1. AN UNRULY FIELD

1A. Me
When I chose Exarchia as fieldwork for my ten months research it was because I had been living there for some time previously. Crossing this cozy lively space, the very first feeling was that something thick was going on through its small streets, something connecting people and environment around them, but I couldn’t catch it really. In a night of December 2008 everything has changed. Two bullets of a policeman in the flesh of a regular youngster of the area and, through tears and passion, a whole network of solidarity relationships and self organization practices blossomed in Exarchia to spread out all around Greece. One year and a half had
passed when I left to go back in my country, the longest and deepest period of my life.

When I returned in Athens, and more precisely in Exarchia, for my fieldwork my first concern was not to investigate some specific social practices taking place in this place, so over represented and mythologized lately and, on the contrary, so intimate for me, but mostly to understand how the perception of urban space changes in time of economic transformation, that is a cultural and social transformation as well. My attempt in doing so was basically to smash the stereotypes surrounding a conflicting piece of city and push forward the reflection on what actually means an everyday condition of conflict.

1B. And the field
Once the extreme outskirts of Athens, where Polytechnic school was built in the end of XIX century, Exarchia is a now a very central neighbourhood located between the rich district of Kolonaki on Lykabetous hill and the archaeological museum, fighting for its right to survive as it is against a persistent rhetorical criminalization supporting a creeping attempt to gentrification. Exarchia, indeed, has a peculiar history linked with social and political struggles since its very beginning.

Its maze of small streets and crossroads ensured the perfect environment for riots since the second world war, during which the only partisan brigade active inside the city was located in Neapoli, the upper part of Exarchia, between Strefi and Lycabettus hills. Its taverns, cafes and open spaces offered places to talk without attracting attention during the dictatorship. Its central position in the city makes it extremely easy to reach. The many typographer shops give the opportunity to print posters and counter information magazines, at affordable prices.

These historical and practical reasons allowed the construction of a legacy very hard to break, a sort of active mythology.
This is possible because of a constant practice of dwelling the area and negotiation between the social actors who participate in this practice. Some examples of this are the self organized clinic at Vox squat in Exarchia square, or the liberated and self managed park of Navarinou street. The main characteristic is the practice of everyday life, continually object of negotiation between social actors, without any commissioning to others, and where relations and uses of the space want to be totally out of commercial and hierarchical logics. Giorgio Agamben may call this kind of practice as *deconstituent power* (Agamben, 2003).

What matters to be underline is that it is not a sort of Christiania, where one can enter the “wonderland”, but actually a piece of city that acquired its characteristics with the practice of people that dwell this place. And of course, because of the porosity of its boundaries, it is characterized by the possibility to be replicated elsewhere.

In this sense, Exarchia represent the embodiment of the conflict between diametrical opposed perception of urban space: The city where roles and tasks are given and disciplined in the name of an imposed common good, versus the undocile space of negotiation where actual needs and means to satisfied them are woven together. (Lefebvre 1991, 2014)

2. A RHETORIC WAR

As crisis overimposed its presence on the city in the known forms of empty shops and urban decay, it also involved a more deep impact on city spaces perception, that varies, of course, with the variety of spaces. For Exarchia this process has much to do with its history of social practice I mentioned above. Consequently, we can see how conflict is not just embedded in urban uprising dynamics, but involves ways in which the concreteness of everyday social practice can collide with rhetorical discourse of power, precisely as in the case of Exarchia.
To make an easy example, the latest mainstream newspaper articles about Exarchia can be of some interest. The neighborhood is described as “a gray zone”, a “ghetto” where vandalism and urban decay are widespread and tolerate because of the “fear and negligence” of the inhabitants, in order to raise the attention on the necessity to normalize this piece of city. Moreover, it is possible to mention, as a glaring case, a famous interview the ex right-wing minister of public order and citizen’s security Nikos Dendias gave some years ago about the city in time of crisis, where he expressed his desire to be able to hang-out in Exarchia for a coffee someday. He said:

‘I believe that even those who think that Exarchia is a place out of the law, or believe they can act differently from all the rest of our fellow citizens, they should realize that even in Exarchia police is needed. I believe that little by little society is changing, perspectives are changing and all the city center will be normalized, even Exarchia.’

What’s interesting here is that, in the attempt to call for a normalization, the construction of a paradigmatic exception is actually taking place. This discourse interrupt the normal flux of urban practice, made of contradictions and diversity, to impose a paradigm of emergency. This paradigm can be traced in the physical definition of the Exarchia boundaries involing police garrisons and patrols, the main aim of which is not so much “guarding the emergency”, but to make it evident, to construct it. To actually break down the condition of porosity the urban flow is made of.

After a short period of change in police strategy, in conjunction with the election of a new left-wing government, things are now more or less back to the origin.

We are not much far away from the “restraining” model of city Foucault discusses, with its hierachization of the urban space based on management tasks and orders, in order to face the outbreak of plague (Foucault 1993).
In this sense, Exarchia represents the spatialization of the otherness as possible, that is perceived as a risk to be faced.

3. QUESTION EVERYTHING

An everyday conflict is taking place, then. But now a problem rises and concerns how can we speak about this condition. Although conflicts are not a new issue for the social sciences, they are rarely connected with urban Western dynamics, whereas many are spreading in these contexts. The question is how can we basically represent them without jeopardize their political values and effectiveness on one side, and dumb them out on the other.

Moreover, as we saw the importance of rhetorical strategies within conflicts, how can we talk or write about spaces of conflict like that, without actually replicate the stereotypes that want Exarchia and other urban landscapes like that, as the exceptional terrain of a conflict that is, in fact, spread everywhere? How can we escape both the “journalistic” sensational but altogether indifferent approach and the dominant discourse of exception to recount an everyday condition of conflict without subtracting agency to the social actors?

The classical anthropological approaches are getting obsolete to interpret them: In the end of the 80s some courageous anthropologists tried a new way: It was the rise of a new “militant” school, having the aim of demolishing the boundaries between the researcher and his/her interlocutor in order to break the power relationship and restore the objectivity of the conflict situation (Clifford, Marcus 1987). But what’s the objectivity in a conflict?

Is it enough to let the “others” speak through our pages (and which language do they speak on our written paper?)?

The huge risk embedded in this approach is to drain ourselves out in the experience of the “others”. Or worst, confusing our agency with their one. So, how to face this risk? I argue that what’s
important is to leave aside the role of researcher and ask ourselves “Who am I?” “Which side am I on?”. This is the ultimate act of responsibility for our “informants” who need to trust us, and for our agency too. It has to do with the necessity to separate the authority from the authoriality, and put the former aside.

It is, let’s admit it, a very complicate process, as it is difficult to recognize our authority, especially if we feel akin to the cause we are “studying”, but it emerge every time we find ourselves thinking in terms of “me as an anthropologist” (even one who give voice to the “others”), and not of “me as a person engaged”.

4. THERE IS NO AUTHOR(IAL)ITY BUT YOURSELF

As long as both anthropology and literature have necessary to deal with the representation of reality, I argue that literal rhetorics, beloved to interpretive anthropology, are what can help us to express a more horizontal knowledge on these terrains. Not a kind of authoritative authoriality, caging the others in its own interpretive grids, but an authoriality as the possibility of concatenation with the other (in Guattari-Deleuzian terms), as a tool to tell about the encounter with the others (Deleuze, Guattari 2010).

Narration and storytelling are, in fact, foundamental in practicing anthropology as long as they are inextricably linked to what we live and perceived on our field. Indeed, as Michael Taussig once put it:

‘most of what anthropologists hear from their so-called “informants” are stories, but the anthropologists don’t recognize them as stories. (...) So I thought if anthropologists in general are reducing stories into information, my job — or our job — should be the reverse: recognizing that this is storytelling, what’s being told to me, and to take responsibility for writing my own story.’

In this sense, the New Italian Epic phenomenon, theorized by
WuMing1 from the Italian literary collective WuMing can be of some interest for us, as its main concern is the necessity to take a side (WuMing1 2009).

Of course, there are many chances to develop a passion for fields of research where the object of our inquiry is interesting and thrilling because of our incapability to establish any kind of connection with them (I think of researches about far right movements or the so-called “ethnographies of the 1%”, just to make some examples). Even in these cases, anyway, the necessity to take a side is given and, as we own authoriality on our narrative, it comes by itself. The great difference lies on the fact that the stakes in discussion are more concerned with the disconnection as possibility to understand, even when there is a close relationship with interlocutors, and the results show it clearly. A brilliant example of this kind of research is Didier Fassin’s ethnography of French police in Paris suburbs (Fassin 2013).

But let’s concentrate on a “choosing of battlefield” that sees us closer to our interlocutors, so far.

At first, I believe it is pivotal to point the very important issue of jeopardization out. As we are talking about a condition of conflict, the acknowledgement that there are things that cannot be said, in order not to expose out informers must be always present to our mind: there is a moral balance (that in my personal experience came always along with a very physical discomfort when lost) that have to be kept, separating the account and the analysis of the reality through our experience among other social actors, from the awkward moment when someone, for the research sake, does not respect the informer’s confessions or friendliness (reducing stories to information, in Taussig terms). I argue, this is the main aspect making the real difference between a totally authoritative narrative as novels and a kind of more complex authoriality as the ethnographic one.

It was 2008 when WuMing1 used the definition New Italian
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Epic for the first time during a contemporary Italian literature seminar at McGill University in Quebec. He is a member of Luther Blisset collective writing project which took the name Wu Ming after their best seller “Q” in 1999. The new wave of Italian writing coming along with their books such as Babsi Jones’ “Let my words taste blood” (2007), just to give an example, has a common denominator their strong contact with reality, both in terms of writing and contents. Their novels aren’t by any chance some sorts of “postmodern narrations” where time, space and subjects get confused, as they aim to go beyond it.

In the unidentified narrative objects, as he called the NIE novels or short stories, the main ingredients are history or real facts but the narration is woven together with them following some particular criteria: First, the absolut denial of the icily ironic, indifferent tone allows us to overpass the rigid observational step that poses distance between “us” and the “other” impeding to really come in contact with “informants” on our field and after, when the moment for writing comes, not to betray their trust. Second, the use a slating gaze, that means refusing every hegemonic perspective, and seek more individual, specific narrations. Third, the necessity for our researches to be always multidisciplinary (that corresponds to the lack of a defined literary canon, for what concerns NIE novels). Moreover, WuMing1 suggests us to seek a narrative complexity that is to say being able to express all the complexity of our fieldwork turning inside out all the safe concepts often used to explain situations, and re-express them thanks to all the rhetorical tools we have available. Furthermore, he urges us keeping in mind the necessity of a not elitist writing, in conformity with the principle of horizontality. In WuMing1 terms it corresponds to a pop attitude in our expressive register. To do so, personal experiences in the encounter with the “others” are very important tools. Lastly, a very important feature of every NIE novel, as well as every ethnography dealing with urban conflict issues, should be
the necessity to avoid objectified truths and to keep our story open as much as possible, as part of a diachronic and collective effort of comprehension (WuMing1, 2009).

In this sense, I strongly believe that, as social scientists, the time is now to face a small but substantial sort of revolution in our approach to ethnography. To go beyond both a merely observational, although participant and careful to \textit{local knowledge} (Geertz, 1998), stance and the hip ontological speculation on cultures. Storytelling (that could be both visual or written) should have a preeminent role in this, as long as is definitely the only way we have to actually practice anthropology. To quote Michael Taussig once again ‘The fieldwork is incredibly important to me, because I can’t write without some sense of the tangible. And from that, I generate stories.’

5. OVERTURE

During my fieldwork my personal relationship with whatever was happening around me was pivotal. My memories, my point of view and my engagement couldn’t leave me indifferent and they became part of the ethnographic experience as a whole. Not just in the moment of writing, but well before, this issue has posed a problem about my positionality in relation with the people I met, but also with my active role on the field I was speaking about. Narrative literature about cities helped me a lot to define what kind of story I wanted to tell.

This does not want to be an attempt to deny the concretness of reality in favour of a pure subjectivity in any way, it is more an invite to reflection on considering ourself as researchers not as “tool of research” anymore, but as an unavoidable fact in our fieldworks.

I propose a new approach to urban conflict dynamics that, by considering their not-exceptional features, does not deny the cul-
tural, but most of all experiential differences between “informants” and anthropologist. That’s what a new interpretive approach is all about: not denying the existence of power relationships, but shooting for deconstruct them, as we might do with a toy, to understand how it works. Storytelling, in last instance, through its constitutive process of authoriality, is the basical and more horizontal way to tell about our continuously developing relationship with the other, where both she or he and I exist and take an active role in the social process.

NOTES


REFERENCES