jokes and personal anxieties were shared and somehow a continuum of problematisations was established.

The last day of the seminar it became more straightforward that space matters: when discussing about the crisis, and sharing thoughts over the societal and academic future, the voices of a local anti-austerity demonstration joined the dialogue in the room. In relation to struggles in Argentina and Greece, Enrico Pugliese explained why the so called 'comparative' example of Argentina and Greece is not so much comparative per se. As the contexts are rather different, the emergent struggles vary. Pugliese underlined that research should engage with a multi-scalar approach on the different issues and redefine concepts such as mobility and movements.

During the last seminar of the Aegean the notion of the crisis was deconstructed, examples of everyday resistance came forth, and discussions turned into interactions that still take place. This platform has created a space for hope for future inspirations amongst radical geographers; a space where ideas may run free and perceptions that are non-conventional can still be put under consideration.