1. CRISIS

1.1. ‘Crisis’ as critique and knowledge

The word, ‘crisis’ comes from the Greek verb ‘Krinen’ which means to judge, to form an opinion, to criticize. Crisis does not predefine a specific response. It is the act and the outcome of the critique; the mental act that leads to a response. Accordingly, critique comes from the Greek noun ‘kritiki’. ‘Kritiki’ is carried out in order for ‘krinein’ to take place. Thus, crisis cannot truly exist without the act of critique.

Roitman (2011: para 6) provides an enlightening explanation of “how crisis is constructed as an object of knowledge”. It is a
means to think of history as a narrative of events, politics, culture, relationships and even individual behaviours and norms. It works as a means to judge the past and learn from the past. But when she speaks of judging the past, is she not referring to the act of critique? Foucault asks for a critique that does not plainly evaluate whether the object is good or bad, correct or wrong. He speaks of a critique as a practice, producing along this process, different realities - values and truths - hence, a new ‘normalcy’. Thus, crisis is about becoming.

1.2. Crisis as subject formation and governmentality
Through the production of ‘truths’ and ‘normalcy’ crisis influences our understanding not only of ourselves but also of the position we hold in our societies. However, ‘truths’ and ‘normalcy’ guide political decisions and the political economy (processes of production) as well. In turn, processes of production influence social technologies, which have the power to shape the subject. Processes of production are understood as the socio-economic relations which emerge in urban environments where agglomeration of opportunities and concentration of people occurs. In accordance with Bratsis (2012) observation that the relation between state and civil society in Greece is organized correspondingly to the state’s economic operations, authoritarian statism (Poulantzas, 1978) allowed for contradictions and contention to emerge, and thus power to be asserted through surveillance, police control, fear and violence.

But is power working only from the top-down? Foucault shows that power relations are more complex. By introducing the notion of governmentality, he connects ‘technologies of the self’ with ‘technologies of domination’. Hence, governmentality is not limited to state politics but also includes techniques that range from the government of one’s self to governing the other. Power doesn’t only constrain human action, but at the same time makes action
possible. Therefore, power can also be seen as a form of resistance and transformation.

2. CRISIS IN ATHENS

2.1. Debating crisis in Athens

Athens has been at the epicenter of the news defined as a city of ‘crisis’. How was then crisis and the urban trauma framed?

In 2010, when Greece agreed on a loan from the IMF, ‘crisis’ was proclaimed as “a depoliticized mismanagement result, as a systematic mistake mostly produced by the people” (Encounter Athens, 2013:2). There was no explanation relating to a broader condition or trend, or even a global context. Crisis had to be perceived as a local problem that required specific treatment. It has been claimed that the crisis discourse across Europe “is portrayed as an abstract given, virtually a supernatural phenomenon and almost exclusively as an economic one.” (Leach et al, 2014: EXSUM).

Since the country entered a period of economic uncertainty, austerity policies of neoliberal governance applied in Greece generated rapid social and economic changes, already evident in the physical and social urban fabric of Athens (Kaika, 2012; Leontidou, 2012, 2014). As the debt crisis had been deepening, austerity policies managed by marginalization of the impoverished to spawn a polarized society undergoing a deepening crisis of social and cultural identity. The therapeutic menu seemed to include well known strategies of facilitating investments, privatizations and disposessions that have already been put into practice elsewhere around the globe. For once more, the city and its space become a favoured territory for realizing relevant policies and measures, some of which are: rapid privatization/selling of public land and properties, private property confiscation, increased deregulation of planning, future development of mega-projects and public space
regeneration competitions. Nonetheless, these measures applied in city politics intensify the conflictive transformation of urban space, its usage, its perception and its appropriation.

2.2 Reclaiming Athens

Athens, hence, is a city in crisis not only due to the fact that structural changes and policies aim to re-inform the city, but also because it has become a territory in which conflicting imaginaries are spatialised. Traditionally, the centre of cities is the core where spatial manifestations of political debates take place. It is the field where both the practices of the dominant powers and the oppositional imaginaries are manifested. Athens has a central role in the crisis debates since it is the place where both the distribution of power -state, parastate or bottom-up- as well as the effects of crisis are manifested and experienced -fear, insecurity, surveillance, resistance.

In 2008, in response to this situation but also triggered by the death of a young boy by a policeman, riots started (The Press Project, 2013). A hidden and concealed social reality activated an exceptional social rebellion and exercise of counterpower. Counterpower therefore, when exercised by activists in solidarity in order to contest relations of power and control, acted as a guard over the “emergence of systemic forms of political and economic dominance” (Graeber, 2007: 35) within the society itself. Taking into consideration the economic uncertainty and the neoliberal policies implemented in countries and societies that were undergoing through processes of financial uncertainty and instability, it comes as no surprise that mobilizations counteracted to existing and rising models of economic and social control through actions of civil disobedience. After the first demonstrations, a second crest of actions occurred, that of occupying public buildings. That was an attempt to create meeting places in order to raise and discuss issues related to the ‘new’ Greek reality.
2.2 Solidarity and counterpower - examples in Athens

December cultivated new hopes in society with its immediacy and originality, suggesting that there were still vital social forces that were fighting for a new perspective of life. The December events were not an answer to the forthcoming new reality but instead they posed a question concerning the relationship between the city and the citizens as well as a question regarding the right of the citizens to self-define their lives, and finally, to gain the right to dream and to create. Since 2008, related sporadic protests have continued into 2011. People kept asking for a re-evaluation of the past tactics, a critical approach to the country’s development.

Social unrest arose in the city of Athens and through civil disobedience actions, such as upheavals, riots and protests, materialized in the urban space. In the city centre, around the Exarcheia neighbourhood, local associations, resident committees and neighbourhood groups engaged in politically, occupying practices and protest actions, such as the establishment of Skaramaga squat, the occupied Navarinou park project, the Empros occupied theatre, The Cooperative “Kafeneio” at Plato’s Academy etc. Anastasopoulos (2013: 350), when looking into those emerging communal urban experiments argues that one can observe “a shift in sectors of the private sphere of society into collective forms which embody solidarity. It is at a time such as this that many re-address an entire value system and their notion of the commons.”. These actions hence indicate the strong network ties emerging between political activists and the city’s cultural scene.

In this context of extensive urban and social transformations combined with activists’ international networking through involvement in social networks and digital activism, Greek solidarities, spontaneous grassroots practices and activists groups were strengthened and consequently new social movements were incubated (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012; Leontidou, 2012). Actually, the fact that society’s grassroots became detached from institutions
of state power allowed for a social movement space to be created and thus pointing out different ways of developing the urban.

The mass media described this period as traumatic while the city per se started to concern the political scenery and the dominant rhetoric. Crisis was finally given a specific space and of course that space was no other than the center of the city. But what was Athens trauma? What was the city going to be saved from and by whom?

2.3. Athens’ trauma

Initially, the trauma had to be framed. In the dominant rhetoric, one could identify two fundamental axes. Firstly, the protesters and the immigrants were presented as being responsible for the city’s decline. The space that was occupied by the above groups but also used as a scene of political manifestation was portrayed as the reason for the city’s degeneration. The protesters were presented as a threat to the economy by occupying the streets and disrupting shops operation. Accordingly, the immigrants were blamed for the looting of shops during protests and for ‘stealing’ jobs from the Greek citizens. The dominant discourse positioned political activity as an enemy to economy, and a direct opponent to the social peace and security. Further to that, immigrants and criminality became synonymous in newspaper headings. At this point, we can notice an enemy formation tactic dividing the citizenry in-between them, pointing the ones who threaten the ‘public interest’ and the ‘public good’.

These ‘truths’ were almost never questioned publicly. The situation was presented in such a way that a state of exception, requiring immediate intervention, should be accepted. Crisis formed the guilty, disciplined, indebted man, the ‘criminal’ immigrant, the ‘criminal’ protestor, and the ‘criminal’ anti-authoritarian. The last three categories were unified under the broad label of anomie. This activated an ideological-police plan under the broad subject
title ‘Zero tolerance to anomie’ (Filippidis, 2013). Political events were positioned as part of the wider ‘pathogenesis of the city center’, while new values emerged: orderliness, security of investment, public security and safety.

Interestingly, Mike Davis (1990) has articulated how surveillance techniques correlate with issues of public safety: since security issues have been for the last decades at the point of attention, installation of cameras (CCTV) in public communal spaces is perceived as a justifiable practice, negating nevertheless civil liberty, transforming the city into ‘city-fortress’ and establishing a new ‘ecology of fear’. Fear becomes a governance tactic that leads public opinion towards a desired path. It constructs moral orders, panics and truths (Altheide, 2003; Shirlow and Pain 2003), opposing, in this way, the ‘well behaved’ citizen to the ‘non behaved’, the ‘other’. Politics of fear also homogenize entire groups of people and they construct the threat per se. Political action is defined as ‘political violence’ (Dalakoglou, 2013) that is responsible for the urban pathogenesis and the prevalence of lawlessness. In the context of urban crises, a further aspect of the politics of fear can be identified. That is the geographies of fear. Here, entire neighbourhoods are perceived as dangerous and as a threat. That was the case of Athens.

The state shows hardly any tolerance towards the threat to the quality of life and welfare of residents -whose residents? - by applying preventive police practices and by persecuting subjects who ‘match’ these ‘illegal’ phenomena (Smith, 1996, 2003). Police presence in the city centre, mainly in the precarious and traditionally rebellious neighbourhoods, was already reinforced to sustain public safety in the urban space as a reaction to the December 2008 upheavals. The space, through the establishment of street barriers and extensive police presence, becomes reorganized and re-designed in non-direct ways with the police force acting as ‘urban planners’. Techniques of security and police criminal acts become justified.
Police operations, such as Xenios Zeus, whose aim is to “stem the flow of undocumented immigrants who have changed the face of the Athenian center» (in the newspaper To Vima, 2013), become rational. Moreover, when considering the events which led to the dismantling of Syntagma 2011 squats, it becomes obvious that the state’s interference strategy adopted was one of severe police repression (Bratsis, 2010; Leontidou, 2012, 2014; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos, 2013).

But the state’s tactics of re-addressing control were not limited to the aforementioned operations. Evictions of occupied buildings were also placed in action. The Skaramaga squat, which generated a fertile space for workshops, events and political groups to connect and at the same time supplemented individual housing needs, was forcefully dissolved by the eviction of the building in January 2013 conducive to issues of public safety and hygiene. Another case as such was the eviction of Villa Amalia, a symbolic squat in the city. Specifically, Dendias, former Public Order Minister, commenting on the eviction stated: “A democratic society cannot allow the forces of anomie and chaos to block the country’s path to development” (Oikonomakis 2013). The society and its space are divided between the disciplined and the anomic, the lawless.

3. WHAT WAS THE NEW KNOWLEDGE -IF NEW- PRODUCED?

3.1. State’s tactics and their role in knowledge production
The above mentioned transformations resulted into altering a neoliberal society and its shape into an ultra neoliberal society. This rationality which functioned as ‘politics of truth’ produced new truths that in turn became part of the new ‘government’ which consisted new domains of intervention and regulation. Since the city is dominated by anomy producing violence, the city should be controlled and treated in respective ways.
Crisis cemented the culture of conflict, fear, and threat over the city. Thus crisis altered the spaces of the city; its ownership, usage, perception, imagination, appropriation and re-appropriation.

3.2. Knowledge produced by the social movements
Actions of popular spontaneity and creativity unfolded through contentious relations within the city and exceeded the material sense of urban space towards the creation of social space. The realization that transformation in an apparently fixed political field can still be achieved became instilled in the social imaginary of political insurgents. These actions pointed out how grassroots’ spontaneity, was acutely suppressed by a state which reproduced terror and unleashed flow of violence to its own citizens who defy neoliberal policies. Therefore, since urban space could no longer accommodate social movements’ actions, due to the fact that the government produced tactics in order to assert control by managing ‘disorder’, it is argued that a shift of the action space had occurred from reacting in public open space to places of more private, cultural and academic character.

Through occupation movements, organization strategies, composition of resources and the formation of networks between immigrants, students, anarchists and autonomous movements, new spaces were constructed. The dominant symbolic order and social power was questioned, hence making the vision of alternative worlds attainable, embracing the idea of building the new world within the shell of the old one. Activists engaged into practices of pre-figurative politics by creating groups of dedicated mobilization willing to make sacrifices towards the claim of social justice by acts of civil disobedience in hope of achieving new institutions within the society. Forms of resistance therefore emerged in order to challenge the existing modes of urban growth, address social change in created spaces of mobilizations and as a result establish the roots for new alternative practices of urban developments.
‘Crisis’ gradually educated us to live with the loss of the city’s contested nature, thus creating a new social imaginary.

At the same time, it becomes evident how institutions of commoning facilitated an alternative imaginary towards an autonomy which exceeds the spatial distinctness and surpasses physical boundaries in localized struggles (Stavrides, 2014). These eventually lead to collective political action. It also illustrates how strong bonds and connections lead to the formulation of networks within intertwined professionals, local associations and activists allowing the expansion of the political field of expression in places of safe environment and consequently making the shift of addressing claims from the public realm to also academic circles apparent. Democracy, therefore, through practices of emancipating autonomy is returning to spaces in which it originated: the spaces in-between (Graeber, 2007: 367) in a period of crisis, an in-between moment implying a transition towards change.

3.3 Social movements and the university – the role of the researcher

The city of Athens was transformed portraying an image of a militarized city. It was a transformation towards a kind of totalitarian state which by presenting its democratic character focused however on controlling behaviour and practices which are considered anomic and anti-social (Stavrides in Athens: Future suspended, 2014).

Due to this transformation and since urban social movements have been persistently restrained by top-down government policies and urban tactics, it comes as no surprise that new social movements in Athens have been expanding their field of expression and practices through constant networking in digital spaces, places of cultural character and academic circles, where their claims and struggles obtain legitimacy and exceed the sphere of anomic behaviour. Activists have the chance to form new networks, allies
and gain knowledge and resources on specific urban issues. Connections between local associations, insurgents, professionals and individuals committed to public and political actions are defined as crucial for the future of social movements in Greece, so actions of disobedience and localized struggles can achieve scalar compression, allowing for a collective response to crisis. This ‘knowledge’ produced within the aforementioned circles of social creativity and collective action, must become equally justified and popular to the ‘knowledge’ produced by the state.

As Merrifield (2014: 163) elaborately defends “probing researchers - inside and outside university - can ally themselves with militant activists, transforming themselves into probing militants and activist researchers, vocalizing joint dissent in brainy and brawny ways.”.

NOTES


REFERENCES


