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'EXARCHEIA DOESN'T EXIST': AUTHENTICITY,  
RESISTANCE AND ARCHIVAL POLITICS IN ATHENS

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT:

My thesis investigates the ways people, materialities and urban spaces interact to form affective ecologies and produce historicity. It focuses on the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, Athens' contested political topography *par excellence*, known for its production of radical politics of discontent and resistance to state oppression and neoliberal capitalism. Embracing Exarcheia's controversial status within Greek vernacular, media and state discourses, this thesis aims to unpick the neighbourhoods' socio-spatial assemblage imbued with affect and formed through the numerous (mis)understandings and (mis)interpretations rooted in its turbulent political history. Drawing on theory on urban spaces, affect, hauntology and archival politics, I argue for Exarcheia as an unwavering archival space composed of affective chronotopes – (in)tangible loci that defy space and temporality. I posit that the interwoven narratives and materialities emerging in my fieldwork are persistently – and perhaps obsessively – reiterating themselves and remaining imprinted on the neighbourhood's landscape as an incessant reminder of violent histories that the state often seeks to erase and forget. Through this analysis, I contribute to understandings of place as a primary ethnographic 'object' and the ways in which place forms complex interactions and relationships with social actors, shapes their subjectivities, retains and bestows their memories and senses of historicity.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....   | 6  |
| CHAPTER 1.....   | 8  |
| On the map and in history.....   | 11 |
| Affect and authenticity.....   | 15 |
| Exceptional, performativity, archive.....  | 17 |
| A place that doesn't exist.....  | 20 |
| Thesis outline.....  | 23 |
| CHAPTER 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW.....  | 26 |
| PART I.....  | 28 |
| The birth of a neighbourhood.....  | 28 |
| Exarcheia turns into a battlefield: WWII, Civil War and the Dekemvriana.....                             | 31 |
| Post-Civil War.....  | 32 |
| The years of the dictatorship.....   | 34 |
| Exarcheia's emergence as an anarchist stronghold.....  | 36 |
| Post-dictatorial violence: Operation Virtue, Chemistry School Occupation and the murder of Kaltezas..... | 39 |
| Exarcheia as an 'ávaton'.....  | 42 |
| The calm before the storm: Greece's Europeanisation era.....   | 45 |
| The storm: the financial Crisis and December 2008.....   | 46 |
| PART II.....   | 51 |
| Exarcheia under the spotlight.....   | 51 |
| Heterotopia, dystopias and bourgeois utopias.....  | 56 |
| Exarcheia on the map of political topographies.....  | 59 |
| MAIN CONCEPTUAL APPARATUSES.....   | 62 |
| An assemblage of affects.....  | 62 |
| From affective space to archival space.....  | 68 |
| Competing neighbourhood visions, competing authenticities.....   | 71 |
| The right to the city as a right to preserve.....  | 74 |
| CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS.....   | 76 |
| A staccato ethnography.....  | 79 |
| Participants.....  | 82 |
| Interviews.....  | 85 |
| Ethical concerns.....  | 88 |
| The Self in the field.....   | 93 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| Walking the field(s) .....   | 95         |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: MAPPING AFFECTIVE GEOGRAPHIES, READING EXARCHEIAN ARCHIVES.....</b>  | <b>102</b> |
| <b>PART I.....</b>   | <b>102</b> |
| Katerina's walk .....  | 102        |
| Disclosing chronotopes, unsilencing histories.....   | 122        |
| <b>PART II .....</b>   | <b>127</b> |
| Vicky's walk .....   | 127        |
| From posterscapes to memoryscapes.....   | 144        |
| <b>PART III.....</b>   | <b>148</b> |
| Leonidas' walk.....  | 148        |
| Oscillating between enchantment and disenchantment.....  | 163        |
| <b>PART IV: CONCLUSION .....</b>   | <b>166</b> |
| Walking as the encounter itself.....   | 166        |
| Affective chronotopes, spectres of history and cryptocolonialism .....   | 170        |
| From museum to conservatoire to an archival space .....  | 179        |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: NARRATIVES OF APOLITICISATION AND POLITICAL PERFORMATIVITY.....</b>  | <b>185</b> |
| Alexis' day .....  | 185        |
| Shifting affectivities .....   | 191        |
| A performance or a performative? .....   | 200        |
| Báhala and bahalákides: antipolitical significations and political significance.....   | 206        |
| Báhala and notions of (in)authenticity .....   | 211        |
| Internal fragmentations: anarchierachy, self-referentiality and political disenchantment .....   | 218        |
| Beyond the báhala: a matter of authenticity or a matter of practice?.....  | 227        |
| <b>CHAPTER 6: THE 'EXARCHEIA PROBLEM': POLITICS OF NEGLECT AND TERRITORIAL STIGMATISATION.....</b>                                       | <b>232</b> |
| <b>PART I: DECONSTRUCTING 'EXATHLEIA': VERNACULAR CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF MORAL AND MATERIAL 'WRETCHEDNESS' IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD .....</b> | <b>235</b> |
| In the aftermath of the 'refugee crisis': geographies of solidarity, crime and insecurity .....  | 235        |
| Self-appointed security .....  | 255        |
| Aesthetics of abandonment and tangibilities of neglect: 'About the central and abandoned neighbourhood of Exarcheia'.....                | 258        |
| Conflicting neighbourhood visions.....   | 270        |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| PART II: POLITICS OF NEGLECT AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF ‘THE STATE’   | 273 |
| .....  | 273 |
| Zone of tolerance.....   | 273 |
| Aliens in blue.....  | 276 |
| New government, ‘new’ Exarcheia?.....  | 280 |
| Square interventions.....  | 284 |
| The government prioritises ‘political crime’.....  | 289 |
| Crime and criminalisation: Constructing the ‘problem area’.....  | 293 |
| Who is the state in Exarcheia?.....  | 303 |
| The importance of being absent.....  | 310 |
| CHAPTER 7: EXARCHEIA AS AN ‘AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE’: CRISIS,<br>TOURISM AND THE RUINS OF GENTRIFICATION..... | 313 |
| Laissez fair gentrification.....   | 314 |
| Narrowing down: gentrification in Exarcheia.....   | 320 |
| The ruins of the crisis: Greece’s post-2008 rediscovery as a colonial spectacle .....                      | 322 |
| Exarcheia’s gentrification: (anarcho)tourism and the Airbnb fever .....                                    | 328 |
| Resistance to gentrification.....  | 332 |
| .....  | 337 |
| Crime & tourism: where the state vilifies the market commodifies.....                                      | 337 |
| Exarcheia as an ‘authentic experience’ .....   | 342 |
| Emergent and conflicting authenticities .....  | 346 |
| Locals’ perceptions of Exarcheia’s authenticity.....   | 354 |
| Concluding note: the ruins of gentrification .....   | 358 |
| CONCLUSION: ‘ATHENS’ LAST NEIGHBOURHOOD’.....  | 364 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....  | 383 |

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*To my grandparents, Maroulla, Miltiades and Varvara,  
my favourite storytellers.*

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: (MIS)UNDERSTANDING AND (MIS)INTERPRETING

### EXARCHEIA

*“Exarcheia doesn’t exist...*

*in history;*

*on the map;*

*in life.”<sup>1</sup>*

If you look up the word ‘Exarcheia’ on the Internet, you will be bombarded with endless information. You will come across documentaries, films, books and songs about it. You will read about it as Athens’ ‘self-governing community’, ‘Athens’ neighbourhood that’s gone from riots to art galleries’; you will read about Exarcheia as the bohemian district frequented by people from all walks of life: ‘from punks, street musicians and extreme leftists, to students, writers and old couples’. You will find a guide on ‘the best 30+ things to do in Exarcheia’; you will read about ‘Exarcheia turning into a ghetto’ and a ‘den of criminals’ and you will find out ‘how Airbnb has angered Greek anarchists’. You will read about squat evictions, anarchist-police clashes, crimes, arrests and the state ‘attack on Exarcheia’. You will learn about its street art, alternative bookshops and

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<sup>1</sup>This is the title of a book by Leonidas Christakis, a Greek author, painter, actor and publisher from Thessaloniki who lived and worked in Exarcheia. Christakis was a prominent and eccentric figure in the neighbourhood and well-remembered by some of my older interlocutors. For many years after the Greek Civil War, the state targeted him because of his leftist and anarchistic ideologies, as well as the themes of his work that were largely concerned with the urban marginals such as artists, poets, robbers, drug addicts and prostitutes. He died in Athens in 2009. His book inspired the title of this thesis.

solidarity initiatives; you will come across to opinions about why Exarcheia is *'the most misunderstood neighbourhood in Athens'*.

How do I, then, begin to write about a place that has already starred in myriad conversations, debates and texts and which has already preoccupied many before me? When I told friends and family in Athens that my research focus would be Exarcheia one thing became apparent: everyone had an opinion about it. Reactions ranged from enthusiastic 'Wow, you are going to study Exarcheia, that is so cool!' to worrisome 'Be careful over there!' and finally to contemptuous 'Exarcheia? Really? Could you not have chosen any *other* neighbourhood?'

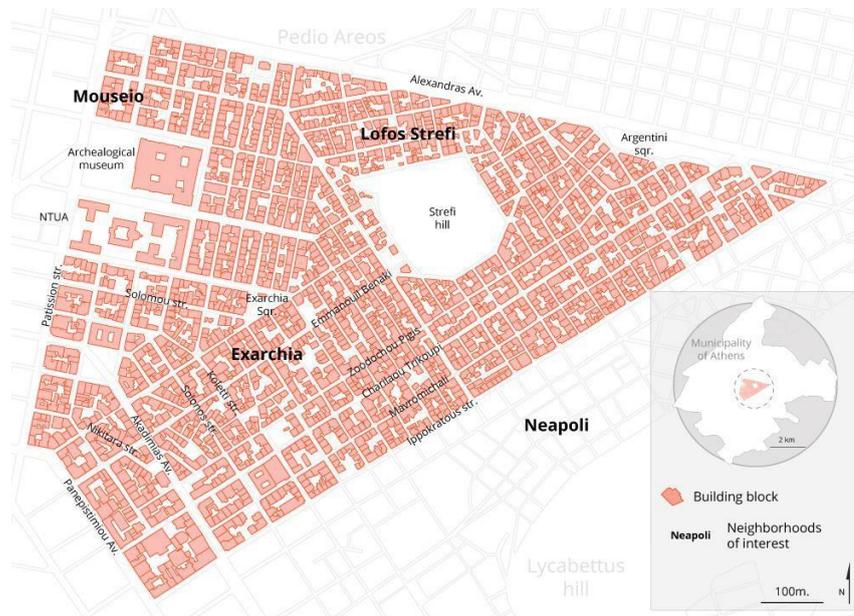
Months before my fieldwork officially commenced, conflicting narratives about Exarcheia had been already emerging as rumours akin to those whispered about a notorious guest at a dinner party prior to their arrival. My mind was also preoccupied with my own opinions about Exarcheia, despite the fact that I was brought up in Cyprus and had never prior to my fieldwork, set foot beyond Solonos St. – the street generally considered to be the border between Exarcheia and the district of Omonoia (Vradis 2012; Cappuccini 2018). My opinion about Exarcheia was not based on experiential knowledge but on a *prior, experience-less* kind of knowledge, what Hans Georg Gadamer (1975) calls a "pre-understanding" (*Vorverständnis*) (see also Davies & Spencer 2010); a kind of imagining which nonetheless carried in it particular social representations. As a teenager, this imagining and prejudices about Exarcheia were mainly a reflection of my family's fears of what they had been referring to as *paliogeitonia* (shabby-neighbourhood) of *alítes* and *prezakia* (punks and drug addicts). In conversations with

friends, Exarcheia emerged as political metonymy for anti-authoritarian activism but also a metonymy for 'chaos' and 'anomie'. In retrospect, I understood that 'anarchy', 'chaos' and 'anomie' were often synonymised and that ultimately my family's concerns reflected a wider societal perception of Exarcheia as a dangerous place; a perception that had been largely facilitated by decades-long, intense media coverage that was accentuated by the events of December 2008 and its aftermath.

I can clearly recall myself in Cyprus, at the age of fifteen paying for the first-time conscious attention to the name 'Exarcheia' the days after the shooting and killing of Alexandros Grigoropoulos: a high school student, an age-mate of mine, was shot dead by a police officer. The murder of Alexis (as he became known) by a policeman in the heart of the neighbourhood on December 6, 2008, triggered the most violent riots Athens had seen in recent years. Within hours, hundreds of young people hit the streets and soon the city was quite literally 'on fire'. It was in the days and years that followed these events that, during my visits to Athens, I recall my family advising me not to hang out anywhere near Exarcheia in order to avoid getting caught up in the so-called anarchist-police clashes, which were a frequent occurrence at the time. Whether it was circumstantial or down to obeying my parents, I, in fact, entered Exarcheia for the very first time in my life in October 2016 at the age of 23.

## On the map and in history

2



**Exarcheia as it often appears on maps: bordered by Patission Avenue, Solonos Street, Ippokratous Street and Alexandra’s Avenue on the west, south, east and north respectively.**

Exarcheia is dense and somewhat claustrophobic – characteristics that are symptomatic of its location in the heart of Athens. Look down on the grid and you will see a little, triangle-shaped area bordered by Patission Avenue, Solonos St., Ippokratous St. and Alexandra’s Avenue on the west, south, east and north respectively. Although this is what Google Maps says, on the ground, people tend to mark Exarcheia’s borders differently. While the width of Patission and Alexandra’s makes their role as boundaries indisputable, on the other end, Exarcheia’s boundaries seem to be “much more fluid, porous, open to dispute – and the occasional reinterpretation” (Vradis 2012: 165). After

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://www.athenssocialatlas.gr/en/article/property-transformations-in-exarcheia/> (last accessed 24.2.2021)

questioning his interlocutors, Vradis concludes that “Exarcheia was considered to run anywhere until Charilaou Trikoupi and Asklipiou St.” and “somewhere between Panepistimiou and Solonos St.” (ibid). As we will see, a similar dissonance was also evident among my own interlocutors (Chapter 4).

Exarcheia is about 3000m<sup>2</sup> and covers only 0.21% of the total metropolitan area (Cappuccini 2017). Despite its size, Exarcheia hosts today approximately 20,150 people, meaning that every 1000m<sup>2</sup> accounts for 24.5 residents, ranking it as one of the most densely populated districts of Athens (Cappuccini 2017). Contrary to Greece’s overall ageing population, the latest data obtained also indicates that Exarcheia’s population remains young. According to the census, 45.3% of its population ranges between 15 and 44 years of age, of which the largest group is between 25 and 34, while only 21.6% of the residents are over 65 (ibid: 13). Its notable age demographics can be attributed to its location between university campuses, due to which Exarcheia still remains home and a ‘haunt’ for many students.

Its built environment is a mixed and uneven landscape of old and older condominiums. Between them, the occasional melancholic sight of a neoclassical house, that once stood proud and magnificent, but which is now left abandoned with its wooden shutters peeling off and its interior caving in. Exarcheia’s roads are narrow and lined up with cars and motorbikes. Indeed, when you first walk into the neighbourhood, it might not strike you as distinctly different to other central Athenian districts. Except, as Chatzidakis et al rightly point out, Exarcheia is a place you “cannot stray into accidentally” (2012: 494). That is partly because you walk in it already looking for ‘exceptionalities’ and expecting it to be different. At the same time, if you look around

you start to notice that in some ways it actually is different. There are certain features and configurations in Exarcheia's materiality that you don't encounter in other parts of the city centre. Walls are covered in murals, posters, banners and graffiti bearing anarchist slogans denouncing capitalism, patriarchy, consumerism and state violence. With the exception of the sandwich shop *Gregory's* and the electronics' shop *Plaisio* on Stournari St., just off the square, you won't find any other chain stores in Exarcheia. You won't find boutiques or jewellery shops. If you need to withdraw cash, you will realise that there are no banks in the vicinity and the nearest ATM is about a ten-minute walk away on Panepistimiou St. in Omonoia. Bars and cafes around you bear names such as 'Molotof', 'Underground' and 'Decadence'. You might notice that for its small size Exarcheia hosts an impressive number of independent bookstores, publishing houses and printing shops. In other words, even without any prior knowledge, you might sense that Exarcheia is a "loaded signifier" (cf. Benson & Jackson 2012: 798).

Like our controversial guest at the dinner party, Exarcheia holds more than one reputation. For every article that condemns Exarcheia's ghettoisation, increased criminality, frequent riots, wretchedness and lack of security, an equal number of articles praise its ethos of autonomy, freedom, resistance, and solidarity towards marginalised groups. Today, an even larger amount of online articles promote Exarcheia as a hip tourist destination with bohemian cafes, bars and restaurants, 'cool' street art and an 'authentic insight' into 'real Greece'.

Exarcheia's plural existence in popular imagination is rooted in its long and turbulent history. As we will see, conflict, civil unrest and the socio-economic transitions in Greece throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century were mapped onto the neighbourhood, transforming it into

a district that is quintessentially Athenian but concurrently 'exceptional'. Its exceptionality here does not pertain merely to the historical and political contingencies that rendered it Athens' radical political district par excellence. Exarcheia is treated as 'exceptional' in its emergence as the stage upon which the state performs itself as legitimate and successful. As I discuss, the state exceptionalises Exarcheia by constructing and maintaining its reputation as a 'problem area' and an off-limits topography of immorality (cf. Weszkalnys 2010). It does so by withdrawing itself from or using the neighbourhood as a zone of tolerance for the city's unwanted and dangerous citizens and non-citizens (cf. Panourgia 2009) and, at the same time, by launching zealous 'brooming' operations when election time approaches.

Exarcheia's 'exceptionality' in comparison to other Athenian districts is also anchored in its ability to place interlocutors in an antagonistic frame of mind and stir controversy, both in public and private forums of discussion. When I eventually started to present snapshots of my field research at conferences, added to the encouragement, enthusiasm and curiosity of fellow conferees about my topic, were also instances when a (usually) Greek member of the audience would challenge me with remarks such as 'I think you're reproducing stereotypes about Exarcheia' and 'you shouldn't romanticise the neighbourhood', or 'Exarcheia is not exceptional, people there just want to *live*'.

Such remarks used to puzzle me. Is the role of ethnography to challenge or refute stereotypes? If I indeed reproduce them, is my study 'unoriginal'? At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I was thinking of ways to describe what this thesis is about, I always found it easier to explain what it is *not* about. Anxious to step away from clichés I would defensively contend that my work is not an ethnography of anarchist and

solidarity politics; that it is not a study of Exarcheia's 'counterculture', its riots, its criminality and stigmatisation, or its commodification *per se*. Then as I began to write, I realise that this thesis is about all and none of these representations. I can finally confidently say that this thesis does not aim to 'go beyond' stereotypes in the sense of debunking them. As the reader will soon realise, this thesis is not an atonement of Exarcheia's representational exoticism. Instead, just like the people that helped bring it to life, it both negates and affirms Exarcheia's (non)existence as Athens' anarchist neighbourhood, heterotopia of resistance, intellectual hub, abandoned district, dangerous ghetto and gentrified middle-class utopia. Its pages will concurrently avert and place their focus on all of these 'trite' representations.

### Affect and authenticity

More than stereotypes, Exarcheia's representations also reflect conflicting neighbourhood visions and constitute pieces of a fragmented and ever-incomplete reality. This study is ultimately a collection of 'partial truths' (cf. Clifford 1985). My interviews with people who frequented, lived or worked in Exarcheia often revealed utterly different neighbourhood experiences. 'This is the place where I can breathe!' exclaimed one informant when another exasperatedly told me 'I feel I'm suffocating here!' Through these first interactions, a rather straightforward question arose: how can a place be both loved and despised with equal intensity?

I conceptualised these emotive intensities not simply as feelings or emotions (cf. Massumi) but as 'affects'. My theoretical approach to understanding the connection

between people and place draws and builds upon affect theory (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Brennan 2005; Bennett 2010). Studying Exarcheia 'affectively' is largely indebted to Yael Navaro-Yashin's conceptualisation of 'affect' as both human experience and as "the mark of energy discharged upon [individuals] by dwellings and environments" (2009: 4; 2012). In the course of my fieldwork, interpreting but also misinterpreting Exarcheia became a process of identifying and recording affectivities, which allowed me to look deeper into the relational connections between people and place and to transcend the one-sided and rigid associations that 'belonging to' and 'attachment to' imply.

Affect, as we will see, was located in words both spoken and written. Indeed, I spent a lot of time hearing about Exarcheia in long interviews and documentaries. I learned about its history and significance through people, books, articles, songs and poems that were in themselves loci for the (re)production of an *Exarcheia-in-the-mind* (cf. Benson & Jackson 2012). The life history of Exarcheia fueled and intertwined. Similarly to the life histories of my interlocutors, it could be studied through tangibilities and captured corporeally and intersubjectively (Husserl 1989; Duranti 2010) by the use of walking (Yi'En 2013; O'Neill. M. & Perivolaris 2014; O'Neill & Roberts 2019; Wunderlich 2008). Pacing through Exarcheia with or without the company of my participants brought a series of serendipitous encounters with the neighbourhood's conspicuous and inconspicuous materialities and histories. In the chapters of this thesis, Exarcheia's macro and micro-materialities are not simply the background setting upon which 'real' events unfold, but true protagonists in themselves. Posters, murals, graffiti, banners, social centres, bookstores, resident initiatives, squats, molotov cocktails, barricades, street names, hoods, gas masks, cracked pavements, broken streetlamps, memorials, absent buildings, defaced monuments all construct different and conflicting

neighbourhood visions and authenticities. Authenticity's polysemic character (Theodossopoulos 2013) was reaffirmed in my fieldwork through an ethnographically-driven reconceptualisation of 'the authentic' as something more than an aesthetic quality or an individual attainment. As I demonstrate throughout my study, place authenticity and notions of the 'authentic self' were deeply intertwined and laden with political significations. More than a game of distinction, the quest for authenticity in Exarcheia emerged as a political tool that acquired rich material expressions which this ethnographic study endeavours to present.

### Exceptional, performativity, archive

My opinionated interlocutors (in and out of Exarcheia) and the controversies surrounding Exarcheia, made me revisit my own understandings of what is ordinary and what is exceptional. I learned that just as the exceptional can eventually be neutralised, generalised or understated, the ordinary can also be exceptionalised, singularised and studied. In Exarcheia I realised that mundane, everyday elements can reveal an exceptionality, which arises through their very repetitiveness. Ridding myself of the suspicions about the ordinary as something unworthy of academic attention (cf. Das 2007), I began, through my ethnographic engagements, to understand the way everyday social and material details are embedded in and constitute the 'eventful' in the lives of ordinary people. In Exarcheia, I came across a complexity that would appear counter-intuitive to those that think from the top-down, namely governments, institutions and the elite.

As my fieldwork progressed, I became interested in the banal, the repetitive and the inconspicuous elements of the urban environment that surrounded me. In Exarcheia the mundane consisted of moments of ordinary violence (Das 2007) embodied in weekly riots, as well as moments of political effervescence like protests and commemorative marches (Chapter 5). As I demonstrate throughout this study, the interactions, micro-dynamics and micro-eruptions that take place during these seemingly mundane, uneventful moments of quotidian life can be as potent and telling as one of those big ‘explosive’ moments that ‘make history’. I argue that repetitive street acts in Exarcheia acquire through their very reiteration a theatrical quality. This theatrical quality is either ridiculed in popular and media discourses or literally treated as a spectacle by an emergent wave of tourism fascinated with urban insurrection (Pettas et al 2021). Yet to recall the words of Judith Butler, the “*apparent theatricality* [of Exarcheia’s street-acts] *is produced to the extent that* [their] *historicity remains dissimulated (and conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of historicity)*” (1993: xxi).

One of my aims in this study is to disclose the historicity of Exarcheia by “descending into the ordinary” (Das 2007). In Exarcheia, history was ‘made’ and maintained through the everyday. Reiterations, or what Butler calls *performatives*, were discursive, corporeal and material, reproducing the past in the present and in multiple presents all at once, creating provisional spatiotemporal knots (cf. Kirtsoglou 2021). While the widely accepted as ‘eventful’ moments tend to comprise part of the official historical narrative of the state, Exarcheia’s political discourses and materialities incessantly and obsessively memorialise those other moments that the state chooses to understate, omit or erase. These are the moments and stories (*istories*) at the margins of official history

(Herzfeld 1987; 2020): moments that constitute part of the peripheral narrative of the Greek Left, born out of persecution, resistance and marginalisation. They are stories muted, absented and left unsaid. My ethnographic walks captured those absences and silences but also those visibilities and voices in Exarcheia that reproduce and maintain this narrative as well as a largely univocal counterculture that exposes and decries our late, mutant capitalism.

The “ethnographic place” (Pink 2009) entrenched by this research, is both a place in the ‘now’ and a place in the past. The two of them fold into each other forming a topography marked by temporally disobedient chronotopes (cf. Kirtsoglou 2021). In Exarcheia I was chasing and I was being chased by both tangibilities and apparitions. My ‘ethnographic place’ was obsessive and affective, but above all, *archival*. Exarcheia’s archival politics were articulated through the neighbourhood’s ability to collect, retain, express, remind and preserve this particular historicity. Exarcheia’s “performative accomplishment” (Butler 1993) lay in its capacity to resist erasure through the discursive, material and corporeal dictation of an unbending (counter)narrative that whispers at passersby from all directions. Exarcheian spaces did not merely exude ‘hazy and atmospheric’ intensities (Guattari 1990) but articulated with haunting pertinacity very specific political demands, stories and reminiscences of marginalised others within and beyond Greece. My conceptualisation of Exarcheia as an archival space thus incited another set of questions: how do urban spaces morph themselves into potent political topographies? How do they preserve history and memory and what is the significance of doing so?

By understanding the properties of the archive through the work of historians, philosophers and anthropologists (Steedman 2002; Derrida 1994; Stoler 2002; Trouillot 1995) and using it as a metaphor in my urban ethnographic study of Exarcheia, I was able to locate Exarcheia's idiosyncrasies as a space that had the ability to deliberately resist erasure and ruination (Navaro-Yashin 2009; Stoler 2008); a ruination that is both material, affective, historical and memorial; a ruination malleable and resilient that takes the form of moral and material decadence, stigmatisation, beautification and commodification.

I argue that amid and against these processes Exarcheia remains an archival space and a "lieu de memoire" (Nora 1989) that files in its (in)tangible world layers of history and memory. If Exarcheia was a person, it would be a hoarder with an incredible ability to collect and *recollect*. But then Exarcheia is also its people, and it is those people's attachment to and conservation of materialities and narratives that maintain the Exarcheia-as-archive.

### A place that doesn't exist

*"Exarcheia is all of the things and none of the things you'll hear"*, was Leonidas' opening statement during our walk.

*"Meaning?"* - I asked eagerly.

He stopped and looked at me. Darting his eyes from side to side in a playful, conspiratorial manner, he whispered:

*"I'm going to tell you something that might come as a shock to you: Exarcheia doesn't exist".*

Cryptic statements of the sort were typical with Leonidas and amusingly frustrating for my younger, impatient self during those early fieldwork days. When I asked him to explain, he did so, as usually with a story.

*"I once visited my village in western Greece. I was talking to one of the old men, telling him that I was there for the summer. He told me, 'You love this village don't you?' 'Of course I do', I responded, 'it's our village'. Then the old man said 'it is indeed, when we love it. But sometimes we hate it. Then it's not our village anymore'. This made me wonder what actually makes a place. Is it the landscape? Is it the people? If the landscape changes or if the people leave or die, does that place still feel like yours? It doesn't, does it? So it depends on how you look at it. If you see something that you like, that you admire, that attracts you –whether that's called anarchy, political movement or neighbourhood – if you see it, then it exists. If you don't see it or if you think its attributes are superficial, then maybe it does not exist."*

At the time, preoccupied as I was with the idea of an ethnographically accurate representation of Exarcheia, I didn't think much of Leonidas' story. It was only later, that his words echoed meaningfully in my thoughts. 'What makes a place our own'?

Although an overused and ordinary question, it can precipitate 'extraordinary' insights into the processes of place-making and belonging.

The story of Exarcheia is one such story of extraordinary ordinariness that this thesis will, throughout its pages, endeavour to recount. It is a story of place; of materialities and spaces that have been sculpted on Exarcheia literally and metaphorically through use, performance and memory. As the cliché goes 'people make a place', for this reason, this thesis is also inevitably a study of people and their stories (*istories*). Its pages wish to draw attention to individual characters, aspirations, memories, ideological views and preconceptions but above all sentiments. With 'affect', 'archive' and 'authenticity' as its main theoretical apparatuses, this study examines Exarcheia as a resilient affective ecology and an archival space whose historicity is composed of feelings, meanings and recollections diachronically circulating between the human and the nonhuman world.

At the same time, this is a story about a place that doesn't exist. It doesn't exist in the sense that each of its visions and reputations cancel each other out in an incessant process of self-negation. Its many over and under-representations examined in this thesis will ultimately say everything and nothing about Exarcheia because there is no 'Exarcheia' and because, ultimately, Exarcheia exists in history, in life and even on the map, only the way you imagine it to.

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## Thesis outline

The following chapter, Chapter 2, is divided into two parts. Part I places Exarcheia against the historical and socio-political background of Greece starting from its emergence on the map in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Part II gives an overview of the academic literature on Exarcheia and compares and contrasts Exarcheia with other urban spaces. It then proceeds to outline the research aims and discusses the broader conceptual apparatuses used to address them.

Chapter 3 delineates the methodological and ethical considerations that emerged before, during and after the commencement of my research. The chapter includes theoretical reflections on the processes and experience of 'doing fieldwork'. It also scrutinises the very notion of 'the field', my own positionality as a researcher and reflects upon the use and significance of walking ethnographies – one of the primary research methods of this study.

Chapter 4 is the first ethnographic chapter. Here I present and examine the 'mobile' narratives of three interlocutors, Katerina, Vicky and Leonidas. By 'walking' the reader around Exarcheia through the eyes of three different people, I aim to draw attention to the neighbourhood's remarkable and unremarkable histories and materialities. Walking as a discursive method, a corporeal and sensorial experience allowed me to map Exarcheia as an affective geography while introducing the reader to its potent archival properties.

In Chapter 5 I focus on one of Exarcheia's quintessential characteristics: its weekly so-called anarchist-police clashes (also known as 'bahala'). The banality and destructive nature of these repetitive clashes incited feelings of frustration and disenchantment among many interlocutors, who referred to them to highlight a sense of *apoliticisation* and consequently a loss of authenticity. On the other hand, with Exarcheia's historicity always in mind, I came to reconceptualise the *báhala* as important performative articulations that despite their perceived banality constitute an element of Exarcheia's archival politics that upholds the legacy of the Greek Left and the partisan logic of the streets. The last sections of the chapter continue to examine notions of (in)authenticity and different points of contention within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu.

Chapter 6 is also divided into two parts. In Part I, I outline narratives of what is referred to as the 'moral wretchedness' of Exarcheia and provide a nuanced discussion on the impact of crime, fear and insecurity on residents and anarchists. I then draw attention to the neighbourhood's *tangibilities of neglect* as encountered by interlocutors through their lived experiences of the neighbourhood. I conceptualise those as the 'material wretchedness' of Exarcheia. I here employ 'wretchedness' after the Greek equivalent 'athliotita' or 'exathliosi' - the root word of the popular derisive nickname 'Exathleia', which I argue is packed with affective agency and meaning. I discuss the different uses of urban space and the conflicting neighbourhood visions that those denote. I posit that the state benefits from and contributes to Exarcheia's *athliotita* through a *politics of neglect* and I explore this argument further in Part II where I examine Exarcheia's role and emergence as a 'problem area', its stigmatisation and its relationship with the state through consecutive governments. In my concluding sections, I discuss vernacular

conceptualisations of the state and the role of the 'absent-present' state in the backdrop of an increasingly neoliberalised urban landscape.

Chapter 6 prefigures the argument I explore in Chapter 7. Chapter 7 begins by discussing the post-2008 emergence of a 'crisis-tourism' in Greece. It examines processes of gentrification in districts of Athens and beyond and draws parallels with Exarcheia's case. Narrowing down its focus on Exarcheia, the chapter then discusses the reconfigurations and impact gentrification and commodification have brought upon Exarcheia and interrogates the neighbourhood's parallel existence as a popular destination for travellers seeking an 'alternative', authentic experience. By using interviews and media content, the rest of the chapter discusses the effect of tourism and short-term rentals on the urban and social fabric of Exarcheia and the interrelationship between crime and gentrification. My discussion on touristification and commodification in Exarcheia becomes another lens through which I examine the concept of authenticity (also seen in Chapter 5), while gentrification itself is conceptualised as a form of *ruination*.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Exarcheia's small size is disproportionate to its turbulent history - a history certainly too rich for a single thesis chapter to sufficiently cover. I will nonetheless attempt to grant the reader the historical context necessary for understanding the narratives and events that are discussed and analysed in the remainder of this thesis.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I provide a linear historical outline of Exarcheia's emergence as a central Athenian district within the wider socio-economic and political setting, through historical, academic and non-academic sources and news publications. Starting from the establishment of the Greek state in 1830, the tumultuous events of WWII, the Civil War and the seven-year-long dictatorship, I then move on to Greece's so-called "Europeanisation era" (Vradis 2012), the 2010 debt crisis and its aftermath, before finally landing on the "ethnographic present" (cf. Fabian 1983)<sup>3</sup>. By doing so, I wish to give the reader an account of how geographical and historical contingencies shaped Exarcheia's character as the epicentre of major events associated with urban resistance and political discontent. Through this historical timeline, I also hope to offer the reader a preliminary understanding of the reasons behind the ambiguous and contested narratives of a neighbourhood that is, to this day, equally demonised and glorified in political, media and popular discourses.

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<sup>3</sup> I had to reconcile with the fact that the present is *ever-moving* and therefore, even though this chapter was constantly re-edited in an effort to catch up with 'ongoing' affairs, it can never be up-to-date with the reader's present. I agree with Fabian (1983) that writing in the present tense can impart an artificiality and create a sense of 'atemporality' and distance from the interlocutors and the field. For this reason, most of my discussion is written in the past tense.

In the second part, I give a brief outline of the scholarly work and media publications on Exarcheia, before contextualising it within the broader academic literature. As I demonstrate, Exarcheia's reputation as a "place with a reputation" (Benson & Jackson 2012: 798) is affirmed through media discourses, which tend to oscillate between narratives of demonisation and romanticisation, through which the neighbourhood emerges as either a dangerous ghetto, or an anarchist hub, a highly politicized space and, in recent years, a gentrified middle-class utopia. I draw comparisons between Exarcheia and other urban hubs and spaces that have had a similar trajectory and which occupy a similar place in the popular imagination. Finally, I delve into some theoretical reflections before outlining my research aims, which emerged from my fieldwork but also my conceptual understanding of space and place as derived from theories on affect (Brennan 2004; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Bennett 2010), authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013; Zukin 2008; MacCannell 1973) and the 'archive' (Derrida 1994; Trouillot 1995; Steedman 2002; Stoler 2002; Cvetkovich 2003)

## PART I

### The birth of a neighbourhood

Greece was established as an independent state in 1830. Plans for the urban development of Athens were swiftly put forward and thousands of craftsmen and tradesmen from Epirus, the Peloponnese, the islands of the Cyclades and other parts of Greece arrived to work on the construction sites of an expanding city.

The first wave of urbanisation in Athens in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century followed a long period of 'non-planning' (Hastaoglou et al 1987). Exarcheia found itself amid the official and unofficial spatial reconfigurations of Athens. It was one of the first neighbourhoods to form in the space where the "political haggling between the first illegal buildings and the official city plan" had unfolded (Koutsoumpos 2019: 218). In Exarcheia, just like the rest of Athens, the romanticism of the European architects of that time only went as far as the construction of a few impressive neoclassical buildings. The rest of the urban fabric of Exarcheia was made up of the spontaneous dwellings of the people who worked in the construction sites of those buildings, the area that is today known as Neapolis (literally, 'New Town') (ibid).

The most commonly iterated story on how Exarcheia got its name is one regarding a merchant called Vasilios Exarchos. When he arrived in Athens from his hometown in North Epirus at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he set up a grocery store at the junction of

Themistocleous and Solonos St. in an area then known as *Pitharadika*<sup>4</sup>. Exarchos' shop soon became famous for its cheap yet high-quality products - especially its olive oil - and Athenians from all parts of the capital would visit it for their daily and weekly food supplies. As the popular story goes, it wasn't long before the old name of the area was forgotten and people started referring to it as Exarcheia, after the successful merchant.

The founding of the National Technical University of Athens -colloquially known as the Polytechnic- and the University of Athens, further enhanced the population rise of Exarcheia and its vicinity. Their presence transformed the neighbourhood into a student and intellectual haunt and destined it to become host to the first notable student protests in Athens dubbed *Skiadika*<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the establishment of Greece's first School of Fine Arts in the area turned Exarcheia into a meeting point and a home for a number of known and unknown artists, whose ateliers, workshops and exhibitions, along with the emerging bookstores, publishing houses and printing shops gave the neighbourhood its bohemian character.

Despite its rapid increase in population, late 19<sup>th</sup> century Athens barely resembled the disorderly, crowded metropolis that we know today. An 1882 picture (*Figure 1*) shows that the areas beyond Strefi and Lycabettus, as well as those beyond the Polytechnic, remained uninhabited. The now busy Alexandra's Avenue used to be a ravine, and

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<sup>4</sup> From Greek 'pithari' (πιθάρη), meaning 'pot'. The area was named after its many pottery workshops, for which the quarry on the rocky hill behind it provided the necessary raw materials. Later, the quarry became what is today the forested hill of Strefi.

<sup>5</sup> In Greek: Σκιαδικά. In 1859, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexandros Ragkavis, contended that Greek consumers should only purchase locally produced goods. As an example, he suggested that Greeks should wear straw hats (*skiadia*) made on the island of Sifnos, rather than imported ones from Europe. On May 10, 1859, university and high school students wearing locally made *skiadia* gathered at *Pedion tou Areos* to listen to the military band - an event attended by the royal couple. Hat importers from abroad who were affected by this initiative reacted by sending employees wearing either ragged hats - to ridicule the students - or imported hats, which had become the symbols of royalism. The police attacked those wearing *skiadia* and made arrests. See Tarrou 1969; Dimitrakopoulos 1977; Dimaras 1977.

Tzavella St. in Exarcheia marked at the time the border of the city (Nakos 2016)<sup>6</sup>. Soon, however, incessant demographic and infrastructural changes would expand the limits of Athens, and blur Exarcheia's boundaries and those of its nearby neighbourhoods of Neapoli and Kolonaki<sup>7</sup>.



Figure 1. An 1882 picture showing the areas beyond Strefi, Lycabettus and the Polytechnic barren and largely uninhabited.  
Source: <https://www.mixanitouxronou.gr/o-mpakalis-pou-edose-t-onoma-tou-sta-ex/>

The most significant alterations in the urban landscape of Athens took place in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Building Regulation of 1929 and the possibility of horizontal ownership saw the sudden and fast-paced construction of blocks of flats in the centre of the city (Marmaras 1989). In Exarcheia, the junction of Solomou, Metaxa, Trikoupi,

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<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://www.mixanitouxronou.com.cy/categories/istoria/afti-ine-i-proti-fotografia-tis-akropolis-meta-tin-tourkokratia-ta-schedia-gia-tin-anikodomisi-tis-katestrammenis-athinas-ke-i-antidrasis-ton-ikopedouchon/> (last accessed 13.10.21).

<sup>7</sup> To this day, there is general indecision as to where the borders of Exarcheia end and where those of Neapoli and Kolonaki begin - an ambiguity that is reflected in property sales ads and business addresses in which the districts are often hyphenated as Neapoli-Exarcheia or Exarcheia-Kolonaki. In his book 'Exarcheia doesn't exist in history, on maps, in life', Leonidas Christakis attributes this subjective fluidity to the area's 'seasonal fluctuation' (2008:87). I discuss these 'fluctuations' in Chapter 6.

Stournari and Themistocleous St. that today forms its 'triangular' square, was at the time surrounded by houses, which in subsequent decades were demolished and substituted with apartment blocks.

Exarcheia turns into a battlefield: WWII, Civil War and the Dekemvriana

Exarcheia's connection with the Left can be traced back to the beginning of WWII in Greece. On September 27, 1941, only a few months after Greece was occupied the Nazi forces, the founding meeting of EAM<sup>8</sup> took place in a small house on Mavromichali St. (Apostolou 1982: 62)<sup>9</sup> in the neighbourhood. Towards the end of WWII, two days after the withdrawal of the German forces from Greece on October 12, 1944, British troops arrived in Athens. It did not take long for the lack of cooperation between the United Kingdom and the communist-led EAM-ELAS<sup>10</sup> to result in what became known as the 'December Events' (*Dekemvriana*)<sup>11</sup>, recalled as one of the bloodiest and most politically polarised events of WWII in Greece (Christodoulakis 2016; Squires 2018). On December 3, 1944, the culmination of the ideological tensions between rightists and leftists turned the streets of Athens into a battlefield (Kirk & McElligott 1999). EAM-ELAS, the KKE and

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<sup>8</sup>Acronym for *Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo* (National Liberation Front, in Greek: *Ελληνικό Απελευθερωτικό Μέτωπο*). EAM was the biggest movement of organised Greek Resistance against the Axis forces. It was founded by representatives of four left-wing parties: Lefteris Apostolou for the KKE, Christos Chomenidis for the Socialist Party of Greece (SKE), Ilias Tsirimokos for the Union of People's Democracy (ELD) and Apostolos Vogiatzis for the Agricultural Party of Greece (AKE).

<sup>9</sup> In his book *Ἡ Νικηφόρα Επανάσταση που χάθηκε*, Thanasis Hatzis says that the meeting took place in a house at the end of Ippokratous Street, which is parallel to Mavromichali Street.

<sup>10</sup> Acronym for *Ellinikos Apeleftherotikos Stratos* (Greek People's Liberation Army, in Greek: *Ελληνικός Απελευθερωτικός Στρατός*). ELAS was the military arm of EAM during the period of the Greek resistance until February 1945.

<sup>11</sup> In Greek: *Δεκεμβριανά*

OPLA on one side, the British Army, the Greek Government, the Hellenic Royal forces and Gendarmerie on the other, fought each other for thirty-three days. Some of the fiercest battles of the Dekemvriana took place in and around Exarcheia (Panourgia 2009: 145). On December 5, around fifty ELAS militants occupied the Polytechnic, before British forces finally recaptured it. In the meantime, the General Security offices on Stournari St. in the heart of the neighbourhood received blows from the artillery the guerrillas had installed on the hill of Strefi.

The Dekemvriana ended with the defeat of EAM-ELAS and its disarmament via the Varkiza Peace Agreement in February 1945. However, what felt like the end of WWII in Greece was only the dawn of its Civil War, which officially broke out in March 1946. The Civil War (*O Emfylios*) - regarded by some as the very first proxy war of the Cold War era (Jones 1989; Marantzidis & Antoniou 2004; Marantzidis 2015) - ended with the defeat of the communist forces on October 16, 1949.

## Post-Civil War

The aftermath of the Civil War was characterised by an intense ‘anti-communist witchhunt’ (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos 2002) put forward by its victors - the nationalistic and pro-Western Greek forces – who, using their rhetoric of *ethnikophrosini*<sup>12</sup>, were

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<sup>12</sup> *Ethnikophrosini* also *ethnikophrosyne* – defined as ‘national way of thinking’ or ‘loyalty to the nation’ (Stefanidis 2016: 29) or simply ‘national-mindedness’ (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos 2002: 92). For more information on the Civil War in Greece see Mazower 2004; Stefanides 2005; Rizas 2008; Veremis 1997; Kostis 2013.

determined to establish national security. Although centrist administrations dominated the political scene in the first years after the Civil War, the Right still maintained its institutional strength in the security forces and the management of public affairs (Siani-Davies & Katsikas 2009). Taking advantage of the increasing discord among the centrists, the Right secured its political control through the election of influential figures such as marshal Alexandros Papagos and subsequently Konstantinos Karamanlis and his National Radical Union (ERE). Through the policies of their respective regimes, the notion of *ethnikophrosini* took the form of “legitimated semi-institutionalised mechanism of repression” (Mouzelis & Pagoulatos 2002: 88). The law required citizens to present a ‘certificate of social reliability’ (*pistopoiitiko koinonikon fronimaton*)<sup>13</sup>. Greek society was divided into those nationally minded (*ethnikofrones*) and those regarded as dangerous and anti-patriotic (*miasmata*), whose influence, political and civil rights had to thus be curtailed. This legislation meant that any Greek citizen found to be communists or communist sympathisers were denied a loyalty certificate and with it things such as employment in the public sector or even admission to higher education. Political dissidents were arrested, and heavy surveillance was set up to spy on those suspected of being affiliated with the Left. According to Siani-Davies and Katsikas, “even reading the leftist paper *Avgi* could lead to trouble with the police, who had considerable power and influence, especially in rural communities” (2009: 564).

The political and ideological marginalisation of communist and left-wing forces, as well as the obsessive top-to-bottom control of any form of social and political development that could transform the socio-political status quo - a phenomenon that Samatas (1986)

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<sup>13</sup> For more information on this see Clogg (1979: 168) and Samatas (1986: 35).

calls the “Greek McCarthyism” - led to the establishment of what has been described as a regime of “guided democracy” or “restrictive parliamentarism” (Lyrinzis 1984; Samatas 1986; Mouzelis & Pagoultos 2005) and the formation of various para-state organisations. The ‘Great Red Scare’ observed in the US and Western Europe at the time further fueled the Greek anticommunist crusade, which climaxed with the rise of the military coup of 1967, led by Brigadier General Stylianos Pattakos and Colonels George Papadopoulos and Nikolaos Makarezos – an alliance that also became known as ‘the Junta of the Colonels’<sup>14</sup> (*I hounta ton syntagmatarhon*).

The years of the dictatorship

The Colonels arose from the ranks of the anti-communist para-state organization IDEA<sup>15</sup>, which had been active for more than ten years prior to the *coup d’etat*, in 1967. The dictatorship years in Greece were a period of intense political violence, often described as a “low key civil war” (Kornetis 2010: 183)<sup>16</sup>. The climate of suppression, however, was unable to halt the dissemination of democratic ideas, particularly among the Greek youth. During the dictatorship, the student movement in Greece was predominantly influenced by communist and libertarian discourses. Although it is often

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<sup>14</sup> In Greek: *Η χούντα των Συνταγματάρχων*.

<sup>15</sup> Stands for *Ieros Desmos Ellinon Axiomatikon*- meaning *Holy Band of Greek Officers*

<sup>16</sup> In 1973, another coup led by the chief of the Greek Military Police Dimitrios Ioannidis, overthrew George Papadopoulos. Ioannidis became known in history as the ‘invisible dictator’, for until he stepped forward to seize complete power, he had remained behind the scenes of political activity. Papadopoulos was filled with sheer determination to annex Cyprus to Greece and achieve the *ENOSIS*. The coup d’etat in Cyprus on July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1974, sponsored by Ioannides breached the London-Zurich Treaties Agreements, giving Turkey the opportunity to invade Cyprus as one of the guarantor powers. The events in Cyprus were pivotal in the restoration of democracy in Greece and the subsequent arrest of Ioannidis and his collaborators (Kassimeris 2008).

argued that these influences spurred out of France's May 68 (Glimenakis 2011; Apoifis 2017), the critique of existing socialism (namely that of China and the USSR) had already begun in Greece -and elsewhere- before the dictatorship of 1964. As Giorgos Karampelias, a renowned author and political analyst who had participated in May 68 as a student, explained to me in an interview<sup>17</sup>, major events such as the ongoing Vietnam war had instigated and synchronised the politicisation and mobilisation of young people around the world. The so-called baby-boom generation in Europe and the USA that was born after WWII collided with the established convictions and perceptions of traditional society as well as the "Marxist orthodoxies in European social movements" (Apoifis 2017: 86). The waves of radical change reached Greek shores and similar socio-political fermentations began to take place but got abruptly interrupted by the 1964 coup.

Four years into the dictatorial regime, France's May 68, the Italian autonomous Marxists and the Situationists rekindled the desire for radical change amongst revolutionary Greek circles (Glimenakis 2011; Apoifis 2017). According to Karampelias, during that time, part of the dictatorial regime's strategy of getting rid of its "dangerous citizens" (cf. Panourgia 2009) involved the issuing of ten-day passports, making it impossible for many young people studying abroad to return home. It was during their student years in Paris, that some young Greeks, including Karampelias, found themselves fervently involved in the student movement of May 68. According to my interviewee, the majority of students that participated embraced a communist tradition, whereas anarchists at the time were, as Glimenakis (2011) puts it, "minor players" (2011: 37). Anarchism in Greece, according to Nicholas Apoifis had been lying dormant since WWII and as his

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<sup>17</sup> I interviewed Giorgos Karampelias in April 2021.

informants posit, overall, anarchist activity had been “stifled by life-threatening distractions” (2017: 86), namely the Nazi Occupation, the Civil war and the military junta. The consensus in sources is that anarchism as a political movement in Greece began to crystallise in the years after 1973 and the subsequent fall of the dictatorship (Glimenakis 2011; Apoifis 2017).

### Exarcheia’s emergence as an anarchist stronghold

For some, the prelude to the fall of the dictatorship had come on November 17, 1973, months before the invasion of Cyprus, when thousands of students and youth zealously protested against the dictatorial regime by occupying the Polytechnic. The occupation ended in bloodshed, when a military tank crushed down the central gate of the Polytechnic, killing 23 protesters<sup>18</sup>. The National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) would become an emblem of resistance against tyranny, independence from foreign rule, political freedom and freedom of expression (Protopapas 2012). As if by osmosis, the adjacent neighbourhood of Exarcheia -that had already acquired a reputation as a site of rebellion during the Civil War- became, following the Polytechnic Uprising, firmly established as a site of radical politics of discontent, freedom and urban resistance to cryptocolonial and hegemonic mechanisms that rendered Greece subject to the interest of foreign powers (cf. Herzfeld 2002). The same ideologies and slogans that emerged during the events at the Polytechnic were reiterated with equal fervour in subsequent youth mobilisations that sparked within and around Exarcheia. However,

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<sup>18</sup> Other sources mention different numbers. See for instance Egger (2011), Clogg (1992) and Kallivretakis (2004).

beyond its role as a place for the romantic evocation of the ideals of the Polytechnic Uprising, Exarcheia would acquire a reputation as a site of terrorist activity.

Following a transition to democracy after 1974 – a period known as *Metapolitefsi*<sup>19</sup>- the institutionalisation of a large segment of the Left in Greece was marked by its absorption into the socialist PASOK. Another part of the Left remained faithful to the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) which was legalized and gained representation in the newly established parliamentary democratic system. The KKE's official party line took its distance from the 'western-inspired' rock, hippy and punk subcultures that thrived in Exarcheia during the 1980s<sup>20</sup>. In this post-1974 political scene, a certain 'branch' of the left felt largely under-represented by the political personnel of the time who almost in their entirety had focused on democratization, the restoration of the communist party and its supporters and the establishment of a solid liberal democracy (cf. Karakatsanis 2001; Kostis 2013). Disillusioned by the politics of normalisation and liberalisation and remaining true to an ideal of 'revolutionary politics', multiple, different and divergent leftist sects continued their separate existence at the margins of institutionalised politics. Sometimes referred to as 'anti-establishment' and other times as 'anti-constitutionals', these publics (cf. Warner 2002) ranged from what was termed as the 'radical left' to small but influential anarchist groups<sup>21</sup> who promoted a strong anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian and anti-imperialist rhetoric (Apoifis 2017: 88; see also

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<sup>19</sup> Literally 'regime change'. It refers to the period in modern Greek history that followed the fall of the junta of the Colonels in 1974 and the transition of government to parliamentary democracy after the 1974 legislative elections. There is, however, disagreement on whether and when the *Metapolitefsi* ended. The 2012 elections on June 17<sup>th</sup>, the financial collapse of 2008-09, the Cold War (1989-1991) and the death of Andreas Papandreou (1996) have all been argued to be milestones in marking the end of *Metapolitefsi* and the onset of the post-*Metapolitefsi* era (Pappas 2014; Vradis 2020; Diamantopoulos 1997).

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>21</sup> SYRIZA – the political party in office during the first three years of my research (2016-2019) – started as a coalition of a number of such groups. SYRIZA is an acronym that stands for 'Coalition of Radical Left' – in Greek: *Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras* (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς).

Herzfeld 2002). The 1973 uprising would come to symbolise the point of conception of contemporary Athenian anarchism and of partisan action mostly represented by the organisation *17th November* (*Dekaeftha Noemvri*<sup>22</sup>), named after the date of the Polytechnic Uprising itself. The organization started its action with the assassinations of a US officer and two of the most renowned junta torturers (Kassimeris 1997). In its long history, it enjoyed the silent approval of many (even non-right wing) Greek people (cf. Kirtsoglou 2006), which was gradually transformed to neutrality and disapproval as the organisation's character, targets and practices gradually changed.

The *17th of November* was finally dismantled in 2002 after several of its members were arrested. Until that time, it co-existed with other, smaller partisan groups whose actions were more symbolic than lethal. The partisan movement served to remind Leftist supporters that the visions of the Polytechnic generation had not been fulfilled. This sentiment of dissatisfaction and disappointment can be traced back to a dynamic group of leftists and a minority of anarchists who formed part of the nucleus of the Polytechnic revolt and for whom liberal democracy was simply not good enough (Kotea 2013). These individuals had hoped that the student uprising would come to represent not only the struggle against dictatorship but also a struggle against the capitalist system as a whole and would therefore continue in subsequent years to protest against the state, capitalism, imperialism and dependence on foreign powers (particularly the USA).

After 1974, Exarcheia morphed into a site of radical politicisation. It became a meeting point for students, restless youths, low-key supporters of urban partisanism, and official representatives of left-wing organisations that set up their offices in the neighbourhood.

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<sup>22</sup> Often abbreviated as 17N.

These interactions subsequently brought together the “movement of autonomy” (*kinima autonomias*) that as Karampelias explained to me in his interview was “the precursor of the anarchist movement”. In the late 70s and throughout the 1980s, the neighbourhood would become the epicentre of university occupations and student demonstrations but also a locus for a series of infamous police operations.

Post-dictatorial violence: Operation Virtue, Chemistry School Occupation and the murder of Kaltezas

In 1976, the parliamentary parties, including KKE, did not endorse the annual march to the US embassy that typically followed the commemoration march of the Polytechnic Uprising around Athens. That same year, the post-1974 recently re-established democratic regime launched the Riot Police Units - known as MAT<sup>23</sup>- to control and confine street riots<sup>24</sup>. Exarcheia was the first and main neighbourhood in post-dictatorial Greece where such semi-military operations took place. Police tactics involved blockading parts of Exarcheia in order to 'catch' individuals assumed to be affiliated with radical political groups. This mission resulted in the detainment of mostly youth, under the pretext of 'not looking proper' (Dalakoglou 2013), which was often

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<sup>23</sup> In Greek: *Μονάδες Αποκατάστασης Τάξης/Μοναδες Αποκαταστασις Τaxis (MAT)*

<sup>24</sup> Many mark the Polytechnic anniversary of November 17, 1980, as emblematic of those turbulent times. On that day a group of protesters decided to defy the ban and march to the US embassy<sup>24</sup> (see Apoifis 2017). The incident led to violent clashes and the death of two young people, Stamatina Kanelopoulou and the Greek-Cypriot student Iakovos Koumis who were clubbed to death by the police.

equated with having scruffy looks and piercings that ‘most certainly’ did not suit the face of a developing, modern and (new) EU member state<sup>25</sup>.

The 1980s were characterised by ever-increasing tension and incessant clashes between police and rioters (Kornetis 2010). The failure of Prime Minister Andrea Papandreou’s PASOK to deliver its promise of assigning more power to the socialist Left and working-class movements, along with the deteriorating economy and the government’s adoption of neoliberal austerity policies, further exacerbated the situation. Perhaps the most important event in the history of the post-dictatorial anti-authoritarian movement of the 1980s was the occupation of the Chemistry School in May 1985. This was launched as a response to yet a new round of police operations in 1984 that became known as ‘Virtue Operations’ (*Epiphirisis Areti*)<sup>26</sup>. At the same time, protests and occupations were held throughout that year against the state-led gentrification of Exarcheia, which was at that time part of a wider government effort to ‘beautify’ Athens<sup>27</sup>. It was through these mobilisations that, according to Apoifis, “anarchist ideas and actions fermented and were refined” (2017: 89). Apoifis cites the action at Hotel Caravel on December 6 as one of the early examples where protesters deployed militant tactics - like the use of petrol bombs - and attacked several places that epitomised capitalist and consumerist values, i.e. banks, chain and designer shops or car dealers (ibid).

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<sup>25</sup> Greece’s EU accession negotiations were initiated in July 1976 and concluded in May 1979, with the signing of the Treaty of Accession in Athens (*Zappeion Megaron*). The Greek Parliament ratified the Treaty of Accession of Greece to the European Community on June 28, 1979. The Accession took place two years later, on January 1, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> The term ‘virtue operation’ was used as early as the 1960s, as a euphemism for police raids in urban settings. After the events of 1984, it was established in public discourse as the term that described police raids in Exarcheia more particularly.

<sup>27</sup> For more on this see Chapter 7.

The Virtue Operations of 1984 established Exarcheia as a zone of constant police surveillance and unprecedented state scrutiny with arrests taking place daily. In response to this, the anti-authoritarian movements organised in 1985 a protest at the square of Exarcheia demanding that police leave the neighbourhood. The latter surrounded the square trying to break up the protest by arresting people, which subsequently led to the gathering of the protesters inside the Chemistry School located on Solonos St. The occupation came to an end five days later, after the state agreed to free those detained and allowed the squatters to leave the building without proceeding to further arrests (Theofani & Raftopoulou 2014).

The Occupation of the Chemistry School in May 1985 is considered a significant victory of anti-authoritarians and anarchists<sup>28</sup> against the state, not merely because it forced the latter to give in to protester demands, but also because the incident itself marked an entire epoch and is considered one of the most vigorous manifestations of public discontent towards state violence, leaving behind the slogan *"Inside the Chemistry school, a handful of anarchists, humiliated the state and state-violence"*<sup>29</sup> (Karamichas 2009; Kornetis 2010; Theofani & Raftopoulou 2014). However, the extent to which a handful of people could truly possess that kind of power against the state has been disputed. Only a few months later, in November 1985, 15-year-old Michalis Kaltezas was killed by a 25-year old riot cop named Athanasios Melistas, in Solomou St., during

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<sup>28</sup> In interviews some participants conflated the terms 'anti-authoritarian' and 'anarchist', while others used the word 'anti-authoritarian' in opposition to 'anarchist'. For my own analysis, I have espoused Apoifis' definition which groups these categories together on the basis of 'three critical characteristics': struggle against all forms of domination, commitment to an ethos of prefigurative politics and anti-dogmatism - that is, supporting a diverse, open-ended system of thought and rejecting a dominant, singular approach to anarchist politics (2017: 12). Throughout this study, the words 'anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros*' are used to refer to the crystallised set of narratives, places and tactics that emerged in Greece during the period of Metapolitefsi (Kittis 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Original: *'Mesa sto Chimio, mia houfta anarchikoi, xeftilisan to kratos kai tin katastoli'* / *'Μέσα στο Χημείο, μια χούφτα αναρχικοί, ξεφτίλισαν το κράτος και την καταστολή'*.

the Polytechnic Uprising demonstrations. Famous slogans such as “*Cops, Pigs, Assassins*” and “*Violence against state violence*” first emerged during those turbulent post-dictatorial times (Kornetis 2010).

Kaltezas’ murder on the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polytechnic Uprising can be arguably considered the climax of the increasingly hostile climate between PASOK (the socialist party) and the extra-parliamentary leftist opposition. At the same time, the incident certainly interrupted the ‘disillusionment and numbness’ that overwhelmed a large section of the radical left after PASOK’s first season in government and led to more violent protests (Giovanopoulos & Dalakoglou 2011). The police brutality of the 70s and the 80s cast a long shadow and left a strong imprint on the people’s collective memory. Youth mobilisations would continue throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The Polytechnic, as Kornetis observes, would become a ‘lieu de memoire’ and a model for subsequent uprisings (2010; cf. Nora 1989).

Exarcheia as an ‘ávaton’

Thus far, I have discussed how the aftermath of the dictatorship saw Exarcheia emerging as an urban hub with counter-cultural characteristics and a site of revolt that continued to generate political resistance and maintain the memories of the Greek Left that stretch as far back as the Civil War. In time, the neighbourhood became a haunt of

leftists and anarchists and was soon hailed by the press as an *ávaton*<sup>30</sup> (off-limits territory) for the police and other state actors (Vradis 2012; Kotea 2013). As Glimenidis argues, isolated urban partisan groups that deployed militant or so-called revolutionary violence did not “fit the template of the anarchist participation that contribute[d] positively to the political process” (2011: 46). Indeed, two events in the late 1980s demonstrated the stronger presence of anarchism in Greek politics. In 1986, in what Apoifis describes as a “watershed moment for anarchism and anti-authoritarian politics in Greece” (2017: 90), a national conference was held in an effort to unify the different anarchist currents (Glimenakis 2011). The conference produced an Anarchist Union, which despite opposition from insurrectionist anarchists<sup>31</sup> lasted a few years.

Despite the nuances and differences within the anarchist milieu, the Greek media began to place anarchists in one generic, all-inclusive category – something exemplified in the commonly used (to this day) catchphrase ‘anarchist-police clashes’ (*oi sygkrouseis ton anarchikon me tin astynomia*). In the words of author and former US Foreign Service Officer in Athens John Brady Kiesling (2010):

“Anarchist’ is a generic term used by the Greek media and police to refer to ominously dressed youth who congregate in Exarcheia and throw rocks at police. True anarchists (as opposed to children who like to paint the symbol on walls) are a minority in Exarcheia's wide spectrum of anti-establishment

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<sup>30</sup>As Vradis (2012) argues it was in the 1980s that the word *ávaton* was used by the press for the first time to describe Exarcheia. In Chapter 6 I discuss in detail the sudden emergence of the narrative that portrayed Exarcheia as Athens’ feared and immoral topography of criminals and political dissidents.

<sup>31</sup>Insurrectionist anarchists constitute another current within the anarchist milieu. According to Apoifis, unlike anarcho-syndicalists or anarcho-communists, ‘insurrectionists are more inclined to advocate ephemeral networks of organisation and small affinity-group structures, rather than overt, permanent organisational frameworks’. They don’t try to create a mass movement and ‘nearly always support constant attacks on capitalist, state and consumerist institutions’ (2017: 14)

ideologies from libertarian socialism to murderous nihilism. Members often use the term ‘antiexousiastes’ (anti-authoritarians).”<sup>32</sup>

It is important to add that, during the 1980s, the idea of Exarcheia as an anarchist stronghold hostile to the state was further reinforced by the presence of police units on Charilaou Trikoupi St., originally installed to protect the offices of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Party). Police presence there and on Ippokratous St. - a couple of blocks away - has been thought to act as a kind of human check-point (Vradis 2012: 166), marking the ‘invisible’ border between Exarcheia and its “antithetical” neighbouring district of Kolonaki (ibid: 166) - one of the most affluent, upper-middle-class neighbourhoods of Athens and home to professionals, businessmen, politicians and high-ranking diplomats.

The strategic ‘handling’ of Exarcheia by respective governments turned it into a reflection, or as Vradis puts it, a euphemism (2012: 131), of the political and social tensions observed on a national level. This was exemplified in the 1980s, during the so-called Europeanisation era in Greece (Vradis 2012) when Athens found itself trapped and suffocating in the tentacles of capitalism, with its lacking infrastructure unable to support its “chaotic gigantism” (Tsavdaroglou & Makrygianni 2013: 23). The unregulated and unlicensed urban expansions, characteristic of the entire postwar period, were legalised in 1985 as part of the Operation for the Reconfiguration of the Urban Plan (ORUP) and the Master Plan of Athens. One of ORUP’s main goals was the use of urban planning as a means of eliminating anarchist and far-left political elements

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<sup>32</sup> Kiesling here raises points recurrently discussed by my interlocutors throughout my time in Exarcheia. The issue of the ‘true’ versus ‘inauthentic’ anarchist and the construction of the subjectivity of the anarchists as evil, rock-throwing individuals underneath hoods is something I discuss in depth in Chapter 5, where I analyse ideological ruptures within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros* and notions of apoliticisation.

in Exarcheia (Tsavdaroglou & Makrygianni 2013). The Virtue Operations constituted part of this 'brooming' and 'grooming' of the neighbourhood, and even though they only lasted a few years, police sieges would continue with varying regularities in the area throughout the next decades.

### The calm before the storm: Greece's Europeanisation era

In the 1990s, the socialist PASOK was eager to transform Greece into a 'good and modern' European state by adopting several neoliberal policies, such as privatisation and "flexible labour relations" (Matsas 2010:55; cf. also Laskos & Tsakalotos 2013). The party's attempts to adapt the Greek economy to the demands of capitalist globalisation were met with multiple acts of anti-neoliberal resistance, which the state's traditional resistance-suppression mechanism of personalised clientelism could not control (Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012). Neighbourhoods would often become the nucleus of urban struggles that took place in response to the neoliberal reforms and developments that the state had introduced. Exarcheia, Athens's quintessential hub of urban resistance, was no exception, even though similar citizen initiatives were observed in the adjoining neighbourhoods of Kypseli and Patisia (Arampatzi & Nicholls 2012). Despite coping better than other Greek cities, Athens did not acquire the economic environment necessary to thrive in the enhanced competitive context that its admission to the EU in 1981 demanded (Chronopoulos 2010: 740). Modernisation plans began to fail, and urban restructuring projects were put to a halt as Greece became a migrant-receiving country following the collapse of the USSR. The socio-economic issues

simmering beneath the surface were masked by the excessive focus on foreign investment and centralised growth that took place to support Greece's "Europeanisation dream" (Vradis 2012: 86), namely its gentrification projects and events such as the 2004 Olympic Games. These investments would eventually not only come at the expense of Athens's sustainable development but also sharpen the pre-existing socioeconomic disparities within Greek society itself. Bearing in mind the big financial crisis that hit Greece only five years later, one can retrospectively understand that this time of relative prosperity, extravagance and indulgence, was merely the calm before the storm.

The storm: the financial Crisis and December 2008

Different sources place the onset of the Greek economic crisis at different points in time (Knight 2010). Some sources suggest that the antecedents of what is often termed simply 'The Crisis' can be traced back to Greece's accession to the European Economic Community in 1981 and the country's sudden and unregulated liberalisation (Klein 2008; Knight 2011), while the consensus - as reflected in media outlets and popular rhetoric - is that the palpable effects of the Greek crisis first emerged in 2008-2009.

That was also when three gunshots and the death of a 15-year old boy became a catalyst for a long-awaited and unprecedented explosion. The fatal shooting of teenager Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a policeman on December 6, 2008, in an alley in Exarcheia sparked a series of riots nationwide, which escalated to what is known as 'the most

intense social crisis in the thirty-four years since the democratic transition of Greece' (Karamichas 2009: 289). The murder of Alexis<sup>33</sup> - saw impromptu yet surprisingly synchronised crowd mobilisations flaring up in Athens and rapidly spreading to cities in and outside Greece. The first nights of the protests were marked by extensive property destruction, police station attacks, burning of banks, cars and upmarket stores in cities all over Greece (Apoifis 2017). During the first week, various places in Athens were set on fire – including the Christmas tree on Syntagma Square - and demonstrations, though not always violent, would continue throughout 2009.

The narrative of the demonstrations was defined by the desire of demonstrators to both relate to and abstain from past events. For instance, attempts by activists to break away from the heroisation narratives of the Polytechnic Uprising of 1973 by making explicit the anti-heroic and critical tone of their revolt, were juxtaposed with moments of direct interpellations of the 1970s, such as those evoked through slogans like *'In every corner [there is] a policeman, the Junta did not end in 1973'*<sup>34</sup> (Kornetis 2010:177 emphasis mine). At the same time, bold claims like the one made by controversial politician Mimis Androulakis<sup>35</sup> against the 'polytechnic generation', have been contested by Giovanopoulos and Vradis. The latter, suggest that December 2008 "completed the work

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<sup>33</sup> Grigoropoulos remained known in everyday rhetoric and in the memory of Greeks simply as 'Alexis'. The use of the abbreviation denotes endearment and the appropriation of his death by the wider public. For lack of more suitable words, I have here used 'appropriation' as a positive term to translate the Greek word *oikiopoiisi* (οικιοποίηση). The root verb *oikiopoioumai* literally means 'to make mine that which belongs to someone else', 'to hold within my home (*oikos*)'. This is also quite different to the English 'familiarise' which translates as 'making something known to oneself'. Thus the death of Alexis was *appropriated* in the sense that the anger and sorrow his death brought upon his family were shared and felt by many.

<sup>34</sup> In Greek: 'Σε κάθε γωνία, υπάρχει αστυνομία, η χούντα δεν τελείωσε το 73' (*'Se kathe gonia, yparhei astynomia, i hounta den teleiose to 73'*).

<sup>35</sup> Androulakis had once declared that the Polytechnic generation is a group of 'vampires [...] that absorbs generations in its own past' and a ghost that haunts future youth rebellions not allowing them to form their own character (see Kornetis 2010).

of previous moments of social antagonism” (2011: 111) by materialising and fulfilling movements in Greece that had been building up over the years since the fall of the dictatorship.

Another more widely cited connection with the past is that of Dekemvriana of 1944. This link, though again not a consistent one, was observed in everyday rhetoric, articles and brochures of that time. It was also clearly reflected in the lyrics of a song called *Rage (Orgi)*, by the punk-hop band *Methismena Ksotika (Μεθυσμένα Ξωτικά)*. As one of the verses goes:

*“We are a beautiful image coming from the future, from those that never recognised Varkiza, because no December has ever ended”.<sup>36</sup>*

*“We are an image coming from the future”* - a widely-used motto at the time of the events - that might reflect the rioters’ refusal to identify with past events (Kornetis 2010), is then immediately followed by a not-so-subtle reference to the Dekemvriana of 1944 and the Varkiza Agreement responsible for disarming the communists at the end of WWII. The use of ‘Dekemvriana’ to refer to December 2008, was a conscious choice made by rioters to echo the violent December battle in Athens between EAM-ELAS and the British forces at the start of the Civil War, and albeit fundamentally incomparable in their causation and aim, the Dekemvriana of 1944 and 2008 resemble each other in the sense that they both deeply (re)polarised Greek society (Vradis 2009). The song itself is a condemnation not only of the state, but as the lyrics suggest, a direct criticism towards

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<sup>36</sup> In Greek: *‘Είμαστε μια όμορφη εικόνα από το μέλλον, από αυτούς που την Βάρκιζα δεν ξέχασαν ποτέ, γιατί κανένας Δεκέμβρης δεν τέλειωσε ποτέ.’* (*‘Eimaste mia omorfi eikona apo to mellon, apo aftous pou tin Varkiza den xehasan pote, giati kanenas Dekemvris den teleiose pote.’*)

the ‘other’ Greek, the Greek next door, the one who remains ‘a spectator, faithful to consumerism’, surprised, yet merely annoyed at the unexpected duration of events<sup>37</sup>.

*“December wasn’t the answer. It was the question”.*

The explosiveness, violence and chaos of December 2008 left no room for doubt that the riots were much more than a manifestation of civilian anger towards the cold-blooded killing of an innocent teen by the state. This was succinctly conveyed through the well-known slogan “December was not the answer. It was the question”, which titled many articles published at the time; a phrase that Google Search finishes for you when you type in ‘ο Δεκεμβρις’<sup>38</sup>, and which someone might still be able to spot amongst other graffiti on the walls of Exarcheia.

Indeed, more than simply the people’s response to the murder, the riots were primarily a question about the way the society’s suppressed and marginalised felt towards state violence and the burdens the neoliberalisation of the economy had brought upon them. The aftermath of December 2008 revealed the chasm of Greek society, filled with resentment and rage towards those ‘on top’. It was the outcome of a deeply-rooted and long-standing social discontent towards a corrupt and incompetent elite and an ever-deteriorating economy - a sentiment that was reflected in another powerful slogan:

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<sup>37</sup> From the original song verse: *“Oso gia sena pou ap’tin proti stigma se vrika theati, pisto stin katanalosi, ehthro gia tin zoi, pou olo afto to des san xesasma, to vrikes ‘logiko’, ma aganaktises pou kratise ‘ligaki’ parapano”* (“Όσο για εσένα που απ’ τη πρώτη στιγμή σε βρήκα θεατή, πιστό στην κατανάλωση, εχθρό για τη ζωή, που όλο αυτό το ‘δες σαν ξέσπασμα, το βρήκες λογικό’, μα αγανάκτησες που κράτησε ‘λιγάκι’ παραπάνω”).

<sup>38</sup> Full slogan: *‘Ο Δεκεμβρις den itan i apantisi, itan i erotisi’ (Ο Δεκέμβρης δεν ήταν η απάντηση, ήταν η ερώτηση’).*

*“The first stone was for Alexis; the rest are for us.”*

The popular participation in the riots was so vast and diverse that references to it as an ‘uprising’ were made almost without hesitation (Karamichas 2009). Unlike previous decades, this time “the state could not simply present the December uprising as one more Exarcheia-centered incident of ‘rioting hooliganism’” (Stavrides 2014:547) of a homogenous group of unruly anarchists, bored teenagers or long-term activists who traditionally possessed the know-how of rioting. What made those last days of 2008 notable is that the demonstrations consisted of people from all walks of life, who turned the streets into an arena for the anti-authoritarian alliance, not only of politically conscious individuals but of angry students, the unemployed, precarious workers and newly-arrived migrants - many of which had never demonstrated before (Panayiotakis 2011).

The riots of December, as Vradis rightly observes, are without doubt the “true child of Exarcheia” (2009: 147). For the second time in history, a teenager was shot dead by the police in the streets of a neighbourhood whose historical trajectory had already shaped it into a site of political unrest and resistance to state oppression. Alexis was killed in the heart of “anarchist territory” by the very enemy, the state (Squires 2018), making people question if his fate would have been any different had he been hanging out with his friends in any other neighbourhood that Saturday night. The shooting was interpreted as an act of audacious provocation and was, as Karamichas eloquently puts it, “the straw that broke the camel’s back and unleashed an anger that had been brewing for a long time” (2009: 289).

## PART II

### Exarcheia under the spotlight

It is not surprising that the post-2008 era is characterised by a considerable and unprecedented surge in local and international academic interest in Exarcheia that only increased in the upcoming decade. The explosive events following the murder of Alexis in the heart of the neighbourhood, saw its name being repeated over and over again in both media and scholarly platforms as the place where a ‘15-year old boy was shot dead by a policeman’. As the incident and its aftermath were being processed in subsequent years, a large body of work was published analysing and reflecting upon their potency and significance within a wider Greek but also international socio-political setting (Astrinaki 2009; Vradis 2009; Petropoulou 2009; Close 2009; Panayiotakis 2009; Sagris & Schwarz 2010; Mermigka 2010; Moran & Waddington 2016; Arampatzi 2016). With the December riots as their focal point, some studies drew comparisons between the riot culture in Greece and that of other countries such as the UK, France and Spain (Andronikidou 2012; Andronikidou & Kovras 2012). These studies conclude that the persistence of rioting in the repertoire of Greek society is noticeably absent in other societies, even in those such as Spain, with which Greece shared an equally tumultuous past and a parallel transition to democracy in the 1970s. Andronikou and Kovras (2012) attribute these differences to a deeply-rooted “culture of resistance” triggered by a lack of consensus and compromise among political leaders during Greece’s democratisation – a phenomenon that only accentuated pre-existing economic and socio-political disparities within the country.

The events of December 2008 become a harbinger of the global financial crisis of 2008-09 (Vradis 2012: 12) and a period of callus austerity for Greece. Academic attention on Exarcheia now shifts away from rioting to the neighbourhood's character as a site of resistance and political expression. With a state of 'crisis' becoming a prolonged state of being (Agamben 2005), disillusionment, anger, sarcasm, hope and solidarity are mapped onto the built environment of Exarcheia: its walls, covered in murals, posters and graffiti are there to loudly utter collective emotion when upper lips stiffened by pride and agony. Some studies emerge that look at Exarcheia's murals and graffiti in the backdrop of the widespread increase of political street art in Athens and Greece during the years of 'the Crisis' (Tsoumas 2011; Zaimakis 2015; Chatzidakis 2016; Alexandrakis 2016). In 2013, photographer Takis Spyropoulos published a book that captures the shifting mood and tone of the graffiti adorning the walls of Exarcheia from 2009 to 2012. The pictorial and linguistic elements of murals and graffiti reflected both the character of the neighbourhood and also became an exhibit for the artistic expression of collective Greek consciousness during those years<sup>39</sup>.

Anti-neoliberal articulations in Exarcheia also take the form of political posters. Some authors have examined why, despite being in the digital era, traditional posters are preferred by activists in Exarcheia. Posters are compared with other "visual cultures of protest" in Belgrade and Slovenia in an attempt to understand them beyond representative images (Brown et al 2017). Chatzidakis on the other hand focuses specifically on the 'solidarity story' as narrated by the neighbourhood's political posters

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<sup>39</sup> For more on Spyropoulos' book see: [https://www.athensvoice.gr/36746\\_x-arheia-uncensored](https://www.athensvoice.gr/36746_x-arheia-uncensored) (last accessed 23.11.2021)

and argues about their role as a “testament to the persistence of solidarity during profoundly unsettling times” (2018: 415) as well as their local and *translocal* impact.

Beyond posters and street art, the years of the financial meltdown are also considered momentous in the history of squatting and the reappropriation of public spaces (Poulimenakos & Dalakoglou 2018; Cappuccini 2018). The earliest squats in Exarcheia date back to the 1980s. During that time, Athenian anarchists established the Lela Karagianni and Villa Amalia squats, which ran for two decades until their eviction in 2013. The first squat in Greece is said to be the one created on Valtetsiou St. in Exarcheia in 1981. During its short life span, it was used not only as a space for common living but also to host political discussions, events and parties, attracting hundreds of visitors daily, before being forcibly evacuated by the police a couple of months later. The student movements and the emerging punk scene of the late 80s and early 90s saw squats emerging in many areas of Athens (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou 2011) as the anarchists and anti-authoritarians continued to turn abandoned buildings into communal homes and autonomous spaces operating upon the principles of collective solidarity and egalitarianism. Although Exarcheia was not unique in its contribution to the squatting movement of that time, it would acquire a prominent role in the organisation of solidarity structures in the post-2008 period. The squats of the 1980s, organised as spaces of urban resistance to the state, inspired and guided the organisation of solidarity spaces in the height of austerity that forced many Greeks to live in conditions of extreme poverty. Organised as collectives, the Exarcheia squats proliferated in many other neighbourhoods where solidarity spaces emerged in the form of collectively organised citizen initiatives (soup kitchens, ‘social pharmacies’ and communal grocery shops) that sought to support the crisis-generated destitution of

fellow citizens (Papadaki et al 2015; Cabot 2019). The know-how of the original Exarcheia squats, and their progeny – the solidarity spaces of the financial meltdown – was utilised in 2015-2016 during Europe’s so-called migration crisis. The anti-austerity narrative merged with a pro-refugee one and defined the organisation and implementation of several grassroots initiatives in Exarcheia (Arampatzi 2016) but also spread well outside the geographical limits of the neighbourhood.

The proliferation of solidarity initiatives and structures was met with an equal increase in academic research focusing on some of the emblematic self-organised spaces in Exarcheia such as Navarinou Park (Pashali & Myriouni 2011; Stavrides 2014; Cappuccini 2018; Arvantidis & Papagiannitsis 2020), the Notara refugee squat (Tsavdaroglou 2018; Raimondi 2019) and the Vox\* squat just off the square of the neighbourhood (Dalakoglou & Poulimenakos 2018). According to Dalakoglou and Poulimenakos,

“the social condition produced in the squatted buildings and social centres during that period supplied participants in the revolt with new ideas, the determination to pursue autonomous forms of self-organisation, and novel forms of struggle including the occupation and transformation of the urban landscape in everyday life” (ibid: 173).

Exarcheia is presented as a place of conviviality made up of a plurality of trajectories and “stories yet to be imagined and narrated” (Zaman 2020: 532). Zaman argues that the notion of “neighbourliness” between squat residents is moulded not merely through social and interpersonal relations but also through a relation to the built environment,

that is, the repurposed public buildings themselves (ibid: 538). Squires (2018) on the other hand investigates social reconfigurations like grassroots organising, solidarity networks and spatial forms of resistance as exemplified in the materialisation of anarchist politics of dissent.

Exarcheia comes to be defined as a “heterotopia of resistance” that promotes alternative politics and “green consumption” (Chatzidakis et al 2012; Chatzidakis & Maclaran 2012; Chatzidakis 2017; Chatzidakis 2020). Discussing Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia as a “kind of effectively enacted utopia” (1986: 48), Antonis Vradis argues that “a utopian image is not [necessarily] what [springs] to mind when thinking of Exarcheia, but nevertheless, an image of an area that was sufficiently different; where certain rules were withheld, if not altogether neutralised, even inverted”. Although Exarcheia’s unusually high riot concentration does “indeed point in the direction of a ‘heterotopia’”, Vradis contends that a ‘heterotopic’ schema is not sufficient to understand the “Exarcheia condition” (Vradis 2012: 206). Instead, he contextualises Exarcheia’s existence as Athens’ “magnet of dissent” (2012: 18) in the Metapolitefsi years through Henry Lefebvre’s theory of rhythmanalysis (2004). He argues that previously riots had been explained only as a quintessentially Exarcheian phenomenon (2012), through which the neighbourhood was constructed as Athens’ *par excellence* “heterotopia of deviation” (cf. Foucault 1984). By reading the neighbourhood as a repertoire, or as a “multiplicity of rhythms” (2012: 204), Vradis tries to understand its diverse realities and dynamics within the wider Greek context. He breaks down Exarcheia’s everyday into divergent rhythms, which can collectively create polyrhythmias, eurythmias or arrhythmias. As he notes “what may appear as co-existence of different social groups in the neighbourhood (that is, a polyrhythmia) has only too often in the case of Exarcheia

turned into conflict (an arrhythmia) – or conversely to some spontaneously creative situation (a eurythmia)” (2012: 176).

In his work, Dimitrios Ioannou (2016) deploys Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of *assemblage* to conceptualise the ‘Exarcheia condition’, its *Metapolitefsi* changes and its emergence as a topography of fear and anomie. ‘Assemblage’ does not refer to Exarcheia’s structured environment, that is, its roads, infrastructure, the square and surrounding buildings. These constitute, according to Ioannou, the layer (*stroma*) of Exarcheia, which is merely the remnant of the processes of urban production (93). What ‘assemblage’ is used to describe instead, is the social, political and cultural heterogeneous compositions or *multiplicities* in Exarcheia, namely its spaces, social movements and groups of people (i.e. squatting movement, publishing houses, collectivities, anarchist movements, Polytechnic movement).

Heterotopia, dystopias and bourgeois utopias

Despite (or perhaps due to) being “frustratingly incomplete, inconsistent [and] incoherent” (Soja 1996: 162; Johnson 2006), Foucault’s study of ‘heterotopias’ (1967) has incited an abundance of scholarly work. More specifically, the concept of ‘heterotopia’ has been both deployed and challenged by human geographers who endeavoured to better understand the social, economic, cultural and political changes that inform the identity of contemporary landscapes (Dehaene & De Cauwer 2008; Johnson 2006; Cenzatti 2008; Soja 1996; Hetherington 1997). The term heterotopia has

been used in the analysis of a diverse set of case studies, ranging from Washington DC's Chinatown (Lou 2007) to the Red Light District in Amsterdam (Zerva & Nijkamp 2016) and even business schools (Beyes & Michels 2011). The heterotopic qualities that have been attributed to Exarcheia as a place that imagines and materialises alternative ways of 'being' in the world (Chatzidakis et al 2012) have also been used to characterise locales such as Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen (Magagnoli 2015) and the cultural centre Metelkova in Ljubljana, Slovenia (Siegrist & Thörn 2020; Kanellopoulou & Ntounis 2015, 2017). Just like Exarcheia, Metelkova's heterotopic character has been located in its ability to "inhabit a position outside the ruling neoliberal ideology" by providing its users with a platform for the politicisation and the articulation of critical standpoints, and "a vision of an alternate [political] way of organising and experiencing everyday life" (Siegrist & Thörn 2020: 1847). Similarly, the autonomous enclave of Christiania has since its emergence in 1971 performed itself as a "subversive heterotopia" (Kanellopoulou & Ntounis 2017: 2224; cf. Stone 2013) in continuous opposition to the Danish government – a dynamic that echoes that of the relation of Exarcheia with the Greek state<sup>40</sup>.

Another commonality that seems to underlie these locales is the threat they are facing in light of their increasing touristification and commodification. Drawing from Exarcheia and Christiania as well as the autonomous communities of the Zapatista in Mexico, Tolkach (2017) acknowledges the potential of a kind of tourism that aligns with the anarchist philosophy in creating and fostering a sense of solidarity and grassroots globalisation between people across the world. On the other hand, authors have warned of a reversed, commodifying potential embedded in spaces of alternative imagining

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 6.

namely their appeal to a form of tourism that exoticises and spectacularises them, and which effectively undermines their autonomy and anti-capitalist ethos (Bianchi 2009; Hutnyk 2007; Tolkach 2017). Vehement anti-gentrification discourses and practices in both Metelkova and Christiania parallel those in Exarcheia in recent years (Petas et al 2021). These processes reveal the capability of these heterotopias in “both enforcing and disrupting neoliberal urbanism” (Siegrist & Thörn 2020: 1853) – an ambiguity that I further explore in Chapter 7.

Meanwhile, Exarcheia’s representation as a ‘dangerous’, dystopic hub coupled with its parallel transformation into a popular tourist destination and a kind of neoliberal, bourgeois utopia, mirrors the gentrification trajectory of places like Harlem in New York and Kreuzberg in Berlin. For years, before ‘regeneration’ plans were put in place, these districts attracted considerable negative media attention, emerging as decadent ‘problem areas’. In direct juxtaposition to the media’s so-called “culture of sympathy” towards the December riots (Andronikidou & Kovras 2012: 716), Exarcheia’s treatment by the media has since the 1980s amounted to an inexhaustible culture of *antipathy*. The majority of articles published from the Metapolitefsi onwards promoted a narrative of demonisation not unlike the one that saw Kreuzberg emerging in media discourses as a ‘ghetto’ with symptoms akin to those of a ‘decaying’ Harlem (Stehle 2006). During my research, I became deeply interested in how ‘problem areas’ in cities are constructed. A central aspect in my analysis of Exarcheia as a stigmatised district was the work of Loic Wacquant on “territorial stigmatisation” (2008) and its ‘contaminating’ effect on

residents, which I have used to draw upon the similarities between Exarcheia's case and that of the city of Las Vegas (Nédélec 2017)<sup>41</sup>.

It was not until recently that the stigmatising repertoire on Exarcheia became paralleled with a discourse of romanticisation that exoticised its role as a refuge, a site of experimentation, artistic effervescence, solidarity and resistance to neoliberal politics. Travel blogs emerged promoting Exarcheia as an alternative tourist destination, while amateur tourist guides capitalised on the neighbourhood's history. Some articles explained to readers why 'Exarcheia is the most artistic neighbourhood of Athens'<sup>42</sup>, while a minister even compared it to Montmartre<sup>43</sup>. With a nostalgic yet critical tone, other articles reminded readers of the more 'innocent' days of Exarcheia before it was 'ruined' by delinquency<sup>44</sup>, while others asked the reader – quite reasonably so - which description *at last* 'truly' befits the neighbourhood<sup>45</sup>.

### Exarcheia on the map of political topographies

Going beyond the aforementioned representations, I argue that the people, practices, discourses and materialities that defined Exarcheia's character and reputation as a locus of active resistance and radical discontent, situate it within an even wider scholarship concerned with the potency of urban hubs in morphing themselves into

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<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>42</sup> See for example: [https://www.athensvoice.gr/life/urban-culture/athens/418759\\_giati-ta-exarheia-einai-i-pio-kallitehnikigeitonia-tis-athinas](https://www.athensvoice.gr/life/urban-culture/athens/418759_giati-ta-exarheia-einai-i-pio-kallitehnikigeitonia-tis-athinas) (last accessed 16.11.2020).

<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>44</sup> See for example: <https://www.iefimerida.gr/stories/otan-ta-exarheia-itan-limani> (last accessed 16.11.2020).

<sup>45</sup> See for example: <https://m.popaganda.gr/exarchia-ghetto-athens/> (last accessed 16.11.2020)

dense political topographies. Well known places like Alexanderplatz in Berlin, Taksim Square in Istanbul and Cairo's Tahrir Square are all imbued with historical and political significations, invoking powerful images of collective dissent and celebration. An ample body of work has shown that, far from rigid 'objects', public spaces are vibrant canvasses of social, cultural and political expression (Weszkalnys 2010; Setha Low 1996; Gül et al 2014; Baykan & Hatuka 2010; Erbey 2017; Attia 2011; Rabbat 2012; Marchuse 2014). The ruptures of the social contract in recent times produced resilient, affective crowds (Lopes et al 2021) that reclaimed public space not simply as their "operation room" but as their "home" where they would "live, sleep, pray, socialise, demonstrate, and shape their destiny" (Rabbat 2012: 207). I recall here the Arab Spring, where emblematic protests like those in Tahrir Square against corruption and economic stagnation became the prelude of the international Occupy Movement that spanned throughout 2011 and 2012 (Kerton 2012).

In Gisa Weszkalny's (2010) *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, 'der Alex', as the locals affectionately call it, becomes a platform for the competing visions of a post-reunification Germany. Der Alex is an assemblage where practices, people, things, technological regimes and diverse agendas are deeply intertwined and impossible to separate. This entanglement is also exemplified in the case of Istanbul's Taksim Square in May 2013, where modest demonstrations against the government's urban development plans turned into violent protests of an unprecedented scale. Their scale, the death of 15-year old Berkin Elvan amid violent commotion and their role as an emotive catalyst for the expression of a wider set of social, political and economic grievances poignantly evokes the 2008 December riots that sparked in Exarcheia following Grigoropoulos' death.

Examining the historical particularities surrounding the Gezi Park riots, Gül et al note how architectural projects can often become symbols for the promotion of the ideologies of a particular regime. In the case of Taksim, the reconstruction of a former Ottoman Artillery Barracks in Gezi Park was a means of signalling a “new political agenda aimed at curbing the power and influence of Kemalist elites” (2014: 71). This political agenda, however, clearly “failed to fully understand” -or perhaps it ignored – “the deep-seated underlying cultural values and associations” vis-à-vis the history of Gezi Park (2014: 17). The article briefly discusses the Erdogan government’s intention to reconstruct the barracks as a means of removing the square’s symbolic ‘free’ status and by doing so *erasing the republican memory* of the place (ibid: 68). Citing McCann’s work (2013), the authors rightly observe that urban politics are often characterised by political tactics that frame reality (ibid). As I discuss shortly, *strategies of erasure* became crucial to my conceptualisation of Exarcheia as a political urban topography that resists the state’s forgetfulness, modernity’s obliterations (cf. Benjamin & Osborne 1994) and neoliberalism’s ‘creative destruction[s]’ (Harvey 2006).

## MAIN CONCEPTUAL APPARATUSES

An assemblage of affects

*“Nowhere else in Europe is there such a large urban space, a whole neighbourhood, able to host feelings with such density and frequency.” (Takis Spyropoulos, photographer<sup>46</sup>)*

Having stepped into the same cycles of repetition and having witnessed events such as the Friday clashes between the police and Alexis’ annual commemoration march demonstrators<sup>47</sup> I certainly did notice the rhythmicities of quotidian life in Exarcheia described by Vradis (2012). At the same time, having conducted my research within a quite different time frame to that of Vradis (his 2008-2011, mine 2016-2019) I also encountered new kinds of polyrhythmias, eurythmias as well arrhythmias and witnessed the formation of new types of assemblages in Exarcheia.

During my early fieldwork days, Exarcheia was, as an interlocutor put it, ‘on the cusp of change’ (*‘sto katofli tis allagis’*). As Greece was dealing with Europe’s ‘crisis of migrant reception’ (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris 2018), Exarcheia’s solidarity structures readily accommodated thousands of refugees and migrants (Chapter 6). That was also a time

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<sup>46</sup> See Spyropoulos’ interview on: <https://valestory.wordpress.com/2015/10/15/> (last accessed 5.3.2020).

<sup>47</sup> See Chapter 5.

that coincided with an upsurge in crime rates in the neighbourhood and a burgeoning number of Airbnb apartments and tourists in the area (Chapter 7). While all this was happening, Greece also switched from the leftist government of SYRIZA to the liberal-conservative government of New Democracy, a transition that was marked by increasing squat evictions and a series of anti-Airbnb protests (Chapters 6 & 7).

Recent theory on the notion of affect (Navaro-Yashin 2009; 2012; Brennan 2004; Bennett 2010) has provided a particularly useful conceptual apparatus in helping me understand my interlocutors' experiences of their neighbourhood in light of these events and the changes they precipitated. Building upon Spinoza's notion of *affectus*, Yael Navaro-Yashin defines affect as the exertive power that "is not simply an expression of the inner world of informants", but also the "mark of the energy" exuded and felt by their surrounding material and conceptual spaces (2009: 4). Writing in critique of psychoanalysis, in her compelling book *The Transmission of Affect*, the late Teresa Brennan (2004) also discusses the ways affective energies are exerted upon us by other people and by the outer environment. She challenges the subject-object, subjective-objective divide and echoing Massumi (1995), separates 'affect' from 'feeling' by arguing that the latter is expressive and its function is that of discernment. Feelings are, in her words, "sensations that have found the right match in words" (2004: 5). Taking cue and building upon Brennan's work, Navaro-Yashin goes beyond binary conceptualisations that see object-oriented approaches (cf. Latour 1996; 2007) being placed in opposition to theories of social constructionism (Kleinman et al 1996). While Brennan focuses primarily on the intersubjective transmission of affect, Navaro-Yashin turns her attention to the environment as a locus for the production of affective energy

and proposes an *affect-subjectivity continuum* (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 24; 27). That is an understanding where neither human beings nor objects are “actants in their own right” (Latour 1996: 240) but are involved equally in an interdependent, interactive relationship.

In her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, political theorist Jane Bennett produced a critique of Weberian notions of a disenchanted modernity. Her analysis centred on the ethical relevance of human affect, or what she terms “the mood of enchantment”. Hijacking the monopolisation of ‘enchantment’ by religious studies, she seeks to map out the animated properties and potentialities of secular modernity in motivating ethical behaviour. While continuing to think of affect as central in politics and ethics, in her subsequent book *Vibrant Matter*, she turns her attention to affect “not specific to human bodies” (2010: xii). She reconceptualises her concept of enchantment as two-directional, pertaining to “humans who *feel enchanted* and whose agentic capacities maybe thereby strengthened” and also to the “agency of the things that produce helpful, harmful effects in human and in other bodies” (ibid; her emphasis). In Brennan’s world, affect is located not only within organic non—human bodies (animals, plants, fruit) but also in inanimate things like bottle caps, metal, gloves, wood sticks, trash is capable of catalysing a public.

Throughout my thesis, I also pay attention to such, otherwise banal, micro-materialities and interrogate their potency in transmitting affect. Drawing both on Navaro Yashin’s and Brennan’s work, I too conceptualise affective energy as “both interior and exterior”; an intersubjective and *presubjective* intensity that “refers to subjectivity and the world

of objects at one and the same time” (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 17). However, rather than viewing affect as indiscernible and indescribable (Brennan 2004; Massumi 1995), I concur with Navaro-Yashin that it can be both an expressible emotion present in human interiorities but also a “non-discursive sensation that an environment generates” (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 168) – a quality Guattari once poetically described as “hazy and atmospheric” (1990: 67). Following her suggestion, however, I did not simply study affect theoretically or philosophically but deployed it ethnographically, as a means of mapping the landscape of meanings unfolding around me during my fieldwork (pace Brennan 2004; Bennett 2010).

Beyond the abandoned artefacts left behind in Greek-Cypriot homes after 1974, Navaro-Yashin expands the scope of her study to “institutions, and administrations, modes, of governance, and legal practices as capable of inducing, and being charged with, affect” (2012: 31). She conceptualises objects in a political field, such as documents, as “affectively charged phenomena” and mediums of “make-believe” that legitimise state practices and the state’s very existence. In my work, while recording the affect permeating spaces and materialities, I also take its notion a bit further. Inspired by Alessandro Duranti’s discussion on the “agency *in* language” (2004; his emphasis) but also Brennan’s dialectical opposition of feeling versus affect, I argue in favour of the agency of words as *affectively constructed and articulated*. Brennan separates feelings from affects, but not emotions from affects, for affects are simply overwhelming emotions with “longer-lasting affective constellations” (2004: 6). I argue that feelings can be directly described with words like ‘sad’, ‘happy’ or ‘angry’ – adjectives that are more personal and biographical (Massumi 1995). During my fieldwork, I encountered

words -not adjectives, but nouns- that expressed a specific emotion, transmitting a non-specific kind of intensity that could only be deconstructed through an intimate understanding of local particularities and historical specificities. For instance, words such as 'báhala' (the so-called anarchist-police clashes), 'bahalákides' (the agents of the *báhala*) and 'Exathleia' (a derisive nickname) are in my work conceptualised as loci that both encapsulate and exude affect (Chapters 5 & 6 respectively) and carry deeper context-specific significations.

In Navaro-Yashin's ethnography of post-war Cyprus, the predominant kind of affect exuded by the abandoned homes and the ruins is that of melancholia. Equally, Brennan's first reference to affect in her book is to "grief, anxiety, or anger" (2004: 1) and as her argument unfolds, it becomes clear that these seem to be the *only* affects. Positive emotions like "love" are "living attention" (ibid: 24) and conceptualised antithetically to affect, with which they occupy mutually exclusive positions. Put differently, for Brennan affect is a negative force. However, my own understanding of affect is neither singular, nor solely negative. My ethnographic engagements with the various representations of Exarcheia introduced me to a *multiplicity of affects*, which 'charged' at me concurrently. Exarcheia exuded positive intensities through its aura of solidarity and inclusiveness, which were affects in their own right and not simply the result of the absence of affect. As such, the neighbourhood emerged both positively as a place that sheltered and exercised the principles of solidarity, autonomy and direct democracy but also negatively as a geography of fear, whose anomic elements eclipsed the significance of the politics it reproduced. Exarcheia appeared both a place of freedom and a place of oppression; a place worth fighting for (and writing about) and a

place scorned as unworthy of attention, which one would wish to abandon at the first opportunity. Its urban landscape of dilapidated historic houses from the 1890s and 1920s, graffiti-infested walls and cracked pavements produced an image of ‘decadence’ and ‘seediness’ that was both derided and prized (literally – see Chapter 7). Indeed, conversations about Exarcheia elicited a range of different and antithetical emotive articulations that were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Love and hate, excitement and fear, disgust, apathy, melancholia, anger and disappointment were some of the emotions that coloured the words and silences of my interlocutors during interviews.

As my fieldwork progressed, I decided that I did not want this thesis to be an interrogation of any particular Exarcheian representation, but rather a *representation of representations*: a collection of interpretations and misinterpretations, understandings and misunderstandings of the neighbourhood. Admittedly, indicating the multiplicity and multimodality of places, or that places are not compact and singular but porous and always unfinished, is no longer considered a novelty. Yet as Weszkalnys aptly observes, “multiplicity is inherent, but grasping this multiplicity, [its depths] and its implications is not easy” (2010: 7). I aimed to capture this multiplicity and multimodality through a visceral exploration of the area; an exploration that involved not comprehending and mapping the emotions of my interlocutors but also the *affect* imbued in and instigated by the living and non-living environment of the neighbourhood; by the presences but also by the absences and silences (Navaro-Yashin 2020). How did Exarcheia make my interlocutors feel and why? What or who can shape one’s emotions towards and relationship with a place? What (im)material elements of everyday urban life can cause

affective relationships to shift? Why are some people attracted to a place while others fear and avoid it? And why do some love it when others hate it?

In approaching these questions, I wanted to rectify what I deemed an important oversight in a large segment of academic research on Exarcheia. I argue that much of the important scholarship I have outlined in this chapter treats Exarcheia – albeit to varying degrees – as the background setting or the platform upon which things unfold. Exarcheia has often starred as the location of the ‘real objects’ of study but barely as the ‘real object’ in itself (cf. Samanani & Lenhard 2019), resulting in the production of studies *in* as opposed to studies *of* Exarcheia. Exarcheia is not of course a monolithic entity or place, but it deserves attention in itself as an affective ecology composed of people’s interactions with multiple (in)conspicuous histories and materialities. In my chapters the emergence of different kinds of affect composed differing *states of relationality* between individuals and Exarcheia. As such, rather than explanations of Exarcheia, my chapters become representations of the neighbourhood through the eyes of others, including myself. My primary objective is to present Exarcheia the way it presented itself to me: as an amalgamation of emotions and auras, or to speak in Deleuzian terms – an assemblage of affects.

From affective space to archival space

My initial intention was to focus on my interlocutors’ experiences, letting their narratives guide me through different spaces and corners of the neighbourhood and

examine its emergent affective portraits. Led by the field as I was, however, and captivated by the incessant, haunting murmur of its walls, I realised that beyond an affective space, Exarcheia was also an unwavering archival space – a space laden with “archival power” (cf. Trouillot 1995). By ‘archive’ I do not of course refer to a collection of documents. Indeed, Exarcheia engages in a process of *archivisation* (Derrida 1994), but not the kind instituted by the state nor the kind social and cultural historians are conventionally interested in. On the contrary, Exarcheia’s archives collect a different type of *dust* (cf. Steedman 2002): the type that the state wishes to ‘sweep up’. More than an “archive of feelings” (cf. Cvetkovich 2003), Exarcheia is an archival space composed of affective chronotopes – (in)tangible loci that defy space and temporality (Kirtsoglou 2021). The interwoven narratives and materialities emerging in my fieldwork were persistently –and perhaps obsessively– reiterating themselves and remaining imprinted on the neighbourhood’s landscape as an incessant reminder of violent histories that the state sought to erase and forget. Following Ann Laura Stoler’s useful distinction between the *archive-as-source* and the *archive-as-subject* (2002), I came to conceptualise Exarcheia as the former. Exarcheia’s stubborn resistance to erasures, and its multiple material, temporal and affective layers transformed it into a live mnemonic entity that one cannot understand simply by reading it but by ethnographically interrogating it. The Exarcheia-as-archive I encountered resembles Pierre Nora’s “lieu de mémoire” (1989) in its ability to monumentalise events, retain and express particular political historicity. Put differently, Exarcheia is a memorial palimpsest (cf. Miltiades 2020) made up of recollections and reminiscences both individual and collective that were imprinted on the urban surface. It is also a historical palimpsest composed of the layers of political and cultural history stored within its conspicuous and furtive materialities. In its (in)tangible world, myriad of *istories* (Herzfeld 1988) get

absorbed and tenaciously emerge to inform, indoctrinate, remind and haunt. These are often painful stories of dissidence, marginalisation and persecution that collectively construct the narrative of the Greek Left; a narrative that stretches beyond the virtual boundaries of Exarcheia, or Greece, to align itself with the struggle of the *universal subaltern* - the oppressed 'other' *everywhere*.

Archives in Exarcheia are not just the stories of its people, its conspicuous and inconspicuous memorials or its robust and frail tangibilities. Archives are also the posters, banners, murals and graffiti that layer its walls; its squats, social centres and collectives, its discourses and its *báhala* (mildly violent street protests that routinely end in clashes with the police). I discuss *báhala* in Chapter 5, where I argue that these partisan acts of resistance are themselves a mode of archival politics that reveal the “performative and dynamic” properties of space (cf. Benson & Jackson 2012: 807). Having first explored their perception as banal and apolitical acts of violence that induce feelings of disenchantment among interlocutors, I came to understand them as potent performative utterances. The Butlerian logic of *performativity* (1992), was central to my reconceptualisation of the *báhala* as potent performatives that align and reproduce the political ethic and legacy of the Greek Left. *Báhala* repeated practices enact and reinforce particular perceptions of place that are in turn re-inscribed on individuals (Benson & Jackson 2012; Leach 2005; Fortier 2000). In Exarcheia, horizontal economic organisation, the building of solidarity networks, commemorative marches, protests and committees all constitute modes of discursive and corporeal ‘exercise’, or – to evoke Brennan (2004)– “language[s] of the flesh”, that in their didactic

repetition prepare subjectivities for a revolution ‘against the system’ whose apparition might or might not morph into ‘incarnation’.

Competing neighbourhood visions, competing authenticities

“Writing this book”, reflects Weszkalnys, “was a constant effort to put into words whether the Alexanderplatz that people invoked was a past, present or future – or all of these at once” (2010: 167). It wasn’t long before I realised that just like Alexanderplatz and other *activial places of contest* (Benson & Jackson 2012; Weszkalnys 2010; Gül et al 2014), Exarcheia, too, was an (im)possibility (ibid) made up not merely of multiple (mis)interpretations, but also visions –persistent ‘not yet’- that competed for public representation. Residents, regulars, anarchists, *bahalákides*, shopkeepers, tour guides, artists as well as politicians, all concurrently represented, performed and imagined a different kind of Exarcheia: Exarcheia as a topography of immorality (Weszkalnys 2010), ‘wretchedness’ and exclusion parallels and negates Exarcheia as a heterotopia of resistance (Chatzidakis et al 2012), solidarity and radical politicisation; Exarcheia as an *ávation*, a convenient arena for weekly ‘anarchist-police clashes’ and creative disorder annoys and at same time incites a longing for anarchist-inspired modes of social organisation; Exarcheia as an archival space that retains and relays the legacies of political struggles is rebranded into a ‘museum’ and its political performatives are turned into spectacles. These are some of the (im)possible Exarcheian representations I hope to capture.

In their comparative study of the urban district of Peckham in London and the commuter villages of Horsley and Effingham, Benson and Jackson point to the different performative registers through which place is practised. In Peckham, middle-class residents try to strengthen popular representations of their neighbourhood to others like them by investing it with symbolic meaning. In the commuter belt villages, residents engage in place maintenance practices by “warding off unwelcome change” associated with suburbanisation (ibid: 806). The authors argue that both case studies exemplify ways of doing and performing space and concurrently demonstrate the ways place-making moulds subjectivities, generating a particular habitus.

Taking their point further, I argue that place-making practices emerge as ways of *performing and producing authenticity*. In Exarcheia this is evidenced through its multiple conflicting representations that I recounted above. Therefore, the interrogation of conflicting Exarcheian images ultimately became an interrogation of parallel, conflicting authenticities. Discursively, notions of (in)authenticity during my fieldwork were expressed in emotive terms and experienced through nostalgia, anticipation and resistance, disenchantment and discontent with ‘apoliticisation’ and ‘commodification’. In my attempt to capture what constitutes the ‘authentic’ in Exarcheian narratives, I draw on several studies, ranging from post-modernist approaches to inauthenticity as a condition inherent to modernity (Baudrillard 1981; Foucault 1988; Rorty 1989), Bourdieusian notions of authenticity as an aesthetic claim (Bourdieu 1984), as well as authenticity’s reconfigurations in the world of tourism and travelling (Wang 1999; Bruner 2001; Richman 2008; Shepherd 2015; Zukin 2008). I also employ MacCannells’s

(1973) well-known concept of “staged authenticity” to conceptualise both the political performativity of corporeal expressions such as the *báhalá*, but also more conventionally, to capture notions of ‘the authentic’ in the backdrop of Exarcheia’s touristification and commodification.

Throughout its pages, this thesis grapples with the many faces of authenticity (Thedossopoulos 2013) that continuously formed, disintegrated and reformed, even as I was writing about it. Similarly to Marcus Banks (2013), I came to view authenticity not as a ‘static quality’ but as an instrumentally used process that is negotiated, performed, asserted and rejected with equal confidence through social and political interactions. Ultimately, ‘the authentic’ in my work reaffirms the impossibility of its own definition (Lindholm 2013) and emerges as a value, an aesthetic claim, a commodity, an affect and a loss. However, more than that, I argue that authenticity in Exarcheia becomes a political tool for the material articulation of competing neighbourhood visions involving divergent performative utterances. As I demonstrate in my chapters, each of the aforementioned Exarcheian representations is consolidated through the dynamic interaction of local subjectivities, spaces and materialities. Nostalgic imaginings of Exarcheia appear to be “projected onto place”, visibly, *on the ground* (Benson & Jackson 2012: 807).

The right to the city as a right to preserve

Exarcheia's history, materialities, subjectivities, its relationship with the state and its partly gentrified landscape produce multiple affects and multiple authenticities that morph it into its various competing representations, which in turn cancel each other out in a process of continuous self-negation. 'Which Exarcheia?' and 'Whose Exarcheia?' are the two core questions around which the pages of this thesis unfold. Evoking Henry Lefebvre's famous adage, David Harvey remarks that "the right to the city is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it to our heart's desire" (2003: 939). Exarcheia speaks to both of these notions but also something else. I argue that questions of place, attachment and belonging do not pertain only to the freedom of individuals to change urban space as they please, but also to keep it as it is; to preserve its built environment and with it, the histories and collective memories that remind, unite them and inform their identity. In an era of globalisation and aggressive development, urbicide -quite rightly so- continues to pertain not merely to the tangible demise of cities that occurs through war or decay, but also to any form of ruination (Stoler 2008; Navaro-Yashin 2009) that can compromise the "social robustness" (Weszkalnys 2010: 138) of public spaces and the affective interactions of people with and within those spaces.

In many ways then, to tell the story of an urban place today is to ultimately tell a story of ruination. In time, however, I came to define my own urban ethnography of Exarcheia not merely as an account of how a place is ruined or produced (Lefebvre 1991; Low 1996) but, more accurately how a place *produces, tells, resists and subverts various covert and visible forms of ruination*; an account of how through their (in)tangibilities

and (in)conspicuousness urban spaces –in this case, Exarcheia- maintain, lose and regain their social, political and affective robustness.

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## CHAPTER 3

### Research Methods

My first steps around Exarcheia were intuitive. My research project initially focused on solidarity initiatives and started at the makeshift camp of Piraeus and the state-run camp of Skaramagkas in 2015 and 2016. I aimed to spatiotemporally extend its scope to Exarcheia where most of the refugee solidarity structures in Athens were located. I first entered the neighbourhood in October 2016 planning to volunteer at a local autonomous Social Centre that taught Greek to refugees and anyone else interested in learning the language. I encouraged many of the Syrian acquaintances and friends I had made at the camps to attend the classes, which were free and held twice a week.

The classroom was a vibrant space consisting of people of different age groups and nationalities. Syrians, Pakistanis, French, German, Italians, Spanish, Hungarians, Polish, Americans, Africans – people who had either by choice, necessity or force found themselves in Athens gathered together in one small room at the Social Centre to learn Greek. The number of students in my class fluctuated constantly since most of them were transient: refugees, migrants, Erasmus students, NGO workers, volunteers and digital nomads<sup>48</sup>. Some students eventually had to leave the country, or the city but new ones would appear at the classroom door every month. Although I was advised by other teachers at the Social Centre to ease things on myself by not accepting newcomers arriving too late in the curriculum, I found it difficult to do so and instead decided to work my way around my material to accommodate everyone.

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<sup>48</sup> The term refers to individuals who works remotely, typically online, in various locations of their choosing, rather than a fixed business location.

I led the classes every Wednesday and Thursday from October 2016 to June 2017. The Social Centre was frequented by people typically affiliated with the Left, anarchists and anti-authoritarians and was the meeting point of some of the main anti-authoritarian groups in Athens. The Social Centre also had its own assembly whose politics focused solely on the day-to-day running of the place and whose members met weekly to discuss and decide democratically on important matters that had arisen.

My involvement in the Social Centre progressed rather organically. As a teacher-volunteer, I started attending the assembly to both update myself and inform others about matters that concerned teaching. After my classes, students would often hang out at the café area of the Social Centre. At 6 pm it was still early (the bar would not open until 7 pm) and there was usually no one available to prepare drinks so I would often take the initiative of stepping behind the bar until someone else arrived to take over. Before long, my bar shifts became regular and ended up lasting several hours.

The Social Centre eventually became what I would call my 'safe harbour' in Exarcheia, for it was the place where I would mentally retreat to, throughout my fieldwork to organise my thoughts and write up my field notes, but also physically, to protect myself, when clashes between local anarchists and the police broke out around the neighbourhood. The Social Centre was also where I first started to make contacts and cultivate relationships of trust and rapport with individuals that I would later approach and ask to participate in my research. It was behind the bar that I first met many of my future research participants: Vicky, who taught me how to make espressos and introduced me to the Water Boys; Zacharias, who frowned upon my use of honey

instead of sugar in my iced coffee (*frappe*); Katerina who was a regular and who always asked for the 'forest fruit tea'; Leonidas, who sat at the bar and challenged me into philosophical debates. The early steps of my fieldwork were unorthodox, in the sense that my interlocutors, first became friends and then participants, rather than vice versa. Through these relationships and the conversations that fostered them, my interest gradually shifted -or rather expanded- from looking at Exarcheia solely as a locus of counter-hegemonic solidarity in light of the refugee crisis to seeing it as a neighbourhood that is and has been the "house and universe" (Bachelard 1958) of many different actors, with multivalent biographies and multiple -often conflicting- historicities. My initial steps and interactions propelled me to explore Exarcheia as a place full of 'nests', 'shells' and 'corners' filled not only with the known legacies of political struggles and collective resistance but with those furtive meanings and affects imprinted on them by individual experiences that varied significantly.

It is these first steps and how they influenced my methodology that I wish to discuss in this chapter. I will begin by discussing the perennially -to researchers- debated issue of 'field time', the understated usefulness of 'absences' from the field and how they shaped my ethnography. I will then give a brief overview of my participant pool and my interviewing methods. Following a note on ethics, I discuss my positionality in the field before examining the notion of 'the field' itself in anthropological research. In the final section, I discuss my use of walking in exploring and ultimately 'reading' Exarcheia as an archival space.

## A staccato ethnography

The time frame of my fieldwork and interviews can be divided into four periods. The first, took place from October 2016 until October 2017 when I returned to the UK to begin transcribing my interviews and organising my notes. During that process, I noted 'gaps' in my data that needed to be filled. In retrospect, I understood that those 'gaps' were the byproduct of my struggle to impose order on the multiplicity of my field-experiences that did not readily conform to my desire for structure and meaning.

It was the transcription process and not my initial contact with 'the field' that precipitated many questions and granted me a more lucid sense of direction as to what my objective was. I, therefore returned to 'the field' and continued to do so for the next three years. Every Christmas, Easter and summer holidays I would combine seeing family and friends with 'bursts' of fieldwork which involved frequent visits to Exarcheia, observation, re-establishing contact with old informants and finding new ones. Following October 2017, the next few face-to-face interviews I conducted were in the summer of 2018, then Easter 2019 and finally in August and early October of the same year before returning to the UK. This *staccato ethnographic research* that I ended up conducting raised questions –or rather doubts– in my mind as to what can be considered a sufficient amount of time in 'the field' and whether the length of time spent somewhere can truly account for the depth and quality of one's research.

At the same time, I noted the paradoxical tension between the demand for 'timely' and relevant anthropological projects and theses, the inevitable tardiness of bringing them into fruition and technical issues such as funding and deadlines. Most funded PhD

candidates in the UK are expected to have completed their theses within three years of which about one year is typically allocated as 'time in the field'. As a result, candidates are expected to produce the best they can within that specific time frame. It is, therefore, reasonable to argue that in such cases, the length of time spent in the field becomes irrelevant on the grounds of being predetermined. What holds greater significance for the research is the way the researchers utilise their resources and the way they assess their data, always vis-à-vis the question(s) they have set out to answer.

In my case, being self-funded meant switching to a part-time PhD was the financially wiser option. The five years I had to complete my thesis proved to be beneficial, not because I could spend more time in 'the field', but rather because I could afford to 'return' to the field multiple times – not least because I had a home and family in Athens, which made that feasible. In other words, it was not only my presence in Exarcheia but also my absence that enabled me to take a step back, unwind and assess my data. As Dalsgaard and Nielsen put it, "analytical insights tend to erupt through a continuous oscillation between (temporal as much as physical) approximation to and distance from one's informants and research sites, *so periodic absence from the field is logically as necessary as one's presence*" (2013; also Whyte 2013, emphasis mine). The potency of short-term field visits in allowing ethnographers to pay attention to details and the use of fragmentary yet rigorous data that can expose the workings of supposedly all-powerful phenomena and uniform discourses lie at the heart of what Anna Tsing (2005) terms "patchwork ethnography".

October 2019 was the month I conducted my last in-situ interviews with participants in Exarcheia and had therefore mentally perceived that period as the 'end' of my

fieldwork. 'At some point, you have to put a full stop down for your own sake, otherwise, it'll never end', were the words of a good friend who had recently received her doctorate. I agree with Rapport (2000) that 'entering' and 'leaving' the field refer much less to physical movement and more to an experiential and cognitive transition. Indeed, this transition could occur irrespectively of my physical presence in Exarcheia and there were times I visited the area with friends for a drink while being truly able to mentally depart from 'the field'.

Ironically, that proved harder to do once I left Greece. Instead of a 'full stop', my physical departure felt more like a semi-colon and the mental closure I was eager to impose on myself proved to be temporary. I am not referring merely to the online communication I maintained with informants, or my keeping up-to-date with life in Exarcheia through the reading of articles, discussion forums and Facebook posts. If according to Rapport (2000), entering the field is an experiential and cognitive transition, then I was re-entering the field not only when I visited my research site but also when I began to write about it. Because of this, the imagined linearity of stages that see the writing-up phase commencing after the end of the fieldwork quickly collapsed. In other words, I never quite managed to perceive 'doing fieldwork' and 'writing-up' as two discrete phases. The solitary act of writing was an extension of doing fieldwork for it was about *remapping* the landscape of meanings I had composed during my 'official' fieldwork days. It was not merely a process of downloading information on a word document, but rather the processing *itself*, that inevitably remoulded and redefined the 'ethnographic place' I thus far knew (cf. Pink 2008). Hence, although I situate *embodied* fieldwork experience at the heart of my thesis, I acknowledge that the ethnographic place is formed not only by *attuning* our bodies "socially, materially and sensorially" with

people and places in the present (Pink 2008: 193; Miltiadis 2020) but also by *evoking* those very attunements. The mental and subsequently textual reconstruction of the ethnographic place that the writing-up process demanded saw the surfacing of new connections, memories, imaginings and pathways but also more 'gaps' that I had to address by conducting more interviews. Due to Covid-19 travel restrictions, the last three interviews were conducted online via zoom and Facebook video call.

## Participants

Several times throughout my thesis I had to clarify to family, friends and interlocutors that my study is not concerned with anarchist politics per se. I was interested in the political history of Exarcheia but also the affective relationships that emerge through the interaction of different individuals *with* and *within* Exarcheia. For this reason, I was less concerned with categorising individuals the same way Nicholas Apoifis (2017) did in his compelling ethnography of anarchy in Athens. Knowing the differences between various anarchist currents was useful in terms of contextualisation and processing information, but not crucial to my objective. This is because I did not engage primarily with one group of individuals bound together through adherence to a social movement or cause. At the same time, with Exarcheia still being the main locus of anarchist activity and organisation, naturally, and inevitably, a number of my participants were or had once been involved in the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu. However, not all of them self-identified as anarchists or anti-authoritarians, but when they did and where relevant, I specified so in my chapters. My participants were of different age groups, gender, political dispositions, socioeconomic backgrounds and occupations. A few were

unemployed, while some owned shops or publishing houses in the neighbourhood. Several of the people I interviewed were quite political and strongly opinionated on local current affairs. Others had actively participated in various anti-authoritarian events and political discussions, as well as actions ranging from environmental protests to factory occupations – some of them for months, others for years and some for decades. My interlocutors were people from all walks of life and often did not have much in common apart from the fact that Exarcheia had been for years and for different reasons the “centre of their universe” (cf. Rapport & Dawson 1998: 6). For this reason, creating *intersubjective realities* in my fieldwork was not – and could not have been – always about coming to a *mutual understanding* (Duranti 2010: 7). Sometimes intersubjective realities were formed through mis-translations, productive (cf. Tsing 2005) misunderstandings and conflicting interpretations.

My interlocutors expressed conflicting feelings about Exarcheia and occasionally disregarded opposing views as ‘wrong’, ‘ignorant’ and ‘naïve’ or simply as “partial-truths” (cf. Clifford 1986). As a result, I came to believe that a ‘thick’ account (Geertz 1973) of Exarcheia can only be achieved by accepting these different and conflicting interpretations that reflect the multivalence of my interlocutors’ experiences. Recognising the heterogeneity of Exarcheia required treating all my participants who lived, frequented or worked in Exarcheia as *experts*. The different situated knowledges that will be accounted for in the pages of this thesis are the result of my interlocutors’ respective “embodied capital” (Bourdieu 1986), accumulated through their individual neighbourhood experiences, which albeit diverse and divergent, all had one thing in common: they were voiced with unabashed confidence.

Ultimately, the single common denominator in the group of people I interviewed was Exarcheia – the place where the largest part of their social and/or professional lives unfolded. Yet the Exarcheia that their narratives constructed were *multiple* (cf. Weszkalnys 2010), reflecting different and often conflicting realities. For analytical reasons and in an attempt to conceptualise these realities I formulated two *etic* participant categories: Exarchiots and Exarcheians. The former is a demonym that I use to refer to the long-term residents of Exarcheia. However, since residency in Exarcheia was not a stamp that guaranteed belonging to the local community, I also propose the category of Exarcheians - a demonym that relates to Exarcheia not as an administrative residential district but as an ideological, discursive space. The distinction I am making does not intend to imply the existence of two homogenised categories, where each holds a shared vision of Exarcheia. Exarcheians just like Exarchiots were idiosyncratically different, polythetic individuals. I argue that what binds them together is their *elective relationship* with the neighbourhood as a politico-historical topos and their self-identification through that relationship.

I see Exarcheians as the “exogenous locals” (Bousiou 2008), whose subjectivity is defined by their attraction to and emotional investment in Exarcheia. Exarcheian is therefore an *etic* term that reflects the *emic* terms ‘Exarcheiakos’ or ‘plateiakos’ (the one who frequents the square), a word which one interlocutor, Kyriakos – who had spent most of his evenings on the square (plateia) of Exarcheia – proudly used to describe himself. It is worth noting that the local terms ‘Plateiakos’, or ‘Exarcheiakos’ use the suffix -akos denoting belonging. Rioters, anarcho-tourists, digital nomads, artistic colonisers, rebellious teenagers, anarchists and other transit subjectivities that appear in my thesis, all fall under the category of the Exarcheian. This needs to be

understood as a fluid and provisional category of identification with a place where subjects could express themselves, by exercising an anarchist identity, by engaging in political discussions, because they owned an independent bookstore, engaged in solidarity action, painted a mural or threw molotov cocktails.

## Interviews

“Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets.” (Oakley 1981: 243)

Secrets or rather, *surprises*. Before any interviews had commenced, I presumed the dichotomous and asymmetrical power distribution in the field as *de facto* in favour of the researcher – the one who ‘extracts’ information. Inequality and exploitation have discussed in anthropology as the inevitable products of the exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee (Denzin 2001; Karnieli-Miller et al 2009, Reason 2004 and others). Ethically mindful qualitative research sought to bridge these gaps and ameliorate past mistakes. While such efforts were undoubtedly important in the progress of various disciplines, they ran the risk of overlooking the fact that power is not merely an instrument of coercion monopolised by an individual or a group against another.

To recall Foucault, power is in constant flux and negotiation; it “is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it *comes from everywhere*” (1978: 93, emphasis mine). Vis-à-vis the researcher-subject dynamic I am discussing here, the intersubjective omnipresence of power is what is possible to miss when looking at the researcher as the sole beholder of power. Consider, as an example, Enosh and Buchbinder’s (2005) alternative interpretation of the famous fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood. In a keynote speech, Kvale (2003) had used the metaphor of the “gentle and enticing wolf” to draw attention to the potential abuse of power of researchers over participants. Yet wouldn’t it be possible for the roles to be reversed and for the interview to end “when the interviewee devour[s] the interviewer”? (Enosh & Buchbinder 2005: 590).

Such ‘plot twists’ are in line with Limerick et al’s (1996) experience in the field as well as my own. During my research time, there were numerous occasions when “the dynamics of power shifted according to the phase of the interview process and the unique relationship established between the researcher and participant” (ibid: 458). Power indeed emerged as *discursively constructed* (ibid), since “control over knowledge shifts loci of power between researcher and participant in unexpected ways” (Ben-Ari & Enosh 2012: 423). In my experience, interviewing or the time that builds up to the interviews required an exchange of information and knowledge from both sides. It was a dynamic process that, as I discuss in the following section, I chose to embrace as a researcher for its ability to create intersubjective realities. My early illusions about the distribution of power favouring the researcher were dispelled every time I interviewed or simply discussed with certain older participants, typically male, whose ability to monopolise and stir the conversation was sometimes overwhelming. Admittedly, when

interviewing strong-minded and well-informed individuals, I rarely felt in possession of any kind of advantage merely because I was the one asking questions. Besides, although I was choosing my questions, my interviewees could choose both *what, how and if they wanted to answer*. I often became aware of my positionality as a young, female researcher; the limits this might posit, the vulnerability it might project and the power asymmetries it might present – this time in favour of certain participants.

As Limerick et al aptly put it, “the interview is a gift received by the researcher” (1996: 449) and just with all gifts, the feeling of indebtedness it sparks within the receiver automatically sees the power shifting towards the giver. Eventually, accepting that my relationship with my participants would be simultaneously and unavoidably symmetrical and asymmetrical, and finally understanding that the perfect, ‘proper’ interview is “actually unattainable” (Oakley 1981: 255), I welcomed and provoked such power shifts myself. Apart from asking participants to choose the time and location of the interviews, I also invited them to take me for walks around the neighbourhood, following an itinerary of their choice while talking to me about *their* Exarcheia without being prompted by a list of preplanned questions. These ethnographic walks were a way of further destabilising the discursive production of power through the embodied act of walking<sup>49</sup>.

At the same time, I also planned to make sense of Exarcheia myself. By ‘inviting’ the material sites to tell their own stories captured on the neighbourhood’s walls (Knight 2015; Alexandrakis 2016), in old photos and memoirs, in books and publications that

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 4.

described the neighbourhood and important personae that marked its vernacular politics, I wanted to allow this thesis to be enriched by different disciplines such as history, political geography, cultural and literary studies. All kinds of texts, including songs and poems by prominent artists and writers, were examined in an 'inter-textual' effort to put together the largely fragmented history of the radical left in Greece that Exarcheia recounted. In an effort not to claim that I 'represent' people who can (and do) perfectly represent themselves (Kirtsoglou 2004), excerpts of political texts are included in the thesis. I aimed to incorporate in the final work several life stories as these were narrated to me by my informants in order to make the final text as 'polyvocal' as possible (cf. Rabinow 1986). Part of the same effort to trace these publics that are born in discourse guided my use of 'virtual', 'on-line ethnography', especially on websites established by anti-authoritarians groups (cf. Postill & Pink 2012).

### Ethical concerns

Exarcheia was the home and a regular haunt for many people. It was, in the words of one of my interlocutors 'a dense urban village' where 'everyone knows everyone else' whether by face, name or personality. Since my participant pool consisted largely of people who worked, lived, or frequented Exarcheia, one of the main ethical considerations I was faced with was protecting their anonymity, even when the latter was not requested. To do that I have used pseudonyms, which in some cases participants had chosen for themselves. When a name change did not suffice, I altered other elements of their identity such as birthplace or profession, as long as these elements were not important within the context of my analysis. For instance, Markos'

job as a musician and George's job as a book publisher were core and irreplaceable components of their positionality within Exarcheia for they lay at the heart of their relationship with the neighbourhood. With regards to the occupations, I did change however, I made sure to replace them with a job of a similar nature in order to stay as faithful to the participants' professional and social status as possible. The only two names that have not been changed are those of Giorgos Karampelias, an author and political analyst, and Kostas Bakoyiannis, the current Mayor of Athens for the obvious reason that both hold a position of public prominence in Greek society and their interviews took place on the very grounds of this position.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to my pool of participants using a number of terms: interlocutors, informants, discussants, and interviewees. I also refer to some of them as 'friends'. I ought to emphasise that I have used none of these textual references lightly. I recognise my participants as "rounded individuals [and] multi-faceted social beings" (Amit 2000: 2) and I am therefore aware of the discomfiture such characterisations might cause – some more than others. Generally, 'interlocutors' and 'discussants' have been my preferred terms since I felt they reflect the egalitarian and empowering relations that can emerge during an interview where both research parties are involved in an exchange that has the potential to create intersubjective realities. As for terms like 'informants'<sup>50</sup> and 'interviewees', they might be more problematic in that they "embody

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<sup>50</sup> I was also aware of the negative undertones the word 'informant' could carry within the historical context of Exarcheia. 'Informant' in Greek can be translated to both 'pliroforitis' and 'pliroforiodotis'. While the first one is a term typically used in research to describe the person from whom a researcher obtains information, the latter carries denotations of 'spy', 'ruffian' or 'traitor' and usually refers to someone who is the holder of confidential, insider information and betrays that information to the police or another authority. This distinction is an interesting one to point out, particularly in the case of a neighbourhood whose existence is defined through a constant opposition to the police and the state. Another commonly used word with similar connotations was 'asfalites' – a term that refers to undercover policemen who attempt to infiltrate the area. My participants unanimously believed that Exarcheia 'had asfalites in every corner'.

the assumed passive role of the subjects of the research” (1996: 450). Moreover, I am aware that using these terms to refer to people I had come to know as friends or mentors throughout my fieldwork has the potential - albeit unintentionally - to diminish the value of relationships I truly cherish. I am nonetheless confident that those participants I am today lucky enough to call my friends are aware of the technical phraseology inherent in academic research. My use of such terms is a matter of convention and does not reflect nor has the power to devalue my real-life long-term interactions.

To complicate matters more, Amit reminds us that even the use of terms such as ‘friend’ or ‘mentor’ can be problematic, since “however sincere the attachment [implied in these words], ethnographers are still exploiting this intimacy as an investigating tool” (2000: 3). Different authors acknowledge the lack of research terminology able to convey the simultaneous symmetrical and asymmetrical relationship between researcher and participants I have discussed earlier (Limerick et al 1996; Bateson 1990). I propose that one way to ease this terminological stalemate is to ‘forget’ about it altogether in certain fields where the monopoly of power by the researcher is nothing but an arrogant illusion. The field can be a dynamic arena, with constant power shifts between the researcher and the participants that once recognised can become an invaluable source of knowledge construction. Ben-Ari and Enosh very accurately observe that,

“Since attempts to achieve a form of direct reciprocity and egalitarianism have been largely futile, we suggest perceiving relations between researcher and participants as based on *indirect reciprocity*, in which each party brings

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different forms of expert knowledge to the exchange. Reciprocity allows for asymmetrical relations, be they static or dynamic while enabling each research party to gain from them.” (2012: 427; emphasis mine)

This of course is not to say that, if feasible, direct reciprocity should not be attempted. The norm of reciprocity might not be able to prevent the abuse of power, but it can certainly curtail it. The reason why attempts to achieve egalitarianism have been “largely futile” is because very often researchers simply did not have the opportunity to directly or indirectly reciprocate and found themselves feeling guilty, uncomfortable or inadequate (Uehara 1995: 490). I, too, was not immune to such feelings, although I was able to find ways to quietly reciprocate and wordlessly express my gratitude to participants, even months after an interview.

Another thing that required special consideration in the context of Exarcheia was the issue of consent, or to be more specific, *how* to obtain it. Once my research had officially commenced, all participants of this research were individually informed of my identity as a researcher. Consent is a matter of continuous negotiation since circumstances in the field constantly fluctuate (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007). For reasons I will explain shortly, I never perceived written consent to be an “obligatory passage point” (Rydin 2012). I ensured explicit consent was obtained verbally and since all my participants agreed to be recorded, I was able to document their consent in an opening statement that ensured their anonymity and their right to withdraw from my research at any point. Verbal consent was the only sensible option when doing research in an area with strong ties to the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu. I was mindful that some highly politicised individuals in my study, especially those of leftist or anarchist

convictions, might be particularly sensitive to the act of 'signing', a phenomenon that has its roots in Greece's turbulent 20<sup>th</sup>-century history. Up until 1974, all communists and communist-sympathisers targeted or captured by the police were asked to sign a 'declaration' (*dilosia*) that they denounce communism and its various versions. Signing in communicative contexts carries since then a negative connotation in Greece across political spectrums. However, if we recall the Foucauldian approach to the ethos of documents applied by scholars, we can see that aversion and suspicion towards them may be actually an international phenomenon (Reed 2006; Riles 2006; Dauber 1995). Other scholars also observe the hegemonic ability of documents in making political subjects "visible, archived classified, measured, compared, and controlled on a mass scale" (Jacob 2007: 251). Following this logic, consent forms are problematic since, in a way, they contradict the very idea of consent and can compromise the rapport the ethnographer is trying to build. According to Jacob, this is because consent forms can produce an entirely new form of personhood not based "on [the] cognitive humanistic understandings of the consenting individual" but "preserved by legal and bureaucratic documentary proceedings" (ibid 2007: 250; Pottage 2004). As such, although stemming from a well-intended effort to demonstrate good, "proper' practice, I agree with others that the formalisation of research ethics through consent forms can backfire by reducing the research participants to mere evidentiary artefacts of "bureaucracies of virtue" (Jacob & Riles 2007).

## The Self in the field

A great deal of my fieldwork was facilitated by the fact that I can speak Greek. In some ways, my ethnographic engagement with people in Exarcheia is a case of anthropology at home (cf. Jackson 1987). Part of my family comes from Athens; I can speak the language and I am fairly familiar with a number of events that belong to the ‘unofficial’ history of the post-1974 period. At the same time, however, one could argue, that this field site is far from ‘home’ to me (Reed-Danahay 1997). My English education coupled with my previous lack of familiarity with politico-philosophical and academic jargon that was part of the everyday parlance of many of my highly eloquent and well-read interlocutors often made me think *‘I might as well be in a foreign country’*. For, here I was, in Athens’s so-called anarchist territory, possessing an understanding of anarchy limited to what I had read in a couple of books and papers. Overall, my age at the time of my fieldwork, the fact that I spent most of my years in Cyprus (with its own local set of complex politics)<sup>51</sup>, even my accent and of course my total lack of political involvement in social movements rendered me a sort of idiosyncratic foreigner to the radical political ethos of many of my interlocutors. I, therefore, considered my relation to the field

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<sup>51</sup> My limited knowledge of anarchism was also a result of the socio-political environment in which I grew up. I had been brought up in Cyprus, a place where a longstanding conflict rooted in the divisive histories of ‘motherlands’, Greece and Turkey, elicits the strategic use of memory in interpreting the past (Papadakis 1993). Where I come from, clinging on to a national identity is a political statement, a strategy of resilience and for many a way of preserving their dignity. I identify myself as Greek-Cypriot, rather than Greek or Cypriot, mainly for the sake of clarity, even though I do often use the two interchangeably depending on the context, a matter that itself clearly exemplifies what Papadakis refers to as the ‘double talk’ – one that often emerges through the conflicting co-existence of narratives of ‘Cypriotness’ and ‘Greekness’ (1998). The post-1974 years in Cyprus saw the emergence of two contrasting dimensions of nationality: the ‘Greek’ dimension, rooted in the belief that Greek-speaking Cypriots ought to identify with their Greek origins and cultural heritage, and the ‘Cypriot’ dimension expressed through the need for ‘rapprochement’ with the Turkish-Cypriots in an effort to reunite Cyprus (ibid). Thus, having been brought up among these different nationalist narratives and in an environment where politics was articulated and manifested either explicitly or implicitly in nearly all platforms of my social life, anarchy – to put it simply – just never occurred to me as an option.

neither privileged, nor disadvantaged, but rather a position of discovering, deciphering learning and understanding.

Rather than a “cultural shock” (Rapport & Overing 2007), what I initially experienced in Exarcheia was a mixture of intriguing curiosity, surprise and bewilderment. I was a “third-person character” (MacIsaac et al 2009:3) that still had to immerse herself into this new political and socio-cultural setting that felt familiar in its unfamiliarity and straightforward in its complexity. Yet, as Vered Amit puts it, “comprehensive immersion presumes a singularity of focus and engagement”, that “flies in the face of the *actual* practices of many anthropologists” (Amit 2000: 5, emphasis mine). Like many before me, I soon realised that the field is not “a bounded set of relationships and activities” that exists independently and “which is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered” (ibid: 6). Furthermore, the process is not as contingent as the word ‘discovery’ makes it sound, but rather laborious. For, it demands and is shaped through all of the anthropologist’s resources: emotional, relational, financial, political, conceptual and intuitive. Hence Amit’s conclusion that “an idea of fieldwork in which the ethnographer breaks from his/her usual involvements to immerse himself/herself in those of others is an oxymoron” (ibid). But while ‘the field’ is indeed moulded through dynamic interactions, activities and engagements over a period of time, it never quite ‘sets’. Therefore, and as I discuss in the following section, rather than thinking of accessing the field as a single, one-off process, I argue that the anthropologist finds herself constantly negotiating her status in a continuous process of entering and exiting.

## Walking the field(s)

“When people go on a holiday, a space undoubtedly opens up for them which is at first fairly homogenous and of uniform value. But very soon this space breaks up into familiar paths and places, preferred or avoided, and most often there then emerges a particularly favoured spot, a quiet corner which thus becomes the pivot of the whole experience of the holiday space.” (O.F. Bollnow 2011:68)

Adhering to the anthropological protocol, one of the main things I felt compelled to define during the embryonic stages of my fieldwork, was the boundaries of Exarcheia or - to put it in ethnographic terms - my research field. However, that task was never completed, for just like the holiday in an unfamiliar place ‘entering’ Exarcheia saw this ostensibly homogeneous space breaking up into multiple paths and places. In time, the idea of Exarcheia as a uniform space collapsed, and soon familiar, favoured, disliked, preferred and avoided spaces emerged. As a result, I found myself in a process of continuous familiarisation and defamiliarisation, for scrutinising the unfamiliar in my research did not necessarily render it unexceptional or even immediately explicable (cf. Amit 2000: 4). My ‘immersion’ in Exarcheia brought about a paradox: the more I knew the less I knew, simply because new interpretations were formed alongside new questions, and new assertions were easily refuted.

Abandoning the notion of a homogenous space also meant rethinking the notion of ‘the field’ as rigid singular. Indeed, its rigidity was debunked early on in my fieldwork. During an “aimless wander” (Yi’En 2013) around the neighbourhood on a busy Saturday

afternoon with two law students, Nick and Alex, I was asked what my research focus is. 'At this point, everything', I thought, but then ended up giving an equally generic response by saying that I was interested in the 'space of Exarcheia'. Alex was quick to challenge me: 'Right, but what do you mean by space?' 'I think you shouldn't treat space as a wholesome entity' Nick added. 'Exactly. It's more like spaces of Exarcheia' agreed Alex.

My walking companions proved to be right. After the first walks around the alleys and streets of the neighbourhood, that sense of 'the field' gradually faded (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) and gave its place to multiple intertwined spaces. These multiplicities, both conspicuous and furtive, rendered the notion of 'the field' void. Yet the word 'void' here does not intend to denote futility or triviality. On the contrary, anthropology's preoccupation with 'the field' is what grants it an innate advantage when it comes to theorising space. As Setha Low reminds us:

"Regardless of whether it is an ethnographic multi-sided study, a survey of human bones locations, or an archaeological dig, there is an encounter with the inherent materiality and human subjectivity of fieldwork that situates the anthropologist at their interface." (Low 2014:37)

Low's assertion echoes Hastrup who also suggests that "the field has strong spatial connotations, and this is one of its merits" (2010:192). Therefore, whether intended or contingent, socio-spatial understandings in anthropology will emerge inevitably since the ethnographic field is itself a category and/or a means of conceptualising space. Hastrup concludes her argument by adding that the spatial connotations of 'the field'

are a merit “even if its physicality is too often bracketed or seen simply as a backdrop to social life” (2010:192). This last point was used as my impetus in attempting the opposite: instead of remaining the background setting upon which social phenomena and interactions occurred or simply the “container of social relations” (Saunders 1986: 276), ‘the field’ of Exarcheia, was brought to the forefront and deconstructed as the expression of multiple and subjective spaces.

Consequently, the reason the notion of ‘the field’ was regarded as void, was because the rigid singularity that it signified did nothing but contradict the plurality of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1988) that I encountered during my fieldwork. The term ‘field’ itself proved inherently problematic, as it alluded to an understanding of space as a discrete bounded portion of territory, an entrenched piece of land that the anthropologist visits to study “discrete, object-like phenomena” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:7). Thus Gupta and Ferguson’s endeavour to decentre ‘the field’ as the privileged site of ethnographic work and redefine it as “the interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations” (1997:37) suggests, that if one can talk about a multiplicity of inner spaces then one can also talk about the existence of multiple fields. Therefore, rather than ‘entering’ *a field*, I was moving in and out of fields.

I began to explore these multiple fields by switching from ‘aimless wandering’ into what can be termed as ‘introspective walking’. By deploying walking as an introspective mode of movement, I did not intend to resort to what some might dismiss as “navel-gazing” (Wedeen 2009) but rather used it as a means of familiarising myself with my surroundings, consciously drawing attention to my own feelings and bodily practices as I navigated through the neighbourhood. Here, familiarisation is understood as one’s

ability to bound place by and within themselves. Therefore, walking as relational, embodied, reflective and revelatory (O'Neil & Roberts 2019) was consciously used as an *incessant place-making practice* (Casey 1996; Field & Basso 1996; Sandberg 2015) and not as a “process of knowing places” (Yi'En 2013:214), since the verb ‘knowing’ alluded to a predetermined, complete and objective understanding of place, denying the potential existence of subjective interpretations of space.

On a few occasions, at the very beginning of my fieldwork I happened to walk through Exarcheia in the company of some of my interlocutors, usually to find a quiet café to conduct the interview, or sometimes because we bumped onto each other in the Square and happened to be heading towards the same direction. These unplanned walks and the brief yet insightful conversations they sometimes incited, led to my decision to incorporate walking into my interviewing method. Following the work of O'Neil and Perivolaris (2014) and extending Fabian's notion of “ethnography as communication” (2014:202 original emphasis), I reminded myself that communication ought not to be merely discursive but also embodied. As such, ‘ethnography as communication’, may well be ‘ethnography as movement’. I began seeing that walking was not merely an embodied practice, but also a reflective, discursive (Wunderlich 2008) and interactive one. ‘Trading places’ was deployed as a practice that involved not only the mental mapping and non-material construction of space through verbal communication but also a corporal construction and reinforcement of space as well as boundaries through the rhythmic act of walking (Lefebvre 1996). Adding to Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity (1989), I hoped that by ‘trading places’ with participants through walking and listening, I would allow myself the *possibility* of seeing Exarcheia the way they see it.

In addition to 'sedentary' interviews, walking with my participants did allow for a better insight into the experience of the "dailiness of urban life" in Exarcheia (cf. Latham & McCormack 2007: 25). Place-making was hence conceptualised as the outcome of "spatial transformations through social interactions, conversations, memories, feelings, imaginings" (Low 2014:35), and subsequently, *movement*. Therefore my "sense of place" (Hastrup 2010) was not formed only through my *own* perceptions and experiences of my surroundings. The different fields that unfolded before me were also determined intersubjectively through my interaction with interlocutors, who whether in ad hoc conversations or prearranged interviews expressed different understandings of what Exarcheia is, as well as what is not.

Walking with others sought to further unravel the neighbourhood's multiplicity, discover its affective spaces (Navaro-Yashin 2009) and *coproduce* narratives. In line with Kanellopoulou's observation, I too expected walking to be "a form of engagement with [Exarcheia]" that was to be "expressed through our emotional reactions when faced with [its] materiality and symbolism[s]" (2017: 180; also in Macauley 2000). I walked alongside my discussants trying to interfere as little as possible in their "spontaneous talk" and consciously avoided directing or influencing their itinerary, acting more as a "travel companion" (Kanellopoulou 2017: 182) and sometimes even as a tourist.

The itineraries of my walking companions were mobile acts of "storytelling" (Yi'En 2013; Kanellopoulou 2017), during which they would present me with their own unique readings and interpretations of the spaces unfolding before them. More than simply

mapping “chronotopographies” (Chatzidakis 2018), I was interested in carving affective geographies (Navaro-Yashin 2012), that is, capturing the “sensual intensities that may move through human bodies but that do not necessarily emerge from them” (ibid: 168). Indeed, discursive walks with my participants precipitated a serendipitous collaboration that allowed for a visceral, embodied connection with both my walking companions as well as the semantic fields expanding and retracting before us. My walking companions did not only go through and discover places. They also *came* from places, carrying their own world views, emotional predispositions, preconceptions, fears, desires and experiences, which interacted dynamically with time and the inherent physical characteristics of their surroundings in Exarcheia. Therefore, even when faced with the same artefacts, memorials, buildings, walls, streets, and corners, their readings were distinctly personal and emotive.

I argue that the rhythmic act of walking has a hermeneutic potential that can disclose the palimpsestuous nature of urban spaces and their multiple (im)material layers (Miltiadis 2020). Walking emerged as a mode of “negative methodology” (Navaro 2020; Napolitano 2015) in the ways it enabled me to trace silences and erasures in the neighbourhood. It allowed me, in Navaro-Yashin’s words, to “tarry through the negative” (2020) to record the sound of absent voices and “catch the sight of that which somehow remains unseen” (Degen & Hetherington 2001: 1).

Finally, whether alone or in the company of my interlocutors, walking enabled me to conceptualise Exarcheia as an archival space, whose micro and macro-materialities tenaciously exposed and decried painful histories of oppression and persecution. Chronotopic layers of histories of struggle and resistance, affect, individual and

collective reminiscences are found embedded in Exarcheia's old and new buildings, posters, murals, graffiti, monuments, street names and self-organised spaces. Therefore, walking not only became a tool for mapping affective geographies and creating "intersubjective realities" (Duranti 2010) in the city but also a means for ethnographically 'reading' the city and examining its archives. It is the narratives and meanings born out of this kind of mobile engagement with Exarcheia that I present in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Mapping affective geographies, reading Exarcheian archives<sup>52</sup>

#### PART I

##### Katerina's walk

On Themistocleous 66, just off the square of Exarcheia hangs a sign that says, 'Nosotros, Free Social Centre' (*Eleftheros Koinonikos Choros Nosotros*)<sup>53</sup>. The name is painted against a red and black background – the symbol of anarcho-syndicalists during the Spanish Civil War. The name 'Nosotros' ('Us') itself pays tribute to the legendary anarchist militant group founded by the Spanish insurrectionary Buenaventura Durruti and signifies the Social Centre's libertarian and anti-authoritarian political identity. Nosotros was set up experimentally in 2005. It was not squatted but rented collectively by a group of anti-authoritarians. It is a two-storey neoclassical building with tall ceilings and big windows, whose rooms are now used to host its various activities. On the first floor, there is the café-bar and a cafeteria-like space with tables and chairs, which is also used for lectures, meetings, book launches, film screenings exhibitions, music events and parties. In the summertime, these activities take place on its terrace. Nosotros also provides free language classes and seminars on a range of different topics, such as theatre, painting, history, photography, martial arts, dancing, singing, music and

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<sup>52</sup> All photos during the ethnographic walks were taken by me.

<sup>53</sup> In Greek: *Ελεύθερος Κοινωνικός Χώρος Νοσότρος*.

computing. 'Nosotrians' describe it as a non-profit, direct democratic place that does not adhere rigidly to any ideology and instead seeks to promote autonomy, creativity, freedom of thought and expression.

I met Katerina at the terrace of Nosotros in the summer of 2016. I guessed she was somewhere around her early 50s but her smiling eyes and youthful countenance made her look younger. A self-proclaimed anarcho-autonomous communist, Katerina was currently unemployed and often spent her evenings in Nosotros, attending its free English or alternative history classes, before joining her friends for tea at the centre's café bar.

Katerina was also a member of the Association of Alternative Action (*Syllogos Enallaktikis Drasis*). As she explained, part of the activities of the Association was the organisation of tours around the historical monuments of Exarcheia, with a particular focus on those with a socio-political character. Katerina maintained that these tours aimed at giving a different approach and dimension to the historical events of Greece. When I told Katerina about my idea of a walking ethnography, I did not know that this would become the excuse for her first tour, or her "maiden tour" (*partheniki xenagisi*), as she laughingly put it. She was pretty excited about our walk, and upon meeting me at the corner of Patisision St., exclaimed, "Maraki, thank you so much for giving me this opportunity!" and then, turning to my recorder, warned me that she was a person with a lot of sensibilities so I had to pardon her if she got too emotional.

We began the tour outside the Archaeological Museum on Patisision St. and then turned on the east side into the pedestrianised Tositsa St., which was demarcated by the wall of

the Museum and the Athens Polytechnic. “We see some odd faces here. Junkies”, commented Katerina referring to the group of rough-looking men standing by a tree. Since the drug business of the Square was dismantled by Exarchiots a few years back, Tositsa had acquired notoriety as a haunt for drug users, primarily of heroin – a testament to the fact that drug piazzas in Exarcheia did not disappear but merely rotated (Vradis 2012).



Figure 1.

Our first stop was on Tositsa St. We stopped in front of a plaque (*Figure 1*) that carried the names of the people who were killed on March 5, 1943, during the struggle against the forced drafting of Greek citizens by the Third Reich. Katerina explained: “*The war took an unfavourable turn for the Germans. They capitulated in Stalingrad and faced an overwhelming defeat in North Africa, which left them in great need of human resources*”. On January 30, 1943, Konstantinos Logothetopoulos, the then Nazi-appointed Prime

Minister of the Greek collaborationist government, had himself signed the drafting order which:

“represented a threat to dozens of thousands of families because the departure of men and women for the Reich would not only have deprived their families of their all-important physical and emotional support but also threatened directly their own lives given the squalid working conditions and the Allies’ continuous bombardment of Germany’s industrial areas.”

(Gkotzaridis 2016: 58)

This led to massive protests, which culminated a month later in an EAM-led rally that led to many injuries and the death of at least seven people whose names Katerina read out loud: “Marinakis-Seirios-Edmondos, Toron-Koukouvis-Havorakis-Mouskousis and many others unsung”. Katerina informed me that:

*“As soon as the decree was announced, within seconds I would say, the people’s mobilisation was so strong... everyone came out and flooded the streets! I even get goosebumps telling you about it! One mass of people went to the government offices, and the other big mass went to the Ministry of Labour, where they symbolically burned some of the files to sabotage the order.”*



Figure 2.

Further down, Katerina pointed at a headless bust (*Figure 2*). “They beheaded her”, she added with a soft, sad tone, glancing at where the head used to be. She was talking about the statue of Lela Karagianni who had been vandalised the previous year. Lela Karagianni is “an emblematic figure of the national resistance against the Nazi Occupation” (Gekas 2020: 119). Wife of a pharmacist and the mother of seven children, Lela used her husband’s drugstore as a refuge for British soldiers. She facilitated Greek army officers to flee Athens and through Crete to join the newly established resistance movement in Egypt (*ibid*). Karagianni had formed her own ‘cell’ within the broader Resistance movement under the code name Bouboulina, a reference to the female Greek captain Laskarina Bouboulina who had fought against the Ottomans during the War of Independence. Her house was located in Kipseli, a twenty-minute walk from where we were standing, on a street now named after her<sup>54</sup>. In 1944 Karagianni was captured and

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<sup>54</sup> On that road –Lela’s Karagianni 37– the first ever squat was organized in 1988 in an abandoned building that belonged to the University of Athens (see Chapter 2). Lela’s Karagianni actual residence,

tortured by the Germans before being sent to Haidari concentration camp, where a firing squad executed her on September 8, 1944.

It took me some time to connect Katerina's utterances and silences in front of Karagianni's beheaded statue. What was said –*they* beheaded her'- and what was not said –who were *they* and why would they behead a resistance heroine- encapsulated the historical complexities of 'Greek Resistance to the Germans'. Alongside the local resistance movement, mainly controlled by EAM and its military division ELAS, a number of Greek army officers joined the official Greek government that had fled to Egypt. Those officers eventually fought the Axis Powers alongside the British Forces in North Africa and the Middle East. Through association with this side of Greek resistance (and through non-direct association with EAM), Lela Karagianni remains within certain political circles an 'ambivalent' figure: a heroine of resistance for sure – but perhaps too bourgeois and philo-establishment to be fully acknowledged as such. Most importantly, Lela's post-mortem sin was that her heroic stance against the Germans 'was used by the bourgeois state in order to class-wash' (or absolve) itself from accusations of offering safe heaven to ex-German collaborators<sup>55</sup>. Lela Karagianni's beheaded statue spoke of the complexities of historical narrative and of wounds and traumas yet to heal. The symbolic act of her beheading was largely rooted in retrocausal readings of the history of resistance through the perspective of political events that happened decades later (cf. Kirtsoglou 2021; Knight & Stewart 2016). The affect emitted by the marble bust was powerful enough to cause its beheading.

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built in 1923, is now a protected monument and houses a technology hub of the Municipality of Athens located in Lela's Karagianni 1.

<sup>55</sup> See for example <http://www.katioussa.gr/istoria/lela-karagianni-mia-asti-stin-antistasi-kata-tou-katakaktiti/> (last accessed 10.9.2021). For more information on collaborators and their relationship with the post-war bourgeois state see indicatively: Mazower 2004; Chaidia 2004).

Coincidentally, the street of our next stop was named after Bouboulina, the Greek heroine of 1821 who inspired Lela Karagianni. “Here, on Bouboulina’s 18 were the offices of EAT-ESA (EAT-EΣA), the secret police. This is where they brought all the leftists”, said Katerina while pointing at the beige building with the washed-out red windows. The place (*Figure 3*) she was referring to, commonly known as “The Terrace of Bouboulina” (*I taratsa tis Bouboulinas*), had from 1950 until the early 1980s been the headquarters of the Athens Security Sub-Directorate (*secret police*). It hosted the offices of the secret police, interrogators, detention cells and cells of confinement. However, what made the building notorious was its terrace, which was used to torture political dissidents. According to testimonies, there was a laundry room on the terrace and, next to it, a narrow table on which they would tie prisoners’ legs. Above that, a wall with various instruments of torture hanging: hammers, sticks, bamboo rods, metal wires, long thin sandbags.

The Terrace of Bouboulinas (also known as slaughter-house, *sfageio*) remained one of the most notorious torture centres during the dictatorship era in Greece (1967-1974). “Those arrested by the junta military police were tortured here with the most brutal and inhumane methods”, Katerina explained emphatically. Towards the end of the dictatorship, the building with the bloody roof was demolished and substituted by a condominium perhaps in the regime’s effort to erase material evidence of atrocities. Yet, as Bill et al. argue, “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (2010: 11; also Navaro-Yashin 2021). Even though the original building no longer stood there, its memory did, and the *knowledge* of its prior existence was as potent as its tangible presence would have been. As Katerina explained, the march of the students of the Polytechnic down this very street on November 17, 1973, was a foretelling that they

were not going to forget. She then gestured for me to follow her to our next (obvious) stop: the Athens Polytechnic.



Figure 3.

As we continued our “mindful walking” (Jung 2014) towards the entrance of the Polytechnic, I saw a colourful tree standing between two of the plentiful sophora trees that line up Stournari St. It was colourful, but not because it was blooming (*Figure 4*). The top part of the trunk and the branches had been painted with a Klein blue colour, and on top of it, several abstract, golden mosaic-like shapes had been drawn. The other half of the trunk had been divided into rhombuses, painted black, green and yellow, with pink dots scattered on them randomly. The tree was not real but “an artistic intervention of the residents of Exarcheia” (*kallitehnikhi paremvasi*), explained Katerina as I took a picture.



Figure 4.

A few meters down, at the entrance of the Polytechnic, the guard peered at us inquiringly, and I asked if I was permitted to take photos inside. With a rather dull tone, the guard said that it is “normally forbidden” and then, maintaining the uninterested expression, added, “If anyone asks, just don’t say you asked me”. We thanked him and walked in.



Figure 5.

I had only been inside the courtyard of the Polytechnic once before, during a concert (Figure 5). “In 1973 this was filled with students”, Katerina said softly as we entered the courtyard and she continued: “After the assembly at the Law School, the students marched towards the Polytechnic to fortify themselves and to actively resist the regime. These buildings - the School of Architecture and the school of Fine Arts - are where the slogans were written. The KKE pilloried the student movement, saying that the uprising was illegal, and this was, in my opinion, a grave mistake. Spontaneous action is also the most sincere. Putting your own requests forward without propagating any [political] space is the most transparent political act”.



Figure 6.

Partly through the evocation of photographs and videos of the uprising I had seen in documentaries, and partly through inventive imagination, my mind's eyes filled the courtyard with hundreds of students ardently shouting “Bread, Education, Freedom”<sup>56</sup>, hurriedly climbing on gates, holding banners and waving flags. Before me, past and present were folding into one mental image (cf. Degen & Hetherington 2001). With banners held up alongside those condemning the Junta, calling for NATO and the USA to ‘get out’ (Figure 6), the Polytechnic in 1973 had transformed into a space explicitly exposing and denouncing Greece’s cryptocolonial condition (Herzfeld 2002). Although the Junta collapsed not long after the calamitous attempted coup d’etat in Cyprus in July 1974, the echo of the Polytechnic became the constant reminder of the 1974 anti-imperialist and anti-hegemonic political vision, that largely remained an unfinished project in Greece. Until today, the slogan “The Polytechnic lives on” (*To Polytechnio zei*)<sup>57</sup>, never fails to revive itself in graffiti, banners or protests of the traditional Left in Greece.



Figure 7.

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<sup>56</sup> In Greek: ‘Ψωμί, Παιδεία, Ελευθερία’ (*Psomi, Paideia, Eleftheria*) – the slogan of the student uprising.

<sup>57</sup> In Greek: ‘Το Πολυτεχνείο ζει’.

As we approached the front entrance of the Polytechnic (*Figure 7*), Katerina was narrating the story of the building's construction, which was funded by George Averoff, a businessman and philanthropist from Metsovo (hence the name 'National Metsovian Polytechnic'). Standing in front of the entrance, Katerina pointed at the giant bronze head (*Figure 8*) – a memorial to all who died during the student Uprising – and next to it, the twisted remains of the front gate crushed by the tank – the infamous event that precipitated the bloodshed<sup>58</sup>. Next to the gate stood a plaque with the names of the students of the Polytechnic that “gave their lives for the ideals of the National Resistance” (*pou edosan tin zoi tous gia ta idanika tis ethnikis antistasis*) of 1941-1944 (*Figure 9*). “*These are those who died, either by protesting the Nazi’s decree of forced mobilisation or by taking part in big strikes like the one I’m going to talk to you about later*”, explained Katerina, and then making a comparison with present-day demonstrations added: “*After the 5th of March<sup>59</sup> the people of Athens flooded the streets continuously. They didn’t just protest once like we do today. It was constant. Today, we protest, and then we stop*”.



**Figure 8.**

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<sup>58</sup> The number of people killed during the uprising has been a point of contestation with official sources reporting a number ranging from 18 to 59 and rumours saying that even up to 200 or 500 lost their lives. For an interesting discussion on the matter see Kallivretakis (2004).

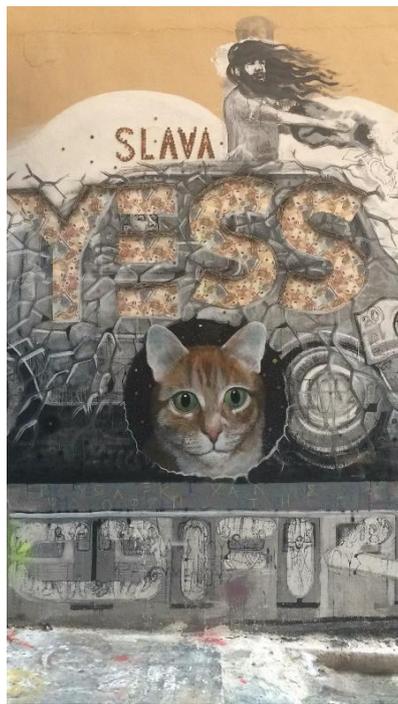
<sup>59</sup> March 5, 1943 - the date of the demonstration against the forced drafting of Greek citizens by the Third Reich. Also discussed earlier.



Figure 8.

When it was first built in 1862, the affluence of the Polytechnic became a matter of controversy, yet its unique character was valued, nonetheless. I couldn't help but think this was probably not the case today. In front of us, the robust neoclassical buildings, despite their magnificence, stood lonely, surrounded by unkempt verges with weeds overtaking their lawns while their walls were infested with murals and graffiti scribbles (*Figure 10*). I recalled the words of another interlocutor, Marios, who, upon hearing me commenting on the 'effect of graffiti on buildings', responded in a wry manner: 'I like them like that. I like their filthiness!' Similarly, another interlocutor, Themis, had once told me, 'I like dirty buildings with graffiti on them. That's right - dystopia! (*Etsi - dystopia!*)', he had exclaimed in a playful yet provocative manner.

Figure 9.



While aesthetically displeasing (to some), to argue that all graffiti are “mindless, senseless vandalism” (Macdonald 2001: 2) would be an invalid assumption. Indeed, the materiality of the Polytechnic was contextually and symbolically rich. The evening was quiet, yet its walls were screaming. Even though graffiti and street art were not the “minor literature” Deleuze and Guattari had in mind (1983), in the inner courtyard of the Polytechnic, the poems, song lyrics, clever excerpts and quotes from books sprayed on the walls emerged as the political literature of a minority composed using “major language” (ibid). And although it does not adhere to “collective action on the ground”, it is certainly one that appeals to collective values and responsiveness (Alexandrakis 2016: 278). The impressive murals on the walls overtook intelligible graffiti scribbles - my distaste for which I had now forgotten - and their design and colour conveyed a range of emotions: humour, sarcasm, anger, contempt, solidarity, agony, and irony (Chatzidakis 2018; Knight 2015). Some reminded, warned, reminisced; others perplexed, shocked, and some I am yet to decipher.

Our next stop was at the junction of Patission and Gladstonos St. Katerina stood in front of the bust of a man, enclosed in a patch of green.

*“When Greece was conquered by the Germans, it became their protectorate, and then various organisations started to spring steadily. There were two main poles: those who wanted the liberation of the country from the Nazis like PEAN<sup>60</sup> and EAM, and others like ESPO, an ethnosocialist organisation*

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<sup>60</sup> PEAN is the Greek acronym for the *Panhellenic Union of Fighting Youths* (In Greek ΠΕΑΝ – Πανελλήνιος Ένωσις Αγωνιζόμενων Νέων). It was a Greek resistance organisation during the Axis Occupation of Greece in WWII. The organisation was based in the areas of Athens and Piraeus and although it did not expand to become a mass movement, it was one of the most active urban resistance groups that emerged during the Occupation and one of the first to carry out bombing attacks against Germans and their collaborators.

*similar to Golden Dawn, who were pro-occupation. ESPO was at the time also recruiting young people along with Greek soldiers to form the so-called Greek Legion, to stand by the Germans in the Wehrmacht and fight against Russia and the Allies. The KKE viewed PEAN as a provocative organisation because PEAN members blew up the ESPO offices that used to be here.”*

Katerina then pointed at the building to our right. “It was a huge success for Greece. The echo of this explosion spread in Europe, the USA and all around the world”, she added. At the column of the junction, under the name of the street, is a plaque commemorating the explosion. The bust next to us was the memorial of Konstantinos Perrikos (*Figure 11*), the leader of the PEAN resistance movement, who, along with seven others, had meticulously planned the explosion that killed 29 ESPO members (some say more), including its leader. They were all arrested and executed after another member of the organisation, Polykarpos Ntalianis “this Judah”, as Katerina put it, betrayed them for three golden pounds per insurgent. Ntalianis, however, did not live long after that to enjoy the wealth of his betrayal. He, too, was eventually captured, interrogated and executed by other PEAN members.

Behind the bust stood a four-sided column with the faces of some of the saboteurs. Among them was the face of Ioulia Mpimpa (*Figure 12*), in the house of which, the bomb was constructed. “*Ioulia lived in Koukaki. She was from Samos. She had married young and was a teacher. She was low key. She wasn’t a leftist, but when she heard that Glezos and Santas took down the German flag in 1943, the desire to revolt woke up within her. She decided she must do something patriotic*”, explained Katerina and then,

emphatically expressing what she imagined Mpimpa’s thoughts must have been, added, “I will contribute to the Resistance!”.

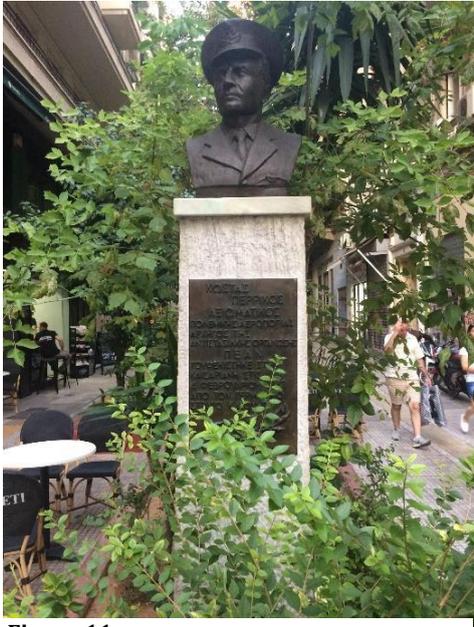


Figure 11.



Figure 10.

The memorial of the PEAN members at Gladstonos marked the end of our historical tour around the “contentious points of the Resistance” (*epimacha simia*). One could argue that *epimachos*, the Greek word for ‘contentious’, carries here a double meaning. The places we had visited were both *epimacha* in that they - to this day - stir controversy and ignite debates. But *epimacha* where *machi* means battle or conflict, also conveys an understanding of these places as loci of struggle, fight and violence; the violence of a past whose urban markers somehow remained mute and inconspicuous to passersby but which Katerina’s words reanimated.

Our final stop was the Square of Exarcheia. In the junction of Themistocleous and Arachovis St. and adjacent to the Square stood a building that evokes nothing special to the historically uninformed eye. It is a six-floor construction completed in 1933 and one of the first apartment buildings in Athens that, despite no longer being blue, it is still known nationally as the ‘Blue Condominium’ (*Mple Polykatoikia*)<sup>61</sup>. She gestured at the ground floor of the building. She informed me that until recently, it hosted the famous Café Floral, which was a café-bookstore, an art space and, in Katerinas’ words, “a haunt for thinkers and comrades with capital C. The members of the movement used to have a more established presence here”, added Katerina and continued: “Exarcheia is now like an unfenced vineyard (*xefrago ampeli*)”<sup>62</sup>.

Opposite Floral was the squatted social centre K\*Vox, which functioned as a café, cinema, library and the base of the anarchist group *Rouvikonas (Rubicon)*. Formed in 2013 amidst the difficult years of the Greek financial crisis, K\*Vox was one of Exarcheia’s many pockets of “radical otherness” (Manche 2020); a “here-and-now” heterotopia of resistance (Chatzidakis 2013; Poulimenakos & Dalakoglou 2017) that fervently responded to the troika’s austerity measures by public acts of symbolic

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<sup>61</sup> The Blue Condominium was one of the first to be erected in 1933 during the so-called Condominium Era in Greece. It was a five-storey apartment building on the corner of Arachovis and Themistocleous Streets. Its impressive facade and unique architecture attracted several artists, well-known journalists and politicians who lived there at various points in time. During the Metaxas dictatorship and WWII, the Blue Condominium turned into a base of the counterintelligence organisation *‘Midas’*, while in the December Events that precipitated the Civil War it was used by members of ELAS who installed a machine gun to attack a British tank attempting to enter the Polytechnic from Stournari St. At various points in history, a number of distinguished people, such as the singer Sofia Vembo, the politician Leonidas Kyrkos and the actress Katina Paxinou had lived in its apartments. The history of the Blue Condominium is rich and forms an integral part of the history of Exarcheia, I was therefore surprised Katerina did not mention it.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Unfenced vineyard’ (in Greek: *ξέφραγο αμπέλι*) has been directly translated from Greek, and in its metaphorical sense is an expression that wishes to project the idea that a place is now ‘unguarded’ or ‘unconfined’ and therefore ‘vulnerable’ and in danger of being trespassed (Butulussi 2019). By whom Katerina did not clarify, but the ‘trespasser’, in Exarcheia, as I later understood, had multiple faces, and the recurrence of this topic in my research demanded its own separate platform of analysis. For more see Chapter 6.

violence. Anarchists at K\*Vox not only challenged and resisted dominant hegemonic forms of organisation in the wider society that surrounded them, but also offered alternatives based upon the principles of solidarity and direct democracy. For instance, during the financial collapse, K\*Vox hosted the ADYE clinic, which provided a vertical organisation of care to people with or without medical insurance and was run by both employed and unemployed doctors, dentists and pharmacists (Poulimenakos & Dalakoglou 2017; Manche 2020).

“Come see the space, it’s very beautiful. It has a library too”, said Katerina and beckoned me with a head tilt to follow her inside.

“This is where we sat with my teacher of the *Alternative Action* and others. Right on this table. We wanted to initiate a project about direct democracy and self-management”. She then paused and read aloud a poster on the wall “When people are in the danger of tyranny...”. “Do they choose chains or do they choose arms?” I continued, completing the quote. “Listen to the song”, Katerina said with a smile, and I tuned in to the sound of the Greek song playing in the background.

*Herds of gaunt slaves moan as they row,  
If you don't break your chain, you will die with the oar  
Since they live by having you as their eternal slave,  
throw the chain in the waves, and get rid of them too*<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> “*Agéles doúlon xésarkon vongóntas kopilatoúne, tin alysída sou an den spas me to koupí pethaineis, afou sklávo aiónio s’ echoun aftoi na zoúne, tote rihtin sta kýmata ki aftous gia na xekaneis.*”

As we stepped back outside, the urban sounds took over: motorcycle exhaust pipes, cars honking, indistinct conversations from the people sitting in the surrounding cafes or talking on the phone as they hastily crossed the street. We decided to conclude the walk with a drink on the terrace of Nosotros. Watching her smile as she gazed around the balconies of Exarcheia prompted me to ask:

“What does Exarcheia mean to you?”

*“For me, this is the only place where you can fearlessly express your opinion. It is the only place where you can fearlessly organise any mobilisation against the enemy”,* she responded with confidence.

“Who is the enemy?” I asked.

*“The enemy is the system. We don’t live in a democracy. There is no democracy in a class system. Aristotle said that only when wealth is equally distributed we will be able to talk of a democracy”,* responded Katerina ardently.

I then adjusted my initial question: “What comes to mind when one utters the word ‘Exarcheia’?” “Resistance, revolt, echo! (*Antistasi, epanastasi, apoihos*)”, said Katerina in a stentorian voice, and continued: “Resistance is followed by revolt. And revolt means power, echo. A strong echo that will spread to awaken the place. These are the three words that mean ‘Exarcheia’”.

## Disclosing chronotopes, unsilencing histories

Katerina's tour had marked Exarcheia through a route that connected key sites and (im)materialities, which, if physically conspicuous, were often discursively absent from dominant narratives and city tours around Athens. Her aim, in line with the objectives of her *Association of Alternative Action*, was to share with me her knowledge of silenced histories or what I call *bypassed narratives*, by following historical paths that were peripheral, both figuratively and literally, since most of our walk took place outside the 'heart' of the historical centre of Athens - one usually associated with antiquity. Katerina was tracing both presences and absences in the neighbourhood's material landscape (cf. Miltiadis 2020), and her words reanimated spaces at the margins of official histories (Napolitano 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2020). Unlike the uncontroversial glories of ancient Greece, these were uncomfortable histories recounting the atrocities of wars and internal conflicts that left behind an extensive collective trauma and did not constitute part of the official Greek narrative. These material and conceptual spaces had been silenced, made implicit or even destroyed. By looking at traces, absent buildings and ruined busts, Katerina was "tarrying through the negative" (Navaro-Yashin 2020: 168). That is, she was consciously highlighting the importance not only of evidentiary presences but also absences, erasures and ruins. As such, my discursive walk with Katerina emerged as a fruitful means for responding to the need for what Navaro-Yashin (2020) - inspired by a number of authors (Fowles 2010; Stoker 2013; Gordillo 2014; Napolitano 2015; De León 2015)- calls a *negative methodology*: a positionality that critically interrogates "anthropology's phantasmagoria of positivity" and the researcher's misplaced assurance that the world ought to be "researchable in all its moments" (ibid: 162).

As we paced through the neighbourhood, observing absences and ‘listening’ to silences, each (in)visible memorial we visited stood before us both as “a fixed point in the contemporary landscape” and an “artefact of representation” of the past in the present (Withers 1996: 326 - 327). In a workshop held in Durham in 2021<sup>64</sup> as part of a Durham IAS project on memory, Navaro-Yashin referred to the concept of ‘more-than-human memory’ and discussed the potentialities enabled through a post-humanist approach to memory that opens up the latter to directions that exceed human imagination. Challenging human subjectivity as the sole site for memory production, Navaro invited us to think about a study of memory that relies on material and spatial methodologies. During her discussion, a question was whether we ought to use the same term to refer to the memory of humans and that inscribed on spaces and materialities. Having pondered upon this question myself and bearing in mind Navaro-Yashin’s influential contribution to the theory of affect - where the latter is understood as a continuum between the human and the non-human (2012) - I argue that the same conceptual approach ought to be adopted in our study of memory.

In line with Navaro’s argument, my understanding of a ‘more-than-human’ memory appreciates material and spatial dimensions without removing human imagination from the equation (or continuum). Since memory is a human interiority, its inscription upon ‘non-human’ spaces and materialities is itself a product of human subjectivity. Therefore, to return to the terminological query, I argue that searching for an alternative word to describe non-human memory is perhaps redundant, for Navaro’s own nuanced conceptualisation of ‘affect’ already serves that purpose. In my research,

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<sup>64</sup> Source: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/advanced-study/projects/current-projects/representing-memory/> (last accessed 16.12.2021)

at least, an approach of objects and spaces as loci of affective energies that activate themselves once in contact with human interiorities is a ripe conceptual platform for analysing the dialogical relationship between humans and space that emerged during my walks. Put differently, devising a term for 'non-human' memory might not be analytically necessary. The 'non-human' does not remember but *reminds* through its absorptive and productive potential to be imbued by and exude affect. It is not my intention to diminish the agentic capacity of spaces and materialities since I cannot deny their ability to stir unexpected emotions and reactions within me and others. I also do not wish to equate affect to memory but rather argue that the *affect* of urban materialities informed by historicity and the subjective knowledge and disposition of the onlooker acts as a *precursor to memory* and, in turn, transforms urban artefacts into memory aids and Exarcheia as a whole into a *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989).

If the urban artefacts we encountered with Katerina were the bearers of any kind of memory, that would have been a second-hand *memory-in-the-waiting*. For, each memorial aimed to incite in the beholder memories of past, unexperienced histories now buried somewhere in the chamber of collective forgetfulness. In that sense, we can talk about objects not as sites of production of memory *per se* but as committed participants in a dialogical process of remembrance and knowledge formation. I perceived the artefacts Katerina and I encountered as having their own distinct *semantic fields*, constituted by objective meaning (the historical knowledge of what happened) and affective meaning (the emotions it invoked in us). My walk with Katerina made the semantic fields of certain inconspicuous objects and locations perceptible. For instance, owing to its reputation as a 'hangout of junkies' (*steki gia prezonia*), for most pedestrians Tositsa St. was usually a 'pass-through' and never a

destination. Before my discursive walk (Wunderlich 2008) with Katerina, I had only hastily walked through Tositsa and once parked my car there, only to be later advised by a passerby not to do so again because, as he put it, ‘they break into cars over there’ (*spane aftokinita eki pera*).

Moreover, the memorials on Tositsa St. (the Karagianni bust and the plaque) could not act “in their own right” (Latour 1996: 240), for without interaction, they remained static, silent witnesses to the events unfolding around them and did not awaken but merely memorialised the past. It is argued that their *semantic field* and their historicity had been *superimposed* by the affective energy (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012) of Tositsa as an ‘immoral space’, a place where drug addicts and dealers frequent during the day and which becomes an arena for *báhala*<sup>65</sup> during the night. In our walk, Tositsa was not a passage but a stop. Katerina’s narrative had activated the *semantic field* of the memorials creating a “dialogical experience” (Degen & Hetherington 2001: 2). As she was poignantly reading the names of the fallen citizens on the plaque, she was initiating an interaction that made the memorials conspicuous again. A new Tositsa emerged, detached from its dominant associations with crime and immorality.

Just across Tositsa St., Katerina revealed the lingering affect of the notorious non-existent building at Bouboulina’s. A building whose case exemplifies Degen and Hetherington’s observation that experiences of absence in presence are usually revealed when “places are changing, transforming and when a debt is not being acknowledged in that transformation” (2001: 3). And so the Terrace of Bouboulina, although erased from the social fabric, lingered in collective memory. Its *ghost* (ibid)

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<sup>65</sup> Anarchist-police clashes. The *báhala* are the main object of analysis of the following chapter.

demanded recognition; a recognition it received in abundance through personal narrations and testimonies and solidly through books, documentaries, and songs that have reopened paths of memory that the state had been firmly guarding. The demolition of the building at Bouboulina's 18 was very likely an attempt to drown the screams of those in confinement and the cries of pain of those tortured with flogging, electroshock, nail and hair uprooting and other unspeakable acts of violence. The building was erased from the urban fabric so as not to tell its story but continued to tell this story precisely through its absence that became in itself an eloquent testimonial.

Right across the street, one could hardly ignore the stentorian roar of the Polytechnic's walls. More than a grandiose edifice, the Polytechnic University had acquired its cultural and political substance by becoming the emblematic stronghold of students, protesters and anarchists; a place for concerts, political events, a canvas for talented (and not) delinquents. Its materiality was one that could both "speak for itself" (Appadurai 1986) but also one whose polysemic quality, was composed through collective and personal histories. For Katerina, the collective was very much part of the personal too, and vice versa. The un-lived past was becoming part of her lived experience of Exarcheia and a feature of both her individual and collective identity that was imbued with historicity and cultural meaning.

## PART II

### Vicky's walk

"Exarcheia is full of posters!" exclaimed Vicky enthusiastically.

*'Full of posters might even be an understatement'*, I thought to myself. Exarcheia did not have walls - it had signboards; it had canvases. Vicky prompted me to follow her down Themistocleous St. Her hand pointed at the thick layer of posters on the wall.

I first met Vicky behind the bar of Nosotros, as she was very patiently trying to teach me how to operate the espresso machine. Vicky had first come to Athens as a student to study sociology. Currently unemployed, Vicky often spent her evenings at Nosotros with her partner and friends. She was ardently involved in the day-to-day running of the social centre, in the organisation of its numerous events and was always present at its weekly assemblies. As a student, Vicky had been a member of the centre-leftist student union PASP but gradually shifted from the traditional left into the anti-authoritarian milieu of Exarcheia and was now an active member of Athens' Anti-authoritarian Current (AK). However, Vicky did not see herself as an anarchist or an anti-authoritarian and preferred to self-identify as a humanist.

When I asked her to walk me around Exarcheia, she eagerly accepted, although she said she did not know where exactly to take me. On the day of our meeting, the idea of following the poster routes in Exarcheia came to her rather spontaneously.

As I followed her through the neighbourhood's alleys, Vicky gestured right and left: “We only post in the heart of Exarcheia. First board (tabló), second board. We call ‘board’ (Figure 13) those parts of the wall that have many older posters underneath, so you can stick your own on top with a little glue and minimal effort.”

The ‘heart of Exarcheia’ was the Square and the roads and alleys surrounding it. Vicky wanted to retrace with me what she called the “posting route” (*diadromi afisokollisis*), that is, the route she and other members of Nosotros followed around the neighbourhood when they put up posters.



Figure 12

“The modern way of ‘posting’ today, whether it is for cultural or political events or ideas, is done through the Internet: through Instagram, Facebook and through various blogs. *Afisokollisi* [‘putting up posters’] here, however, is still going strong (einai

dynamiki). *Exarcheia is a place with a lot of young people, so posters here are still seen and read (akoma vlepontе ke diavazonte)."*

Posters (just like graffiti) in Exarcheia were omnipresent, their ubiquity granting them a nearly innate quality. In a mundane material landscape, otherwise not distinctly different from the rest of the Athenian centre, the posters - along with murals and the graffiti - informed those deprived of even the slightest knowledge of Exarcheia's history that *something else is going on here*. They were, put differently, a quintessentially Exarcheian characteristic. In Vicky's opinion, if one wanted to trace the virtual borders of Exarcheia, one had to simply discover where the posters stopped.



Figure 14.

The majority of the posters were political: some were urging people to gather up against state oppression; others were invitations to a talk about the beauty ideals imposed by society (*Figure 14*); some were advertising a music event held the following weekend to collect money 'to support prisoners and persecuted comrades'. The posters were voices on the wall, following passersby and incessantly calling for attention, demanding action,

condemning inaction. Posters were contextually political, but also political in terms of action, in the sense that their (abundant) presence alone was defying the law forbidding putting up posters in public places without permission; a law which all Athenian districts are expected to abide by, and which was explicitly stated for pedestrians to see only two blocks from where we were standing (*Figure 15*). In other words, posters were objects of defiance and part of a materiality of subversion. They both contained the message and were *themselves* the message, participating in the very idea they represented (i.e. anti-neoliberalism, anti-authoritarian sentiments).



**Figure 15: A sign on Akadimias St. that reads "Putting up posters is forbidden. Law Article 2147". Photo taken by me.**

The posters not only constituted an essential part of the spatial idiosyncrasy of Exarcheia but were also a vital element of its communitarian culture. Vicky used the word 'dynamic' to denote how, despite other dominant contemporary means of communication elsewhere, posters in Exarcheia 'were still going strong' and continued to be the primary mode through which news and information were disseminated. Yet their 'dynamism' also pertained to their ephemerality since political posters in Exarcheia were constantly changing, catching up with the rhythms of the neighbourhood, seizing moments and political ideas (Chatzidakis 2018). Unlike the murals and the graffiti, the life span of posters was no longer than four months. Therefore, their presence was foregrounding "time in space" and not "space in time", as Chatzidakis rightly observes (ibid: 413). Soon, new, freshly printed posters would be pressed against the old ones that were damaged from the sun and the rain. The old posters would nonetheless remain useful, entering a new state in their social lives (cf. Appadurai 2006), transforming, as Vicky noted, into boards for the next round of posters to be pressed on.



Figure 16.



Figure 17.

We turned left to Koletti and walked towards a street. Although maps still identify it as 'Mesologgiou', in Exarcheia now, it bears the name 'Alexandros Grigoropoulos' after the fifteen-year-old boy fatally shot there by a policeman in December 2008. Stopping briefly, Vicky commented: *"It was not an accident. The gun was aimed straight at him. Bang. He was shot right there between the AEK<sup>66</sup> association and the bar Spirto. The guys on shift that night told us that they came out and saw a boy covered in blood. His friend was screaming"*. Then shifting her attention to the posters said, "This part here on Mesologgiou St. is a piazza (*piatsa*)". By 'piazza', Vicky meant clusters of coffee shops and bars in various corners of Exarcheia that were popular hangouts, especially for young people and which were thus ideal for putting up posters or handing out flyers. According to Vicky, in Exarcheia, piazzas usually consisted of two to three cafeterias or bars, where young people frequented, "their average age being twenty years old maximum". *Cusco* café, *Bilias* café and *Café Poleitai* made up the piazza at the intersection of Mesologgiou and Koletti St., usually humming with activity throughout the day. In the early hours, the piazza retained a relaxed coffee shop atmosphere. The cafes turned into vibrant, busy bars in the evenings, their tables and chairs extending on the pedestrianised Mesologgiou. At the same time, coffee, tea and juice gave their way to wine, beer and *rakomelo*<sup>67</sup>. Sometimes after ten, they turned off their lights and blasted the music bringing *kefi*<sup>68</sup> to their customers.

*"In this piazza here, there is always a lot of young people. Maybe not necessarily political or politicised youth, but youth, nonetheless. Some are hipsters; some are apolitical, some are pretentious",* the latter of which Vicky defined as those who are "alternative"

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<sup>66</sup> A national football team.

<sup>67</sup> Also *racomelo*. It is a Greek mixed alcoholic drink. The word comes from *raki* (ρακή) and *meli* (μέλι), meaning 'honey' – hence the name. In Greek: *ρακόμελο*.

<sup>68</sup> Colloquialism meaning 'high spirits'. See Kirtsoglou 2004.

(*enallaktiki*) but “don’t know why”. “They are alternative in appearance (*sto phainesthai*) but not in essence (*sto einai*)”, she said with a smirk and started walking back down towards the piazza at the end of Koletti St. The two main café bars there were *Karagkiozis* and *Mavros Gatos*. “This here is another board that we use”, said Vicky gesturing at the series of posters covering the wall on our right-hand side.



**Figure 18.**

On our left-hand side was the old, traditional tavern *Dourios Ippos* (Figure 18), which Vicky had discovered back in 1987 when she first came to Athens as a student. “It is the best tavern in Exarcheia, with cheap food. In the summer it operates on the terrace, and it’s *fantastic*. Can you see how the ivy climbs?”. Vicky’s eyes were smiling as she gazed up at the front of the old building. Ivy branches were falling in front of its sign. The ivy on the terrace had utterly engulfed the railing. It spread on the walls of the adjoining buildings, giving the place an unkempt and abandoned appearance, incompatible with

its interior and the food served, which were - as I was soon to find out – as nice as Vicky described them.



Figure 19.

As we were walking down Koletti St., Vicky recalled the time when she first came to the neighbourhood. She explained that she did not enter the anarcho-autonomous milieu as a student but much later in her life. She was first introduced to the neighbourhood of Exarcheia as a member of PASP. After that, she began to deviate toward more anarchistic ideologies. PASP (Panhellenic Fighting Student Party) is a student union mainly affiliated with the social-democratic party of PASOK and has been operating in Greek Universities since 1974. Vicky pointed at the place where the PASP offices used to be. Not far from there was the self-managed squat, *Skala* (Figure 19). Vicky explained

that after the building was first squatted about ten years ago, the squatters and the owner managed to come to an agreement. The owner granted the property as a usufruct, provided that the collectives running it paid the taxes. Since its legalisation, *Skala* opens almost every night after 7 pm. It often hosts live *rempetika*, while during the day its first floor transforms into the workshop of a carpentry collective. Its members do repairs pro bono in various other autonomous spaces around Exarcheia, like *Nosotros*, which in turn cover the material expenses.

We were now standing in front of *Mavros Gatos*, one of the most popular café-bars in Exarcheia. “*The virtual boundaries of the heart of Exarcheia are here*”, said Vicky. “*At least as far as the posters are concerned. We sometimes put up posters in Solonos and beyond, but they get quickly covered by commercial ones. Commercial posters are printed in abundance. They get good funding from companies. They pay people who do this job, and so everywhere in Athens, although it is illegal, they put up posters. But in the heart of Exarcheia, political posters have the lead. In the heart of this neighbourhood, they might attempt to put up commercial posters, but locals send them away quickly. Exarcheia is an ávaton<sup>69</sup> for **their** posters*”, explained Vicky. I caught myself thinking of political posters as messengers, who were granted asylum in Exarcheia whilst remaining unprotected outside its virtual borders where their message got quickly (sup)pressed, and their voices were superseded by the ever-loud voices of consumerism.

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<sup>69</sup> An off-limits territory.



Figure 20.

We turned right towards Mpotasi St. An empty store on our right was where the publishing house *Exarcheia* (Figure 20) used to be, still retaining its sign, a few metres away from the cooperative café *Locomotiva*. *“The beautiful thing with these initiatives is that they are not just dull coffee shops. They host discussions, presentations. It’s not just about drinking cappuccino and doing kamaki<sup>70</sup>. Fermentations also take place in them (ginonte kai zimoseis). That’s why they have better prices. Their goal is not to make a profit, but simply make a living”*, commented Vicky as we walked past the bookstore-café. On Stournari St., we walked past the Gkini building of the Polytechnic. Its corner with Bouboulinas St. ignited in Vicky’s mind memories from the riots of 1995. *“These railing (Figure 21) here was where we escaped from. I was 26. Hundreds were arrested by the police that day”*. Vicky was referring to the anniversary of the Polytechnic

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<sup>70</sup> Greek slang for ‘flirting’.

Uprising on November 17, 1995, which is considered by many one of the most violent and turbulent ones in the Metapolitefsi era<sup>71</sup>.



**Figure 20.**



**Figure 22.**

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<sup>71</sup> On that day, university and high school students, along with workers of the far left and anarchist milieu had occupied the NTUA before the police entered and arrested more than 650 people.

We soon reached Tositsa (*Figure 22*), which Vicky marked as “the other virtual boundary of Exarcheia since nobody posts anything on the walls beyond it”. *“This is a drug-dealing piazza. Dealers left the [Exarcheia] Square because the residents and the solidarians have kicked them out, but now they are here. The junkies (prezakia) are ill people; they are addicted. They are the lumpen part of society. The real problem is drug dealers who get access here easily and their bosses who you won’t even see.”*

After Tositsa, the posting route continued until Kallidromiou St. and then returned to the heart of Exarcheia. We were now on Spyrou Trikoupi St., and Vicky pointed at *Oneiro* (Dream), a former hotel, occupied by migrants and asylum seekers. Vicky believed that squats located in the city’s centre allowed refugees to interact with society, form networks and not feel isolated. However: “If you think about it, they are still trapped” Vicky remarked and continued: *“They have shelter and food. But is that what being human means? They are still trapped inside the city. They have no future; they don’t know what to do with their lives or how they are going to raise their children. They are trapped souls. That’s why every day, day and night the Square fills up with young refugees and migrants getting drunk, not knowing what to do. [They are] what Baumann<sup>72</sup> talks about: wasted lives”.*

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<sup>72</sup> The latter was a reference to Zygmunt Baumann’s book of the same name. ‘Wasted lives’ are the lives of humans that are considered ‘excessive’ or ‘redundant’ and thus ‘undesirable’, a side-effect that Baumann deems inherent to the ‘order-building’ and ‘economic progress’ of modernity (2004:5). Like other interlocutors, Vicky read a great deal of, not only literature but also academic and philosophical books. She and others that I had encountered in Exarcheia, had been actively involved in the refugee squatting movement but could also critically (and passionately) engage in timely academic discussions surrounding issues of migration, citizenship, modernity and globalisation, and were very well acquainted with the writings of Baumann, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, among others. For instance, notions such as ‘vita activa’ (Arendt 2018 [1958]), ‘bare lives’ and ‘state of exception’ (Agamben 2005), constituted part of the everyday parlance of many of my interlocutors.

As we approached the Square, Vicky exclaimed in a *ta-da* kind of tone: “And here is our Square! Full of banners and refugees who are already drinking beer (it was 4pm), and who are not used to alcohol, so they will soon be getting wasted.”

We walked past the Square and were now on the quiet Tsamadou St., which was, according to Vicky a “historical street”. In the corner with Stournari St. was an old *kafeneion*<sup>73</sup>. A few metres up the road was the *Migrant Haunt (Steki Metanaston)* and at Tsamadou 10, a little park (*Figure 23*), which as Vicky informed me, used to be a hangout of drug addicts who, after buying their fix from Tositsa St. came here to ‘shoot it’. “It’s not a park of high standards, but at least now, and with the creation of the migrant centre, we don’t have to walk through needles”, commented Vicky.



**Figure 23.**

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Kafeneion’ is a word originally used in Greek to refer to all-male coffee shops and while it can still be encountered in small towns and villages, amid the dominant coffeehouse culture in big cities like Athens, the traditional kafeneion nowadays feels like a remnant of the past. For more see Papataxiarchis 1998.

We continued our walk in the parallel alleys surrounding the Square. The next alley was called Oikonomou. Vicky introduced it: “This is a street that gets burnt [frequently] (*mia odos pou kegete*)”. When the *báhala* at the Polytechnic spread closer to the heart of Exarcheia, Oikonomou St. gets blocked with barricades made up of bins and planks to stop the authorities from entering the Square and transforms into a battlefield for the so-called anarchist-police clashes.



**Figure 24.**

Right after Oikonomou St. came Themistocleous St. “This was my favourite part of the neighbourhood when I was in PASP. I liked it because it was pedestrianised; it had trees. It reminds me a bit of those 1950s neighbourhoods”, said Vicky wistfully. As we strolled through the shady Themistocleous St. (*Figure 24*), Vicky gestured right and left: “*This is*

*Ostria, where my favourite café was when I was in PASP. This is a theatre. Here we have café Intriga - one of the famous Exarcheian cafes - and this is Methonis St. Now you feel like you are in the 1960s, with all these old neoclassical buildings, the trees... You can't hear any cars, at least not until Kallidromiou St.". From Methonis St. we turned right on Emmanuel Benaki St. Vicky stopped in front of a tavern. She prompted me to take a picture of it, and I was right to sense that she had a lot to say about it:*

*"This is Barba Yiannis (Uncle Yiannis). It is the most classic eatery (fagadiko), the oldest in Exarcheia (Figure 25). I remember it since the 80s, it's here allegedly since 1915! Everyone has eaten here, every minister who has served in the past 30 years. Barba Yiannis in the 70s and 80s used to accept student coupons. I remember those coupons. And the food here was decent too (axioprepestató)!"*



Figure 25.

A few metres down on the right was Valtetsiou St., and Vicky pointed out to *Rozalia*, her favourite tavern in the 1980s. I jokingly asked if the past tense implies it was not her favourite tavern anymore. “Well now that I’m unemployed and the prices sting, I don’t come unless someone treats me to dinner (*na mou kanei to trapezi*)” she said laughingly. “It’s become more lavish now (*kirile*). It used to be like a tavern out of a Hadjihristos<sup>74</sup> movie, and it used to be the only one here. Now its design is modern”.

With each restaurant name came a little piece of information. I learned how *Rififi* was owned by “*a comrade (sintrofos), who when he had a lot of food left he used to give it to Nosotros for free, and we used to sell each meal for 1.50, 2 euros each. Whoever didn’t have any money at all could eat for free*”.

Our walk around the posterscapes (and the tavern-scapes) in the heart of Exarcheia was nearly done. It was getting late and Vicky had a job to attend to. We decided to conclude our walk at Navarinou Park. On the way there, I recall Vicky walking ahead of me. I could not see her face, but the tone of her voice made me think that a bittersweet smile must have appeared on it when she said gently:

*“I like Exarcheia, Maria. I like this neighbourhood because it is depressing. It’s like a cave - not much light gets it. I can’t describe Exarcheia with a few words, but I can tell you that they remind me of my youth that’s getting lost, which is depressing. Exarcheia for me is a place of freedom, where you can express yourself politically and socially however you want. Not if you are a fascist though. For me, Exarcheia is a space of art and culture. Because here we still*

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<sup>74</sup> A Greek 1950s actor.

*have cultural events, exhibitions, poetry nights, theatre shows, photography, street art. It is art emerging from below - it's underground art. Exarcheia means freedom but also marginalisation. It's the freedom of the marginals, the art of the marginals. Here you can be yourself even when you don't have money, whether you are a refugee, a migrant, disabled, an addict, or a prostitute. And this is a big deal."*

She paused for a few seconds and then added: *"I was not sure what you wanted to see today, but I took you around these streets because this is where I frequent. I am really trapped inside this cave (eimai poli egklovismeni se afti ti spilia)"*.

From posterscapes to memoryscapes

My walk with Vicky opened up a route to the posterscapes of Exarcheia (Chatzidakis 2018). This time, it was not historical monuments but political posters that marked the path we would follow. Even though I tried to pay closer attention to posters by taking pictures or reading their content, Vicky, said little about them during our walk. Unlike the monuments in Katerina's walk, the posters were not static or silent. One did not have to speak of the posters, for the posters could speak for themselves (Appadurai 1986). Unlike the ambivalent agency of other objects, I argue that the political posters of Exarcheia were *faithful* mediators who did not distort nor modify the meaning they were supposed to carry (Latour 2007: 39). Hence, in this case, their "transformative potential" did not lie in their ability to create "narrative ambiguity" (Kappler 2017: 133) but in their collective ability to radically transform. This radical transformation has both

an aesthetic, tangible dimension and a conceptual one. Posters in Exarcheia were quintessential elements of its radical political topography not only because they transformed the visible, built environment but because they had the potential to also (radically) transform *the mind* of passersby. Although their presence on the walls was short-lived, the aim of political posters was not to simply catch the eye in the fleeting way advertising posters do. Political posters in Exarcheia sometimes featured long texts whose persuasive political language was often dense and academic. Walls covered in such posters resembled books aimed at transmitting a political narrative, popularising it, and letting people become politicised by osmosis. The posters themselves acquired the role of mini manifestos, seeking to teach and sometimes even indoctrinate. For, they were not addressing consumers but political subjectivities. They did not intend to be evanescent but rather to provoke or influence the political mind, to clutch onto the memory of the onlooker, to provoke them to stop and devote time to read them.

As “complete actors” (Latour 1996: 239), the posters in our walk had acquired the role of the guide. They had become spatial markers delineating the virtual boundaries of the ‘heart of Exarcheia’ that Vicky wanted to trace. Yet what I thought was going to be a route through posterscapes had rather become *a posteroute through memoryscapes*: the socio-spatial landscape unfolding before us during the walk was animated by Vicky’s memories (cf. Butler 2006).

Vicky was from Nafplio, a seaport town in the Peloponnese, and, as mentioned, had come to Athens in the late 1980s to attend university. University life in the capital was (and still is) a dream of many students from provincial towns and villages. But apart from the fun nightlife and the ‘taste of freedom’ it granted young students, entry to

higher education was also “a unique opportunity for self-realisation and identity-shaping” (Kirtsoglou 2004: 132). Similarly, Vicky’s ‘encounter with politicisation’ (ibid.) happened through her involvement in PASP, whose offices were located in Exarcheia. This, in turn, brought her into contact with the anarchist milieu. Her encounters and social interactions in Exarcheia played a fundamental role in moulding her political ideas. As such, the neighbourhood had come to be a significant part of Athens with which she identified. Exarcheia had become the ‘cave’ in which she was ‘trapped’, albeit willingly, and from which she did not want to ‘escape’. Her words denoted attachment to Exarcheia as an “ideological place” (Possick 2004) but also as a place filled both with autobiographical (Halbwachs 1925), and socio-biographical memories (Zerubavel 2003). While both autobiographical and socio-biographical memories constitute part of an individual’s life history, I use the former to refer to those events personally experienced and which do not necessarily fall within the broader political or historical narratives, such as Vicky’s reminiscences of the time spent in Exarcheia as a student, exploring its various taverns. By the term socio-biographical memories, I refer to those recollections situated within broader political and historical events, like Vicky’s experience at the riots of 1995, or of certain individuals who frequented Exarcheia and its student-friendly taverns, but later became ministers who served rather conservative policies. These were Vicky’s personal memories, but always remained closely interwoven with collective ones (Kanellopoulou 2017).

Our walk had been less structured than that of Katerina’s in the sense that encounters with materialities were unplanned but equally ‘mindful’ (cf. Jung 2014) and meaningful, nonetheless. Vicky followed the *posteroutes*, which brought her into serendipitous, nostalgic encounters with the past. All of her memories were from her student years.

*Dourios Ippos*, the first tavern she had discovered when she first arrived in Athens; *Rozalia*, her favourite tavern in the 1980s before it became too upmarket and expensive, the picturesque Methonis St., the PASP offices and the black railing of the Polytechnic at Bouboulinas St., all invoked a kind of nostalgia that was “not only [the] expression of [her] inner world, but also the mark of the energy discharged” by the materiality of Exarcheia (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 4). Exarcheia for Vicky symbolised the unrelenting passage of time and, therefore, her ‘youth’ that was ‘getting lost’. In that sense, her love for Exarcheia was not merely about attachment to a place, but attachment to and *saudade* for a specific time *in* that place that she could not relive but which she could mentally still visit. Her nostalgia here is therefore understood not in the English sense of the word, which “implies trivialising romantic sentimentality”, but a nostalgia that adheres to the original etymological connotation of the Greek verb *nostalgho*<sup>75</sup>, which speaks of one’s “desire with burning pain to journey” (Seremetakis 1996: 4); an “affective state of longing” (Kirtsoglou 2021). Walking around its busy streets and quiet alleys made Vicky melancholic, but she did not want to walk away. She instead chose to embrace the depressing affect of the materiality around her. And while her ‘youth was getting lost’, for her, Exarcheia as a space of art, culture and freedom of expression still maintained the youthful vibrancy and vigour that had first attracted her as a student.

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<sup>75</sup> In Greek: *νοσταλγώ*.

## PART III

### Leonidas' walk

I met Leonidas on a winter evening in 2016 at Nosotros. He was a 37-year-old former bouzouki player and lived in Kipseli with his elderly father. Leonidas had been frequenting Exarcheia since he was a child. Before the financial crisis hit Greece in 2008, he had for years performed in several taverns in Exarcheia and other central Athenian districts. Because of his reputation as a bouzouki musician in the area, most people still knew and referred to him as 'Leo the bouzouktzis'. Lest his musical instrument made him identifiable, I suggested changing it in my notes to ensure his complete anonymity. My suggestion was met by Leonidas' adamant objection on the grounds that 'the instrument is sacred and should remain as it is'.

Despite being unable to earn money doing the only thing he loved, Leonidas categorically refused to tie himself down to any other regular form of employment. He would only sporadically help his brother, who owned a small hardware store on Ippokratous St. The money he earned from that, coupled with unemployment benefits and his father's pension, was enough to get them by and help sustain his 1990s Honda motorbike, which was, as he often put it, his 'pride and joy'.

Leonidas had a calm and confident demeanour. I always found it curious how he was Athenian yet spoke like a Pireotis until I found out much later that he had attended school in Piraeus, where his mother had worked as a teacher. Like many of my

interlocutors, he had a broad knowledge of various topics and was an eloquent passionate discussant. Interviews with him often took a philosophical turn, for he was an ardent reader of philosophy. But unlike most of my discussants in Exarcheia, who seemed to be primarily interested in post-modern philosophers, Leonidas' philosophical references and allusions rested in Greek antiquity. He had also half-jokingly insisted that I state in my thesis that he self-identifies as an Epicurean – after the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus.

Following a restless youth and a decades-long involvement in autonomous spaces in Exarcheia, Leonidas now seemed disenchanted with the changes in the neighbourhood and abstained from the anarchist milieu. In line with the teachings of his favourite philosopher, he pursued a 'tranquil, simple life'. After accepting the inevitability of keeping our conversations on a single tangent, Leonidas gifted me a small black notebook to start listing and keeping track of all his parenthetical points in our discussions so we can eventually return to them. He acquired the role of a mentor and became a point of reference for most of my fieldwork, as he was well-known in Exarcheia and always well informed about the neighbourhood's affairs.

I interviewed Leonidas several times throughout my time in Athens. I think I lost count of the number of times he told me he was 'sick of Exarcheia' - a statement that I nonetheless found difficult to believe, mainly for two reasons. First, despite his repeated insistence on the need to 'finally get out of this place and go to another neighbourhood', he always asked me to meet him at *Mouria*, his *steki* (haunt). My second reason of disbelief pertained to the kind of Exarcheia he introduced me to during our walking ethnography: an Exarcheia that he loved, perhaps as much as he hated.

Leonidas asked me to meet him for our walk at the junction of Mesologgiou and Tzavella St. in the heart of the neighbourhood. I already knew the significance of that location. It was the place where fifteen-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos was fatally shot by the policeman Epaminondas Korkoneas on the December 6, 2008<sup>76</sup>. “He was standing right here”, said Leonidas pointing to one of the cement balls that line up the pedestrian Tzavella St. “The bullet came directly from here. Right here, a straight line, and got him right in the heart”, Leonidas explained as he indicated with his index the direction of the bullet. “Korkoneas is in jail”<sup>77</sup>, Leonidas said and he remarked: *“but his accomplice, Saraliotis is out. Even his lawyer stopped defending him when he said he would not apologise to a fifteen-year old!”*.

Like most walls in Exarcheia, the walls of Tzavella St. have not been exempted from graffiti, posters and the ‘audacious’ creativity of street artists. Around us, the cafes were humming. A few metres away was Alexis’ memorial, and right behind it on the wall, at the intersection of Tzavella and Mesologgiou St., two black plaques hung over colourful graffiti slogans. On the left, an innocent-looking Alexis in a black t-shirt was looking back at us. Next to his photo, an inscription in Greek letters read: *“Here on December 6, 2008, with no reason, the innocent smile of Alexandros Grigoropoulos was erased by the bullets of his remorseless murderers”*.

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<sup>76</sup> The murder of Alexis and the political, social and emotional gravity of its aftermath have been extensively discussed by a number of academics (Astrinaki 2009; Karamichas 2009; Vradis 2009; Kornetis 2010; Pourgouris 2010; Apoifis 2017).

<sup>77</sup> None of us could have imagined then, that an unrepentant Korkoneas serving a life sentence, would be discharged a couple of years later, ironically enough, on the basis of a newly introduced SYRIZA government bill that allowed prisoners to seek release after serving one-third of their sentence.

The plaque on the right framed the photograph of Berkin Elvan, another 15-year-old whose life was also cut short by a policeman during the Gezi protests in Turkey in 2014. Elvan was out buying bread when he was hit by a tear-gas canister fired by a policeman in Istanbul. Just like Grigoropoulos' death, the death of Elvan had fuelled anarchist sentiments and a series of protests around the world. Captured during a demonstration, the photograph showed Elvan wearing a red scarf, his arms raised and his hands gesturing the peace symbol. A small text accompanied it:

“During the June Uprising in Istanbul, at Taksim Gezi Park, fourteen-year-old Kurdish boy Berkin Elvan was seriously wounded by police [...]. He received a head injury from a tear gas canister and was in a coma for 269 days. Every day there were actions to announce his situation to the world. When he died, three million people took part in his funeral. [...] Alex and Berkin are symbols of the struggle. Their memory lives on in our struggle!”

As I read the plaque out loud, Leonidas interrupted me, pointed at something I had never noticed before and said:

*“When riots of December 2008 began, Subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatistas of Mexico sent this as a gift to honour the memory of Alexis and to display his solidarity towards Greeks. He refers to himself as ‘Subcomandante’ as a mark of respect for the Commandante, who is, of course, no other than Ernesto Che Guevara. There is a video on YouTube where he addresses the events in Greece and opens his speech in Greek saying ‘Thank you, Greece, for what you are doing, for what you are’. That was an important*

*event. The echo of December was so big and has a history. December affected, ignited, inspired, created. Come and see what [the poster] says.”*



**Figure 26.**

The gift (*Figure 26*) was a poster encased in a wooden frame and depicted the people of a small town or village on a sunny day going about their daily business in what looked like a busy, vibrant square. Blue and white predominated, as the sunlight had caused the original colours of the paintings to fade. I moved closer to read the small caption on the left bottom corner:

*“For the dignified, outraged youth of Greece. With respect and admiration.”*

“It’s San Cristóbal de las Casas, one of the seven towns of Chiapas” explained Leonidas.

The aftermath of December was a “hugely emotive catalyst” (Apoifis 2017: 103), and the emotions it elicited were captured and remained forever enclosed in the materiality of the urban environment within and beyond Exarcheia (Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011; Dalakoglou and Aggelopoulos 2017; Chatzidakis 2017). ‘December’ soon became self-contained; it did not need any specifications, nor did it require any introductions or explanations - it was simply referred to as ‘the December’ (*o Dekemvris*). But as the rioters themselves enigmatically put it, ‘December was not the answer, it was the question’ directed at the more profound socio-cultural crisis that already existed and which revealed struggles and contradictions that injected the movement with newly-found confidence (Vradis and Dalakoglou 2010; Chatzidakis 2013) and creativity (Spyropoulos 2013; Chatzidakis 2018) that were now taking form and colour on the walls around us. If political posters and graffiti in Exarcheia were omnipresent before, after December, they multiplied.

However, as we had just seen, the built environment of Exarcheia was not solely marked by an aesthetic of crisis and discontent. Instead, the latter presented themselves alongside materialities of solidarity and resistance. For instance, the connection between Exarcheia and the Zapatistas stretched beyond the corner of Tzavella-Mesologgiou. In the context of solidarity politics, objects reconfigured themselves as “fighting commodities” in the struggle of subverting dominant neoliberal structures of consumption and production (Chatzidakis 2018). Exarcheia started trading directly with the Zapatistas as their coffee was introduced into local collectives (Chatzidakis 2018; Hoelscher and Chatzidakis 2020).

At the intersection of Navarinou St., Zoodochou Pigis St. and Charilaou Trikoupi St., not far from where Korkoneas had fired his gun, Leonidas stopped again. *“This is something worth telling you. Before people and collectives occupied it in 2008, this park that you see here wasn’t a park. In fact, it didn’t have a single tree”*, he said and prompted me to follow him inside this patch of shadowy greenness, which felt like an oasis amidst the concrete Athenian desert.

The Navarinou Park was exemplary of what Chatzidakis (2018) calls the politics of “here-and-now” that proliferated after December 2008. Navarinou was an initiative put forward by the Exarcheia Residents Committee in March 2009. After rejecting the original construction plans of turning what was a parking lot into a building, they decided to transform it themselves into a park. The lot was squatted; its asphalt was drilled out and the space was planted. Even though this was a relatively minor act of urban reclamation, it was yet another subversion materialised, whose potential to “evolve into a much broader escalation by some of the most progressive and militant elements of society” directly threatened the already precarious position of the Greek government and “fundamentally challeng[ed] [...] dominant modes of legality and the state” (Vradis & Dalakoglou 2010: 85-87).



Figure 27.

“This too is part of the echo of December”, added Leonidas, meaning that the creation of Navarinou Park, just like the gift from the Zapatistas denoted the potency of December 2008. We sat briefly on a bench, and I began to study my surroundings. The trees around us had been brought to life through the collective effort of hundreds of people who had spent days and nights transforming cement into earth. A big, impressive mural (*Figure 27*) stretched out on the wall of the building on our right-hand side. I did not fail to notice its aesthetic and semantic congruence with the rest of the park. The mural depicted a grey city, not unlike the one we happened to live in, in the centre of which little green humans on the ground were sprouting seeds, stretching out to become the green stems of blazing, dandelion-like suns. The metamorphosis of the green human seeds symbolised the transformative potential of humankind even in the most adverse of circumstances. The painting signified and completed an aesthetics of defiance and –

perhaps not unintentionally – seemed to be a continuation of the park’s trees. Underneath the mural, a sentence summed up the message: *“You did everything to bury me, but you forgot I was a seed”*.

*“There had been moments when drug mafias tried to establish a dealing piazza here. People fought to keep them out and to keep this place healthy”*, said Leonidas as we were leaving the park. We were now walking on Charilaou Trikoupi St., which according to Leonidas, marked the neighbourhood's boundaries since “beyond it, there is Neapoli Exarcheion, and after that Kolonaki”<sup>78</sup>. I pointed to three policemen standing across the street at the intersection of Ch. Trikoupi with Diodotou St. “Don’t you feel safe now?” Leonidas asked bursting into sarcastic laughter. Like most people I conversed with in Exarcheia, he too knew that the presence of the police at various locations around the neighbourhood was not to protect Exarcheia but to protect *from* Exarcheia. Hence, it was no coincidence that these locations were always found along the ‘boundaries’ of Exarcheia with its neighbouring districts, performing the border as a kind of informal “human checkpoint” (Vradis 2012:166) in an ongoing process of subjectivisation (cf. Demetriou 2007) that separated ‘good’ from ‘dangerous’ citizens<sup>79</sup>.

We continued up towards Kallidromiou. Right and left unravelled the usual patterns of the Athenian urban landscape. We were pacing through it, leaving behind us a series of

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<sup>78</sup> While Leonidas seemed to contradict himself (how can something be ‘another part of Exarcheia’ but also mark its limits?), he did, in fact, reiterate the ambiguity surrounding the demarcations of Neapolis (and by consequence Exarcheia), which either appears as a separate district, sometimes hyphenated with Exarcheia (Exarcheia-Neapoli) and sometimes as part of Exarcheia (Neapoli Exarcheion, meaning ‘Neapoli of Exarcheia’). While their boundaries fluctuate, it can be argued that although initially an extension of Exarcheia, Neapolis (literally ‘New Town’) came to be perceived by Athenians as a distinct district. The separate historical and socio-political trajectories the two areas took crystallised into a shared narrative that is aptly captured in Kairofylos’ 1995 book titled *‘The beautiful Neapolis and the misunderstood Exarcheia (Η ωραία Νεάπολις και τα παρεξηγημένα Εξάρχεια)’*.

<sup>79</sup> I discuss this further in Chapter 6.

apartment buildings whose ground floor housed a number of different shops: a bakery, a car service, a plumbing shop, a clothes store. Underneath the balconies, droplets from overworked air conditioner condensers were slowly forming little puddles of water on the cracked pavement. A police van was parked in front of the *PASOK* offices across the street, and behind its caged windows, I could discern two seated police officers chatting. A bit further down, someone was leaving *Asimakopoulos Bakery* with a bag of baked goods. The door opened, and suddenly, a sweet, yeasty aroma flooded the street. *“Asimakopoulos is one of the oldest bakeries in Athens, founded in 1915 on Ch. Trikoupi, in the exact same place it is found today”,* commented Leonidas and continued: *“Now, with the recession, thousands of stores have shut down. **Thousands.** It didn’t use to be like this here. It was full of shops. Now it’s daytime, and everything seems open to you. But if you were to come at night, you would see. I’m talking about the nightlife, the bars, the cafes. Only 1% of that is left.”.*

I tried to imagine what life in Athens looked like before 2008, at a time when I was still a high school student in Cyprus and had, therefore, no clear recollection of it. Listening to Leonidas’ nostalgic reminiscences of his bouzouki days in a once vibrant Athens, I began to notice even more the imprint of the financial crisis on the materiality of Exarcheia. Bars that must have been once busy with customers now stood desolate, transforming parts of streets into exhibitions of empty shopfronts. During the day, everything indeed looked busy, deceiving passersby. But as Leonidas pointed out, the traces of the crisis revealed themselves during the night, taking the shape of the silence and emptiness of bars that were now permanently shut. Another, less visible impact of the financial crisis on the Greek urban landscape, was the increased number of vacant apartments as many young people returned to their parental homes, while vulnerable groups such as the

unemployed and immigrants ended up homeless. These spatial changes and urban desertification poignantly reflected Greece's socio-economic hardships paved the ground for gentrification and the advent of the now controversial Airbnb that made its debut in the Athenian centre not long after the onset of the financial crisis<sup>80</sup>.

When we arrived at Leonidas' favourite coffee shop, *Mouria* he explained to me: "*A lot of people come here. All sorts: ordinary people, old people, artists, actors, directors, musicians, intellectuals, and leftists. Mouria first opened for business in 1915. It was built on this spot after a rock rolled down from Lycabettus and landed right here, where a shack used to be*". Its name, 'Mouria', meaning 'berry tree', came from the berry trees that surrounded it and which, according to Leonidas, used to be *even* more abundant in the area<sup>81</sup>.



Figure 28.

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<sup>80</sup> See Chapter 7.

<sup>81</sup> The berry tree is arguably the most frequently encountered tree in Athens today, lining up many of its roads.

When we turned left on Kallidromiou St., Leonidas asked me if I knew Nicholas Asimos. I responded in the affirmative and asked why he was asking. “I’ll take you to where he lived and hanged himself”, he explained, and a few metres down, on our left-hand side, he pointed at the wooden cream door of a ground-floor apartment. Nicholas Asimos was a composer and a singer who became an emblematic figure of the counter-culture of Exarcheia and was known for his restless, anti-conformist and provocative temperament. He wrote songs and poems whose “angry and humane lyrics” (Christakis 2009: 13) attacked state oppression and hypocrisy and sang many impromptu ones in the streets and in the Square of Exarcheia, where he spent most of his time. The house Leonidas was pointing at had been Asimos’ store or “preparation space” (*chóros proetimasias* - *Figure 28*), as the artist himself called it. A rape accusation by an ex-girlfriend, his forcible committal to a mental institution and a deteriorating psychological state are often cited as the reasons why in 1987, in this tiny apartment in Kallidromiou 55, Asimos decided to end his life.

Kallidromiou and its surrounding streets are arguably the most residential area of Exarcheia. Being further from the turbulence of its centre, it is also –with notable exceptions (cf. Vradis 2012)- the most tranquil. The weekly open-air market (*laiki*) of Exarcheia takes place here every Saturday. The cars parked on its sides (*Figure 29*), give way to stalls of fruit, vegetables, meat and nuts, sheltered underneath orange tents, which from a distance appear as two rows of orange umbrellas lined up between the berry trees (*Figure 30*).



**Figure 29.**



**Figure 30.**

The *laikí* made the street feel wider, but that day, the cars parked on either side of the road induced claustrophobic anxiety in any driver trying to squeeze through. Kallidromiou was full of neoclassical buildings betraying the effort to instil the spirit of Greek antiquity into modern-day Athens (cf. Panourgia 2004). Leonidas and I took a short break at *Bourbon*, a café which according to him, is the haunt of “various people of the arts” (*diaforon anthropon tis tehnis*).

During the second part of our walk, Leonidas took me to the corner of Stournari with the pedestrianised Tsamadou, to show me the *Kafeneion*, which like *Karagkiozis*, *Mouria* and other coffee shops in Exarcheia retained the style of the traditional (once all-male) *kafeneia* (cf. Papataxiarhis 1998) but were now frequented by everyone. Although privately owned, the *Kafeneio* constituted a pole of attraction for anarchists and leftists. “We have done time *there*” said Leonidas jokingly to emphasise how much time he and others used to spend discussing and exchanging ideas in this particular coffee shop.

Next, Leonidas took me at the intersection of Stournari and Mpotasi St. where 15-year-old Michalis Kaltezas was shot dead by a policeman during a demonstration in 1985. In the corner, a memorial plaque erected in 2005 to honour him read:

*Not a single drop has been shed in vain.*

*The flower of our youth was watered.*

*Our stone breath was painted with silence and screaming.*

We turned back and walked parallel to the Square on Arachovis St. On my left-hand side, on the corner with Emmanuel Benaki St., was the 5th Lyceum of Athens. Enclosed within graffiti-infested walls and hidden behind tall trees, the building perfectly blends within its surroundings. Across the street, Leonidas stood in front of an abandoned neoclassical house (*Figure 32*) that was going to be our final stop. Its rusty door was locked and its wooden, discoloured blinds were shut. Only its exterior was alive, covered in a collage of graffiti and posters. Its left wall was adorned by a mural frequently encountered in travel blogs on Exarcheia: a man in a hood looking in awe outside the building's window (*Figure 31*).



Figure 31.



Figure 32.

*“This used to be the Dada bar. It was goth, a bit dark, with dark music, mirrors, candleholders. That sort of thing. It was here for years. It wasn’t like that. It used to be vibrant. Like a beehive”,* said Leonidas and the tone of nostalgia in his voice was hard to miss. *“There is nothing else”,* he finally proclaimed. *“This is it! Exarcheia is nothing more and nothing less than what you’ve just seen”.* “So then take me to your favourite place, if you have one”, I suggested, not really wanting our walk to end just yet. *“My favourite part of Exarcheia is its streets. These streets are my love!”* he said, and a dimple marked his cheek.

Oscillating between enchantment and disenchantment

When he was a young man in his 20s, Leonidas had participated with zest in numerous self-managed initiatives in Exarcheia. Although he never self-identified as an anarchist, his ardent involvement within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu (or as it is locally called *chóros* – literally ‘space’) was known and admired by many. However, the Leonidas I got to know through numerous interviews, and long impromptu conversations consistently gave me the impression that he was now disheartened. At the end of our walk, he expressed his belief that Exarcheia was “not the place the majority of people thought it was”. “It was a place with a sense of freedom” he remarked, “but nowadays, most people see it as a platform for ‘exercising rebellion’ (*epanastatiki gymnastiki*)”. According to him, Exarcheia appealed to the youngsters for the wrong reason, which he defined as their false conflation of *eleftheria* (freedom) and *eleftheriotita* (liberty). According to Leonidas, “freedom presupposes values one lives

by, such as the refusal to dominate, or let others dominate you” (*na min eksousiazoz kai na min eksousiazome*). He regarded liberty –*eleftheriotita*– as a kind of *counterfeit freedom*, void of morals and ideals. “People think that freedom means to do as one pleases”, he said, and alluding to the frequent clashes with the police, he continued emphatically: “Is freedom about smashing everything around me?”.

With words echoing but simultaneously contradicting the frequent comparison of Exarcheia to the small Gaelic village of Asterix (Cappuccini 2018; Koutsoumpos 2019), Leonidas often cynically commented on how people “*think Exarcheia is the Gaul village of revolution*” and continued: “*But of course, popular imagination runs wild! Others believe that solidarity and mutuality have been established here. That’s also a myth. Millions of people have passed through Exarcheia. If those millions of people had actually stayed, then we would have had a revolution. It is true that there are structures of solidarity, and there have been important solidarity initiatives for migrants and refugees. There is solidarity in Exarcheia, but up to a point. This never managed to create a massive movement. Transcendence never happened (pote den egine i ypervasi)*”.

Leonidas’ feelings oscillated between enchantment and disenchantment, for the Exarcheia he described above were sometimes different from the *Exarcheia-in-the-mind performed* and actualised in space during our walk (cf. Benson & Jackson 2012: 800). On the one hand, an Exarcheia emerged as a metonym for the disappointment and futility any involvement in the anarchist movement made him feel today. His attachment to the place had come through an ideology that he felt the neighbourhood did not represent anymore.

On the other hand, Exarcheia was a landscape of artefacts, where objects and locations, such as the memorials at Mesologgiou St., the Zapatistas poster, the Navarinou park were faithful testaments to the powerful, lived experiences of resistance and solidarity whose permanence challenged Leonidas' shifting sentiments about a neighbourhood that had once inspired him.

At our meeting point at the intersection of Tzavella and Mesologgiou St., Leonidas chose to stay longer, prompting me not only to look but "see and understand". The little corner was not dense merely in terms of the number of graffiti and posters that adorned its walls but was also symbolically and historically dense. Its materiality was inundated with meaning, spanning "across spatial and temporal boundaries through a shared iconography" of protest (Tulke 2020: 125), but also of pain and grief and at the same time of solidarity and hope. That corner was a capsule that both travelled in and defied time. Hanging side by side, the memorial plaques of a Greek and a Kurdish boy whose deaths had uncanny similarities, created a mutually affirming narrative of discontent and resistance that transgressed naturalised nationalist narratives of difference.

As Leonidas introduced me to spaces and corners, such as Nicholas Asimos' house, Kaltezas' memorial, and the dark neoclassical house where the beloved *Dada* bar once used to be, our seemingly aimless wander had inspired the sharing not of memories but of knowledge, anecdotes and opinions that animated conspicuous and inconspicuous materialities, visible and invisible spaces.

Although never taciturn and always opinionated, Leonidas somehow never said much about himself. His account was less autobiographical, and he was more interested in giving me factual knowledge about the sites he considered important. When I commented on it, he jokingly admitted that “there is no better way to hide yourself than to talk about yourself”. As such, I knew from the beginning of our walk that ‘the personal’ would be furtive, left for me to unpick. If ‘the personal’ accounts for sharing one’s *own* life history, then Leonidas’ walk was not an embodied narrative of his own life history *per se*, but that of the history of the objects and spaces we were encountering. Segments of his own life history, however, kept emerging indirectly, in a space where his memories and emotions “were stored in specific everyday items [and locations] that form[ed] the historicity of a culture”; “items [and locations] that create[d] and sustain[ed] [his] relationship to the historical as a sensory dimension” (Seremetakis 1994: 3).

#### PART IV: CONCLUSION

Walking as the encounter itself

Embracing ethnography as *movement* and using walking both as an introspective and a discursive tool (Wunderlich 2008), the objective of this chapter has been to bring together meanings and (im)materialities previously invisible, hidden or unknown and

ultimately to map out *affective geographies* (Navaro-Yashin 2009) on the urban landscape of Exarcheia. Walking alone as a doubly exploratory act of inspection-introspection was certainly illuminating but walking in the company of others was potent in the way it invited walking companions to inhabit the same reality, albeit momentarily.

When I asked Katerina, Vicky and Leonidas to take me for a walk, I did not express a preference as to where I wanted to go or what I wanted to see. I refrained from telling them where other people had taken me before to avoid influencing their decision. I wanted the walk to be 'open to interpretation'. However, I am now certain that even if their itineraries had been identical, their walking narratives would have still been distinctly different. For, one can never walk through the same place twice, let alone when one shares that walkscape with others (Wunderlich 2008; Careri 2018). This is not only because time and space are "experientially indistinguishable" (Christou-Kent 2016: 14) but also because space is imbued with subjective and intersubjective meanings (Duranti 2010). This is because people don't only go through and discover places – they also *come* from places (Casey 1996; Kanellopoulou 2017), carrying their own world views, emotional predispositions, preconceptions, fears, desires and experiences, which interact dynamically with time and the inherent, physical characteristics of a place. Therefore even when faced with the same artefacts, walls and corners and even when walking on the same street, the narratives that emerged could have never been identical.

When I use the term 'narrative', I do not refer to a series of linked events cohesively recounted during our walks. My interlocutors' accounts were formed – literally - 'on

foot', and the only structure they acquired was the one given to them by the route itself. The events, memories and stories recalled did not have a chronological order, nor were they always connected. My interlocutors' narratives were somewhat *fragmented*. They surfaced *through* and *due to* the materialities encountered *en route*, with which they interacted affectively, and which rekindled collective and individual memories.

I think of my walking ethnographies as photographs and my walking companions as photographers. Their mind is the camera. Each walk formed a different mental picture. The 'focal length' of my flâneurs shifted, giving rise to diverse emotive and material landscapes. For instance, Katerina had adjusted her focus on historical memorials, while for Vicky, the memorials were omitted from the frame. Vicky had focused on the youth piazza of Mesologgiou, leaving the memorial of Alexis in the 'background', while Leonidas brought the latter to the forefront. Some artefacts remained quiet and blurred in the backdrop of the picture, while others were sharpened, their colours intensified, making them visible and loud, inviting their affective energy upon us. In Katerina's walk, the busts had a lot to say; in Vicky's, the murmur of the posters took over. The railing of the Polytechnic on the side of Bouboulinas' St. was mute before my walk with Vicky, but now, every time I walk past it, it reminds me that this is where the rioters escaped the arrests of November 1995. In Leonidas' walk, the Zapatistas poster and the workshop of Nicholas Asimos became conspicuous, while the corner of Arachovis and Tsamadou St. was not just a corner anymore, but the place where a man's life was cut short.

At the same time, affect was never fixed within the physical elements of Exarcheia but was *relationally* shaped, through the positionality, taste and experiential knowledge of the individual perceiving it. The taverns on Tsamadou and Benaki had for Vicky a

nostalgic affect, bringing back memories of her student years, while Leonidas regarded them as uninteresting parts which were therefore omitted from his walking narrative. Some graffiti were visually displeasing to me, but their affect was not unpleasant for interlocutors like Marios or Themis who had expressed their love for the 'filthy dystopia' this art form created, rejecting as such conventional ideas of aestheticism. The plaques and the busts were mundane to some, but for Katerina who knew their history well, their *semantic fields* were alive and filled with affective energy that elicited within her sadness, anger and pride for times she had not herself experienced.

Although affective energy was not static, I argue that walking together with participants and "trading places" (Husserl 1989) enabled the acknowledgement or even, at times, the vicarious, empathetic experience of that affect. This is because affect was not a private or an exclusive emotion. It was a sensual intensity that moved through us and the urban environment around us, allowing for the formation not simply of *intersubjective realities* – for this was as much about us as it was beyond us – but of powerful *affective realities*. Although fragmented, my interlocutors' 'walking' narratives, seen as the mapping of affective geographies, afforded me a "plural and multi-layered impression" of Exarcheia (Butler 2007: 369) that went beyond dichotomous debates of demonisation versus romanticisation. I began my walking ethnographies thinking that the walk was the *means* to encounter these multiple layers of meanings and affectivities. Yet, I soon realised that the walk was, in fact, the encounter itself.

Amidst the serendipitous encounter with multiple intersubjective realities, emotions and dimensions of Exarcheia, a golden thread emerged through my walking companions' deeply affective narrations. I argue that this thread comprises three

interlinked elements: chronotopes, spectres and archives. The first refers to Exarcheia's unique spatio-temporal qualities identified in how an encounter with its affective geographies can swiftly render time and space irrelevant. As I argue in the following section, a temporal and geographical disobedience is evident in all the material presences and absences that constitute Exarcheia.

Affective chronotopes, spectres of history and cryptocolonialism

“The sound of absent voices, the sight of that which somehow remains unseen – the past speaking to us through the architecture.....And the future too. In other words, we are in the presence of a *not*. Better to call that *not* by its more familiar name – a ghost.” (Degen & Hetherington 2002: 1 original emphasis)

I have discussed in my literature review how historical contingencies made Exarcheia the background setting upon which both oppression and resistance played out. The onset of the Civil War saw the area around the Polytechnic and Exarcheia transforming into an arena for one of the fiercest and bloodiest battles to occur since the establishment of the Greek state. The dark years of the dictatorship turned buildings in Exarcheia into prisons where the EAT-ESA tortured political dissidents, and anyone associated with them. At the same time, the quest for freedom manifested itself in the banners and fervent chants of the exasperated youth who flooded the streets and took

over the Polytechnic in a massive demonstration that signaled the end of seven years of dictatorial military rule.

At the same time, these political and historical happenstances moulded a place whose urban artefacts and spaces were anything *but* contingent. Through my use of discursive walking, in this first ethnographic chapter, I have endeavoured to place the neighbourhood at the fore of my analysis as the ‘real object’ of study, where I hope it will remain for the remainder of this thesis. To borrow an apt quote from Napolitano’s analysis of Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, the discursive walks with participants allowed me to intersubjectively “sense the lingering qualities of materialities ‘looking back at us’ with affective forces of histories” (2015: 61). As we paced through its urban landscape, it became apparent that Exarcheia was neither the background setting nor the arena of these lingering histories that had now slipped out of inconspicuousness. Exarcheia was instead the affective geography they had come to constitute (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009).

While surveying a map of Exarcheia, a historically informed eye might notice that the majority of street names in the neighbourhood pay homage to heroes and events of the 1821 War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire (Bouboulinas, Mavromichali, Koletti, Mesologgiou, Navarinou, Zaloggou, Koletti etc.) and the era of Greek Enlightenment (Benakis, Didotos, Arachova etc.). Most of these names have been granted sometime between the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as is the case with most central avenues and streets in the heart of Athens that are named after historical moments and figures that resonate with Greece’s official national narrative (i.e. 1821 Revolution, Greek antiquity).

To argue that street names become “memory aids” or “memorial arenas” (Alderman 2002) is perhaps not noteworthy in itself but can acquire renewed gravity when we think of streets or locations that preserve in their names the memories of painful, controversial histories. In Exarcheia, this is exemplified through the case of Tzavella Street, which, although officially named after the 1821 revolutionary Kitsos Tzavellas, it was unofficially renamed ‘Alexandros Grigoropoulos Street’ shortly after the latter’s death. Although the name change has not been formally recognised and is invisible on maps, the new plate can be found right underneath that of ‘Tzavella’, and its poignancy is not located only in the memory it invokes but also in the fact that the street is the exact location on which Alexis was shot, collapsed and ultimately lost his life.

With the exception of Alexandros Grigoropoulos St., Exarcheia’s street names do not in themselves indicate the rich and turbulent history of the neighbourhood or its unique political character. But moving from the map to a corporeal encounter with Exarcheia through walking, *other* names might give the urban wanderer an initial idea of the neighbourhood’s idiosyncrasy. Café and bar names such as ‘Underground’, ‘Revolt’, ‘Kubrick’, ‘Dada’ signify Exarcheia’s countercultural ethos. At the same time, *Nosotros* reflects the neighbourhood’s political affiliations, while cafe *Chimio* on Solonos St. pays tribute to the 1985 student occupations of the Chemistry School (located on the same street) that took place in response to the police ‘Virtue Operations’ and the killing of Michalis Kaltezas.

As my ethnographic walks made evident, conspicuous and inconspicuous artefacts in Exarcheia memorialise WWII, the Civil War, the Polytechnic Uprising, the death of

Kaltezas and that of Grigoropoulos. Many other elements of the neighbourhood's materiality speak of histories of oppressed Others well beyond the borders of Greece. Exarcheia's geographical, historical and political disobedience is expressed through a display of cross-national connectivity and solidarity. This is first evidenced in the way the memorials of Grigoropoulos, and Elvan are placed side by side with the Zapatista painting hanging up on the wall next to them – an arrangement that consciously interlinks them as artefacts of the same memorial arena. Their geographically disparate origins are rendered irrelevant, and their distinct biographies are transformed into chapters of a singular political narrative. This same disobedience was also ubiquitous in the way posters, banners and street art in Exarcheia crossed national boundaries by calling for solidarity with political prisoners in Turkey, Kurdish freedom fighters, Palestinians, fellow Italian anarchists or French labour protesters.

I argue that the histories inscribed in the non-existent terrace on Bouboulinas St., the beheaded bust of Lela Karagianni, the Polytechnic and its bronze head memorial, the WWII and Civil War memorials, the memorials of Grigoropoulos, Kaltezas and Elvan, as well as the histories represented by the posters, murals, banners and graffiti, although having occurred at different points in time, are “recursively and retrocausally assembled and re-assembled in provisional chronotopes” (Kirtsoglou 2021: 177-178). As signposts of different historical pasts, the (non)materialities encountered were concurrently testaments to a multi-temporal, politically-loaded space (Hamilakis 2009).

In Exarcheia, exposure and denunciation of economic, political and social violence are what glues together so effortlessly these ostensibly disconnected moments of the past, transforming spaces into affective chronotopes and urban flâneurs into “nomads of

time” (Kirtsoglou 2021). Indeed, an assemblage of seemingly heterogeneous and temporally distinguishable elements forms within its virtual boundaries. Yet, I argue that here contingency has a lesser role to play in its formation (pace Deleuze & Guattari 1987). In Exarcheia, spatio-temporal knots emerge through something that I can best describe as a conceptual magnetism; a localised attraction borne out of a specific political historicity that sees the assembling, in turn, of a very particular set of political events, objects and subjectivities that in their united ecology exude a specific kind of narrative and political affect; one that speaks of the history of Athens’ urban subalterns, state violence, resistance to oppression and Greece’s cryptocolonial condition (Herzfeld 2002).

Taking cue from Michael Herzfeld’s key concept of the cryptocolony, I argue in favour of a view of Exarcheia as a political topography in which the colonial condition, with its multifarious conspicuous and furtive regulations, is incessantly and vociferously exposed and decried. Early on in his development of the idea of cryptocolonialism, Herzfeld (2002) drew a connection between the 1973 student anti-dictatorship rally at the Thammasat University in Thailand and the Polytechnic student uprising in Greece that same year, as well as the influence of the former on the latter. This connection was also clearly evidenced in one of the basic slogans of the Polytechnic uprising – *“Tonight we will become Thailand” (Απόψε θα γίνει της Ταϊλάνδης<sup>82</sup>)*- and a banner held up featuring the word ‘Thailand’, a peace sign and a swastika suspended from the gallows. Herzfeld perceives the two uprisings as mobilisations against the cryptocolonial status of Greece and Thailand, respectively; a status defined as their economic and cultural dependency on the West.

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<sup>82</sup> In Greek: ‘Απόψε θα γίνει της Ταϊλάνδης’.

Reading my walking encounters in Exarcheia through a cryptocolonial lens, I saw the neighbourhood unravelling before me as a topography whose anti-colonial articulations are both discursive, spatial and material, aiming to tackle cryptocolonial apparatuses, namely mainstream culture and mass media, capitalism and an “aggressive national culture tailored to suit foreign models” (Herzfeld 2002). Leaving the latter for Chapter 7, I will presently focus on those anti-colonial expressions that made themselves evident during my ethnographic walks. For instance, solidarity initiatives in Exarcheia such as *Steki Metanaston* and Navarinou Park challenged top-down, hegemonic forms of organisation and responded to the failures of capitalist states. The neighbourhood’s counter-cultural, anti-consumerist ethos was manifested in the abundance of independent bookstores and publishing houses such as *Bibliotheque* and *Exarcheia* that were not hawking best-sellers or pursuing popularity or expansion. Everywhere I turned, posters on the walls promoted music events, theatre shows, book and anthology discussions or film screenings that articulated the neighbourhood’s rejection of elements of mainstream culture such as pop music or profit-oriented Hollywood movies (colloquially mocked as *amerikanies*). I argue that this rejection stemmed from an understanding of those imported elements as a facet of cultural imperialism and thus an iteration of Greece’s cryptocolonial condition today.

Street art played its own role in exposing and decrying elements of cryptocolonialism. A most indicative example is a mural I came across one day on Zoodochou Pigis St. The mural had appeared around 2015, the time of Greece’s third Eurozone bailout, and was accompanied by the widespread – at the time – slogan “*Then with tanks now with banks*”. I see this mural as a chronotope that defied the linearity of time and space,

evidencing through art the nomadic temporality so often encountered in conversations in Greece (cf. Kirtsoglou 2021). Its allusion to the crushing of the Polytechnic gate by a tank during the 1973 Uprising revives and intimately folds the past into the present. In 1973, the phantom of cryptocolonial oppression incarnated into a tank, the military vehicle of a US-backed dictatorship that crushed the gates of the Polytechnic. More than 40 years later, the phantom was reincarnating as the EU and Greek banks that ‘crushed’ the lives and morale of many Greeks. After all, what is an encounter with chronotopes if not an encounter with ghosts - these present *nots* (Taylor 1993) that “problematise the issue of time as well as space and bring the materiality of space into play as a ‘speaking subject’” (Degen & Hetherington 2001: 1)?

But which are these Exarcheian ghosts? What are they made of? I argue that some spectres emergent during my walks were those of my interlocutors’ youth; melancholic, disenchanted apparitions of their generation’s unfulfilled legacy; apparitions of their shattered hopes and political dreams that confronted them as we paced through Exarcheia’s claustrophobic, dark streets – the ‘cave’ as Vicky put it.

Other spectres emerged in the form of poignant reminders. In the case of cryptocolonialism described above, its constant exposure and denouncement in Exarcheia cast a haunting shadow that dispelled any illusions that Greece’s subservient status vis-à-vis the interest of foreign powers had ever shifted – it had merely changed form. Additionally, we can argue that the spectrality of cryptocolonialism itself is located in the very definition of a term that refers to a state of colonialism that was never formally and officially recognised.

Spectres in Exarcheia also emerged in the form of melancholic hauntings that repetitively - if not obsessively - told passersby the uncomfortable stories of political disillusionment, gross injustice and a divided past evoking poignancy and melancholia (cf. Mookherjee 2007) and filling the aura with the leaden hue of painful remembrance. Such stories included the Civil War, the dictatorship years, the Polytechnic Uprising, the killings of Grigoropoulos, Elvan and Kaltezas and even the suicide of Nicholas Asimos – one of ‘the Three Saints of Exarcheia’ – who, after a series of agonising hospitalisations in mental institutions and a rape accusation hanged himself in his apartment in Kallidromiou St. My use of ‘spectre’, however, is not contained to a “presence that hints at past injustices and is a resistive figure” but it also wishes to denote this “play of absence in the presence of the effaced but legible trace” (Mookherjee 2015: 25; [Derrida 1976: xvii]), observed in (in)tangibilities such as the torture terrace on Bouboulinas St. on a building that no longer stands, or the beheaded bust of Lela Karagianni on Tositsa St.

To be more precise, my walking ethnographies were marked by hauntings that took the form of forgotten, silenced and untold political histories (cf. Papanikolaou 2018). The routes I followed with Katerina, Vicky and Leonidas, and those I walked by myself, were chronotopic encounters with *istories* of violence and oppression; *istories* in the Herzfeldian sense (Herzfeld 1988). That is, those painful unofficial histories that the state wishes to contain in the margins of textbooks and remembrance at best or completely efface at worst.

I argue that in Exarcheia, those histories refuse to be effaced. They are ghosts locked up in chronotopes and make their appearance through words or visualities. They remind

and haunt by inviting visitors to be “melancholically reflective” (Mookherjee 2007: 273), and they linger in spaces, materialities and subjectivities whose co-authored narratives tenaciously reiterate themselves. Through these narratives, Exarcheia’s urban landscape emerges as a palimpsest (cf. Miltiadis 2021) of contemporary and past moments that disallow modernity’s forgetfulness. It wouldn’t be an overstatement to claim that this resistance to erasure is a characteristic unique to Exarcheia that cannot be encountered anywhere else in Athens - perhaps not even in Greece.

A relay of ostensibly disconnected people and events is bound together to produce a very specific political history in an almost authoritative manner. Put differently, Exarcheian spaces and materialities don’t simply tell; they dictate. Willfully or not, the urban flâneur comes across an unbending counternarrative that leaves little room for interpretation. Walking through Exarcheia, it becomes obvious where allegiance lies (i.e. with refugees, migrants, Palestinians, political dissidents etc.) and, conversely, who the ‘enemy’ is (i.e. the nation-state, governments, the police, capitalist modes of consumption and tourist commodification.). The neighbourhood creates robust webs of meaning and enforces a univocal and unambiguous (counter)narrative of contemporary politics that expresses solidarity towards subaltern groups and marginalised Others, while opposing authoritarian institutions and mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism such as privatisation and hypercommodification.

From museum to conservatoire to an archival space

Exarcheia's tight intellectual control of the narrative it displays might tempt its comparison to a museum (cf. Boast 2011). This has already been vehemently rejected within the vernacular anti-commodification discourse that emerged in response to the various 'Exarcheia tours' offered to tourists eager to explore the neighbourhood<sup>83</sup>. With its inherent and unshakeable power asymmetries, the museum continues to be challenged despite James Clifford's best intentions to reconceptualise its institution as a "contact zone" (1997). Exarcheia is a contact zone only in as far as it enables incomers and locals' contact with its material and discursive spaces. Its space is dialogical in the way it invites affective interactions between the human and the non-human. However, even as loci of exchange, contact zones should not presuppose an absence of power asymmetries, for their ability to *choose* their 'exhibit' is itself rooted in *dominance*. After all, let us not forget that Exarcheia has never been a working-class district but a middle-class one. To this day, Exarcheia remains primarily a hub of artists, students and intellectuals, who may have been historically deemed subaltern and marginal owing to their heterodox political convictions but have always possessed the cultural and social capital to represent themselves perfectly. The status of Exarcheia as the centre of Athens' intelligentsia is demonstrated through the biographies of its proclaimed 'three Saints': Nikolas Asimos, Katerina Gogou and Pavlos Sidiropoulos – all highly influential artists, defiant intellectuals, tormented souls and conscious political pariahs. Their lives and untimely deaths haunt and shape Exarcheia's historicity and legend. Hence, acknowledging Exarcheia not only as a site of socio-cultural production but as a socio-cultural product in itself enables me to locate the discursive and material articulation of

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<sup>83</sup> See Chapter 7.

its history, politics and memories - its very counterculture- within middle-class aesthetics.

The middle-class subaltern in Exarcheia has succeeded in creating a counterculture that has itself become the neighbourhood's own predominant culture: one which, paradoxically - and up to an extent- resists and derides the middle-class values of excellence, competition and neoliberal development. Yet, contrary to a museum, whose contact zone seeks to provide a "negotiated space" for certain kinds of cultural exchange, negotiations and transactions necessary to the maintenance of the imperialist programme" (Boast 2011: 57; also Pratt 1992), Exarcheia's narrative is specific and non-negotiable. It is a narrative that defies the "imperialist paradigm", cryptocolonialism and the political amnesia of progress and modernisation. If we are to call Exarcheia a contact zone, then we ought to think of its configuration as a horizontal attempt to topple top-down asymmetries of power and influence.

Rather than a curated museum exhibit, perhaps we could think of Exarcheia as a kind of *conservatoire*, choosing a word whose etymology encompasses the neighbourhood's qualities I have so far described. The conservatoire's immediate denotation is that of a 'music school' that teaches what is often deemed the most 'conservative' kind of music, that is, classical music. The word hails from the Latin *conservatorium* and the verb 'conservare', which means 'to preserve' (conserve). Exarcheia is a place that speaks to all the aforementioned meanings. First, as a *conservatoire of histories*, Exarcheia has an ability to *keep* and *preserve*. Like the Latin *conservator* - the agent noun of *conservare* - Exarcheia becomes the defender and guardian of those histories I encountered during my walks. It prevents their erasure by maintaining them visible and keeping them

intact. At the same time, 'conservatoire' pertains to Exarcheia's didactic qualities and its paradoxical nature as a radical political space whose resistance to conservative and conformist values is itself very conservative, in the sense that it remains unchanged and loyal to its anti-conservative ethos.

Exarcheia is also a *lieu de memoire* in the way it leaves no room for spontaneous (collective) memory, in the way it monumentalises events and in the way it creates *archives* (Nora 1989: 12). Its politics are contemporary as much as they are archival. The former (contemporary politics) refers to Exarcheia as an affective ecology of objects, spaces and subjectivities that continuously remains up to date and provides a critique of current affairs through its conceptual and material world. The latter (archival politics) invokes Exarcheia's ability to receive, choose, absorb, organise and store (dis)connected histories and events, which it then embroiders onto its narrative and exhibits to locals and passersby. Following this line of thought, I began to conceptualise Exarcheia as an *archival space*. I do not suggest here that the neighbourhood is a kind of "neutral repository of information" (Fyfe 2019: 138). Instead of viewing Exarcheia as a site of knowledge retrieval, I think of it as a site of knowledge production – an important distinction of function that anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler also articulates in her own differentiation between the *archive-as-source* and the *archive-as-subject* (2002). Exarcheia is understood as the *archive-as-subject*, and its materiality is thus not passively 'read' but ethnographically interrogated. 'Subject' could also pertain to its role as a platform for the dialogical interaction between the human and the non-human. Indeed, Exarcheian archives are interactive; they invite engagement, critical thinking and problematisation; they provoke, remind and mould political subjectivities.

I have argued earlier that the neighbourhood's archival properties are noted in its ability to update and reorganise itself by accumulating and filing information continuously. But this ability should not let us think of archiving as a 'passive act of collecting'. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot pointed out, it is "an active act of production that prepares facts for *historical intelligibility*" (1995: 52; emphasis mine). At around the same time, Jacques Derrida was also warning of the dangers inherent in reading the archive since archiving presupposes choice and choice, in turn, presupposes censorship (1996). Through its selection of narratives, Exarcheia appears faithful to its own 'complete' reality. However, I argue that the Exarcheian archive is neither objective nor subjective, but a dynamic ontology; the interactions between people and (im)materialities form an affective synthesis whose boundaries are porous and fluctuating but whose core remains stubbornly unchanged. Put differently, Exarcheian spaces in my walks constantly folded, unfolded and refolded, but the history they iterated remained univocal.

I agree with Stoler (2009) that Derrida's highly influential work on the archive theoretically captures rather than commences modernism's so-called *archival turn* since others before him or concurrently had been interrogating the link between power and knowledge production (Bayly 1996; Trouillot 1995; Dirks 1993; Stoler 1992). On the other hand, I believe that Derrida's theory remains valuable in the etymological background it provides and the terminology it equips us with through its analysis of the archive. In the first pages of *Archival Fever*, Jacques Derrida is already delving into semantics by tracing the roots of the word 'archive' to the Greek *arkhé*, which, as he explains, means both commencement and *commandment*. Derrida's archive theory is anchored in the latter since it denotes the archive's historical links to government,

power and law. In Greek antiquity, the *arkheion* was the domicile of those who commanded, the *archons*. According to Derrida, the archons were

“citizens who thus held and signified political power and were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognised authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, or employee’s house), that official documents are filed. *The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians.* They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the *hermeneutic right* and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives” (1995: 9-10 emphasis mine)

This definition is not far from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century use of the archive by the imperial state as a supreme technology of rule (Stoler 2002) or, equally, its use by nation-states as a repository of codified beliefs and sentiments and a tool of national narrative construction. Today, the political power of this abstract and elusive archon we call ‘the state’ continues to rely on what Trouillot refers to as “archival power”, that is, the power that “determines the difference between a historian, amateur or professional, and a charlatan” (1995: 52) and which distinguishes between worthy and unworthy objects of research. Trouillot does not view archives as objects or contents but aptly defines them as “institutions that organise facts and sources and condition the possibility of existence of historical statements” (ibid).

The Exarcheian archive (or the *Exarcheia-as-archive*) I have encountered during my walking ethnographies resists these institutions by forming its own archive that is both

tangible (embedded in the materiality) and mnemonic (induces specific memories). The archive is palimpsestuous in its retainment of layers. However, the notion of the 'archive' befits Exarcheia better, for unlike the palimpsestic manuscript "whose writing has been erased to make space for more writing" but in time "reappeared on the surface due to [accidental] chemical reactions" (Miltiadis 2020: 49; Dillon 2005), Exarcheia resists erasure and the display of its multiple layers is *intentional and methodical*.

I argue that Exarcheia's archive is, in fact, a *counter-archive* that subverts linear temporalities and challenges the state's monopolisation of 'hermeneutic rights' and historical narrative production; its spaces, posters, murals and graffiti continue – albeit not unchallenged<sup>84</sup>– to claim and maintain their authorial and hermeneutic agency, to resist silences and erasures and to produce their own knowledge and memories independently and *contra* those of the state.

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<sup>84</sup> See Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 5

### NARRATIVES OF APOLITICISATION AND POLITICAL PERFORMATIVITY

Alexis' day

On December 6, 2016, in an attempt to pursue what some anthropologists call 'field immersion', I decided to follow a group of protesters affiliated with the Anti-authoritarian Current (AK)<sup>85</sup> on the march commemorating the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Alexandros Grigoropoulos' death. My senses were attuned to everything that was happening around me, registering the route, the rhythms of the demonstration, the facial expressions of the people, the slogans shouted, and the banners lifted. At the end of the protest, which traditionally ended in Exarcheia, the AK demonstrators retreated to Nosotros<sup>86</sup>, right off the Square, to avoid getting caught up in the clashes with the police that were soon to erupt. As one of them noted, something like that would have also given police the pretext to raid the social centre, as it had done in the past.

Once inside, the door remained mostly shut, although a few protesters with gas-induced tears running down their faces would occasionally come in. Others were coughing or had faces still smeared with the white residue of *Maalox* – the teargas antidote. Somebody went behind the bar, and drinks were served as normal. People with red eyes and runny noses, sat around tables drinking coffee or tea – a scene that prompted

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<sup>85</sup> Acronym for *Antiexousiastiki Kinisi* (Αντιεξουσιαστική Κίνηση) - the Anti-authoritarian Current. AK is a political network of anarchists and anti-authoritarians dispersed throughout Greece who advocated and operated upon the principles of direct democracy and horizontal organisation. They tend to advocate permanent forms of resistance and anarchist praxis. For more see Apoifis (2017).

<sup>86</sup> During my fieldwork Nosotros was used as the main meeting point of the Anti-Authoritarian Current.

someone to joke that this looked very much like a commemoration service (*“san mnimosino eimaste edo mesa”*). The atmosphere was quite relaxed, and people spent time sharing stories and funny anecdotes from previous protests and humorously devised absurd ways in which one could distract a police officer and get through the cordon that had now formed around the heart of Exarcheia. For instance, one of the guys jokingly said that he could pretend he was a frustrated neighbour who had come to complain, while someone else said that he could act as if he was there to ‘help’ policemen beat rioters up and while doing so discreetly walk through them and leave.

After a while, I climbed up the spiral staircase leading to the terrace. With my eyes squinting and my mouth and nose covered to avoid inhaling yet more teargas, I watched the *báhala* exploding around the square of Exarcheia – scenes I had often seen on the news. *Báhala*<sup>87</sup>, a colloquialism broadly defined as ‘havoc’ or ‘chaos’ (Leontidou 2012; Panourgia 2019), took the form of blazing bins, plastic, metal and wood, whose smoke was floating through every street and alley surrounding the square. Their sound was a haphazard concoction of noises sporadically superseded by the blast of stun grenades. Hooded individuals in balaclavas or gasmasks were running, shouting and throwing stones at the police, whose cordon was now getting tighter. I felt a tingling sensation in my nose and throat as if I just had a bite of food heavily seasoned with chilli powder. While still thinking it was not as unbearable as I had imagined, a dust cloud wafted right through me. Within seconds my eyes started burning and watering uncontrollably. Keeping them open felt almost impossible and rubbing them accentuated the burning sensation because teargas is pressurised powder that creates a mist when deployed and sticks everywhere – an interesting fact I wish I knew beforehand. With great effort, I

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<sup>87</sup> Plural of *báhalo* (Greek: *μπάχαλο*).

made my way down the spiral staircase and re-joined the others on the first floor of the building.

We were forced to stay in Nosotros until the *báhala* subsided. I asked how long they usually last, and a young member of AK informed me that ‘this can go until 2 or 3 am’. Everything that day had happened amid a state of noise and commotion. My interactions consisted of a series of scattered, unplanned, and often interrupted conversations. However, amid those, I could discern a sense of what I can best describe as *insouciance* - a form of light-hearted unconcern. Eight years after the explosive events of December 2008, the annual demonstration seemed to have acquired a somewhat ritualistic character. Shrugging her shoulders, one of the protesters commented that the protest now served ‘more like a reminder to ensure that society and the state know we haven’t forgotten’. I felt that *that* which was not forgotten was a reference not only to the killing of a teenager in the heart of Athens but the ongoing state violence it exemplified.

Earlier, I had overheard someone paralleling the march to an “Epitafios”<sup>88</sup>, a characterisation not too different from the one used by Vradis’ informants, who compared the demonstration to a “funeral march” (*poreia kideia*) (2012:189). Similarly, Loukas, a man in his early 50s who owned a small grocery store near the square since 1985, commented with a chuckle that “some people have Saint Vasilios, others in the parishes have Saint Nicholas, and others have the *panigiri* (*festival*) of Grigoropoulos”.

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<sup>88</sup> Refers to the carrying in procession of the Epitaph – a religious box-like object that symbolizes Jesus Christ’s tomb- on the Good Friday before the Greek Orthodox Easter.

While marching along with the crowd of protesters, I had the sense that everyone else around me knew the precise sequence of events, quite literally, step by step. The series of events I had witnessed, the motion and form of the protest, the movement of the bodies of the protesters and their change in speed and mood, all in unspoken coordination, made me think that along with 'Epitafios' and 'festival', 'choreography' was also a suitable characterisation. The march was saturated with a sense of predictability that emerged from and hinted at the conscious repetition of these specific acts in previous years; a repetition that produced expert bodies in motion upon a stage of harmonised chaos. This sense of expertise and choreographed movement in the streets of Athens is also vividly captured in Athena Athanasiou's description of a police raid during the occupation of the Syntagma Square in the summer of 2011:

"On the day of the demonstrations, the police attempted to evacuate the square of protesters by throwing stun grenades and making extensive use of tear gas, even inside the Syntagma metro station. The protests went on in a thick, toxic cloud of tear gas and other carcinogenic chemical substances. Every time the suffocating tear gas swept over the square, the crowd retreated slowly, waiting for the gas to blow away. As soon as the gas dispersed, the demonstrators moved forward again, in peaceful perseverance." (2014: 2)

Returning to the commemorative march, I argue that the characterisations 'Epitafios' and 'panigiri' carried two different connotations. The first one intended to denote the protest's monotony and perceived lack of zest. Without necessarily losing its significance in at least serving as a memory aid of the morally indefensible murder of a

15-year-old boy by a stray policeman, the poignancy and potency of the commemorative protest had nonetheless inevitably entered the realm of banality; it had lost its primal impetus, attained its apogee and was now a routinised ritual (Turner 1974: 248). Referring to it as a 'panigiri', on the other hand, connoted a different kind of *affect*. More specifically, Loukas' use of 'panigiri' referred not to the actual march but to the *báhala* that succeeded it. *Panigiri*, a word used to describe a celebratory event - such as in a religious festivity during which participants display feelings of joy and enthusiasm - was here, in my opinion, deployed in a derogatory manner with an intent to ridicule. Comparing these incidents with the riots against the police following the murder of Michalis Kaltezas in 1985, Loukas argued that the anarchist movement back then was "more politicised, less nihilistic" and continued:

*"[December] 2008 was a more generalised uprising. Without demands. In 1985, things were much more politicised, and the people's demands were explicitly stated. But those were different times. Young people were more politicised. By 2008 this had very much faded. Today, I think, these riots do not lead anywhere."*

The protesters gathered that day at Nosotros also expressed a sense of dismissal towards the *báhala*. While recounting stories from older demonstrations, it became apparent that some of the older protesters had once also been involved in clashes against the police. Younger members of AK had been actively involved in the organisation of several protests and commemorative marches - including this one - and deemed them an important embodied and material expression of their political discontent. They, however, avoided participating in the clashes that typically followed,

and some even perceived them rather disparagingly. Themis, a 24-year-old member and an eloquent speaker of AK commented:

*“In my opinion, four categories of people take part in the *báhala*: the fifteen-year-olds, the anarcho-tourists, those that go through a second adolescence, like myself, and the classic anarchists, those who wear the gasmasks and guard the barricades. You could easily wear a hoodie yourself, run out and throw a stone at the police. The media would capture the moment, and next thing you know, you appear on the front cover of a newspaper as the dark anarchist, the hooded, criminal element.”*

Themis' words had a tone of (self)sarcasm that could hardly go unnoticed. I was trying to understand whether that intended to reflect a belief that the clashes with the police were futile, banal or ludicrous, or perhaps all three at the same time. Themis was deconstructing the riots analytically, in the Derridian sense of the word, but his comment also pointed at a different kind of de(con)struction: *one identified as political disintegration and internal fragmentation*. This time it was not the words *per se* but the blasé attitude towards the *báhala* that implied a normative acceptance of this disintegration but also dismissiveness and a refusal to attribute them any political substance. Coupled with Loukas' comments, these perceptions on the *báhala* pointed at the self-conscious loss of *political affectivity* in youth mobilisation that I wished to examine further.

## Shifting affectivities

A few months after the march, I was passing by the Polytechnic on Stournari with Vicky. The imposing building ignited in Vicky's mind memories from the riots of 1995 in which she had taken part as a young student. Her description of those events was quickly superseded by a comment on "the wannabe trendiness (*modernia*) of young people (*pitsirikades*) of today who burn [police] trolleys and make confined (*periorismena*) *báhala* as if this is a Sunday church service, except they do theirs every Friday and Saturday". As I have already explained, *báhala* (*pl.*) is a colloquialism for the weekly so-called anarchist-police clashes in Exarcheia and has been commonly defined as havoc or chaos (Leontidou 2012; Panourgia 2019). *Modernia* is a slang word, a derogative derivative of 'moderno' (modern), used to describe something that aspires to look modern or 'trendy' but is merely pretentious. I asked what she meant by 'confined'.

*"Well... they are [standing] at the entrance of the Polytechnic, they set on fire a couple of bins to the left, a couple of bins to the right; cops throw some teargas at them; they come in and out of the Polytechnic, throw a stone at them. Ok, so what? What has changed?"*

Vicky's derisive attitude towards the *báhala* was grounded in a perception of these incidences as pointless acts of violence. If their point once was to make a political statement, 'pointless' could, in this case, be interpreted as 'apolitical'.

*“If there is going to be violence, it should be organised and have an aim, a target. [The target] shouldn’t be [to burn] the trolley that students and workers take to go home. [The target] shouldn’t be the society, the people [...] Violence for me shouldn’t be a goal in itself. I say yes to violence, but under what terms? And why? Are we just going to burn trolleys every Saturday out of the blue?”*

Vicky knew the *báhalas* repertoire well, what would happen first, and what would follow. As she argued, the weekly *báhalas* had now become “like a tradition”, in that they lacked *originality* and had entered the banality of everyday rhythm. Their scale was often not significant, although it was big enough to disturb and result in a cloud of teargas wafting through the neighbourhood's residential balconies and windows, the busy café and bar-lined streets. The supposed spontaneity of *báhalas* (Panourgia 2019) was also refuted every time my participants placed them within specific time frames. I remember a couple of occasions when interlocutors recommended sitting indoors to escape the teargas and smoke, for ‘it’s past 9pm and the *báhalas* will be starting soon’ (*opou na nai tha arxisoun ta báhalas*). On one of my first night strolls around Exarcheia, I recall a group of people on Themistocleous St., watching rather unconcerned and from a safe distance, *báhalas* unfolding somewhere on Metaxa St. I asked one of the older bystanders what exactly was happening to which he responded, “The same old that happens every Friday night’ (*Ta idia pou ginontai kathe Paraskevi vrady*).

For these people, the *báhalas* were Exarcheia’s weekly expected-unexpected micro-acts of orderly disorder. I am not suggesting that a riot or any act, for that matter, could ever follow a single, rigid pattern. Its unexpected character (Kitis & Milani 2015) and

volatility are rooted in performances of unpredictability. If we were to take this an anthropological step further and treat riots as rituals, we should remind ourselves of the unpredictability and spontaneity recorded even in the most structured, rigidly outlined, repetitive acts (cf. Geertz 1973; Schechner & Turner 1985; Mahmood 2001; Grimes 2004). Improvisation as an inherent quality of performance can have a catalytic, transformative effect on the entire act itself. The fire of social change relies on such sparks of spontaneity (Dalakoglou 2012), and even if not tangible, that change could at least be implanted in society's consciousness as a *possibility*.

The most indicative and recent case exemplifying the potency of spontaneity is the December 2008 riots. In this case, sparks of spontaneity led to what was repeatedly described as the most acute social crisis Greece had experienced in its Metapolitefsi years (Karamichas 2009; Vradis 2012; Apoifis 2017). Within hours, young people from every social stratum poured into the streets. The riots represented a trans-societal union of discontent that surpassed the singular event of Alexis' death and exposed more significant political, economic and moral issues long-simmering beneath the surface of Greek consciousness. Amid the disorder, the possibility for a unified society emerged when boundaries were transcended by exasperated youth who, irrespective of their political positionalities or class, had come together to demand a better (working) future (Johnston & Seferiades 2012; Sakellaropoulos 2012).

When the intense emotive response of the riots of December is juxtaposed to the weekly riots in Exarcheia, the significance of the unpredictability of the individual subject gets lost in the collective repetition of the act. This leads to a visible non-outcome that quite frequently triggered a 'So what?' reaction. Dalakoglou (2012), in his attempt to unravel

the socio-spatial dynamics of Athens by analysing the concept of spontaneity, raises an important point about the latter: that spontaneity is, in fact, *not* the point. As he rightly argues, the boundaries between the spontaneous and the non-spontaneous are blurred when it comes to collective and public street actions. Bearing this in mind should not prompt us to strive for a clear-cut classification of the two but rather posit the question of “What happens after ‘the spectacular, spontaneous (or not) moments of revolt’” (2012:512)? When discussing the *báhala*, responses from interlocutors came swiftly: *Nothing happens. They are not spontaneous; they are not spectacular; they are not revolutionary.*

With each repetition, the *báhala* seemed to lose both *effectivity* and *affectivity*. *Effectivity* refers to productivity, that is, the discernible impact and the long-lasting effect that an act could have on society and collective consciousness. *Affectivity*, on the other hand, does not refer to the ability of *báhala* to evoke feelings and emotions in the social actors directly involved in it, but in the ability of *báhala* to *exert an affect and evoke certain feelings and emotions in those observing them.*

In her monograph, Navaro-Yashin expands the scope of her study beyond objects and materialities and looks at institutions, administrations and legal practices as realms charged with and capable of inducing *affect* (2012). Taking this a bit further, I argue that affect is something that can be also exuded through and provoked by collective action and social practices in which the individual subject becomes invisible. My assertion here strongly echoes Emile Durkheim’s notion of “social currents” in public gatherings, which he defines as “great waves of enthusiasm, indignation and pity that are produced [and which] have their seat in no one individual consciousness”. These currents, he posits,

“come to each one of us from outside and can sweep us along in spite of ourselves” (Durkheim 1966 [1895]: 4). They are “dynamic forms of structure” that shape and are shaped by “historical, geographical, cultural, and economic specificities of a group” (Barnwell 2018: 25).

As a key figure in the sociology of emotions, Durkheim has been cited in several contemporary studies on affect (Brennan 2004; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Bennett 2010), although he had never been - until recently (Barnwell 2018) - treated as an early affect theorist. Durkheim’s reference to affect is not direct. Instead, he speaks of a “collective emotion”, which he treats as a compelling and profoundly *social force*. As such, Durkheim does not seem to be troubled by the dualisms encountered in contemporary affect theory like emotion/affect, personal/social or corporeal/cognitive (cf. Massumi 1995; Shouse 2005; see also Barnwell 2018). Hence, apart from the obvious consonance, his work has with theories on affect and post-human agency, it is also liberating in the way it allows us to escape these self-imposed conceptual dichotomies.

I believe that it was this kind of Durkheimian affect – a contagious effervescence - that I was witnessing permeating and energising the atmosphere, materialities, the bodies and collective consciousness of demonstrators. The reason why affect and subjectivities are embroiled in this continuum (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012) is that humans, as mobile spatial fields (Ped 1986 & Low 2009) and spatial beings (Bollnow 2011), experience, perform and produce space (Lefebvre 1991). Therefore, I argue that human practices can influence the state of relationality between individuals and their environment as much as material entities do. In other words and adhering to Navaro-Yashin’s rationale (2009; 2012), what people *do* in a place also has the potency to *(re)mould, establish and*

*rupture individuals' affective relationships with that place* by discharging a specific kind of energy upon them and inducing certain feelings within them.

Hence, individual emotions and objectives actualised through the embodied act of the *báhala* emerged as a collective performance and a social current that produced space and affect, which, however, exceeded and superseded the individual agency and intentions of their instigators. The emotions elicited between the actors and the observers of the *báhala* were asynchronous in the sense that they were out of sync and out of agreement. Whilst *báhala* participants reportedly experienced the aforementioned contagious effervescence, the affect exuded by the *báhala* ranged – according to my interlocutors- from contempt to annoyance, disappointment and indifference. In other words, if the performance (of the *báhala*) aimed to shock, it desensitised instead, and if it sought to raise cognisance, it produced indifference. For reasons I will be further discussing later on, most of my participants were either unable or unwilling to relate, excuse or sympathise with those causing the *báhala*.

Academics have also indicated a shift in the affectivity (and effectivity) regarding the *báhala*. Apoifis marks 2015 as the year of “decline in the visible mass street protests of the recent past” (Apoifis 2017: 151). The ‘recent past’ Apoifis refers to is the years 2011-2013, during which his fieldwork on the anarchist and anti-authoritarian praxis in Athens took place. In the conclusion of his monograph that was published four years after the completion of the research, Apoifis makes a retrospective comparison between the “explosive battles” of the past and the “scuffles” of the present, a shift that he perceives as “concerning” and “poignant” (ibid). My fieldwork, conducted from 2016 to 2019, confirms that this continued to be the case. I believe that the ‘scuffles’ Apoifis

refers to are, in fact, the *báhalas*. Neni Panourgia, in her essay *Exarcheia, mon amour* expands on this observation: “As I look at it, the Square [of Exarcheia] *now* has no politics other than the politics of performance” (2019: 239, emphasis mine). In a debate with a friend, the Panourgia maintains that the *báhalas* are not a politics of desperation performed by a hopeless generation with sunken ambitions but rather:

“pure *anti-politics*, lapsing into platitudinous sloganism (‘Down with the State’) and *acting against the daily needs of the citizens* –meaning that unless alternative forms of banking, book-publishing, commons and transportation are established, the burning down of ATMs, bookstores, cafés and public buses, *critiques nothing* but rather passes the financial burden of destruction precisely onto the population that such actions claim to be defending” (Panourgia 2019: 239 emphasis mine).

In their failure to be politically meaningful, the *báhalas*’s only potency lies in their ability to eclipse and eliminate any true political communication intended by others. While I am deploying the verbs ‘eclipse’ and ‘eliminate’ figuratively, this obscuring capacity also has a literal, tangible dimension. Like an exclamation mark at the end of a sentence, the *báhalas* usually took place at the end of overall peaceful demonstrations, like those observed annually on December 6 or November 17<sup>89</sup>. On May 5, 2010, however, events followed a different course when during a general strike in Athens, attacks against the police ignited during the march. The “particularly antagonistic protest” (Apoifis 2017: 121) culminated with a small group of anarchists breaking off from the body of

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<sup>89</sup> The dates mark, respectively, the anniversary of Alexandros Grigoropoulos’ death and the anniversary of the Polytechnic Uprising.

demonstrators and throwing molotov cocktails at a Marfin Bank branch on Stadiou St. The building was soon engulfed in flames, resulting in the death of three workers, amongst them a pregnant woman.

Although extreme, this incident manifests the potency of anti-politics: the fire and the smoke caused by the molotovs obscured the demonstration both literally and metaphorically by masking its message and diminishing its effects while driving the public's attention away from the demands of the protesters to the tragic death of the bank workers. It is thus unsurprising that in the news articles published following the incident, many journalists do not appear concerned about discerning between the perpetrators, who they refer to as 'angry protesters' and the majority of the demonstrators, who were, too, left aghast at the unexpected turn of events.<sup>90</sup>

It can be argued that dismissing *báhalá* as apolitical can undermine the agency and individual intention and affirm the *homogeneity* ascribed to them by the media with all-inclusive phrases such as 'anarchist-police clashes'. Therefore, it is important to ask *who* is 'the anarchist' in these so-called 'anarchist-police clashes'? Among scholars, any such presumptions of group homogeneity between anarchists and anti-authoritarians have already been contested and refuted. Apoifis himself maintains that:

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<sup>90</sup> In his monograph Apoifis delineates the ways in which the incident caused tensions within the anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros*. With the odd exception of those who endorsed this action and felt no great sympathy for the victims, attitudes seemed to be divided mainly between those who condemned the actions altogether and those who respected the choice of this particular anarchist tactic but felt sadness and guilt for the deaths (2017: 122-124). Apoifis notes that the overall lack of concern towards how this event could be projected on the broader anarchist and leftist community hails from a 'lack of interest among many [...] in building a mass movement'. While indifference prevailed among some regarding the ways in which the image of the anarchist *chóros* might appear in society in light of such violent incidents, such 'lack of concern' did not emerge in my ethnographic accounts. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, many of my interlocutors were particularly concerned about the negative impact of the *báhalá* on the public's conceptualisation of anarchy and what it means to be an anarchist.

“Individual motivations with respect to violence and the police are nuanced and variable. Simply focusing on the visible actions of social movements collectives does not help us appreciate fully these diverse motivations. We ignore the important elements of political identity construction that occur away from the public eye, where individual movement actors interact with each other. We miss the range of perspectives, meanings and relationships forged within social movements (2017: 19).”

Put differently, what prompted each individual to engage in these ‘scuffles’ could have been the result of ‘variable and nuanced motivations’. The riots of 2008 had been viewed as a novel performance that formed a new, “multiple subject” (Gavriilidis 2013) and one that could not be exclusively attributed to a single status or impetus. Consequently, even though the weekly *báhala* meet neither the size nor the historical significance of the riots of 2008, they, too, deserve a qualitative analysis (Apoifis 2012) to allow us to better understand the desires, ideas and motivations of the actors who choose to engage in them. Until then, the motives and rationales of those partaking in what feels like a senseless public performance can only be a matter of subjective interpretation. At the same time, if the *báhala* are to be viewed as a performance, then it is only fair to ask not only who is performing but also who is this performance for.

## A performance or a performative?

To address the above, I now turn to Judith Butler to suggest that the *báhala* and the commemorative march for Alexis (or others like those of the Polytechnic Uprising on 17/11) are not simply a performance but a *performative*. In her work on gender performativity, Butler used the notion of the performative to explore how linguistic constructions create a reality that we subsequently reinforce not only through speaking about it (i.e. verbally expressing our ideologies) but also by enacting it with our bodies. In the final chapter of *Bodies that Matter* (1992), Butler warns us of misreading performativity as merely a kind of performance and explicitly differentiates between the two. In her words “performance as bounded act” is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists of a reiteration of norms that “precede, constrain and exceed” the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as “the fabrication of the performer’s ‘will or choice’” (1992: 234). This calls for a discussion on agency, but I’d like to first focus on the word ‘reiteration’. Following the Butlerian logic, repetitiveness here is key, for it is precisely what makes certain performances –riots in this case- appear natural and necessary. Like seasonal phenomena or the life cycles of animals – to evoke the words of anthropologist Victor Turner – the annual march and the Friday *báhala* reiterate themselves cyclically and steadily (1974). I have previously cited a protester’s reference to the yearly demonstration as a ‘reminder for the state and society’ that they (the protesters) haven’t forgotten. I argue that marches and regularised *báhala* as reminders are *corporeal, performative utterances*, or in local slang ‘revolutionary exercise’ (*epanastatiki gymnastiki*) as Leonidas stated. ‘Exercise’, refers here both to an act carried out for a specific purpose and literally to the training and physical effort demanded in the planning and execution of demonstrations, especially

for the weekly *báhalas*. Revolutionary exercise or practice denotes the repetitive undertaking of “diverse tactics of activist corporeality” that aims to grant their executors a particular set of skills, knowledge or responses: retreating, escaping or enduring teargas, escaping arrest, “chanting, raising their voices, standing or sitting silently, forming and breaking blockades, and, above all, persisting together in public, in the urban street” (cf. Athanasiou 2014:2; Butler 2011).

The *báhalas* undoubtedly appear futile and banal if we view them as a means; if we think of their immediate repercussions or try to locate their importance in a kind of long-term political impact on wider society. They also appear ‘ordinary’ if we think of ‘the extraordinary’ and ‘the unknown’ as only possible within the realm of the transcendent. If, following Veena Das however, we decide to “descent into the ordinary” we can unpick the *báhalas* in their very existence as banal, everyday neighbourhood rhythms (Das 2007; 2020), recognising what philosopher Stanley Cavell called “the extraordinariness of what we accept as ordinary” (2010:61 cited in Veena Das 2020). With this in mind and through the lens of performativity theory, I propose here a different reading of the *báhalas*. Namely, one that sees them as complete projects whose very ‘ordinariness’ makes them “performative accomplishments” (Butler 1988) in themselves. Their accomplishment is to be found in the way mild acts of revolutionary violence succeed in anchoring themselves in the site of the everyday. Their political meaning and usefulness lies in their very execution and not in their expected future results.

Riots and demonstrations are surrounded in Greece by an aura of mythification and heroisation, sometimes also reflected in the accounts of Greek academics (see Athanasiou’s excerpt on page 19). Participating in collective street action –

irrespectively of scale– is deemed in Greece to be a political and ethical imperative. Partaking in the struggles of the Left (*Agones tis Aristeras*<sup>91</sup>), has historically acquired a very particular political aesthetic. Every new action that can be seen as part of the long history of ‘struggles’, provides participants with a sense of virtue and connects them to a particular political genealogy and collective memory. The importance of these acts, need to be thus appreciated not solely in their relation to whether they manage to bring about some obvious political result. Every new ‘struggle’, every new opportunity to ‘take the streets’ (*na vgoyme sto dromo*), attaches the present to the past, solidifies history and produces more history ensuring the continuity of the Left.

To explain this, it is necessary to revert briefly to the events of the Greek Civil War<sup>92</sup>. The feeling following the defeat of the Communist Party of Greece at the third and final phase of the Civil War was encapsulated in the words of Nikos Zachariadis, the General Secretary of the KKE and leader of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE). Despite the defeat of the DSE and the expulsion of major figures to Albania, during a radio broadcast, Zachariadis would utter the now famous phrase “The DSE did not lay down its arms, it placed them on standby” (*O DSE den katethese ta oplo, monaha ta ethese para poda*)<sup>93</sup>. The phrase ‘to oplo para poda’ (that I have here translated as standby) refers to the military command ‘order arms’, where the rifle is lowered and held vertically next to the right leg of the soldier with its handle resting on the ground. ‘To oplo para poda’ commands the soldier to be in a state of readiness. Its use by Zachariadis during the broadcast is pretty self-explanatory: the Left has not let go off its arms; it will always be alert and prepared to pick them up again and fight. Brutal acts of political persecution

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<sup>91</sup> In Greek: *‘Αγώνες της Αριστεράς’*.

<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>93</sup> In Greek: *«Ο ΔΣΕ δεν κατέθεσε τα όπλα, μονάχα τα έθεσε παρά πόδα»*.

against communists and their sympathisers continued throughout the Cold War and until the end of the 1967-1974 dictatorship, but despite Zachariadis' suggestive speech, October 16, 1949, was indeed the official end of the military hostilities of the Greek Civil War. The phrase 'to oplo para poda', however, with its command to maintain alertness and preparedness left its own mark on Greek post-WWII history. As much as it was used as a false pretext for the incessant persecution of the Left, it also shaped the political subjectivity of many Greek leftists who felt compelled to keep engaging in forms of revolutionary action. 'To oplo para poda' is where I can trace the political significance of what my interlocutors called 'revolutionary exercise'. I thus see Exarcheian riots - even the weekly street 'scuffles' - as a form of exercise in revolutionary practice. I also argue that the *báhala* reflect the intimate relationship between local narratives and the road and exemplify how roads can be both spaces and products "open to social manipulations" (Dalakoglou 2017: 13). In the case of Exarcheian riots, taking into the streets is an act of evocation that served to prepare, to keep in shape, to transmit a particular partisan know-how and teach actors how to manipulate the roads, but mostly to symbolise that a certain alertness is being indeed maintained.

To return to the matter of agency, I maintain that agentic capacity and performativity ought not to be perceived as mutually exclusive (pace Butler 1992), particularly in the case of rioters. Instead, I locate a sense of *reduced agency* in a particular lack of political and historical knowledge that might disallow subjects from seeing beyond their individual intentions and desires. In other words, the *báhala*, as attractively delinquent acts against the eternal 'enemy in blue' (the police), allow youngsters to feel that they *too* are partaking in the ongoing *Struggles*. At the same time, the political signification of *báhala* as performatives *precedes and exceeds the performer*; it spans across generations

of 'fifteen-year-olds' and 'second-time' adolescents (to recall Themis' words), who might often not be fully aware of the broader meaning and intention of these secular rituals but who participate in them, nonetheless. These acts of participation establish an intergenerational continuity that is not only discursive, but also practical.

In this context, agency may be indeed beside the point. Participation in these street actions is what affords the bodies of young rioters intimacy with the street and familiarisation with insurrectional politics. The 'arms' remain by their 'feet' (whether they see them or not) through the repetition of *báhalá*, protests, commemorative marches, committee gatherings, the know-how of molotov-making, squats, social centres and horizontal forms of organisation that, in their united whole constitute the material and technical substructure of a potential revolution that brews and simmers in Exarcheia.

I further suggest that the use of the word 'Epitafios' by my interlocutors, although initially aimed to signify the lack of fervour during the commemorative march for Alexis, carries in its religious denotation an element of 'sacredness'. Its annual repetition that seeks to remind, (re)produces 'the sacred', namely the movement's iconic heroes, who had become increasingly scarce after the fall of the dictatorship. Post-1974 the unknown 'laughing boy' (*to gelasto paidi*) at the crushed gate of the Polytechnic came to represent all the heroic students who took part in the rebellion against the Junta. Just over a decade later, Michalis Kaltezas would be shot by a policeman in Exarcheia during a demonstration, but his death did not precipitate large-scale riots and his name remained relatively unknown outside leftist and anti-authoritarian circles. As Loukas recalled:

*“The reaction to the death of Kaltezas is incomparable to what happened after Grigoropoulos was killed. The response to Kaltezas’ killing was much more isolated, and the rioters did not have any specific demands. People saw that something terrible happened, and yes, there were some marches, conflicts, and building occupations... What happened to Kaltezas produced a politicised generation of leftists, but things were different back then. 1985 had a different political climate. There were some dominant leftist organisations; the youth was politicised, and anarchists were more politicised and less nihilistic.”*

It was the large-scale and violent nature of the riots of December 6 that saw Alexandros Grigoropoulos acquiring a place as *the* dead of the movement (*O nekros tou kinimatos*). His death lifted the veil of disillusionment, ignited anew the anger and disenchantment towards the socio-economic and political status quo and resurrected the memories of other heroes of the Left, like Kaltezas, who then became more widely known. Like the Epitafios, Alexis's commemorative march is a ritual, albeit a secular one. Its repetition emanates an aura of spectrality, reviving ghosts that break the country's blissful forgetfulness. Thus, as political performatives, these commemorative marches-as-processions (*litanies*) and the *báhala*, function as the connective elements that allow for cohesion and continuity within the Left and its offshoot movements. Their reiteration enables participating actors to faithfully pursue and sustain the *ethic of the struggles*.

In my discussion of the *báhala* I have also tried to interrogate their affective potency and the emotions they can elicit in those observing them. I tried to understand why *báhala* are perceived as a(nti)political and banal by politicised individuals within Exarcheia. The repetitiveness of the *báhala* seems to have transformed them into

unremarkable acts, allegedly void of political meaning. Yet, taking a closer look, and without negating some of my interlocutors' unfavourable sentiments towards them, I proposed their conceptualisation as meaningful political performatives and forms of partisan *revolutionary practice*. Street action can be potent in its evocation of an unforgotten civil war, whose lingering emotive quality continues to imbue and inform the collective political identity of leftists in Greece. It is part of a politics of anticipation and reflects a shared sentiment born out of an unconsummated political desire, the harbour of which is Exarcheia.

Moving on from the *báhala* as a performative corporeality, in the following section, I will be discussing 'báhala' and 'bahalákides' (the *báhala* actors) as performative utterances and explore their affective potency as public terms.

#### Báhala and bahalákides: antipolitical significations and political significance

When I met him, Aris must have been 50 years old. He owned a kiosk with his brother on one of the peripheral streets of Exarcheia, and all our discussions took place with him behind the register and me on the steps beside it. Originally from a small town in northern Greece, Aris had come to Athens as a student and had been actively involved in the anti-authoritarian milieu until his late 20s. Aris argued that 'báhala' is a new term, suggesting that the actions, or rather the propagation of actions associated with it, was also a recent phenomenon. Similarly, *bahalákis* (pl. *bahalákides*), the colloquial sobriquet attributed to the perpetrator of the *báhala* was extensively deployed in

popular rhetoric after the events of December 2008 when it came to substitute the until-then media-friendly terms 'koukouloforoi' (*the hooded-ones*) and 'gnostoi- agnostoi' (*the known-unknowns*). The term 'hoodie' is rather self-explanatory and serves to distinguish these 'deviant' subjectivities from the body of deserving citizens- demonstrators (Koutrolikou 2016). The *gnostos-agnostos* (known-unknown) however, had multiple readings. First, it used to indicate that these actors –in their balaclava- induced anonymity- were actually known to the police. It further suggested that they were not being arrested because allegedly some, or even the majority of them remained untouchable because they were 'suburbia's children', the offspring of well-known and powerful politicians and businessmen. The second meaning attached to the term related to the implicit allegation (usually expressed by the Right) that the 'known-unknowns' were known to the police, but never actually faced legal consequences due to their clandestine connections to official political parties. In both scenarios, the term 'gnostoi-agnostoi' was a political term. 'Bahalákides' on the other hand, is a term imbued with satirical undertones, frequently used in a mocking, pejorative fashion both within and outside Exarcheia. I believe that this shift in terminology is itself indicative of the change in the perceived signification and effectivity of rioting.

Calling someone *bahalákis* was not just about identifying them as the agent of the *báhala*. Beyond that, the mere utterance of the word itself, with its diminutive (and diminishing) suffix '-akis', had, in my opinion, a self-deprecating agential capacity that strips the actor of their political potency. The terms *báhala* and *bahalákides* undermined the acts by suggesting that the riots were trivial events of an almost play-like nature. This can be exemplified in phrases like, '*the daily game of the bahalákides with the police*'

or 'the centre has become a Disneyland for the *bahalákides*' and other similar ones frequently heard on the news.

According to Greek dictionaries, the neologism 'báhalo' is an onomatopoeic word formed through the phonetic concoction of noises imitating the sound of 'rattling', 'crushing' or 'batting'. The *báhala* have become inextricably tied to riots, riot makers, and the space rioters create with their actions. Like others, I have so far, rather unconsciously, used the words 'riots' and 'báhala' interchangeably. In other academic work, 'riot' has also been deployed conversely with nouns such as 'demonstration', 'event', 'civil unrest', 'protest', 'clashes' and even 'revolt' (Vradis 2009; Vradis 2012; Cappuccini 2014; Vasilaki 2018). In Greek, 'riot' is best understood as *epeisodia* (events) or *tarahes* (unrest, commotion, troubles), although the word *exeghersí* can also be encountered. *Epeisodia* or *tarahes* imply a sense of spontaneity and suddenness – qualities that, as we have seen, the word 'riot' also claims. *Exeghersí*, on the other hand, best translates to 'uprising' and characterises, a process that is organised and systematic. All these terms (*epeisodia*, *tarahes*, *exeghersí*) are heavily charged with political and historical signification. Conversely, *báhala* is an apolitical term that enables the perception of such events as of anti-political nature.

I shared these observations with an Athenian friend, and the categorisation seemed pretty straightforward for him. Putting these words on a 'scale of seriousness', he argued that 'first come riots (*epeisodia*, *tarahes*), then an uprising (*exeghersí*) and ultimately a revolution (*epanastasi*). An uprising is a step before revolution. The *báhala* have a much narrower meaning. "They are simply *vandalisms*", he contended. My friend's comment prompted me to think that for all their association with the destruction of

private and public property, I had not encountered any work that defines *báhala* as vandalism. The words most commonly used, which I have also adopted at the beginning of this chapter, are ‘chaos’ and ‘havoc’ (Leontidou 2012; Panourgia 2019). While not incorrect, ‘chaos’ and ‘havoc’ are arguably more generic and less explicit words and, unlike the word ‘vandalism’, fail to sufficiently convey the elements of violence, destruction and delinquency often attached to the *báhala*.

The main semantic similarity that one can discern with certainty between riots and *báhala* is that just like the word ‘riot’, ‘*báhala*’ has “connotations of power”, whose discursive usage is “historically shaped by those who opposed or quelled them” (Panourgia in Pourgouris 2010: 243). When used by the media, or politicians *báhala* (and *bahalákides*) have the potency to stigmatise and criminalise, not merely the individuals partaking in its performance but anyone identifying with the anarchist or anti-authoritarian milieu (*chóros*)<sup>94</sup>. Therefore – seen from another perspective- the term ‘*báhala*’ is also loaded *with political significance* despite being laden with significations of a- and anti-politicisation.

Beyond their humorous intent, Themis’ taxonomisation of the *bahalákides* cited at the beginning of the chapter denoted his understanding and disregard of the *báhala* as a

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<sup>94</sup> *Chóros* (Greek: *χώρος*) was the word most commonly used by my interlocutors and although it literally translates to ‘space’ its most accurate interpretation is ‘scene’ or ‘milieu’. Semantically, *chóros* adheres neither to rigidity nor specificity but its usage rather intends to convey the notion as well as acknowledgement of a more ‘fluid assortment of people and ideas [...] that is not even constant in nature or time’ (Kitis 2015: 2). Indeed, the term does not seem to be merely a ‘linguistic choice’ (Drakonakis 2014: 2) but represents a conscious understanding of the fluidity of movements (Schwarz et al 2010; Apoifis 2017).

banal performance in which anyone could take part, as long as they ‘wear a hoodie, run out and throw a stone at the police’. It did not matter who the person underneath the hood was. The affect exuded by the dark hoods, the molotovs and the burning bins superseded the emotions and understandings that any vis-à-vis interaction with the ‘hooded, criminal elements’ could have brought to the fore. Hoodies with molotovs at hand, destined to feature in news articles, were not credited with deeper political intentions. Their motives did not seem to matter and would thus never make it to the mainstream narrative. As objects, hoods and molotovs carried their own agency. As words, they had become connotations of an affective quality tied to ‘mischief’, ‘fear’, ‘delinquency’ and urban degradation in ways too powerful to overcome.

In those powerful media representations, subjective interiorities were muted and deemed irrelevant. The criminalisation of the rioters’ intents, signified in their hoods, the stones and the molotovs, cancelled their motives. This apparent post-human agency of the tangibilities of the *báhala* did not exist in a vacuum. The affective agency of the hood, the molotov cocktail, the burning bins, the barricades, the gas masks, the streets and all the micro-materialities that make up the *material culture* of the *báhala* must be studied within the contexts of historical contingency and political specificity (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2012: 163). I argue that from the Metapolitefsi period onwards, the image of the ‘dark hooded, criminal element’, stripped of any political dispositions, was a necessary protagonist of a state-led demonisation narrative conveniently used to defend the agenda of successive governments and the loyal opposition. The latter have since been accused of exploiting such incidents to point fingers at respective political administrations for their incompetence in solving the so-called ‘Exarcheia problem’ and paving the way for moralising interventions that, as we will see in Chapters 6 and 7,

range from police raids to gentrification. Amid this vicious cycle of criminalisation and ‘purging’, the anarchist becomes the *ipso facto* individual underneath the hood. Feeding a pre-established narrative of apoliticisation<sup>95</sup>, the *báhala* tarnished the image of the anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros* as a whole while concurrently reaffirming and (re)constructing Exarcheia as the immoral geography of Athens in the map of popular imagination.

In the following section, I will present more ethnographic instances and further examine my interlocutors’ perceptions of the *báhala*, which, as we will see, are strongly linked to understandings of authenticity and what it means to be a ‘real’ anarchist.

### Báhala and notions of (in)authenticity

Among Exarchiots, the line of discourse forming around the subjectivity of the *bahalákis* had a twofold thrust. First, there seemed to be a considerable amount of speculation that the *báhala* were sometimes instigated by agent-provocateurs who sought to infiltrate and undermine the otherwise peaceful demonstrations to “scare off citizens and to give pretexts to the riot police to unleash violence against the crowds of protesters” (Leontidou 2012: 301; Kitis 2015; Economides & Monastririotis 2009).

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<sup>95</sup> Contrary to the word ‘depoliticisation’ which is a rather politicised term and as such ‘something of a misnomer’ (Flinders & Buller 2006: 296), ‘apoliticisation’ puts emphasis on the *state* of ‘being apolitical’ rather than a process of change in the way politics are expressed. While ‘depoliticisation’ is often hastily understood as the removal of one’s political control or influence, in reality, it does not eliminate ‘the political’ but rather alters where and how decisions are being made. Therefore my use of the term ‘apoliticisation’ aims at better enunciating the negative connotation of the loss of the political whilst leaving less room for such contradictory interpretations.

However, the majority of my interlocutors perceived the *bahalákides* as individuals who come ‘from the outside’ and who see Exarcheia as their playground. Thirty-seven-year-old resident Antigone assured me that “it is not residents who grab the molotovs and run to the streets”, asserting that she has seen “with [her] own eyes, cars arriving during the *epeisodia* and dropping people off”. For Antigone, “*these are not anarchists. I don’t think these individuals have any political convictions. They are a mass mobilised by others. Now, I don’t know who these others are, but whatever the case, this is not politicised (politikopoiimeno). Brawling every night down there is not politicised. Setting bins on fire is not politicised*”.

Voices reprimanding the *báhala* as senseless, apolitical vandalisms, often came from the very people commonly associated with them. When I first introduced my research topic to Aris, his curt response took me by surprise:

“Exarcheia is fake” (*Ta Exarcheia einai prospoiita*).

He then compared the Exarcheia-of-the-present with the Exarcheia of the 1990s he experienced as a student. With a tone of bitterness, he explained that the people he encountered back then were educated and had goals and ideals. “Now, they are like, what should I do? Hm, I’ll be an anarchist!” (*Tora sou leei ti na kano? As gino anarhikos!*). Drawing a line between his generation of anarchists and the “‘new anarchists’, the *bahalákides*” (Panourgia 2019: 238), he insisted that “back then, they didn’t smash people’s cars. At most, a molotov would be thrown against the police (*ante kamia molotov stin astynomia*)”.

The adjective 'prospoiitos' he used to describe Exarcheia is rooted in the verb *prospoioumai*, meaning 'to pretend', and when someone is pretending, they are by definition being disingenuous and inauthentic. Exarcheia's 'fakeness', according to Aris, can be evidenced in the nihilist acts of the *báhala* and the *bahalákides* who assumed the identity of the anarchist, not because of any deeply-held political ideals but because 'they didn't know what else to do'. This view alludes to an understanding of authenticity directly relevant to Exarcheia's production of political affect and effect. In other words, Exarcheia's authenticity and political historicity as a place are here assessed through the authenticity of the *praxis* of specific individuals. Exarcheia, as an erstwhile authentic geography of the past, is compared to Exarcheia as a present-day *pseudotopia*, a simulation (cf. Baudrillard 1981) imbued with fake and fleeting political sensitivities.

Another instance showcasing the disapproval of 'new anarchists' by older anarchists in Exarcheia, is my discussion with Markos, a 25-year old resident. Markos was a singer in a band. I interviewed him on the doorstep of an empty building in the corner of the Exarcheia Square amid a festival in which he and his crew were performing. Exarcheia's vibrant punk rock scene first attracted him when he was sixteen, and he had been living in the neighbourhood since 2012. During his first visits to Exarcheia as a teenager, he had been fascinated with the abundance of unique bookstores, selling niche books, comics and fanzines, which he and his friends read incessantly. As a young musician and having previously played in many different bars around Athens, Markos found that Exarcheia nurtured a community of artists with whom he could associate and form intimate connections on the basis of a shared ideology and appetite for creativity. As he also explained, bar owners he had collaborated with in Exarcheia did not merely pursue profit; instead, he sensed in them a different kind of

mindset that he had not encountered elsewhere in the capital. He attributed this phenomenon to the fact that “most people in Exarcheia are here for a reason”, which he defined as the quest for a “higher culture” that rejected the mainstream [i.e. capitalist] society or anything that might be construed as conformist (Kitis 2015). Markos’ affective relationship with Exarcheia was based on his own rejection of mainstream commodified lifestyles, traditions and “crap pop music”, as he put it.

In an effort to explain to me what ‘old-school anarchists’ were like, Markos recounted the following incident:

*“During my early days in Exarcheia, I walked into a beer shop and was surprised to hear the television blasting a distasteful hip hop song. I thought I was going to throw up and I told the guy at the till: ‘Perhaps you should turn that off in case an anarchist comes in and smashes that tv’. Back then, I thought that anarchists had similar ideas to me, more violent. I mean, I wanted to smash that TV. But I didn’t cause it was someone else’s property, and also because you obviously can’t smash a TV just because MAD<sup>96</sup> is playing bullshit. Anyway, and then the guy suddenly got all serious and told me, ‘no real anarchist would smash this TV’. And then, taking it really personally, added, ‘I am an anarchist and believe me, I have never violated someone else’s property’.”*

Marinos, an old-school anarchist also entertained similar views. He was the owner of a publishing house in Exarcheia since the 1970s. I found him sitting on a chair behind a wooden desk in his bookstore that I remember thinking was too small for the number of

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<sup>96</sup> MAD TV (also known as MAD) is a Greek television network that broadcasts a music-related programme including video clips, music news, and interviews as well as concert footage.

books it hosted. On the desk was an ashtray filled with a dozen crushed cigarette butts drowned in ash and the familiar stale herbal aroma of a chain smoker's lair lingered in the room. Marinos had a calming and confident demeanour. He had the kind of reassuring calmness and grounded confidence that I have always felt (and hoped) is gifted to people as compensation for enduring the relentless and inevitable passage of time. I noticed that his calmness was only disturbed, and his tone only rose when the topic of the *báhala* came up. He spoke with contempt:

*"They are so stupid that they burn bins, sit there, and inhale the smoke! They think they are doing something rebellious. They measure their authenticity by the number of molotov bottles they throw at the cops. Or they do it to see themselves later on the news and say, 'Oh look, here I am!' Violence in the past was symbolic. Now, of course, it hails from somewhere, but it leads nowhere. Anarchist doesn't mean bahalákis. Now these two have nearly become synonymous."*

Marinos was defining the authenticity of these individuals, not in terms of what he believed to be authentic, but in terms of what he thought it was not: 'anarchist doesn't mean bahalákis'. Demos, another self-proclaimed anarchist and a regular in Exarcheia since the late 1970s, drew a similar argument. In our conversations, he was always explicative and elaborate. In congruence with Marinos, but in a less disparaging manner, he explained that in the 70s, the molotov cocktail was used as a 'political instrument' with the intention to provoke. "Why was it a political instrument? Because we didn't just throw it in the air", he said, explaining that molotov cocktails were used with cognisance and in specific events, such as May 1.

*“That’s what a molotov means. And indeed, the next day, they were talking about us, not about May 1. That was a huge advertising campaign for us. That’s how people got to know us. But in the next decades, for many anarchists [the molotov] became a role. It wasn’t a political instrument anymore used for intervention but a role anyone could slip into. Nowadays, they think anarchist means throwing molotovs, and so many anarchists fall for this.”*

In Demos’ view, the molotov had been an object-provocateur, used consciously and symbolically on specific occasions to call special attention and gesticulate the significance of particular events. Now it had become an empty signifier and the material exemplification of the apoliticisation of Exarcheia. The frequency and mode of use of molotov cocktails today were for him, indicative of the performance’s shifting impetus, symbolism, and intention. The ‘intervention’ of the anarchists on May 1 he described, was bridging past and present histories by reminding society of the role of anarchism in the establishment of workers’ rights. The molotov was then the means for communicating that connection. Today, it had become itself ‘the role’, for its use was mistakenly conflated with being an anarchist, reducing the meaning of these street clashes to that of antipolitical performances of (un)intentional slander. Demos continued:

*“[The báhala] defame and provide an alibi for the defamation of the anarchist chóros, first in the eyes of society and secondly in the eyes of the state. We are not interested in whether the state has a negative impression of us, as much as*

*we are interested in society having a negative impression of us. And we can't reverse this thing."*

Reconciling with or seeking the support and approval of the state was nonetheless a paradoxical pursuit. The purpose of anarchist and anti-authoritarian politics is to maintain an antithetical position towards their "constitutive outside" (State 1984; cited in Howarth 2006), namely the state and its institutions. It was, therefore, the acceptance of society that Demos contended to be of foremost importance to the movement. In his opinion, the *báhala* had severed the relationship between anarchists and society and, consequently with Exarcheia. According to Demos, the *báhala* were continuously reproduced and sensationalised by the media, tainting the image of the anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros* and obscuring other issues that the neighbourhood was facing<sup>97</sup>. More worryingly so, the *báhala* were normalised by those causing them, who either did not care or did not fully comprehend the repercussions of their actions. The *báhala* participants, Demos maintained had fallen 'in a trap', exemplified in their role in perpetuating the widespread perception that, any street action, any riot that occurred was an anti-social, apolitical, purposeless act of violence.

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<sup>97</sup> See Chapter 6.

Internal fragmentations: anarchierachy, self-referentiality and political disenchantment

*“It’s easy to call someone ridiculous when you can’t go out there and do it yourself. I understand how someone could ask ‘why would you go and face an entire police squad who is just standing there doing its job and throw a molotov in the street? Nothing is going to happen, apart from maybe some noise and tear gas. Nothing is going to change’. At a first glance, it’s easy to criticise – I get it. ‘Look at what these idiots are doing!’ On the other hand, you have these 15-year-olds and these 23-year-olds, who, instead of sitting at a café all day womanising, they do this. If some consider this form of protest small and futile, then they have become like the rest of the fifteen-year-olds. Probably all they care about is womanising, and they hide behind political pretexts.”*

This is what Zacharias, a thirty-year-old man who frequented the Social Centre told me. When I shared with him the overall criticisms regarding the *báhala* and the *bahalákides*, Zacharias defended them, arguing that it is simply a matter of “how you choose to express yourself”. He explained that he did not self-identify as an anarchist, nor had he ever participated in demonstrations or riots because this was his personal choice. His supportive stance towards those who chose to participate in the *báhala* was expressed alongside a feeling of doubt about the genuineness of those who condescendingly decided not to but instead preferred to ‘sit at cafes’ and use their involvement in anarchist politics as a pretext to attract women. More specifically, Zacharias was referring to individuals whose:

*“[...] praxes only go as far it suits them: the organisation of a festival, a music event, some political or philosophical debate. They will just play their social game and have a good time. Most of them have never thrown a molotov, and others used to but are too old to do so now.”*

Zacharias was questioning the transparency of long-term organisational frameworks and the discursive politics of AK, implying that they were pretentious and self-centred. Loukas had once also expressed disbelief in the anti-hierarchy of overt permanent organisations such as the AK. Citing this as one of his reasons for never joining the anarchist chóros, he argued that “the absence of a formal hierarchy results in the emergence of informal hierarchies or anarchierachies”, which in his opinion, were more dangerous. For him, having a formal hierarchy in a political system was not necessarily about curtailing the freedom of those in ‘lower’ ranks but about attributing responsibilities to those accountable. On the other hand, an informal hierarchy formed out of the natural advantages and charismas of certain people over others made it more challenging or even impossible to place accountability on individuals when things went wrong<sup>98</sup>.

On a similar note, Zacharias contended that ‘anarchierachies’ were impossible to avoid because “the human factor cannot be removed from one’s political praxis and logos. Some people will always be more influential while others will always be more easily influenced”. Older discussants such as Leonidas opposed such fatalistic views and argued that *“doing away with hierarchies is possible but needs a lot of work. Of course it*

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<sup>98</sup> In his monograph, Apoifis (2017) provides a number of examples on how the internal asymmetries and inequalities that manifest within the anarchist and the anti-authoritarian movements in Athens. See pages 112-115.

can happen! It **has** happened<sup>99</sup>. It's not utopian. It has also existed in the past. The issue is that ideas are great, but somehow the human factor destroys everything", and echoing Marinos, he fervently added:

*"We say that the revolution should first occur within us. I've come to believe that this is true. We should become the change we want to see. That is, we cannot come in here [Exarcheia] carrying our inner miserable self in a group of people and be the ones who create the problem and then blame others."*

The common denominator of all the aforementioned accounts is their assessment of self-authenticity. Despite Zacharias' assertion that each person's choices and mode of praxis were a matter of 'personal expression', it became clear that this claim was not enough to exempt one from criticism. It is, however, argued that political praxis was not only assessed in terms of its practicality (will a *báhalo* achieve something? Do its destructive means bring constructive ends?), but also through a lens of individual sincerity and genuineness (is the *báhalo* ridden in potent personal significances that ought to be expressed?). The common measure in Zacharias' argument and that of the differing opinions of Loukas, Demos and Marinos was the perceived disingenuousness and inauthenticity in the particular modes of action and not merely the fact that they could be considered inefficient or unproductive.

Lack of self-authenticity in a political movement where the principles of direct democracy, horizontal organisation and collective solidarity are fervently advocated is

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<sup>99</sup> I believe Leonidas was here referring to egalitarian, self-organised communities that existed and which continue to exist in different parts of the world.

equated to self-centeredness that directly opposes them and jeopardises the integrity of anti-authoritarian and anarchist structures. A recurring theme in my fieldwork was the belief that Exarcheia was inundated with individuals in the ‘quest for an identity’. Demos defined the neighbourhood as the locus where “young, defiant individuals who feel ‘rebellious’ search for an identity”. Remarks on this identity-searching of young people often carried negative and derisive connotations. These were established in the assumption that such young persons would be inclined to superficially attach themselves to the anarchist milieu and simply perform a role without a sincere emotional investment, a conscious awareness and a genuine pre-existing interest in the *logos* and praxis ascribed to this ideology. For Marinos, the problem of apoliticisation was not the identity-searching of young people *per se* but rather their lack of *ypostasi* (substance, hypostasis) when deciding to enter the anarchist chóros. “Ideologies do not mould humans”, added Marinos emphatically. Instead, it was the spirit and character of a person that, according to him, should draw individuals closer to the ideology that best represented their beliefs.

It was in this sense that identity-seeking was problematised by Marinos. One other element of this problematisation was the “self-referentiality of Exarcheia” (*i aftoanaforikotita ton Exarcheion*), which was often mentioned in my fieldwork. Self-referentiality was juxtaposed to images of the ‘opportunistic’, ‘power-thirsty’ subject who comes to Exarcheia and joins the movement, not because they want to resist an oppressive system, but because they want to be part of the system themselves, *outside* the movement. Some of my discussants often asserted that such individuals would view political discourse and action in Exarcheia as a source of socio-cultural capital and the spaces that produced it as a political baptismal font (*politiki kolimpithra*) and a

springboard they could use for their personal advancement. Consider the following excerpt from my fieldnotes of the conversation I had with a young man who was at the time very active in the political circles of Exarcheia:

*“When we sat down at the cafe, Christos said that he and his friend Kostas were over the anti-authoritarian movement. Christos said he had now demystified Exarcheia and wanted to slowly distance himself. He told Kostas the other day ‘Can you believe that Tsipras will be mentioned in history books, but nobody is ever going to know about us?!’ He felt that he and Kostas could go really far, and if Kostas didn’t follow him in his political endeavours, he would do it alone. He said ‘I’m going to burn bridges. I know they are going to call us traitors, but I don’t care. They’ve been stuck here for years. I’m not saying that the chóros hasn’t offered a lot in terms of networking and theory. But what about action?’.” (Exarcheia, 16/12/2016)*

Christos did not want to be ‘stuck’ in Exarcheia and wanted to ‘burn bridges’ with the neighbourhood as a political and politicising meeting point since it had nothing more to offer beyond knowledge and connections. He considered being enclosed within the anti-authoritarian *chóros* as being limiting and unproductive in the context of his efforts to go ‘really far’ in building a mainstream political career. Being fully aware of how others in the anti-authoritarian *chóros* would perceive him, Christos animated the persona of the opportunistic individual described earlier. His explanation of his own decisions is important to grasp and consider. Beyond classifying them as ‘treacherous opportunism’, one could understand Christos’ claims in the context of unanticipated disenchantment. I

find this quote from Uri Gordon's 'Anarchy Alive!' relevant in partly explaining Christos' decision to leave the anti-authoritarian milieu:

"Diversity is by itself today a core anarchist value, making the movement's goals very *open-ended*. Diversity leaves little space for notions of revolutionary closure or detailed blueprints and designs for a free society..."

(2008: 5 emphasis mine).

This lack of 'revolutionary closure' could describe my feeling at the Panhellenic meeting of AK in Nosotros I had attended with Vicky in the early days of my fieldwork in November 2016. At the end of the meeting, during which various organisational and communicational issues were raised, I turned to her and hesitantly commented that it had not been clear to me whether the long discussion had been productive and led to any substantial conclusions, to which Vicky swiftly responded: "Sometimes the point is not to be productive". I sensed that it was this kind of *meaningful unproductivity* and the 'open-endedness' of the movement's goals that Christos did not concur with. Christos' disenchantment and Vicky's remark point to Exarcheia's political aesthetic. This *meaningful unproductivity* can be interpreted as a conscious act of resistance to middle-class aesthetics and neoliberal concerns such as efficiency, individuality, competition and productivity. Positioning themselves against such "regimes of performance" (Morrissey 2015), these meetings were loci of productive non-fruitation propelled by incessant ideological fermentation and remained indifferent to fixed goals and performance indicators. The discussions were a performative accomplishment in themselves and thus another mode of *revolutionary practice*.

Exarcheia remained self-referential. At the same time, it would be naïve to view Exarcheia as utterly detached from the rest of society. As I have previously argued, Exarcheia remains the state's constitutive outside, as much part of the political system as any other political milieu. The dynamic relationship between Exarcheia and institutionalised politics begs for a Foucauldian understanding of power not as a privilege to be possessed by the dominant class but as an active relation to be exercised strategically. Michel Foucault argues that “power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who do not have it; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them” (1995: 27). I may add here that power not only *invests them* but invests *in* them. I am not merely referring to people like Christos who eagerly equip themselves with Exarcheian social and political capital to further their own ambitions and dreams, but also to Exarcheia's undeniable role as a source of and resource for mainstream politics. I do not just refer to the fact that many leftist and centre-left politicians gained their political capital through their early associations with Exarcheia. More interestingly, I refer to how Exarcheia readily ‘exported’ its modus operandi –solidarity structures, social pharmacies, social kitchens– during the financial crisis and the long summer of migration (cf. Rozakou 2016; Rakopoulos 2016).

According to Demos, self-referentiality as a collective trait of the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu originated in the 1990s. Until then, “the movement used to be multidimensional”. However, from the 1990s onwards, Demos observed that “multidimensional praxes became more self-referential”.

He identified the anarchist chóros' issue of self-referentiality as follows:

*“The praxis and logos of anarchists and anti-authoritarians had an effect on public opinion but not on society. [The anarchist chóros] creates identities because it doesn't have continuity and does not strive for continuity. Don't forget that because of modern society's individualisation, broken social bonds and fragmented individuals, it is difficult to create collectives with perspective and commitment... there are no ties after all. What could someone commit to, and how long for? Hence these phenomena are temporary, and participation is temporary... two years, three years.”*

Demos further asserted that the “antiformalism” (*aformalismos*) of the anarchist movement never managed to ‘escape’ its reproduction amongst youth and did not expand socially because “it felt strong”. It had a remarkable ability to reproduce because it reproduced like an ‘adolescent phenomenon’:

*“What is the adolescent phenomenon? A person who searches for identity, searches for companions (sintrofous), searches for relationships. But not just that. The phenomenon of the adolescent person refers to searching for an ideological identity, for cultural identity. The search is continuous and multi-layered. In this quest, the easiest and most accessible identity is that of the anarchist.”*

In this regard, the openness of the movement was a double-edged sword. It made the movement accessible to individuals with a genuine interest in the common struggle

against oppressive societal structures, but also to those who did not have the *ypostasi* (substance, hypostasis) required, who cultivated a culture of self-importance *within* the movement and for whom ideology, in the words of Chomsky, “serv[ed] as a mask for self-interest” (2013: 45). Vicky observed that “*even those with the best intentions self-reproduce* (aftoanaparagonte). *They do it for themselves, inwardly. It is a kind of self-affirmation, self-satisfaction, self-referentiality*”.

For Demos, self-referentiality in the anti-authoritarian chóros referred to actions whose impact (*epidrasi*) on society was not functional (*litourgiki*) but spectacular (*theamatiki*), in the sense that it was *literally* offered as a spectacle. I believe that Christos’ disenchantment discussed earlier was rooted in this lack of contentment with ‘the spectacular’. Yet, the ‘spectacular’ here, devoid of function and purpose, can still denote a *meaningful unproductivity* and credit this particular aesthetic with a *spectral* quality. Despite their current political disenchantment, older interlocutors like Demos and Aris still recognised Exarcheia as the locus of the reproduction of politics of discontent that never grows old or tired, for it is recurrently rekindled with the energy of rebellious, discontented youths that are attracted to Exarcheia’s anarchist ethos. It is precisely because of this innate pertinacity that Exarcheia’s politics also appeal to the realm of the spectral (cf. Derrida 1994). The neighbourhood’s fragmented spaces piece together to bring about the perpetual invocation of an *absent-present* revolution ‘against the system’ that never really happens. Whether in the form of weekly, so-called anarchist-police clashes, annual commemorative protests or denunciatory material and discursive iterations, Exarcheian politics can often appear to be self-referential; their revolutionary direction against the status quo emerges as a mere apparition of itself, a mere revolutionary exercise

Beyond the *báhala*: a matter of authenticity or a matter of practice?

In this chapter, we have seen how the emotive reception of the *báhala* as banal, futile vandalism and their recurrent occurrence criminalises Exarcheia, tarnishes the image of the anarchist and anti-authoritarian *chóros* and puts a strain on the relationship between anarchists and residents. The majority of my interlocutors perceived the *báhala* as meaningless street acts, void of political purpose and, by consequence, counterproductive. The *báhala* were deemed apolitical and apoliticising, for they had the potency to diminish Exarcheia's political affectivity and incite feelings of discontent and disenchantment that often spilt over into scorn. Discussions regarding the apolitical nature of the *báhala* signified the general apoliticisation of Exarcheia as Athens' political topography *par excellence*.

*Apoliticisation* or the loss of 'the political' in Exarcheia is often explained in terms of a loss of authenticity, specifically the authenticity of the neighbourhood's quintessential political subjectivity – the anarchist. It was clear that my interlocutors understood the problems of apoliticisation, anarchierarchy and self-referentiality to be intrinsically connected to the lack of genuine political sensitivities of self-proclaimed anarchists and anti-authoritarians within the activist milieu of Exarcheia. The notion of the 'authentic Self' was a topic that emerged constantly in these discussions and was sometimes hailed by some of my interlocutors as a prerequisite to resolving issues within the anti-authoritarian *chóros*. Indeed, discussants like Marinos and Leonidas traced the problem through reflexive introspection. Addressing internal fragmentations and power asymmetries could not be done merely through "negotiations, discussions and consensus" (cf. Apoifis 2017: 113) but required, in Leonidas' words, 'a revolution from

within'. This was, in my understanding, a revolution against one's egotism that could finally enable the existence of a free, egalitarian society. Leonidas' words echoed the Rousseauian (early modernist) juxtaposition between 'the inner' and 'the outer' Self, where the former is 'true, genuine, pure and original' and the latter "a mere shadow, something derived, adulterated and peripheral" (Guignon 2004: 43). As American philosopher Charles Guignon explains, in this dichotomy, "to be authentic" demands being "in touch with what lies within, that is the inner self, the self no one sees except you". As such, "our outer avowals can be called 'authentic' only to the extent that they honestly and fully express the inner" (ibid).

What I wish to highlight here is how the perceived authenticity of the political subjectivity of the anarchist emerges as the benchmark for determining the authenticity of Exarcheia as a hub that maintains the ethic of the Greek (radical) Left. Hence, although anarchierarchy (and to a lesser extent self-referentiality) are viewed as the collective failure of individuals to be 'authentic', their 'failure' renders the Exarcheia-in-the mind a fake artificial place. I argue that this is because authenticity is affectively distributed between people, materialities and the ecologies they constitute. The sense of apoliticisation and disillusionment towards Exarcheia discussed by my interlocutors is not an abstract phenomenon but an emotively charged process that is tangible, in the sense that it was 'both seen and felt' (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

The question 'who is the authentic anarchist' has of course no answer since it resonates with the inherent essentialism and dualism of (in)authenticity (cf. Theodossopoulos 2013) that is encountered in Exarcheia and informs vernacular interpretations of the narratives and praxes of anti-authoritarians and anarchists. As we saw, discussions on

authenticity initially emerged through the dichotomous contestation between those who took part in the *báhala* vs those who opposed them. The subjectivity of the ‘inauthentic’ anarchist was identified both in the trope of the *bahalákis* as well as the trope of the pretentious philosophising individual described by Zacharias and was further consolidated through other condescending characterisations such as “rambling philosopher” (*ampelofilosofos*) or “pseudo-intellectual” (*pseftodianooumenos*) that I noted in fleeting conversations during my fieldwork. At the same time, the preferred mode of political praxis of either trope was scornfully dismissed. Phrases such as ‘same, old thing’ (*kathe fora ta idia*) and rhetorical questions like ‘and what did they manage to achieve?’ (*kai tora ti katalavan?*) were used to comment both on the *báhala* and the stagnant regurgitation of anarchist philosophies. In interviews or impromptu discussions with interlocutors, other context-specific meanings of ‘the authentic’ were evidenced in recurring – and often absolutist - sayings such as: ‘the *báhala* are void of political meaning’, ‘anarchist doesn’t mean *bahalákis*, ‘the molotov is used incorrectly’, ‘a real anarchist would never smash a TV’, ‘violence against the police is never pointless’, ‘endless philosophical debates are pointless’, and so on.

For my interlocutors in this chapter, the majority of whom were over 40, the ‘once authentic’ referred to the days of their young adulthood and was constantly compared to the ‘inauthentic *present*’. This perception of inauthenticity as a malaise innate to modernity has been thoroughly discussed by post-modernist thinkers (Baudrillard 1981; Foucault 1988; Rorty 1989) and in the social sciences (Theodossopoulos 2013; Benson 2013; Shumway 2007). Ironically, the fervent ‘quest for authenticity’ is superficially addressed through what anthropologist Dean MacCannell called “staged authenticity” (1973). Both seem to constitute “symptoms of a deep crisis in modern

person-environment relationships and of a mistaken belief that authenticity can be achieved through the manipulation of form” (Dovey 1985:33).

“Staged authenticity” was first conceived by MacCannell to discuss ethnic tourism and has since been widely deployed in tourist studies in contexts ranging from heritage tourism in North Carolina (Chhabra et al 2003), ecotourism in Southern Thailand (Kontogeorgopoulos 2004) to cultural tourism in transnational adoption (Quiroz 2012) and penal tourism in Canada (Walby & Piché 2015). ‘Staged authenticity’ refers to the enactment of a culture by locals to give the tourist an impression of authenticity (cf. Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos 2004). According to MacCannell, there is an “aura of superficiality” to these proceedings that the tourist audience might not always be aware of (1973: 595). In his inception of the term ‘staged authenticity’, MacCannell takes cue from Erving Goffman’s (1959) distinction between the ‘front’ versus ‘back’ region of social settings, with ‘front’ being a stage reserved for hosts, guests or customers (i.e. reception offices, shops, parlours etc.) and the ‘back’ being where members of a culture withdraw to relax between performances (i.e. kitchens, washrooms etc.). MacCannell posits that in tourist settings, things are sometimes constructed in a way that gives visitors the (false) impression that they have entered the ‘back room’. Further developing this idea, he argues that this ‘staging’ does not involve only “architectural arrangements” but that “it is primarily a social one, based on the type of social performance that is staged in place” (MacCannell 1973: 590).

I will further examine the concept of ‘staged authenticity’ in Chapter 7, where I discuss tourism and commodification in Exarcheia. However, I will presently detach the notion from its ‘conventional’ setting (tourist studies). Having discussed my interlocutors’

perception of the *báhala* as an inauthentic, staged performance, I proposed a parallel argument: one that does not contradict but simply puts aside the importance of the authenticity of political subjectivities to focus on the deeper historical and political signification of the *báhala* that in my opinion transcends individual intentions of performers or perceptions of authenticity. I have argued that rather than performances, the *báhala* and the commemorative marches are political performatives that, in their ritualistic, banal repetition, teach performers how to enact the partisan logic of the streets whilst preserving the historical and ethical legacy of the Struggles of the Greek Left.

When viewed as forms of revolutionary practice, the 'staged' quality of protests is not to be judged according to their perceived degree of authenticity but rather with reference to their instructive and preparatory nature. From this perspective, their 'authenticity' is deemed irrelevant, for their potency lies in their recurring execution. In turn, their reiteration affirms the archival properties of Exarcheia. As modes of revolutionary exercise, *báhala* and other collective street acts constitute part of the Exarcheian archival politics. Exarcheia emerges once more as an archival space that retains and expresses a specific political history: the history of Greek leftists and urban subalterns, state oppression, police violence and resistance to it. The *báhala* garner all their ammunition - both conceptual (i.e. political discourse) and literal (i.e. the know-how of molotov and barricade-making) - through Exarcheia's tangible and intangible politico-cultural infrastructure maintained and conserved in this unwavering archival space. Therefore, the *báhala*, whose epicentre is undeniably Exarcheia, represent the tangible enactment of its archive and the corporeal dimension of a multidimensional process of remembering.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE 'EXARCHEIA PROBLEM': POLITICS OF NEGLECT AND TERRITORIAL STIGMATISATION

Following the global financial meltdown of 2007-2008, Greece experienced its own debt crisis that officially started in 2010. Successive bailout packages by the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund, and accompanying structural adjustments imposed on the country had dire consequences for many Greeks. Plummeting wages, increased unemployment and a sharp deterioration in education, health and welfare services became paradigmatic of a period that Greek and foreign media repeatedly referred to as 'the Crisis' (*I Krisi*).

Throughout his time in office (2012-2015), the then Prime Minister and centre-right New Democracy (ND) leader, Antonis Samaras, implemented a series of austerity measures. Several years into the financial collapse, the impoverishment of thousands of Greeks accentuated the chasm between the working and middle classes and gave the 'economic crisis' a political face (Apoifis 2017). In 2015, the newcomer radical left-wing party of SYRIZA and its young leader Alexis Tsipras charged onto the electoral stage with a promising air of change and the motto "Hope is Coming" (*i Elpida Erhetai*) – inspired by a song that became the official jingle of the 'No' campaign in Chile against Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial rule – "La alegría ya vien" (*Happiness is coming*). SYRIZA – who was in office at the start of my fieldwork – won the 2015 elections, interestingly, with the motto "Left for the first time" (*Proti fora aristera*). Soon after, Tsipras and the

leader of the populist rightwing Independent Greeks party ANEL, Panos Kammenos, formed a coalition government that, for many, was an unorthodox and ‘unholy alliance’<sup>100</sup>. Kammenos was appointed Minister of Defence and economist Yanis Varoufakis Minister of Finance before being replaced by Euclid Tsakalotos after his resignation in July 2015.

During its first months in office, Tsipras’ government tried to adopt an anti-austerity policy, but the hopeful promises of a post-austerity vision for Greece were quickly broken. Despite the public’s vote against it, the government accepted a third round of austerity measures, known as the Third Memorandum. Following its acceptance, SYRIZA lost public support and confidence from some of its own MPs, who split to form a new party called Popular Unity (*Laiki Enotita*), led by Panagiotis Lafazanis. Tsipras resigned and called for a general election in September 2015, for which he received a solid vote of confidence. SYRIZA then renewed its coalition with ANEL. Despite SYRIZA’s victory, the palpable sense of disenchantment that permeated Greek society during that time was reflected in the unprecedented abstention rate from the national election process (44.1%)<sup>101</sup>. The SYRIZA-ANEL government continued to rule until July 2019, when, following SYRIZA’s defeat at the European Parliament elections in Greece, Alexis Tsipras was forced to hold legislative elections. This led to the victory of the conservatives (ND) under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Source: <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/07/04/politics/syriza-anel-mia-anieri-symmaxia-pou-volepse-kai-ton-tsipra-kai-ton-kammeno/> (last accessed 5.6.2021).

<sup>101</sup> Source: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/politics/831613/i-megalyteri-apochi-tis-metapoliteysis/> (last accessed 12.2.2022).

<sup>102</sup> For comprehensive discussions of the Greek crisis see indicatively: Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2018; Papataxiarhis 2018; Rakopoulos 2019; Laskos and Tsakalotos 2013; Douzinas 2013; Knight 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016; Knight and Stewart 2016; Kirtsoglou 2021.

The period I conducted my fieldwork in Exarcheia was a time of significant change in the arena of Greek politics when the leftist government of SYRIZA was succeeded by the liberal-conservative ND. In this chapter, I document and examine how locals in Exarcheia experienced their neighbourhood before, during and after that political transition. I have divided the chapter into two parts. The discussions outlined in the first part of the chapter recount the years 2016-2019, a time when SYRIZA was still in power, while the second part documents the events that succeeded ND's electoral victory in July 2019 and its pompous promises to 'clean up Exarcheia'. This was a period in the aftermath of austerity, but with its socio-economic effects still visible and sorely felt by most Greeks. It was also a period that followed what was deemed the 'peak' of Europe's so-called migration crisis of 2015. Throughout this chapter, I aim to explore the effects and tensions that emerged in the neighbourhood in light of these socio-political and economic changes. In Part I, I capture and examine the social, material and affective expressions of these ramifications and I explore issues of criminality, fear and insecurity as discussed by individuals who live, work in or frequent Exarcheia. In Part II, I interrogate processes of territorial stigmatisation, Exarcheia's emergence as a 'problem area', its relationship with the state and how it was imagined by locals. I record a number of competing neighbourhood visions and further disentangle conflicting perceptions of what constitutes an 'authentic' Exarcheia.

PART I: DECONSTRUCTING 'EXATHLEIA': VERNACULAR CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF  
MORAL AND MATERIAL 'WRETCHEDNESS' IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In the aftermath of the 'refugee crisis': geographies of solidarity, crime and  
insecurity

For much of its history, Exarcheia was the breeding ground of social-movement based  
solidarity and autonomous structures of organisation that offered support to oppressed  
and marginalised 'others'. The innate know-how of vertical modes of spatial  
restructuring, rooted in the *archival memory* of Exarcheia constitutes the material facet  
of a revolutionary practice that performs and maintains the organisational and ethical  
legacy of the Greek Left.

Beyond the understanding of archives as stagnant memories locked up in documents, I  
argue that the archive in Exarcheia reinvents itself as a living, breathing mnemonic  
entity, made up of motion and emotion. The memories of the Exarcheian archive are  
both corporeal performatives (Butler 1988;1992), iterated in the repetitive practice of  
learning bodies (see Chapter 5), and material as well as spatial forms of solidarity.

It has been argued that squats and pre-existing informal economies, such as time banks,  
social groceries and pharmacies, collective kitchens and local assemblies, all emerged in  
Exarcheia as "inherited organisational characteristics" of a nearly "native notion" of  
solidarity (Rakopoulos 2015; Arampatzi 2016; Vaiou & Kalandides 2016). During the

long summer of migration in 2015, and in its aftermath in 2016, Exarcheian solidararians readily offered their assistance in an effort to alleviate the ‘crisis of reception’ (cf. Rozakou 2016). Solidarian histories and biographies were rooted in traditions of dissidence, persecution and political marginalization (Panourgia 2009). Being, metaphorically speaking, ‘children of the Left’, “strangers” themselves in the sense of politically “misplaced” and “displaced” subjects (Warner 2002: 75), Exarcheians formed a (counter)public of support for the incoming refugees. In an effort to subvert *the power asymmetries of biopolitical humanitarianism* (cf. Coutin 2005; Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2015), Exarcheian solidararians strove to enact counter-hegemonic sociality platforms (Rozakou 2016). The neighbourhood’s squats operated as spaces where the state’s unwanted guests could become residents with equal rights. Compared to state-run camps, squats allowed refugees to find support networks from within the city. As opposed to the isolated and monotonous life in remote camps, such as Skaramagkas, life in the squats of Exarcheia allowed the displaced to resist passivity, take initiative, and get directly involved in the very issues that concerned them. Squats had their own assemblies where ideas were put on the table, and decisions were made through direct democratic procedures. Individual squat assemblies and a larger coordinating squat assembly would usually take place once a week. In squats like Notara and City Plaza, solidararians tried to convey the idea of autonomy to the squatters and refrained from acting on their behalf. The term ‘hospitality’ - with all its connotations of asymmetry (cf. Candea & Da Col 2012; Herzfeld 2012)- did not constitute part of the solidarian vernacular, for many solidararians claimed to see migrants as ‘comrades’ in the common struggle against the state, rather than as obligated guests.

Despite often being a better alternative to state-run camps, squats also evidenced the drawbacks and impediments inherent in any mode of organisation. Interlocutors involved in the squatting movement noted the ethical dilemmas and discord related to interpersonal conflict and often reminded me that any collective action is not immune to the 'human factor', personal ambitions and intransparencies.

Exarcheia is the only place where I can breathe", admitted Markos, a 25-year-old resident who was the lead singer of a popular punk-rock band. *"It is the only place",* he continued, *"where, in my opinion, one can witness solidarity. Anyone can get asylum here. You hear all these blinded fascists outside Exarcheia cursing at immigrants, telling you that they are all "dirt" and "criminals" and putting them all in the same category. But this is of course not true. Some might be or become criminals, just like in any population and society. But the migrants I have met here are great people who work really hard for very little. I know someone here from Bangladesh who works at a local grill on Alexandra Avenue and who, every time he finishes work, brings whatever food is left and distributes it to people at the Square. For people like him, Exarcheia is a refuge where they can find protection".*

Drawing from his own experience, Markos spoke of a culture of solidarity that he felt was unique to Exarcheia. At the same time, he seemed to recognise that the neighbourhood's openness was, as he described it, "both a blessing and a curse" because it meant that "anyone could find their way in". Exarcheia's 'open borders' also rendered the neighbourhood vulnerable to individuals who *"taking advantage of police absence and the anti-authoritarian ethos of the neighbourhood used it as a hideout to carry out their criminal activities undisturbed"*. Kyriakos, a 33-year-old resident who was on the

front line of the squatting movement and had helped open up a number of squats in the early days of the 'crisis', argued that *"squats where people hide stolen laptops, phones and bags are not squats. Squats are those buildings occupied to shelter people and families. I am in full support of all that"*.

Another man, Spyros, 47, who owned a sandwich deli, used to live in an apartment near the Square. Spyros was Athenian and had been frequenting Exarcheia since he was a teenager. He had chosen it as his place of work and residence because he enjoyed the neighbourhood's vibrancy and identified with its spirit of solidarity and inclusiveness. Following some robberies and knife attacks around his apartment block, he decided to move out of the neighbourhood. When asked to explain the changes he experienced, he said, somewhat timidly:

*"When the refugees started coming, the anarchists tried to help. I was myself preparing and distributing meals in a nearby squat every day for weeks. The anarchists created squats to host [refugees], but some of the people they accommodated were of questionable character. Things got out of hand, and the anarchists didn't know what to do."*

Though Spyros seemed hesitant to elaborate, Thomas, who had lived and worked in Exarcheia for fifteen years, and who had been actively involved in the refugee squatting movement, granted me a more extensive insight:

*"During the refugee crisis, Exarcheia embraced thousands of people and tried to help them. These people fled war and came to a neighbourhood that loved*

*them before they even got here. But in the end, showing solidarity to a big group of people comes with a cost. Not everyone in that population you are welcoming embraces the same values as you do. Some people turned against the basic principles of the [anarchist] movement. We started hearing about incidences of rape, robberies... People of all sorts came to the squats and robbed fellow anarchists; turned against the very people who fought to keep the police out and create a safe space for them. It's fine if you don't respect it. It's fine if you don't share the same values. No one asked you to partake politically. But don't criminalise our neighbourhood."*

Thomas argued that the refugee reception crisis posed some of the biggest challenges the anarchist movement had faced thus far. Anarchists found themselves divided between those who wanted to act upon criminal phenomena and those who refused to do so because it opposed their principles. "We thought, what are we going to do? Become cops in our own neighbourhood? In the end silence prevailed", admitted Thomas. The 'silence' he was referring to, however, did not pertain to the 'quiet acceptance' of crime. He explained:

*"Suddenly we had to welcome thousands of people who have fled war and hardship. Exarcheia was the only neighbourhood that truly welcomed them. We were fighting the cops to protect their own squats! But within these squats, there were some anti-social individuals. And when I say "anti-social", I mean individuals who turned against the resistance ethic of Exarcheia and its ethos of solidarity."*

To my knowledge, most squats operated under a no-drug, no-alcohol policy. The conflation of migrants, anarchists and criminals, subverted the genuine efforts of Exarcheians to establish practical forms of solidarity, by throwing the safety of squats into question. At the same time, I can recall an instance that exemplifies the daily difficulties the squats were facing. Early in my fieldwork, I asked Zacharias to help me get access to one of the local squats as a volunteer. We walked together to the squat, and he asked me to wait while he went to speak to his solidararian friend on my behalf, so I sat on a sofa near the entrance. While I was waiting, a young Moroccan man who used to live in the squat came to visit. Everyone was cordially welcoming him and hugging him. Another man who, as I was later explained, was Algerian, started provoking him with insults about his mother and his country that went along the lines of ‘you Moroccans are all thieves’. Although the young Moroccan man was evidently losing his cool, the Algerian man kept repeating himself, walking around the Moroccan man in circles with a self-satisfied smirk until the latter finally swung a punch at him and dragged him outside. A commotion ensued with women and children screaming until at last the Algerian man run away and the Moroccan man was being calmed down.

After we left, Zacharias explained that this was a bad time for the organisers of this squat and that they were not accepting any new members because there were already too many disagreements on how to handle their internal affairs. To use his exact words: “the solidararians are at loggerheads with each other” (*oi allileggyoi einai sta mahairia*). Interestingly enough, one reason for that was the Algerian man I had just seen. As Zacharias explained, he was mentally ill and had been previously admitted to a psychiatric clinic in Athens. Although his exact story was not known, this man had managed to somehow escape from the clinic and had found himself in Exarcheia, where

this particular squat took him in. During his time there, his instability and unpredictability had caused various problems and compromised the other squatters' safety. His case was a major point of contention among the members of the squat's committee, who did not know how to deal with it. According to Zacharias, some of the solidarians in the squat believed that he needed professional help. They argued for his readmission to a clinic both for his own safety and that of the other squatters, while others viewed this as unethical and refused to facilitate his locking up in an institution, he had run away from in the first place.

Beyond the tensions and internal dilemmas embedded in the running and organisation of local squats, I have also recorded instances of antagonism between residents, anarchists and certain migrants. All migrants were not necessarily ideologically attuned to solidarians. This created frictions and sometimes perpetuated the negative politics of deservingness and eligibility (Cabot 2013). From behind his desk, George, the owner of a local bookstore, exclaimed:

*“You should bear in mind that these people are not migrants. Migrants are in the squats and the hospitality centres. These people you see here [in the Square] are pure delinquents. They did not migrate to escape war. You got the migrants that come here to rescue their families from a war, with two or three children. There are migrants like those who run the ‘Migrant Orchard’, who have found orchards in Oinofyta and cultivate them. They come here every other Sunday and sell products. There is the Refugee Caravan (Karavani Prosfygon) and the Notara Squat that accommodates around 40 families. These are migrants. These people work or try to work. They try, since they*

*found themselves here, to integrate in the society. It is not a coincidence that most of them try to learn Greek. These ones here [points outside] don't care about integrating. They have just found an area where they know nobody will bother them, an area that is not being policed. They can do whatever they want. They are like a woodworm (saraki) that enters the wood and will not come out unless the wood is destroyed."*

George, a self-proclaimed anarchist, had spent all his life in Exarcheia and had opened Bibliotheque on the neighbourhood square four years ago. He referred to Exarcheia as his "birthplace" (*genethlios topos*), even though he was thirteen when he first moved into the neighbourhood. Transgressing literal definitions of 'birthplace' as the 'place where one is born', George viewed Exarcheia as his 'birthplace', for it was the neighbourhood of his *becoming* or as biographer John Forster once referred to the town where Charles Dickens lived as a boy, "the birthplace of his fancy" (2008: 35). The early readings, ideas and imaginations that moulded George can be traced back to his adolescent years in Exarcheia. His character, peculiarities, lifeviews and ideological positionality had been shaped by his lived experience of his surroundings in this neighbourhood. "This is the place where I grew and which has now become part of me", he explained, and then exhaling the smoke from his cigarette, added rather poetically, "*I imagine that all neighbourhoods take the form of paradise, while at the same time giving us a taste of hell. In other words, all neighbourhoods have both good and bad traits. Two things can happen to you in the place where you grow up. You can either hate it too much, or you love it too much.*"

Briefly glancing out at the Square, George seemed to be indulging in bittersweet reminiscence.

*"[people] don't know, and they are not aware of what this place is really about. This neighbourhood here has been built through the collective effort of many people who tried to create a place where they could feel more comfortable and free. Many people don't know and don't respect the history this Square carries. They just think it is what it looks like. Well, it's so much more. Behind it, it has thousands of names and people who don't live anymore; people who have been killed."*

Indeed, the Square was inundated with history or rather *histories* and *istories* (cf. Herzfeld 2020). George had lived in Exarcheia long enough to have witnessed the 'glorious days' (*endoxes meres*) of the square during the early post-dictatorship years when it was a space of ideological ferment and resistance to the new political status quo, a haunt for important and inspiring people. He was lamenting the 'downfall' of the square and subsequently, Exarcheia as a whole came with the introduction of drugs, the (initially) slow creep of gentrification (Christakis 2009: 25-27) and, in recent years, gang crime. Like *Navarinou Park* before it (Cappuccini 2018), the square had become the epicentre of organised crime activities and the bone of contention for territorial control between traffickers. George distinguished the 'decent' and 'deserving' refugees and migrants he had encountered from the delinquent, disrespectful criminals that intimidated him almost daily, while his use of the word 'woodworm' to refer to them strongly echoes other bio-social metaphors such as 'parasite' used for migrants and usually encountered in (far) right political and media anti-migrant discourses (Musolff

2012; Baider & Constantinou 2014). In an effort to avoid criminalising migrant subjectivities, George refused to see these individuals as ‘migrants’ altogether. For him, the drug dealers were ‘pure delinquents’ who, like woodworms, infested the neighbourhood, taking advantage of its tolerance and the absence of police.

I argue that in Exarcheia, the binary logic of determinacy that underpins official asylum processes (Cabot 2013) is both *subverted* and *perpetuated*. Along with the anti-hegemonic solidarity platforms and the unscrutinised and indiscriminate acceptance of migrant subjects, a parallel discourse of differentiation between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ migrant started to emerge. The politics of (in)authenticity here dictated anew the conceptualisation of subjectivities in binary terms. This time it was not the anarchist but the migrant/refugee that was evaluated in terms of authenticity: the genuine and desirable migrant/refugee who is respectful to Exarcheia’s ethos of solidarity and contributes to the local community was juxtaposed with the delinquent migrant/refugee who posed a threat to the Exarcheian ethos. These perceptions were not based on “narrative tropes” related to migrants’ life histories and “recognisable arcs of flight” (Cabot 2013: 457) but instead on the perceived ‘choices’ migrants made following their arrival in the neighbourhood.

Although not always overtly expressed, it was easy to identify a set of expectations that locals like George and Thomas felt were not being met by certain migrants, such as ‘trying to work’, ‘learning the language’, ‘integrating’ and generally being symbiotically involved in the neighbourhood. A clear dichotomy of subject positions emerges here, akin to the one that usually characterises bureaucratic institutions’ technocratic efficiency that necessitates the managerial division of bodies. Several studies on

migration have pointed out the bipartite categorisation of migrating subjects into “worthy” and “unworthy” guests (Rozakou 2012; Capri & Senoguz 2018), “desirables” and “undesirables” (Randeria & Karagiannis 2020), “deserving refugees” and “undeserving migrants” (Knott 2018). I argue that the friction between locals and certain migrants involved in criminal activities highlighted particular aesthetics of eligibility that constructed specific migrant subjectivities as undesirable and ineligible guests who do not comply with the Exarcheian “rules of hospitality” (cf. Rozakou 2012: 563); who posit a threat to neighbourhood’s safety, egalitarian culture and its decades-long anti-drug struggle.

In a quiet yet assertive tone, George prompted me to look through the glass window of his bookstore at the Square: “If I ask you what you see, you’ll say, ‘I see about thirty people’. Now, I will tell you what I see. I see twelve knives and five revolvers”, he said and looked at me intently in the eyes as if to say, *‘You have no idea of the extent of the seriousness of the situation’*. According to George, crime did not merely concern drug dealing but also involved cigarette smuggling, theft, vandalism and gang violence. George informed me that “there are Kalashnikovs and drugs hidden” and that the entire Stournari St. is “an illicit cigarette warehouse. If you lift the manhole covers on the pavement, you’ll see”. He took a long drag from his cigarette. His tone was now quiet and unemotional. “There is conflict too... and messages like this one are being sent”, he added emphatically. He then opened the drawer of his desk, took out a bullet and held it between his thumb and his index right in front of me for a few seconds before placing it upright on the desk. The ‘conflict’ he was referring to, was between him and the senders of this bullet. The message it carried was clear: ‘leave, you’re not welcome’.

On another occasion, George had found a note on his bookstore's door. Its message was clear:

*"Pretty stores burn nicely"*<sup>103</sup>

The message was a reference to the 1996 Serbian film 'Lepa sela lepo gore', whose English title is "Pretty Village, Pretty Flame" but which literally means 'Pretty villages burn nicely'. In Greece, the film was released as "Ta omorfa horia omorfa kegonte", a direct translation of the original title. The film is set during the Bosnian War and tells the story of two childhood friends who, caught up in the devastating circumstances of the tragic conflict, end up becoming enemies after they are forced to choose opposing sides. 'Pretty stores burn nicely', just like 'pretty villages burn nicely', carries in its oxymoronic form the ominous intent of an unremorseful perpetrator.

Whether it was members of gangs or delinquents acting independently, the only certain thing for George was that the people behind the threats found his presence in the Square inconvenient. He recalled numerous incidents where he had verbally confronted individuals trying to sell drugs outside his bookstore and told me about the streetlamps, he had installed outside to brighten up the Square at night, only to find them broken the very next day. Maintaining his business on the Square of Exarcheia amid daily conflict and frequent threats had become a constant struggle that George knew would eventually leave him no other choice but to leave. With a tone I could only characterise as one of raw realism, he said: "I know that I will have to leave at some point. But rather than seeing [the bookstore] burn, I prefer to burn it myself".

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<sup>103</sup> 'Ta omorfa magazia omorfa kegonte.' (Τα όμορφα μαγαζιά όμορφα καίγονται).

'Look! Do you see it? Do you see what's happening? Look right there in front of the kiosk!' cried Roussos as I was once more instructed to look outside a window towards the Square. Roussos was a long-time bakery owner in his late 60s. The interview had not even properly begun when he sat down in a visibly frustrated manner, pulled himself closer to the table, and urged me to observe the young man across the street who was, rather conspicuously, trying to sell marijuana to passersby. The man had taken the place of another man who, earlier that afternoon, had locked eyes with me as I was walking past and, with a suggestive grin, asked me if I wanted to buy some *mavro*<sup>104</sup>.

Roussos had opened his business in Exarcheia more than twenty years ago. Originally from Crete, he was reinforcing the stereotype of traditional Cretan men. He was an exuberant individual with a temper and spoke loudly even when he was calm. Many people in the neighbourhood knew Roussos by his first name. Older generations of Exarchists also knew him for his conservative views, which, as he explained to me, he never tried to hide despite being in the heart of an 'anarchist territory'. He nonetheless complained that he couldn't express himself the way he wanted. "Can I hang the Greek flag up outside my store on a national holiday?" he said in a theatrical tone of indignation. The question was rhetorical since the sight of national symbols was highly intolerable in Exarcheia. Indeed, in a neighbourhood where anti-nationalist convictions resound daily, a Greek flag waving outside a store or on the balcony of an apartment amounts to direct provocation.

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<sup>104</sup> Slang for marijuana.

Once during some *báhala*, Roussos had been assaulted by a group of hooded individuals – “so-called anarchists” (*dithen anarhikoi*) as he put it - while his store had been vandalised several times in the past two decades by people who conceived his conservative views as ‘fascist’. Despite this, the majority of people who knew him respected and maintained friendly relations with him throughout the years. In fact, it was Thomas and Leonidas who had introduced Roussos to me. Recalling the past, Roussos said that *“things used to be more innocent. There were anarchist-police clashes, but people understood that, and the reasons behind them. We used to watch the clashes. Now everyone is hiding. These clashes are not caused by anarchists, nor do they have a political aim. Now Exarcheia is ruled by gangs. In the past, migrants used to work. There was mutual respect between people. The situation was different to what is now prevailing in the square. Now, whatever happens, revolves around drugs. The people selling them are the same people who create the báhala, to maintain the chaos and perpetuate the anomie.”* He then added: “If I could take my family right now and get out of here, I would”.

With a forceful tone, another discussant, Panos, expressed a similar feeling: ‘I swear to you, if I didn’t have to work in here, I’d never step my foot again!’ Panos was a regular in the area owing to his father’s business, which he now co-managed. He had been in Exarcheia almost every day since he was a child. “I greet more people here than I do in Nea Philadelphia where I live”, he explained. However, when he described everyday life in Exarcheia, his tone switched to that of disappointment. Unlike Markos, Panos felt that the ethos of solidarity and mutual respect did not exist anymore. Speaking from a businessman’s perspective, he explained:

*“If I had a problem, if I got into an argument or if something happened to me, I feel that my [Exarcheia] neighbours wouldn’t rush out to help because they are afraid. Because now, you can’t be sure who exactly the person opposite you is. In the past, this was not the case. In the past, if something happened to you, it was guaranteed that your neighbour would offer their help in any way they could.”*

Panos was comparing an Exarcheia of the past with Exarcheia of the present, and beneath his frustration, I could discern an undertone of nostalgia for better days. This sentiment also manifested through his own definition of ‘neighbourhood’:

*“Neighbourhood for me means coming out and saying hello to my neighbours, having a chat. What can I say? Maybe I’m a bit romantic (chuckles). I don’t feel it anymore (Den to niotho pleon).”*

‘It’ in this case is neither void nor ambiguous, but instead signifies a very specific kind of affect that, in Panos’ opinion, was now absent from his daily experience of the neighbourhood. This was an affect of concord and affinity, once conspicuous in the interactions of individuals around him and moulded in trust and shared understanding that had subsequently made Exarcheia not simply the place where he worked but *his neighbourhood*. ‘Neighbourhood’ can be defined both as a district and a *community* within a town or city, yet it is the notion of the latter that I wish to address here. The interrelationship of neighbourhood and attachment is a well-

trodden territory in the social sciences<sup>105</sup>. Feelings of belonging to a place are affected by the individuals' "desire for a quality of life that they imagined existed [...] in the community *in the mind*" (Benson & Jackson 2012: 796, emphasis mine). For Panos, Exarcheia had ceased to be a community that was "constituted- and to an extent, unified – through shared patterns of emotional meaning and understandings" – that is, an *affective community* (Hutchinson 2018: 1).

"Even an anarchist who is very well known around here came into the shop the other day and told me that the police should come and clean up the area", Panos exclaimed in an indignant tone. Increased criminality coupled with fear and suspicion amongst Exarchiots had, in Panos' opinion, led to estrangement and fragmentation within the community. He felt that the sense of solidarity and common purpose that once prompted locals into collective action that kept the square accessible for residents and visitors through frequent "film screenings, feasts, concerts [and] parties" (Vradis 2012: 153) had now faded. "People are afraid because now twenty hooded individuals can appear out of nowhere to vandalise your store, and you really don't know who is who", explained Panos, and then went on to reminisce carefree times he had spent as a child in Exarcheia; times he believed were not charged with the feeling of insecurity that now prevailed:

*"When I was a kid, I used to walk on my own at night from here [Square] until the archaeological museum [Patision St.] where there was an internet café. I was not afraid. Nothing ever happened. You'd see some weird, suspicious faces - ok. But as a child, you would get used to them quickly. These days, this cannot*

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<sup>105</sup> See among others Woolever 1992, Hidalgo & Hernandez 2001, Dekker 2007; Benson & Jackson 2012.

*happen. You feel scared. You feel scared to walk. If you walk on Oikonomou St. or anywhere near Strefi Hill, you feel scared. A friend was telling me that he was walking by Strefi after work when three men jumped on him out of nowhere. They first stabbed him and then tried to rob him. They stabbed him four times on the leg and asked him to give them his bag.”*

Sitting across me, and between quick sips of espresso, Elena, a doctor in her late 30s, told me that returning home in the evening meant making a detour to circumvent the pedestrianised part of Themistocleous St. because of the “suspicious-looking faces (*ypoptes fatses*) that hang out there”. Elena had moved to Exarcheia three years ago to an apartment that her family had rented for years. Overall she felt that Exarcheia was a neighbourhood that gives you that ‘village feeling’ (*aisthisi tou horiou*), and she enjoyed living there. She explained that “everything here is nearby, cafes, the open market on Kallidromiou St., bookshops...You can walk everywhere and see familiar faces all the time”. What bothered her occasionally was the looks she felt she was getting from certain individuals when she happened to walk through the Themistocleous alley that leads to the square; a look that made her feel nervous and led to her decision to “avoid that path in any way possible”. “These are ugly faces”, she added, where ‘ugly’, in this case, had very little to do with physical appearance and much more with her subjective interpretations of the possible intentions hidden behind those faces. “These are faces that are not kidding”, she finally explained, and although she admitted she had never witnessed it herself, friends informed her that *daravéri*<sup>106</sup> (drug dealing) takes place often on Themistocleous St.

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<sup>106</sup> In Greek: *νταραβέρι*. The word comes from the Italian *dare avere* (δοῦναι-λαβεῖν), literally, ‘give and take’. It is a colloquialism used to refer to trade or any form of transaction. In this context, it refers to drug dealing.

Thalia, a 26-year old English language teacher who lived in the area, had also remarked that the presence of ‘suspicious-looking individuals’ in the Square and nearby alleys had been more visible than ever. Thalia did not overtly discuss her political convictions. She was not an anarchist or a member of any anti-authoritarian movement. Still, she embraced the culture of solidarity and inclusiveness, the anti-middle class aesthetic and the artistic effervescence of Exarcheia. Defying her apprehensive parents, she chose to move into the neighbourhood with her boyfriend soon after completing her studies. The two of them used to live in the centre of Exarcheia, just off the Square, but the weekly *báhala* and daily *daravéri* near the entrance of their condominium forced them to look for another place. Still determined to live in Exarcheia, which she explained “[they] both liked despite its problems”, they found a middle ground solution and moved into an apartment on Asimaki Fotila St. on the outskirts of the neighbourhood.

I had myself noticed similar changes during my visits to the neighbourhood. As a young woman, I also had occasionally felt the nervousness expressed by Elena when walking alone through certain parts of Exarcheia during the night - although that was admittedly the case for many other parts of the city in general. Since my arrival in Exarcheia in the summer of 2016, I had noted a change in the ‘demographics’ of its Square. At the peak of the reception crisis, Exarcheia emerged as a “cartography of conviviality” (Zaman 2019). The Square acquired a quality of “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) and became the intersection of various lives and “stories-so-far” (ibid: 12). It was a haunt for local and foreign volunteers who had been involved in the organisation and running of the nearby squats and for young migrants, refugees and their families who liked to socialise there during the day. At night I recall a more relaxed and welcoming atmosphere on the

Square, where people would sit in small groups on benches or cross-legged in circles on the ground, drinking beer and chatting.

In time, however, the different – and usually transit – social actors involved in the organisation of the local squats began to withdraw. Some went back home, and others left Athens to volunteer in other places. Many refugees too eventually relocated, and the Square's use as a drug-dealing piazza became more prevalent. That, in combination with the shutting of several of its cafes between 2016-2019 – including that of historic *Floral* – saw the Square transforming into a poorly lit, highly gendered drug piazza, occupied almost exclusively by groups of men and often used merely as a passage by women, who hastily crossed it to get to the other side or sometimes even walked around it to avoid sexual or other forms of harassment and intimidation. Such kinesthetic adaptations that women (including myself) make in public spaces ought to be understood not only in terms of their safety but also in terms of their freedom (Vera-Gray 2018; Vera-Gray & Kelly 2020). Academics Fiona Vera-Gray and Liz Kelly argue that strategies “from changing routes home to choosing seats on public transport, physically reducing themselves in public, to using headphones and sunglasses as a way of feeling invisible” might occasionally protect women but do nonetheless respond “to a particularly gendered message: that women need to *be less* – less vocal, less visible, less free – in order to be safe” (ibid: 217-218).

Scholars within the sociological and anthropological tradition have long discussed the physical separation of men and women in places such as the home and work and the various cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that contribute to that segregation (Hildred & Geertz 1975; Bourdieu 1971; Goffman 1977 Berk 1985; Ortner 1974;

Hartmann 1976; Hanson & Pratt 1991 among others). In the 1990s, sociologist Daphne Spain examined the role of gendered spaces in perpetuating gender stratification by “reducing women’s access to socially valued knowledge” (1993: 137). Nevertheless, the study of gendered spaces has largely remained focused on enclosed, private or semi-private locations. With a few exceptions (see Ceccato & Nalla 2020), there aren’t many – at least to my knowledge -in-depth studies discussing the processes through which public places such as streets, roads, squares and parks through their conduciveness to criminal activity, fear and intimidation transform into exclusively gendered spaces.

This is not to say that men might not feel uncomfortable or insecure in these same spaces. This exclusionist atmosphere through the patriarchal stratification of space discourages not only women but also certain men and LGBTQ individuals (see Doan 2010) from accessing certain locales. For the greatest part of my fieldwork, I do not recall the square being used as a hangout by women during the day, let alone during the night (cf. Yates & Ceccato 2020). Elena had referred to it as a ‘black hole’ that she and her friends usually avoided. I, too, once recall forcing myself to feel comfortable while waiting for a friend near the kiosk at the edge of the square during the daytime, but it was not long before a man began to make kissing sounds at me and flash a bag of weed from his pocket. At first, I tried to ignore him but finally decided to enter *Bibliothèque* and browse some books to avoid further uninvited looks and sounds coming my way until my friend finally showed up.

It might be tempting to say that the presence of such a space in the heart of a neighbourhood whose denizens and regulars have been historically struggling against all forms of exclusion and segregation is somewhat ironic. Most importantly, as I discuss

in Part II – phenomena like this invite the media to refer to Exarcheia as an ‘independent state of lawlessness’ (*anexartito kratidio anomias*)<sup>107</sup> and present criminality as being exclusive to Exarcheia rather than symptomatic of the entire Athens - or any big city, for that matter.

### Self-appointed security

In the accounts outlined so far, there emerges a palpable tension between attempts to maintain Exarcheia as a place of autonomous political action, and actors who saw a need for allowing police into the neighbourhood in an effort to keep Exarcheia safe from criminals. This tension drove some locals into taking on the issue of security ‘in their own hands’ by promoting alternative policing models that often were unsuccessful, inherently problematic and incompatible with Exarcheia’s anti-violence discourse and spirit of solidarity. During interviews and impromptu conversations, my discussants - usually in a reprimanding tone - made references to the existence of the ‘self-appointed security’ groups of Exarcheia who patrolled the area aiming to ‘drive drug dealers out’ of the neighbourhood. While their tactic was usually intimidation, it sometimes escalated into beating and even murder.

In the summer of 2016, a young Egyptian man who the police knew to be involved in drug dealing and knife attacks was shot a few metres away from the square of Exarcheia by a man on a motorbike. Posts on *Athens Indymedia*<sup>108</sup> stated that the man’s ‘attack

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<sup>107</sup> Source: <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/607607/exarheia-to-anexartito-kratidio-tis-anomias> (last accessed 2.5.2021).

<sup>108</sup> The Independent Media Centre (IMC) is a global collective of independent media organisations and journalists offering collective and non-commercial information. Athens Indymedia (<https://athens.indymedia.org>), just like every autonomous IMC, sets its own goals, manages its own

against three anarchists at VOX was the last drop' and the so-called "popular-revolutionary law" (*laiko-epanastatiko dikaio*) had "imposed his death sentence"<sup>109</sup>. The statement referring to the man's murder both as a "revenge" for his attack against anarchists and as an act of defending a "troubled neighbourhood", was replicated on other websites and by various individuals on social media. Another article published on *Void Network* (*Keno Dyktio*<sup>110</sup>) during that time condemned these posts not simply because they seemed to be condoning the shooting but mainly for "elevating" (*eksipsonoun*) the man into an "all-powerful" drug lord, whereas, in fact, "the ease with which he was executed itself revealed the opposite": that he was not almighty but merely a pawn in a much broader criminal network. Echoing the *Void Network* author's viewpoint, Vicky argued that "[the dealers] are just the mules [vaporakia]. The big bosses are elsewhere, living in nice houses in the nice areas, with villas and expensive cars. You'll never see those here. In Exarcheia, these drug mules usually end up becoming addicts themselves".

The author(s) of the *Void Network* article asserted that 'armed patrolling' and the alleged 'popular-revolutionary law' were the result of an arbitrary decision of an isolated group of people and were not organised by any local anarchist movement, but instead "operate[d] in secret and outside [it]"<sup>111</sup>. Adopting a similar line of argument, Kyriakos, who had lived in Exarcheia since he was a child and whom I always found hanging out with his friends around the Square, called out the hypocrisy of certain

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financial affairs and takes its own decisions through its own process. All IMCs form the IMC network whose website is located at [www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org).

<sup>109</sup> Find the exact post here: <https://athens.indymedia.org/post/1561069/> (last accessed 12.4.2021).

<sup>110</sup> *Void Network* is an international anarchist, cultural, political and philosophical affinity group founded in 1990 in Athens, Greece.

<sup>111</sup> Source: <https://voidnetwork.gr> (last accessed 12.14.2021)

individuals who claimed to oppose drug dealing but who, in reality, benefited from it. He then recalled an incident that took place on the Square with the leader of a self-appointed 'armed patrol' group whom Kyriakos knew was talking with the boss of a drug dealer:

*"I can't remember if we [Kyriakos and his friends] were smoking a spliff or not. Probably yes (laughs), but the point is that after the chat, the drug dealer and his boss left and that guy and his gang started shouting, 'Exarcheia has history! Drug dealers get out of the Square!' (ta Exarcheia ehoun istoria, exo oi narkemporoi apo tin plateia)<sup>112</sup> while staring at us. We laughed. But it wasn't even funny. This was outright fascist. I've known these guys for almost twenty years. And they know I don't sell [drugs]. I've never sold anything in my life. So in the end, for them, it's just a matter of dominance and a pathetic attempt to show the neighbourhood that they are fighting drug dealers when they were, in fact, just having a nice, friendly chat with them only seconds earlier. Guys like that just make money out of this. Most of them are kokakides<sup>113</sup>. If they don't do weed, they do koka or preza<sup>114</sup> during the day, and at night, they pretend to be anarchists fighting drug dealers."*

Kyriakos' story suggests that narratives of criminality are complex and multifaceted, forming through the interactions of different factors and social actors whose incentives might not be apparent to outsiders with no esoteric knowledge. Understanding crime in Exarcheia (and the city in general) requires a close ethnographic interrogation, a task

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<sup>112</sup> A popular anti-drug slogan.

<sup>113</sup> Slang term for cocaine users.

<sup>114</sup> Slang terms for cocaine and heroin.

that was beyond the scope of my thesis. Such a study could hopefully provide an understanding that is more nuanced than the unidimensional one granted by the mainstream media, who, through their sensationalisation of distressing and deeply problematic incidences - such as a murder in broad daylight- continue to vilify the area, treating drug dealing as a quintessentially Exarcheian problem as opposed to a problem of the Athenian urban reality as a whole.

The narratives of crime, insecurity and fear I have outlined so far examined the ethical and ideological dilemmas emergent between different actors in the neighbourhood and highlighted instances of affective *asynchronisation* (cf. Nunes 2014) that create multiple *us*, or ‘crowds’, which do not “devour across space” but rather ‘devour’ *each other for space* (cf. Lopes et al 2021: 551). I am here referring to the spatial antagonisms that emerge from Exarcheia’s incongruous representations as a geography of solidarity and inclusion versus a geography of crime, fear and exclusion. As this chapter unfolds, the reader will encounter more such competing neighbourhood visions.

Aesthetics of abandonment and tangibilities of neglect: ‘About the central and abandoned neighbourhood of Exarcheia’<sup>115</sup>

On 25.10.16, just over a year after SYRIZA’s triumphant victory, a letter<sup>116</sup> written collectively by the Exarcheia Residents Committee was sent to the then Mayor of

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<sup>115</sup> This was the title of the residents’ letter discussed in this section.

<sup>116</sup> Full letter at: <https://www.inexarchia.gr/story/local/epistoli-tis-epitropis-protovoylias-katoikon-exarheion-pros-ton-gkamini> (last accessed 6/5/2021).

Athens, Yiorgos Kaminis. I argue that this letter is a form of complaint and a contestation against the perceived idea that the ‘exathliosi’ (degradation) of Exarcheia is as some kind of karmic retribution brought upon residents by their own apathy for the issues Exarcheia was facing. The letter sent to the municipality outlined these issues clearly and suggested solutions with assertive confidence, challenging the perpetuation and subsequent ‘normalisation’ of Exarcheia’s degradation encountered in mainstream media and government discourses.

The primary issue highlighted by the residents was the lack of cleanliness and respect observed in the neighbourhood, which took the form of accumulated rubbish, cracked pavements, broken streetlamps and commotion.

Two years after the letter was sent, its grievances remained relevant. As George argued:

*“The greatest share of responsibility for this goes to the mayor and the municipality. Under the pretext that ‘this is an area that we do not enter because we are afraid’, they never come to clean, they never come to change the bulbs, to take care of the plants; they do not clean the drains, and when the pre-election period comes you hear them talk about the plans, they have for Exarcheia. You hear Bakoyiannis<sup>117</sup> say, ‘I’ll do this and that’, and a day after the election, he will become another Kaminis.”*

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<sup>117</sup> Kostas Bakoyiannis is a member of the conservative party New Democracy and the current mayor of Athens. At the time of George’s interview, he was a candidate in the municipal elections.

A close examination of the national press coverage on Exarcheia between 2016-2019 reveals a pattern consistent with George's remarks about politicians' 'rediscovery' of Exarcheia's problems during the pre-election period. The majority of media content and discourse analysis published during that time points to two parallel, equally exoticising narratives about Exarcheia. The former depicts a topography of fear and anomie discursively performed through articles talking about 'epeisodia' (unrest) 'molotovs', 'anarchist-police riots', 'December 6th anniversary and its aftermath', 'drugs' and 'arrests'. Conversely, the latter is evidenced in 'sentimental' articles that retell the (hi)story of a 'unique' neighbourhood, idealise its past, and recommend it to visitors for its anti-conformist and unconventional spirit.

I noticed that amid these binary media discourses, there was very little about the residents' concerns about cleanliness and the practical quotidian challenges of urban mobility, such as poor street lighting or deteriorating street signs. These concerns were largely omitted from the politicians' overall 'Exarcheia narrative' until a few months before the elections, when both ND and SYRIZA attempted to address the issues of poor sanitation and anomie in the area.

Consecutive police raids in April 2019 that took place under SYRIZA to evacuate local squats were also regarded by some as yet another last-minute short-term spectacle aiming to appease potential voters. During one of the operations, four officers and a prosecutor searched a residence in Exarcheia on a drug trafficking warrant when they were accosted and attacked by what their report stated were "up to 50 individuals,

including gunmen”<sup>118</sup>. Doubts were expressed about the number of perpetrators and the types of weapons used during the clash<sup>119</sup>. Still, the incident led to a resident protest at the junction of Themistocleous and Akadimias St., which mayoral candidate, Kostas Bakoyiannis, attended. The residents demanded the immediate intervention of the police and the state, emphasising how the ‘situation has been as bad as ever’ with robberies, thefts and drug dealing now being regarded as the norm in the area<sup>120</sup>. Before long, however, their protest got disbanded by “a group of ‘hooded-individuals’ (*koukouloforoi*) who started throwing oranges and other objects at them”<sup>121</sup>. Over the next few weeks, the national press covered a series of interviews and debates between the mayoral candidates of Athens, during which the ‘need for a cleaner and safer city’ was ardently discussed.

Although evidently a popular pre-election topic, (lack of) cleanliness in Exarcheia had been an ever-present matter of discussion among locals in the neighbourhood but also on various Internet platforms. More specifically, on Twitter, the hashtag ‘Exathleia’ (#Exathleia) accompanied the posts of individuals that seem to be affiliated with conservative or right-wing politics (see tweets below). It is my understanding that their views revolved around an impression that the ‘wretched’ reality in the neighbourhood, was, in fact, the only ‘reality’ that the “stupid petit-bourgeois” (*ilithii mikorasti*) – as one post called them - should be reminded of when they ‘dare’ reminisce the better times or

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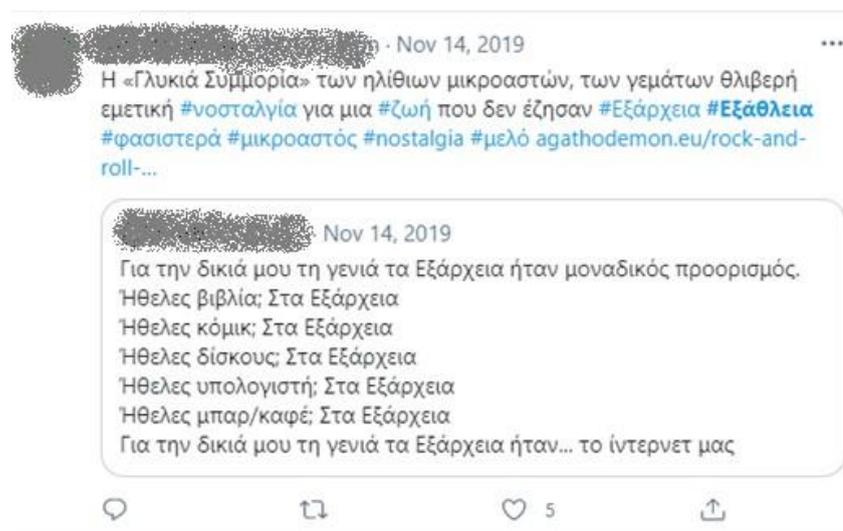
<sup>118</sup> According to the report, one of the officers was cut in the leg, others were threatened with weapons - including Kalashnikovs - while some of the guards had their service guns taken by the perpetrators. For more see: [gr/news/ellada/story/171789/epithesi-apo-omada-50-atomon-dexthikan-limenikoi-sta-exarxeia](http://gr/news/ellada/story/171789/epithesi-apo-omada-50-atomon-dexthikan-limenikoi-sta-exarxeia) (last accessed 7.5.2021).

<sup>119</sup> Source: <https://www.protothema.gr/greece/article/881579/exarheia-oi-drastes-pou-afoplisan-tous-limenikous-paristanan-tous-astunomikous/> (last accessed 8.5.2021).

<sup>120</sup> Source: <http://athina984.gr/wp-site/2019/04/11/katoikoi-exarcheon-zitame-to-aytonoito/> (last accessed 8.5.2021).

<sup>121</sup> Source: <https://gr.euronews.com/2019/04/11/sygentrwsh-katoikwn-eksarxeia> (last accessed 8.5.2021).

praise Exarcheia's long-standing presence as the intellectual hub of Athens. Here, the rhetoric of nostalgia and affection towards the neighbourhood was dismissed by a rhetoric of contempt that usually took the form of scornful descriptions and images depicting filthy streets and overflowing bins, expressing in an almost schadenfreudian manner, Exarcheia's alleged downfall. For all their recognition of the neighbourhood's issues, these particular posts were, in my opinion, not voiced as concerns or even accusations directed at those responsible –namely the state– but appear as unembellished, taken-for-granted, reductionist critical statements which affirm state-led postulations that the problem is Exarcheia as opposed to *in* Exarcheia.



The post retweeted reads: *"For my generation, Exarcheia was a unique destination. You wanted books? You went to Exarcheia. You wanted comics? You went to Exarcheia. You wanted vinyl records? You went to Exarcheia. You wanted a computer? You went to Exarcheia. You wanted a café/bar? You went to Exarcheia. Exarcheia was the internet of my generation."*

The tweeter user above responds: *"The 'Sweet Gang' of the stupid petit bourgeois, filled with repulsive #nostalgia for a #life they never lived #Exarcheia #Exathleia #fascistleft #petitbourgeois #nostalgia #melodrama"*.



**The original post reads: “Whoever walks around Exarcheia can understand that they are blossoming. If again they are afraid (lol!), they can ask an agency how much the rent is. Outrageously high. P.S. If they find something cheap, let us know.” The user that retweeted the post with the picture sarcastically comments: “Exathleia is blossoming.”**

It is worth noting that the first time I heard the word ‘Exathleia’ was within Exarcheia. I was walking down Emmanuel Benaki St. sometime in October 2016. A young woman was on the phone, presumably to a friend, informing them that she was now in the ‘Exathleia’, and I unintentionally chuckled. The word was the outcome of the ingenious coinage of ‘Exarcheia’ and the adjective ‘athlios’, meaning wretched. Despite the blasé, self-evident manner in which ‘Exathleia’ was uttered, it was still a conscious choice carrying a specific message intended by the speaker but at the same time possessed its own kind of agency. This agency was not inherent, in the sense that it did not assume that ‘Exathleia’ “had its own independent goals [and] will” (cf. Duranti 2004: 451). What I am here referring to is not the agency *of* but the agency *in* words as a conceptual apparatus in understanding their polysemic quality but also the conditions and contexts through which different meanings are conceptualised.

Just like the words 'bahalákides' and 'báhala' discussed in the previous chapter, my encounter with 'Exathleia' revealed the agency *in words as affectively configured and manifested* and it further underlined the role of words as loci for the transmission of affective energy. 'Exathleia' was undoubtedly a word charged with emotions. The emotions and impressions it provoked in the listener could surpass those the speaker might have initially intended to express. My unintentional eavesdropping on the woman's conversation exemplified the potency of words in establishing a reality for "whoever happens to be listening" (Duranti 2004). I hence caught myself wondering what sort of realities and affectivities can 'Exathleia' project and what kind of perceptions might have been condensed in it.

Beyond its immediate humorous denotation, 'Exathleia' conveyed mockery and contempt. When the word was uttered by my discussants, mainly in passing comments or impromptu conversations, I noticed that it also carried a sense of bitterness and self-sarcasm, highlighting a sense of self-conscious degradation and a concurrent feeling of disenchantment towards the neighbourhood it characterised. The term 'Exathleia' is packed with vernacular conceptualisations and a shared understanding of a 'wretched' reality in Exarcheia that seems to have both a moral (crime, delinquency) and a physical dimension (debris, ruins). Rubbish, cracked pavements, fading or broken streetlamps and street signs, dark roads, excessive noise, unkempt plants, rotten garbage, dirty drains: these constituted Exarcheia's materiality of neglect and the symptoms of its visible deterioration that affronted both the sensibilities and the senses of its residents - *sight, hearing, smell*. The biggest share of culpability for this was attributed to the state, whose disregard and insensitivity for the decade-long demands of Exarchiots allowed and perpetuated the problems outlined. In my interviews with locals and regulars,

discussing Exarcheia's state of neglect incited feelings of discontent. Sometimes, the tone of my discussants morphed from disappointment to exasperation. Sat on a chair outside his grocery store, Loukas pointed the finger at the state, accusing it of having abandoned the neighbourhood. More than once, my respondents explained that the presence of the state materialised solely through police vans and armed MAT (riot police) guarding Exarcheia's imagined boundaries with the adjacent affluent neighbourhood of Kolonaki. Several participants had also differentiated between the need for sufficient policing to restore safety and combat crime and the feeling of being constantly under surveillance.

These grievances were iterated in an article published in the summer of 2016. The then-mayor Kaminis' statement about Exarcheia's need for 'more policing' (*perissoteri astinomefsi*) was met with an apt response from residents who said policing should never mean the establishment of a 'police state' (*astinomokratia*)<sup>122</sup>. Reporting the events that unfolded at a City Council meeting, the article quoted one of the residents saying that the audience's majority demanded 'normal police and not riot police' in their neighbourhood. Cognisant of the fact that a 'normal' relationship between Exarcheia and the police had never existed, Loukas told me:

*"If the state has a good and a bad face, then I have only seen its bad face. The state is asking for my taxes, and I pay them, but what I get back is much less than what the average Greek receives elsewhere. I mean, I only see klouves<sup>123</sup>, nothing else. There have been some efforts from the municipality recently to*

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<sup>122</sup> Source: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/77016\\_o-kaminis-prosferei-astynomeysi-oi-katoikoiden-theloy-n-astynomokratia](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/koinonia/77016_o-kaminis-prosferei-astynomeysi-oi-katoikoiden-theloy-n-astynomokratia) (last accessed 12.5/2021).

<sup>123</sup> Singular: *klouva* (Greek: κλούβα)– the police van used to transport criminals. In Exarcheia they can always be seen on Charilaou Trikoupi St., usually outside the offices of PASOK (socialist party).

*collect the rubbish more frequently... It is a difficult area for sure, in the sense that there is a lot of local traffic... I mean, it's harder to clean it properly when you have 5000 people going through it every night, and it's easier to clean a neighbourhood that is purely residential."*

Similarly, when asked what changes she would like to see in the neighbourhood, Thalia said:

*"Definitely the cleanliness. It's not one of the cleanest areas. By looking at the streets, you can tell that they don't care for Exarcheia as they do for other neighbourhoods. It has to do with the municipality, of course, because the municipality of Athens is big, so they can't really keep every neighbourhood spotless. But I think they could have done more for Exarcheia. For starters, they could collect the rubbish more frequently."*

Indeed, Exarcheia's state of neglect becomes visible when one takes a walk from the adjacent district of Kolonaki down to Benaki St. Moving from the clean streets and neatly trimmed bushes of the diplomat district towards Exarcheia, and after walking past the human wall of riot policemen at its virtual borders, a landscape that has been denied that same meticulousness unfolds before the eyes of the urban wanderer.

However, a portion of responsibility for Exarcheia's *exathlosi* (degradation) was also assigned to the owners of the neighbourhood's several café-bars and restaurants, particularly newcomers, whose sensitivity and respect towards locals were questioned alongside those of the municipality officials. Beyond the lack of cleanliness and fears regarding public health, negligence and indifference materialised in the expansion-

invasion of the tables of café-bars and the extensive noise pollution they produced as a result. During his interview in the summer of 2018, Panos complained that:

*“Someone comes [in Exarcheia] and sells drugs, someone else comes and sets up his stall and sells stuff wherever they want, someone gets tables out and sets them up all over the pavement and the street, someone else is blasting music till the early morning hours. I would like to see some respect and people stop acting at the expense of one another.”*

Local discussions on the management of public space were infused with disputes concerning either demands or rights to *access* a particular space or disputes concerning the right to *define the use* of a space. I believe that Panos’ comment above speaks concurrently to these two elements. First, because the setting up of tables ‘all over the pavement and street’ is a concern underlying his desire for those spaces to be used freely by cars and pedestrians as they are meant to. Being a businessman himself whose business was also benefiting from the commercialisation of the public space around him, Panos was naturally not opposed to the presence of bars and restaurants in the area. However, he felt that the more they multiplied, the less public space was negotiated in a way that permitted conviviality between its different users.

At the same time, the opportunistic, arbitrary acquisition of public spaces by certain entrepreneurs, along with other undesirable activities such as drug dealing and street vending, created commotion, crowdedness, uneasiness and irritation, all of which, in Panos’ opinion, had a negative effect on the way the neighbourhood was experienced. His argument here pertains to the competing uses of public space and the importance of

streets and sidewalks as intensely parochial despite their ostensible 'publicness'. Exarcheia, in particular, a neighbourhood that has been often imagined as a site of "unassimilated otherness" (cf. Young 1990), breaks down into smaller spaces over which different groups claim ownership (Lofland 1998 and others). Exarcheia's pavements are walked by strollers, lined by trees and mounted by cars; they are claimed by street peddlers trading illicit cigarettes or displaying miscellaneous wares and through business owners' expansionary tactics. On its pavements, one might even catch the rare sight of the spray bottles, paint cans, and brushes of a street artist vigorously at work.

Although in Exarcheia, one still encounters various modes of use of public space, one mode, in particular, seems to prevail in recent times. Taking Panos' argument further, I contend that beyond a sign of disrespect and a cause for annoyance, the multiplying restaurant tables, chairs and menu stands as 'furniture' of an emergent gentrification, monopolise its sidewalks and alleys by imposing a specific use and a middle-class urban aesthetic. The latter seems to be about creating an upscale atmosphere in certain parts of the neighbourhood. This kind of urban restructuring consciously transforms the area into a space favouring the consumer as the 'right kind' of pedestrian (see Chapter 7).

The same logic of space-making applies to the Square and its use as a drug piazza that discourages its quotidian use by certain groups of people like women and children in a primarily residential neighbourhood filled with schools. In response, residents try to reclaim the square through the mass mobilisation and the organisation of big, formal events like book bazaars, concerts, puppet shows or public lectures. At the same time, Exarcheia's solidarity politics and structures, its loci of horizontal organisation and its

anti-capitalist spirit expressed in discourse, practice and street art gather to assemble its portrait as a heterotopia (Chatzidakis et al 2012) that resists and subverts middle-class values and neoliberal socio-spatial economic arrangements. Conversely, in the previous chapter, we saw how the interplay between riotous subjectivities and the micro-materialities of the *báhalá* (the molotov cocktails, the gasmasks, the barricades, the hood etc.) produce in themselves a distinct (sense of) space and entrench Exarcheia as a dissident topography.

In the present chapter, discussions on crime, fear and insecurity coupled with the materialities of neglect construct Exarcheia as the ‘fallen’ neighbourhood with the long-lost charm, that the state has abandoned, and which has now lost its politics and sense of community. The perceived ‘wretchedness’ and deprivation are encapsulated in the word ‘Exathleia’. My interlocutors chuckled at it with poignant sarcasm. I argue that this derisive nickname, born out of the post-Metapolitefsi disenchantment, captures both etic perceptions of Exarcheia but also the internal tensions between different co-existing neighbourhood ‘crowds’. Some of these tensions can be ‘habitually’ situated in certain interlocutors’ discomfort or comfort in Exarcheia. According to the Bourdieusian logic, bodily (dis)comfort shapes the way people experience a social space – which is also a *physical space*. Exarcheia’s derelict urban environment, the debris, its dark and unwelcoming square, the suspicious-looking faces in the alleys at night, the incidents of crime, vandalism and other forms of intimidation constitute sources of physical and social discomfort that can make people lose, in Erving Goffman’s words their “sense of place” (1951). When that happens, “people can feel ill at ease and seek to move – socially and spatially – so that their discomfort is relieved” (Savage et al 2005: 9). What links fields and habitus is, therefore, the reciprocal interrelationship between mobility

and stability – what Bourdieu refers to as the “dialectic of positions and dispositions” (Bourdieu 1987). Such is perhaps the case of Spyros, who had moved out of Exarcheia; or that of Panos and Roussos, who felt that they were ‘suffocating’ and who would have ‘never stepped foot’ in Exarcheia again if it wasn’t for their work – bold statements that sharply contrasted Markos’ romantic declaration of Exarcheia as the ‘only place where he could breathe’.

Indeed, social and physical situations affect one’s sense of belonging to a particular locale. However, there is something more here that is impossible to contain within Bourdieu’s notion of a fixed aesthetic and the relatively rigid social categories that the habitus-field theory requires to work. I argue that Bourdieu did not leave much room for individuality and innovative praxis. The idea of a fixed habitus and the quick retreat in the face of discomfort in search of a more comfortable field cannot explain the ways most of my interlocutors - despite their discontent or discomfort – not only continued to live in Exarcheia but tried to reclaim its spaces, nor can it account for the tensions and spatial antagonisms I encountered throughout my fieldwork.

### Conflicting neighbourhood visions

At first glance, Exarcheia seems to dually exist in the public consciousness as a place of solidarity and grassroots organization, as well as a topography of immorality (cf. Weszkalnys 2010) that operates as the breeding ground for Greece’s dangerous citizens (cf. Panourgia 2009) and non-citizens; one that comes across both as a refuge for those

marginalised and oppressed and a place one wishes to abandon at the first opportunity. But at a closer look, that duality quickly crumbles. My interlocutors' affective narratives saw the emergence of multiple and often incompatible neighbourhood portraits. Yet I do not think of these different portraits as mutually exclusive but as coexisting, antagonistic representations. Disparities regarding the use of space reflect and construct competing visions of a place - where 'visions' refers both to an anticipated and a tangible reality.

I noted the recurring tension between the middle-class nostalgia of investors, certain Exarchiotis, shopkeepers and visitors who might share a vision of a 'neat', gentrified Exarcheia (see Chapter 7) and the more 'ordered' vision of certain AK members or 'old-school' Exarcheians like Marinos, George and Demos who supported structures of self-organisation and direct democracy. This vision, in turn, emerged against the image of nihilistic disorder upheld by young without-a-cause rebels (see Chapter 5) or the dadaistic kind of disorder embraced by those who imagined Exarcheia as an artistic urban dystopia. Like disjointed pieces in a puzzle, these visions and their respective *performatives* (cf. Butler 1992) fit awkwardly together but form part of an ever-changing whole, nonetheless. I argue that these spatial antagonisms also denote competing visions of an authentic Exarcheia. Throughout my study authenticity emerges not merely as an aesthetic claim or a game of distinction (Bourdieu 1984) but as a tool in a very political struggle that has potent material expressions: squats, cracked pavements, rubbish, broken streetlamps, guns, murals, posters, molotov cocktails, teargas, social centres, drugs, banners, knives, hoods, monuments, Airbnbs<sup>124</sup>, soup-kitchens, gourmet restaurants and various other micro and macro-materialities

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<sup>124</sup> I explore the impact of short-term rentals on the neighbourhood in the following chapter.

gather together to form several conflicting and coexisting representations: Exarcheia as a central hub of urban entertainment with alleys prepped with tables and chairs for the consumer parade; Exarcheia as the heart of social movements, abundant in solidarity structures that shelter the urban subaltern; Exarcheia as an anarchist territory that rejects consumerism and gentrification; Exarcheia as a historical neighbourhood that carries the legacy of the Greek Left; Exarcheia as an *ávaton* for the police and a hide-out for gangs and hooded, molotov-throwing miscreants; and finally, Exarcheia as a primarily residential district whose residents feel the state treats them as 'second class citizens' (*polites vita katigorias*), or worse, as if they do not exist at all.

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In the second part of the chapter, I consider the Greek state's own vision of Exarcheia and the ways the state is imagined by Exarchiots and Exarcheians in the neighbourhood. I begin by examining discussions revolving around the state's role and more specifically, its 'blind-eye' policy towards the issues of the neighbourhood and the latter's stigmatisation as a lawless *ávaton*. I argue that my interlocutors' narratives stand on two main pillars: harmful state absence and harmful state presence. My discussants' discontent was directed towards a perceived *politics of neglect*. I define this as the recurring and deliberate pattern of the Greek state's intermittent presences and absences in the neighbourhood. I posit that the state in Exarcheia – just like in many other places - expands and contracts as it pleases. The interplay of absence and presence is imposed by successive administrations, which, irrespective of their official

political stance, overlook the problems locals are facing before suddenly reappearing to 'zealously' deal with the so-called problem of Exarcheia.

## PART II: POLITICS OF NEGLECT AND CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF 'THE STATE'

### Zone of tolerance

"The state likes to hide its dust under the mat. And that's what Exarcheia is. The mat underneath which the dust is hidden." *(George)*

George's interview took place in September 2019, less than a year before New Democracy (ND) won the elections over SYRIZA, and Kostas Bakoyiannis, the nephew of the new Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, succeeded Yiorgos Kaminis as the Mayor of Athens. In light of the upcoming elections and the likely victory of the conservative party, George warned me:

*"You should know that this place [Exarcheia] won't change much because the authorities, the state are interested in having a slandered, stigmatised neighbourhood in which whatever happens stays there, gets solved there and goes nowhere. The police always wanted to push all the delinquents into a place and have them enclosed in one area in order to control them."*

Along a very similar line, Loukas argued that it was not crime per se that was an issue in Exarcheia but its permanence. Regarding drugs, he commented that, unlike other drug piazzas that seemed to rotate, in Exarcheia, drug crime and violence were rooted and non-transitional. While George had referred to Exarcheia as the state's 'mat underneath which the dust is hidden', Loukas compared Exarcheia to a football stadium where hooliganism and clashes with the police are the norm. "You want to kill each other? You can either go to a football stadium or to Exarcheia!" he exclaimed sarcastically. Echoing George, both Loukas and Panos argued that crime in Exarcheia was not simply tolerated but also directed and confined within Exarcheia so that the rest of the city doesn't 'bleed out' (*gia na min emoraghi oli i poli*).

In my discussants' accounts, crime tolerance in Exarcheia emerges as a policy of tactical negligence, tacitly put in place to 'pen in' all unwanted elements and isolate crime in a small, more manageable area. Even though this has never been officially acknowledged as a deliberate state policy (see Vradis 2012), it nevertheless, according to Loukas, explains the commonly used phrase "We've managed to corner them in Exarcheia" (*kataferame kai tous strimoxame sta Exarcheia*)<sup>125</sup>, hinting that this was somehow a desirable and successful outcome. Social unrest had to happen somewhere, and that 'somewhere' was Exarcheia. I argue that Exarcheia did not simply *have* zones of tolerance (pace Vradis 2012) but was *itself* a zone of tolerance within the city of Athens - a punching bag for urban de-stress.

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<sup>125</sup> When Loukas used this phrase in his interview his complete sentence was "Have you not heard them saying (*Den akous pou lene*) 'we managed to corner them in Exarcheia'?", implying that this is a commonly used saying. Although I didn't ask him to clarify, at the time I assumed that by 'them', he was referring to the police.

The establishment of Exarcheia as a space of freedom, a place where one can ‘breathe’ as -my interlocutors stated- and resist different forms of state violence came of course at a cost. In his interview during the summer of 2018, Panos explained:

*“To be honest, getting robbed is something that can happen to you anywhere in Athens. But the point here is that in [Exarcheia], you don’t have that feeling of security. You can’t just call 100<sup>126</sup> and tell them what happened. In Exarcheia, if you call 100, nobody will show up. I’m not saying that I want to see two police vans parked outside 24/7, but on the other hand, I can’t have anyone just coming in here and doing whatever they please.”*

Then sitting back and shaking his head disapprovingly, he added emphatically:

*“I dare you to come here and work seven days a week. You’ll get to see anything. From stabbings to... anything! If, for instance, you have a car crash and call the police... It happened to me. This actress once drove into my car. You might know her. Kind of famous, but I can’t remember her name. Anyway, I rang the police department to get the traffic police over. The officer said, ‘Sorry pal, if we do that, we’ll have to send two MAT<sup>127</sup> squads. If you can, get your papers and come to the department’. Can you believe this? Ridiculous! And this is not the first time this has happened.”*

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<sup>126</sup> The police emergency number in Greece.

<sup>127</sup> *Monades Apokatastasis Taxis* (MAT). English: Units for the Reinstatement of Order aka the riot police unit.

Similarly, Roussos had argued that the Ministry of Citizens Protection and the police bear considerable responsibility for the current situation. In a frustrated tone, he explained that ‘when something happens and the residents or local shopkeepers ask the police to intervene, they respond by telling them “we can’t come, the government won’t let us”’. Then he added, “there is no political will. The police should state publicly that it is not allowed to enter Exarcheia and not offer that as an excuse to the residents every time they call”.

### Aliens in blue

In interviews, narratives of crime tolerance were often coupled with feelings of distrust towards the police expressed through statements such as ‘if the police wanted to intervene, they could’ or ‘whoever has the power to beat up, has the upper hand’. During our discussion back in September 2018 and with a bitter tone, George commented that “every single slogan that has been created about the police is true and has been created for a reason”. He did not directly quote any of the slogans, but he didn’t have to, for even if one wasn’t familiar with them, the graffiti-filled walls of Exarcheia would readily inform them.

*“Cops, pigs, murders!”*

*“Cops sell heroin!”<sup>128</sup>*

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<sup>128</sup> *‘Μπατσοι, γουρουνιά, δολοφόνοι’ (Μπάτσοι, γουρούνια δολοφόνοι) and ‘Οι μπατσοι πουλάνε την ηρωίνη’ (Οι μπατσοι πουλάνε την ηρωίνη’).*

“A Star Made of Cement”<sup>129</sup> was a song by rapper Lex that was a popular hit among a group of young anti-authoritarians I met during the early days of my fieldwork in the Social Centre. Its music exuded a plaintive but indignant vibe. Its lyrics expressed the intense sense of hopelessness and disenchantment towards society and the state experienced by young Greeks<sup>130</sup>, and which can be encountered in many contemporary Greek rap songs.

In the first verse, Lex, rapping in the first person, tells us that he’s watching a (police) pursuit while making coffee, before referring to the “aliens in blue” that “walk amongst us” – alluding of course to the police. The word ‘alien’ reflected a sentiment towards the police that many of my interlocutors seemed to relate to. Police officers were often imagined as belonging to a world ‘alien’ and threatening to the model of egalitarian and anti-hierarchical social organisation that anarchists and anti-authoritarians tried to cultivate and preserve in the neighbourhood. My interlocutors’ experience of police officers in Exarcheia formed an opinion where the latter were viewed less as ‘citizen protectors’ and more as instruments of state violence that could not be trusted.

During his interview, Markos recounted his experience of what he was sure was a police-staged robbery:

*“I was passing by, and then suddenly there was a lot of commotion and running and chasing. And then I saw some men running towards me, and I tried to get out of the way... I saw the MAT (riot police) across the road, and suddenly, one*

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<sup>129</sup> In Greek: Ένα αστέρι από τσιμέντο.

<sup>130</sup> Here I am referring to the disillusionment suffered by a large section of Greek youth following the financial meltdown of 2009.

*of them grabbed me and asked me, 'What's going on? Where are you all going?' One of the guys they were supposedly chasing said that he had some 'unresolved issues' with me, and that's why he was after me. But as I told you, I've worked on TV before, and I know bad acting when I see it. These guys were bad actors! Then one of the policemen started emptying my bag. There was nothing incriminating in it. But the craziest thing was seeing the guy they were supposedly chasing a couple of minutes earlier, having a cigarette and a laugh with them. Then they put me in the car while my 'assailant' sat next to me and began scrolling down his social media page. I was taken to the police station, where one of the chief cops asked me if I wanted to sue that man. I said no. He insisted. 'Are you sure?' I said yes and added that I wanted to call 100 and talk to real cops. And that's when one of them said, 'and what do you think we are? We are here to serve and protect'. Then they looked at each other and burst into laughter. In the end, they let the other guy go claiming that since I didn't want to sue him, there was no reason for them to detain him further."*

What Markos recounted was a staged police operation to justify the arbitrary and unjustified search of people that looked 'suspicious'. Operations like that were taking place in the hope of catching people with illegal substances, which could then grant police a legitimate justification to collect their fingerprints. As such, if the 'suspect' turned out to be 'clean' – like Markos in the incident described above - the next best option was to encourage them to sue their supposed assailant under the pretext of robbery. Despite finding the bad acting of the police and the absurdity of the event amusing, the incident had nevertheless confirmed Markos' suspicion that not only had

the police no real intention to tackle crime and protect citizens in Exarcheia, but their fraudulent tactics contributed directly to the criminalization of the neighbourhood.

Markos shared with me another instance where interaction with state agents left him disappointed. One night, following some *báhalá*, the fire from a burning car spread onto the nearby tree. The residents called the fire brigade, but the firefighters parked on the west border of Exarcheia on Patisision St. and allegedly refused to enter without permission from the municipality. That permission was never granted, and the locals put the fire out themselves. It seems that state presence and state absence in Markos' stories become synonymous in the sense that they appear as phenomena with equally detrimental effects on the neighbourhood. Irrespectively of whether Markos' staged police incident was a common occurrence or not, it nonetheless aligns with the remarks of other discussants who contended that the presence of the police (whether undercover or in uniforms) was harmful because their role had more often than not been either defamatory, incriminating or simply apathetic, contributing to the perpetuation of social degradation and the consolidation of fear in the neighbourhood. Under different governments, the state in Exarcheia appeared to be, simply put, an absent presence that added to the increased feeling of insecurity and discontent amongst locals.

New government, ‘new’ Exarcheia?

“I am going to finish Exarcheia within the first month”<sup>131</sup> (*Tha telioso me ta Exarcheia apo ton proto mina*) had been Kyriakos Mitsotakis’ fervent declaration during an interview almost a year into his election as the president of the loyal opposition party of New Democracy in January 2016. His words resembled those of former Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, who in the aftermath of the riots and vandalisms that took place in response to a new round of austerity measures in February 2012, said that he would “take the hoods off of the miscreants who burned the city”<sup>132</sup> (*tha katevaso tis koukoules apo ta katharmata pou ekapsan tin poli*). Mitsotakis added that the SYRIZA government had “consciously left the country undefended in the hands of *bahalákides*” and promised to “restore law and order”. Several mainstream media articles were published throughout the next three years outlining Mitsotakis’ governance plans for Greece but with Exarcheia often featuring in their bolded headlines as a primary matter of concern.

In line with the repertoire of its pre-election campaign, conservative ND’s victory over SYRIZA in July 2019 was also accompanied by the publication of articles detailing the new government’s plans for Exarcheia. “Trampling down transgression”, “restoring order” and “regenerating” the neighbourhood were listed as some of the primary goals of the Ministry of Citizen Protection. Determined new Minister Chrisochoidis’ statements about tackling the “problem of Exarcheia”, appeared on every news platform, earning him the nickname ‘steamroller’ (*odostrotiras*). By August, the

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<sup>131</sup> Source: <https://www.protagon.gr/epikairoti/44341224898-44341224898> (last accessed 10.5.2021).

<sup>132</sup> Source: <https://www.tanea.gr/2012/02/13/greece/samaras-tha-katebasw-tis-koykoyles-br-apo-ta-katharmata-poy-dielysan-tin-poli/> (last accessed 10.5.2021).

government strove to put words into action by first abolishing the university asylum and then proceeding with squat evictions in Exarcheia. With words similar to those used to describe notorious police operations of the past<sup>133</sup>, the president of the Panhellenic Federation of Police officers, Mr Stavros Balaskas, in a controversial statement, characterised the current police actions as a “silent, technologically-advanced Hoover” that would “suck up all the rubbish and dust in Exarcheia”. Indeed, during the Virtue Operations of the mid-1980s - also nicknamed ‘Operation Broom’ (*Epiheirisi Skoupa*) - the word ‘cleanse’ (*ekkathárisi*) was often used in police press releases (Vradis 2012). Such language of ‘hygiene’ and ‘cleanliness’ is innate to gentrification, a process very often promoted by governments and developers as ‘purifying’ and ‘sanitising’ (Campkin & Cox 2012; Danewid 2019). The juxtaposition of ‘dirty’ and ‘hygienic’ is used metaphorically to refer, respectively, to ‘uncivilised’, ‘underdeveloped’, and ‘dangerous’ versus ‘civilised’, ‘developed’ and ‘compliant’ urban subjects. This colonial mentality that drives gentrification tends to divide the urban landscape into “spatialities of dirt and cleanliness” (Campkin & Cox 2012), where the former are dubbed “wastelands” filled with “crime, drugs, disease, teenage pregnancy and broken families, prostitution, and pimps” (Danewid 2020: 298). As such, ‘sweeping through’ the streets and alleys of urban centres targets predominantly low-income, working-class and race/ethnic minorities, entrenching racialised and class geographies.

In the case of Exarcheia, ‘rubbish’ and ‘dust’, were overtly racist references to unwanted urban subjects (i.e. migrants), but –sadly and ironically- not to the *actual* rubbish that the residents had been complaining about. Yet bearing in mind that Exarcheia still

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<sup>133</sup> Here I am referring to the Virtue Operations of the 1980s, which I have discussed in the literature review.

largely retains its middle-class characteristics, I argue that such a crude choice of words can be traced to deeper historical and political specificities. The choice of Mr Balaskas' words - 'rubbish' and 'dust'- resonates with terms once used for leftists and political dissidents, such as 'pestilence' (*miasma*), thus establishing a lexical genealogy of non-citizens who are stripped of their rights and placed in the category of the "internal danger" (*esoterikos kindynos*) or "internal enemy" (*esoterikos ehthros*) (Panourgia 2009: 114).

I returned to Exarcheia in September 2019 with Mr Balaskas' words echoing in my head and unsure of what to expect. Indeed, the neighbourhood I saw then was quite different to the one I had first stepped into three years ago. During those years and until the last few months of SYRIZA in office, the sight of uniformed policemen in Exarcheia had been extremely rare. Riot police units were typically seen at the virtual borders of Exarcheia with Kolonaki and only approached the heart of the neighbourhood amid the commotion and the opacity caused by the *báhalá*. While the SYRIZA years were marked by the uneasiness caused by crime, a concern of a different kind seemed to hover over the neighbourhood during the early ND days. During that month, a squat was evicted almost every other day. The anarchist 'Citizen Service Centre' (KEP) –an alternative Citizens' Bureau housed in a container– had been removed from the Square, while local anarchists did not (reportedly) put up much of a fight. Some of my interlocutors attributed that to a sense of demoralisation brought about by the "change in the [political] climate".

Wanting to witness this 'changing climate' myself, I had arranged to meet up with a friend in Exarcheia shortly after my arrival in Athens. As expected on a Monday night,

Exarcheia was not as busy as it would have been on a Friday or the weekend but still busier than other parts of Athens. In fact, I had never seen Exarcheia empty and quiet – not even in August. I parked on Eresson St, judging that that would be a safer place for my car and would make it easier to ‘escape’ in case clashes broke out anywhere more centrally. My friend’s thinking was exactly the opposite. She parked hers right on Themistocleous St., believing the cops wouldn’t approach the Square at that time of the night. Despite our precautions, nothing happened while we were there, and on the surface, nothing really seemed different in the aura or the mood of the people around me. It looked like a typical autumn night.

After our drink, we decided to walk around the neighbourhood. As we strolled through the different blocks, my friend and I looked at each other and agreed that one thing had undoubtedly changed: the number of policemen. We had never before encountered so many policemen so close to the heart of Exarcheia. We assumed they were either guarding evacuated squats or waiting for orders from their superiors. “The [police] grip around Exarcheia is tightening”, my companion remarked.

I was eager to know what my interlocutors thought about these changes. When I revisited Exarcheia the following day, I received a mixture of responses. Some people seemed content and comparing the current situation with previous years, while others viewed the government’s attempt to deliver on its promises-threats with distrust and bitterness. These sentiments became particularly noticeable during an incident that unfolded on the Square a few days later.

## Square interventions

On September 26, I planned to meet an interlocutor for an interview. I drove around the neighbourhood, trying to find a place to park. The traffic was unusual for that time of day, and when I finally got sight of the Square, I understood why. A number of municipality workers with brooms and brushes, dustpans, shovels and pruners were busy at work. Some workers were sweeping the ground, two were painting the benches, one was erasing the graffiti off the central statue, and another worker was changing the bulbs on the surrounding streetlamps.



**Watching the interventions. Photo by me.**



**Tree planting on the Square. Photo by me.**



**The removal of 'Citizen Service Centre' (KEP) from the Square. Photo by me.**

Across the Square, in front of the coffee shop tables on Stournari St., stood six policemen covered in riot gear. I parked and walked towards the crowd. Like a stage, the square had been surrounded by denizens and regulars who were now watching the unusual scene unfold. Remarks heavily seasoned with sarcasm and irony were coming from all directions:

*"They should name it Konstantinos Mitsotakis<sup>134</sup> Square."*

*"It won't change, it won't change [meaning the Square]."*

*"No, they should name it Georgios Karaiskakis<sup>135</sup> Square."*

*"I believe they should name it Kasidiaris<sup>136</sup> Square."*

*"Hey, let's not overdo it (laughs)."*

*"Why not? The boys here will love it [meaning the cops]."*

*"Yeah, it will whet their appetite. They could come here, sit and drink their coffee."*

Suddenly, the voice of a young waitress louder than the others' broke through: "Seriously, guys. What is this? [*Pragmatika paidia. Einai katastasi afti?*]. Do I have to have *this* right in my face?! Do you get *this* in your neighbourhood too?!" she exclaimed, pointing at the cops who stood silent in front of the café and gazed expressionlessly at the Square. "Sure, I feel protected!" she added sarcastically.

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<sup>134</sup> Greek politician who was Prime Minister of Greece from 1990 to 1993. He was the father of current PM, Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

<sup>135</sup> Greek military commander and a leader of the Greek War of Independence.

<sup>136</sup> Former MP and now convicted member of the far-right criminal organisation Golden Dawn that managed to get elected and enter the Greek parliament. In May 2020 he created the party Greeks for the Fatherland.

Another young bystander turned to the cops and said: “You are not in Fallujah, man. You are in Exarcheia. We just got bookshops here. You are all dressed up as if you are in Iraq.”

A team of workers began to trim the trees while another group planted new ones. Everyone was watching. A man’s joke that the municipality ‘should also plant marijuana trees’ was followed by a gale of laughter. Another man wondered how long these changes would last and, with a more serious tone, commented that “[the workers] should also paint the ledge around the trees and the cracked pavement”. A woman shouted that “every corner has cops, yet drug dealing continues right in front of them.”



**MAT (riot police) patrol around the square. Photo by me.**

The sentiments expressed by the majority of my interlocutors in Exarcheia during that time were in line with the mood of distrust, sarcasm and mockery that prevailed on the Square that day. The scenes that had unfolded exemplified the discontent and lack of trust the locals expressed towards the state that my interlocutors had been discussing with me for three years already.

Behind his desk, and as usual surrounded by piles of books, George's opinion about the new government came with an impassive tone:

*“Nothing will change. A group of people smashed cars last night, and the police came in the morning after it was all finished. Nothing has changed. A few hours ago, I walked outside and told two people to stop selling drugs in front of my store. Whoever tells you that they see change, tell them, ‘Yeah, right (Nai, kalaaa)’.”*

I felt that the lack of emotion in his tone was not due to indifference, but rather reflected a certain pessimism combined with the knowledge of someone who had lived in Exarcheia all his life and had ‘seen it all before’. Similarly, Marinos<sup>137</sup> claimed that the “current [state] attempts to ‘clean up’ the Square aim only at stroking the ears [*haidevoun ta aftia ton katoikon*] of the residents to calm them down. They want crime cause crime gives them an excuse to intervene”, he said to me. In his interview, Kyriakos said that “in the past, most people opposed these state interventions. Now some even welcome them. When we used to plant trees, people looked at us suspiciously, wondering if we stole them”. He felt that people within Exarcheia were now more

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<sup>137</sup> I have introduced Marinos in the previous chapter.

divided, that there was more mistrust, and that personal interest was guiding individual action. “I would have liked solidarity in [the neighbourhood] to be like it used to be”, he finally added.

I believe that the fact that most of my interlocutors did not embrace the changes they had witnessed at the Square was not because they did not want a greener or cleaner neighbourhood. As Kyriakos pointed out, they had themselves taken initiatives to improve their neighbourhood, and as we have already discussed, grievances regarding poor sanitation had been often put forward to the municipality. The bystanders’ attitude and my interlocutors’ reflection upon these events were not an objection to a cleaner neighbourhood, but an act of calling into question the true intentions of the government, whose ‘beautification’ attempts were interpreted as a minor performance acted out “for show” (*gia to theathine*). The presence of the municipality was seen as a superficial effort that merely ‘ticked a box’ and which could solve none of the actual problems of the neighbourhood. These required long-term solutions, genuine acts of care and not the exceptional, opportunistic appearance of the state that served only to make a political statement of hostility to the Exarcheian culture.

The government prioritises ‘political crime’

During the SYRIZA years, Exarchiots had expressed their discontent and frustration about the state’s abandonment of their neighbourhood. Strongly worded letters were written addressing the lack of cleanliness and protests took place, condemning the

increased criminality, the absence of authorities and the destruction of private and public property caused during the so-called anarchist-police clashes. Yet similar protests and letters also marked the beginning of ND's administration. Several discussants regarded the fervent promises of its electoral campaign as void. At the same time, the impression given by mainstream media that 'law and order' were being restored in Exarcheia was swiftly debunked by residents, who, in a state of exasperation, continued to protest about the criminality in their neighbourhood, which despite the extensive police presence prevailed.

Two and a half years into the ND victory, in January 2020, numerous articles were published summarising yet another letter written by the residents of Exarcheia, in which they expressed their fear and discontent with the dismal climate of insecurity created by the uncontrolled gangs who still operated in Exarcheia, transforming it "into a base of various types of criminals of the common criminal law. Car vandalisms and robberies are a daily occurrence, and many take place in broad daylight"<sup>138</sup>. The article continues:

*"[The residents] also describe how in several cases, the perpetrators do not hesitate to check and display their thefts in public view, at the junction of Kallidromiou and Themistocleous St., or at the entrance of apartment buildings on Eressou St. As they point out in their text, 'the few residents who react are targeted either by being attacked with stones or openly threatened with scissors, knives etc'."*

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<sup>138</sup> Source: <https://www.tanea.gr/2020/01/12/greece/el-as-proteraiotita-to-politiko-kai-oxi-to-poiniko-egklima/> (last accessed: 20.7.2021).

The residents demanded to meet with the Minister of Citizen Protection, Mr Chrisochoidis, who is said to have previously stated that he refuses to converse with Exarcheia residents. Prompted by the activities of the notorious, so-called Kallidromiou gang, the residents met up with the Chief Commissioner of the Exarcheia Police Department. The article included the interview of one of the residents who told reporters that the Chief Commissioner admitted that the police are aware of the area's crime problem but that “the plan [of the Ministry] is to first tackle the *political and social crime* then common crime” (my emphasis).

Even though the statement was hardly a surprise to anyone, it nonetheless affirmed beliefs that combating drug and gang crime in Exarcheia was never really a priority for the ND government, whose main on-the-ground action had so far been the eviction and guarding of former squat buildings (see Pettas et al 2020). Kyriakos commented that instead of “conducting different kinds of operations or attacking the places that protect criminals, [the government] was attacking squats with women and children. Tsipras and Mitsotakis are like crows croaking at each other, and these people find themselves in the middle and pay for it”. Indeed, Exarcheians continuously drew a distinction between crime as an ongoing issue and the criminalisation of refugees and migrants, while the shared precariousness of residents and refugees was highlighted in protests that concurrently opposed squat evacuations and the Airbnb-led gentrification.

The so-called Kallidromiou gang, as the name suggests, mainly operated on Kallidromiou St., which also happened to be the street where the Police Department of Exarcheia was stationed. This made Kallidromiou the ultimate exemplification of this frustrating paradox of omnipresent law enforcement and thriving anomie. Left-wing

political party MeRA25 published a statement demanding that “*the government finally admits that ‘anomie’ is simply a fig leaf [pretext] that hides the need of the autocratic Right to erase from the historical map the Exarcheia of Asimos, Katerina Gogou, Kyrkos, Kalaitzis<sup>139</sup>, of the dozens of publishing and printing shops, of solidarity structures, of intellectual debate, and hand them over at degrading prices to Chinese investors and Airbnb tourists*”<sup>140</sup>.

A sense of déjà vu emerged as the opposing political rhetoric surrounding Exarcheia unfolded, once more transforming the neighbourhood into an arena for the power struggle between the ‘Left’ and the ‘Right’ and their respective political projects. Filippos, who I interviewed in 2017, took me four years back in 2013 when he still lived in his apartment in Mesologgiou St. Filippos was a postgraduate student at Athens University of Economics and Business and had moved to Exarcheia in 2012. He recalled the daily *báhalá* and how “buildings, bins and cars were on fire almost every night”. He admitted that he lost count of the number of times he left a window open in the living room to let some fresh air into the house only to come back from university to find his entire room filled up with smoke and tear gas. The straw that broke the camel’s back was witnessing “the police on Mesologgiou confiscating guns they had found in a basement of a nearby building. Real guns. That was when I decided to get out of there”. He had since moved to a quieter street in Neapoli, the neighbourhood adjacent to Exarcheia. The years 2013-2015 were a period when ND under Antonis Samaras was the leading party of Greece. However, the sense of insecurity that urged Filippos to leave

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<sup>139</sup> Nikolas Asimos (singer/songwriter), Katerina Gogou (poet and actress), Leonidas Kyrkos (left-wing politician), Giannis Kalaitzis (cartoonist) were very influential and who lived in Exarcheia. I talk more about Asimos in Chapter 4.

<sup>140</sup> I discuss more extensively the role of Airbnb in the gentrification of Exarcheia in the following Chapter 8.

his apartment during that time was the same sense of insecurity that made Thalia and Spyros, (discussed in Part I) move out of their own in 2016 under the SYRIZA administration. Comparing these asynchronous yet shared experiences between interlocutors points to a vicious cycle in which Exarcheia emerges as the ideal platform for the finger-pointing game that politicians repeatedly, albeit tirelessly, play.

I argue that the chronic issues that Exarcheians have been facing are suprapolitical, in the sense that no matter who was 'in charge', the neighbourhood's relationship with the state never ceases to be one of mutual distrust and discontent. To phrase this as a question: how effective were previous governments in meeting the demands of the residents and combating crime in Exarcheia but more interestingly, *why is Exarcheia always the problem?*

Crime and criminalisation: Constructing the 'problem area'

Interlocutors old enough to remember, marked the early years after the fall of the military junta in 1974 as a turning point for political and social life in Greece. The Metapolitefsi was an intense period full of promises and changes coupled with hope and disenchantment. The dictatorship had a catalytic effect on collective Greek consciousness and left Greek society with an increased sense of politicisation. The decades that followed saw the gradual proliferation of numerous extraparliamentary organisations that networked and established themselves within universities, seeking to produce politicised youth identities. Dissatisfaction with the new democratic government of conservative politician Konstantinos Karamanlis was reflected in the

mushrooming of various offshoots of Marxism and communism such as Trotskyism, Maoism, Guevarism, Eurocommunism and anarchism (Papadogiannis 2011; Kassimeris 2005). It was, in fact, during this period that, according to Dimitris Kitis, “a set of narratives, places, and tactics crystallised into an ‘anarchist’ or ‘anti-authoritarian’ *chóros*” (Kitis 2015:2, emphasis his). Suspicions that the state was still collaborating with post-civil-war paramilitary groups contributed to the radicalisation of the leftists.

Imbued with a more conservative, Stalinist ideology, the KKE (Greek Communist Party) vehemently rejected the norms and values of the 1960s counterculture that spread in Greek society. It regarded unconventional appearances, sexual liberation, punk or rock concerts and drug use as elements of an imported capitalist-driven modernisation that should not shape the lives of young people. Those post-1974 political and cultural shifts renounced by the KKE gravitated towards Exarcheia that soon came to represent an alternative Left. Recalling the Metapolitefsi changes he witnessed as a young man in Exarcheia at the time, Demos (introduced in Chapter 5) argued that the neighbourhood’s transformation was twofold. First, dissenting from and defying a still largely conservative Greek society, Exarcheia entrenched itself within its virtual boundaries as a locus for an emerging radicalised youth counterculture. At the same, like many parts of the Athenian centre, Exarcheia started to display symptoms of the ‘diseases’ of this new era of modernisation and globalisation - namely drugs and individualisation.

During his interview at his favourite kafeneion, Demos explained that “*along with the exciting new trends and the newly formed, polymorphous groups of people that the 1980s brought to Exarcheia, certain anomic phenomena were also introduced. The boundaries*

*between value and worthlessness (axia kai apaxia) became blurry, making way for crime and social decadence.*” Demos claimed that ‘anomic phenomena’, such as drug use, have been since “tormenting Exarcheia”, transforming it into a “refuge for every Tom, Dick and Harry” (*kathe karydias karydi*). Kyriakos also recalled a time when he was still a student and when the sight of “junkies stumbling around the Square of Exarcheia” seemed *so* out of place to him and his friends that “it was almost laughable”. While the 1980s had an effect upon the entire nation, my older interlocutors argued that these changes were strongly experienced in Athens and particularly in Exarcheia, which after the events at the Polytechnic consolidated its legacy as the rebellious hub of resistance and discontent against state authority and conventionalism.

Although evident in other parts of Athens, the emergence of ‘anomic phenomena’ in urban life during that period coincided with the emergence of a sudden and unprecedented (negative) interest in Exarcheia, whose name had now become synonymous with ‘crime’ and the ‘dangerous’ and ‘corrupt’ new morality of young people following 1974. In the years of Metapolitefsi, Exarcheia became the corpse of media vultures, who, in a state of insatiable frenzy, presented it as the dangerous hub of ‘hoodlum wearers’, drug dealers and punks (Vradis 2012). Similarly, in the television series *Kathodos* (1982-1983) Exarcheia starred as the Athenian ghetto of drugs, crime and promiscuity that any sensible viewer would demand their children to stay away from.

The phenomenon of neighbourhood stigmatisation is certainly not unique to Exarcheia. Several Athenian districts such as Omonoia, Menidi and Agios Panteleimonas have suffered from being portrayed as rough, unwelcoming places and often used as

metonyms for 'slum' and 'ghetto'. However, in Greece's popular discourse, *ávaton* (inaccessible, impassable, off-limits or off-bounds) has been a word exclusively reserved for Exarcheia. In fact, it has been so extensively deployed that any mention of *the ávaton* requires no further clarifications regarding which place the term is referring to. I argue that spatial terminologies of otherness such as 'ghetto' or 'ávaton' are the powerful signifiers of "prefabricated landscapes" (see Nelson 2000), used to contain the 'dangerous' and the 'threatening' exceptionality of a wider topography, while at the same time serving in exceptionalising it. Speaking of Exarcheia as a 'manufactured' or 'prefabricated' *ávaton* should not in any way suggest that Exarcheia's problems are fictitious or that the residents' complaints are irrational or exaggerated. Instead, focusing on the criminalisation of Exarcheia highlights the distinction between Exarcheians' experiential understanding of the problems in Exarcheia and the state's agenda behind the reproduction of *Exarcheia-as-a-problem*.

The media play an integral role in the process of territorial stigmatisation. As powerful *opinion setters*, the media construct and maintain the reputation of places through the appropriation and sensationalisation of historical events and representations. Such is the case for a diverse range of territories - from social housing estates in the UK (Hastings 2004; Hancock & Mooney 2013; Watt 2020) to the city of Las Vegas in the US (Nédélec 2017). The notion of 'territorial stigmatisation' was popularised by sociologist and social anthropologist Loic Wacquant following the publication of his highly influential book *Urban Outcasts* (2008). Expanding upon Erving Goffman's study of 'stigma', Wacquant argued that in addition to physical disabilities, unemployment, drug addiction, race, nationality, sexuality or religion, place of residence is also capable of discrediting and disqualifying individuals in a society (ibid). Wacquant's comparative

sociological study of the black ghetto in the South Side of Chicago and the deindustrialising La Courneuve in Paris demonstrates two distinct yet equally poignant cases of advanced marginality (2008). While some socio-spatial disadvantages like public policies of racial separation (South Side) or mass unemployment and the casualisation of work (La Courneuve) seem to be specific to each place, territorial stigmatisation constitutes their common denominator.

Similarly, in her study of the 'Sin City', Pascale Nédelec notes how Las Vegas' negative representation as a place of indulgent behaviour 'contaminates' the reputation of its inhabitants, who outsiders find hard to imagine as people who are neither gamblers nor employed in a casino.

*"They think we're all gambling all the time, well no we're just families like everybody else. When people know that you are from Las Vegas, they expect that you work as a cocktail waitress and you live in a hotel and you work for the casinos and there's that whole image. They don't understand that we have soccer teams, we have PTAs [Parent-Teacher Associations], we have churches, we have schools, and all of this stuff. I think that's the one problem: we get mischaracterised that way."* (Nédelec 2017: 16)

These comments strongly evoke those made by my own interlocutors:

*"I think people have been 'fed' a huge propaganda about this place. I mean, if you are not from Exarcheia you can't know what's going on. My own parents ask me if I have become an anarchist."* (Thalia, 27).

*“I’ve been chased by stereotypes all my life. When I tell people that I own a bookstore in Exarcheia, the next question is always ‘oh and how come they haven’t vandalised it yet?’”*  
(Marinos, 68).

*“If you hear the news, you imagine Exarcheia as a place where you can’t walk through. Taxi drivers are reluctant to drive in and prefer to drop you at Alexandra’s Avenue. My mother since I was little, was afraid and ashamed of the fact that I live here. To this day when people ask her, where does your son live, she says ‘Lower Kolonaki’.”*  
(George, 64)

Although contextually different, the experiences of Las Vegas and Exarcheia residents highlight the transformation of stigma from topological to residential. In the case of Las Vegas, the obvious tourism imaginaries become “confused” with the “reality of the everyday lives of Las Vegans” (Nédelec 2017: 15). In the case of Exarcheia, the reality of locals is conflated with (and obscured by) media and state-led representations of Exarcheia as a topography of anomie, dominated by criminals and anarchists (the two often purposefully equated). This becomes clear in how Thalia’s parents assumed that her choice to move to Exarcheia was motivated by anarchist sympathies and in the shame of George’s mother about her son’s choice of residence that compelled her to rename Exarcheia ‘Lower Kolonaki’.

My interlocutors’ remarks exemplify Wacquant’s ‘territorial stigmatisation’ as the offspring of the conceptual fusion of Goffman’s notion of “spoiled identity” with Bourdieu’s view of “symbolic violence”. This synthesis aptly explains how place stigma latches onto individuals and vice versa. I thus believe that the territorial stigmatisation

of Exarcheia encapsulates the neighbourhood's tangible but also *symbolic denigration*. Indeed, as 'spoiled' citizens, the residents of Exarcheia are denied a hearing by the Minister of Citizen Protection, while their complaints and concerns about their neighbourhood constantly fall through. Symbolic denigration also takes place through the presence of MAT along the 'border' of Exarcheia and Kolonaki. In its 'capricious' separation of the two districts (cf. Demetriou 2013) with the use of riot policemen that always face towards Exarcheia, the state engages in a process of subjectivisation (cf. Demetriou 2007) that moulds and separates individuals into desirable and undesirable subjects based on the territory they frequent or inhabit.

Vradis argues that the sudden and obsessive preoccupation of the media with the neighbourhood in the 1980s played a determining role in shaping the core of general discourses on Exarcheia and acted as a "self-fulfilling prophecy", in which the narrative of vilification was replicated so extensively that "it eventually became ingrained into the concrete reality of the people it concern[ed]" (2012: 94). In other words, representations of Exarcheia as the 'immoral' neighbourhood of Athens had been so deeply anchored in the social imaginary that even today, it becomes hard to think of Exarcheia without envisioning hooded, black-wearing, molotov-throwing individuals, drugs, barricades blocking streets, garbage cans and cars blazing through a tear gas mist. What succeeded the negative media coverage of the 1980s was the notorious Virtue Operations, launched by the then minister Yiannis Skoularikis, a founding member of the socialist PASOK that was, at the time, the ruling party in Greece. During those years, Exarcheia was treated as a space of both political (anarchism) and social immorality (crime) that had to be purified (Koutsoumpos 2019). It was regarded and portrayed as an immoral dystopia that, prior to any physical beautification, needed to

first be 'enmoralised' and 'cleaned up' from drug dealers and punks. Even though these police sieges lasted only a few years, they set a blueprint for decades to follow. In subsequent years, politicians and media worked almost hand in glove in presenting Exarcheia as the den of 'dirty' anarchists and reckless youths, creating an "imaginative topological space" (ibid: 219) where anarchism and drugs were nearly synonymised.

My interlocutors seemed acutely aware of these vilifying discourses and their everlasting effects on Greek society's opinion of Exarcheia. However, as evidenced in their comments cited above and in ethnographic vignettes presented throughout this thesis, Exarchiots did not always accept or internalise external stigmatising labels (pace Vradis 2012). During an anti-Airbnb protest that took place in 2019 for instance, residents openly contested the tainting of their identity and that of the neighbourhood. A large red banner preceded the body of protesters, and its yellow capital letters asked: I LIVE IN EXARCHEIA. IS IT A CRIME? (see also Chapter 7). Stigmatising labels did not seem to concur with my interlocutors' individual lived experiences of Exarcheia (cf. Watt 2020). As Watt points out through his study of the archetypal stigmatised 'sink estate' of Aylesbury in south London, the locals' experiences of their neighbourhood tend to be far more ordinary than outsiders imagine or what the media portray it to be (ibid). This argument is reflected in the words of Marinos, who chuckles at people thinking his bookstore gets vandalised all the time. It is also reflected in George's scornful rejection of Exarcheia's popular characterisation as *ávaton*, which according to him "falsely promotes the idea of Exarcheia as a place the state is *unable* to enter as opposed to a place where the state *enters when it pleases*".



The banner of the protest: 'I LIVE IN EXARCHEIA, IS IT A CRIME?' EXARCHEIA RESIDENTS INITIATIVE (ΜΕΝΩ ΕΞΑΡΧΕΙΑ, ΕΙΝΑΙ ΕΓΚΛΗΜΑ; ΠΡΩΤΟΒΟΥΛΙΑ ΚΑΤΟΙΚΩΝ ΕΞΑΡΧΕΙΩΝ)  
Photo source: inexarcheia.gr

The conceptual difference between a so-called 'problem area' and "an area *with* problems" (Attenburrow et al 1978; Watt 2010 emphasis mine) is made evident in the accounts of my interlocutors, even those ready to 'leave Exarcheia with the first opportunity'. Portrayed as an *abomination of the body of the city* (cf. Goffman 1963), their neighbourhood was stigmatised, treated as a no-go territory and denied essential civil services such as regular neighbourhood cleaning and access to emergency services like the fire brigade and the police. "Address discrimination" (Kirkness & Tijé-Dra 2017) also had other, less perceptible consequences, such as taxi drivers dropping residents at the periphery of Exarcheia rather than their homes. To borrow the words of urban geographer Tom Slater, "the 'blemish of place' or 'symbolic defamation' is very real for those who have been refused a taxi service" (2017: 107) or any other such

mundane services. I argue that it is in the very disruption of the mundane that the impact of territorial stigmatisation appears to be more profound.

Following this, I wish to highlight the dissonance between my interlocutors' experiential knowledge and understanding of their neighbourhood and its etic portrayals. I argue that crime and violence in Exarcheia were systematically sensationalised. The district continuously found its way into the media spotlight and political campaigns as the par excellence ghetto of criminals even though crime rates in other Athenian neighbourhoods might be equally high or higher. The fact that Exarcheia had been for so long one of the focal points in various politicians' electoral campaigns is, as we have seen throughout this chapter, ironically juxtaposed with the on-the-ground discussions with Exarchiot, regulars and businessmen who have been for decades pointing the finger at subsequent governments for the 'perennial' state of anomie and degradation in the neighbourhood.

Indeed, Exarcheia's post-1974 trajectory is marked by the repetitive oscillation between state abandonment and 'brooming'. Media and state-led demonisation coupled with large-scale police 'cleansing' operations and tactical politics of neglect, all constitute technologies of the same process of stigmatisation that produce and maintain Exarcheia as a 'problem area'. The neighbourhood's concurrent role as a convenient zone of tolerance in the heart of Athens and a cancerous geography that needs to be contained is maintained both discursively and practically. In the accounts presented here, crime does not emerge merely as a social issue but as a tool utilised to serve the particular agendas of politicians on either side of the political spectrum. As such, my use of the term 'criminalisation' when referring to Exarcheia does not pertain to a passage from

legality to illegality via means of legislation or judicial decision but instead aims to highlight the construction of Exarcheia as *the* criminalised space and “geography of fear” (Koutrolikou 2016) *par excellence* in the collective imagination of Greeks. Stretched beyond the realm of criminology, the definition of criminalisation is thus expanded to encapsulate not only those legal procedures that ‘make one criminal’ on paper but also the narrative procedures and indirect strategies that ‘make one criminal’ in social representation.

Who is the state in Exarcheia?

As my interlocutors often discussed the absence, presence, indifference and power of the state, its ‘bad’ and the ‘good’ faces, I began realising that the state in Exarcheia exists both as an elusive abstraction and a tangible reality. By discussing its agenda, I was also reifying it, partaking in its imagining as a conscious and insidious being with plans and ulterior motives that was concurrently absent and omnipresent. The state appeared as an “autonomous organicity” (Laszczkowski & Reeves 2018: 1) with multiple arms that extended and withdrew continuously, pulling various strings and affecting its subjects in any way it pleased.

In conversations with locals, the state usually constituted an emotive topic and a site of emotional investment, stirring within people a number of predominantly negative emotions ranging from scornful rejection to disappointment, sadness, irritation or anger. For many scholars, the relationship between individuals and states is not simply one marked by different emotive responses but an *affective engagement* between

people, things, spaces, practices and discourses. As already discussed in previous chapters, affect is viewed as distinct from emotions in that it is inter- and even presubjective. It exceeds individual interiorities and permeates space (Massumi 1995; Brennan 2004; Navaro-Yashin 2009). It is something like that indescribable yet palpable intensity that one senses, for instance, when they walk into a particular place (Brennan 2004).

I don't think concatenating emotion and affect weakens the analytic purchase of these ethnographies, but I agree with Laszczkowski and Reeves that emphasis on affect "helps highlight the domain of feeling that comes before or beyond its narration as emotion" (2018: 5). I am here interested in both feelings and affect, for I argue that the state, or what Mitchell (1999) calls the "state effect", is anchored in both. The state in Exarcheia was effectuated verbally in people's describable feelings towards it but was also sensed as a presence through an intensity that was not necessarily discussed in emotive terms, but which was shared, nonetheless. For example, an intensity of this kind, difficult to pin down, characterised those first months the conservative government rose to power: a mixture of curiosity, fear, contempt, sarcasm and anticipation towards the eventualities of the party's victory and how they would be reflected on the neighbourhood.

The state also emerged concurrently as a pervasive presence and a visible, condemnable absence. Starting with the latter, I contend that in Exarcheia, the state came into being through a *visible* (Harvey 2005) and often deliberate non-attendance. Its absence was paradoxically verified through the *presence* of the various tangibilities of neglect I discussed in the first part of this chapter (rubbish, cracked pavements, broken streetlamps, etc.) and the sight of certain undesirable subjects like drug dealers.

Furthermore, the state embodied itself in various governmental actors. It is important to note that 'state' and 'government' in interlocutors' narratives were often used interchangeably and in a way that saw the latter emerging both as a *representative of* (Fint & Taylor 2007) and *as the state itself*. As such, municipality workers, politicians, firefighters and the police in Exarcheia both represented and personified the state. The relationship of locals with these various state actors was imbued with tension and ambivalence, rooted mainly in Exarcheia's conflictual existence as both a so-called den of anarchists that rejects the state and its institutions and a primarily residential neighbourhood whose discontented denizens resisted their treatment as 'second-class citizens' and condemned the state's tactical retreat.

This distinction between the 'good' and the 'bad' face of the state – to use Loukas' words – was evidenced in residents' exasperated calls for more effective policing versus the weekly so-called anarchist police clashes. My discussants debunked the myth of Exarcheia's unequivocal hostility towards the police by distinguishing between 'normal neighbourhood policing' (*kanoniki astinomefsi*) that met their needs (i.e. policing that combats gang and drug crime and deals with road accidents) and the pervasive and oppressive state presence that took the form of riot police units, police vans and tear gas – what was referred to as *astinomokratia* (police-state). Another instance exemplifying this differentiation was the municipality's cleaning 'interventions' in the square. I recall the attention of shopkeepers, waiters, customers, residents and passersby being divided between the municipality workers and the wall of riot policemen guarding the square. Those congregated near the guards did not contest their presence but their *mode of presence* by asking them why they were dressed as if they were in a warzone, treating locals like criminals instead of intervening to stop the drug

dealers who operate undisturbed right in front of their eyes. At the same time, the 'hidden' state took a literal form in the neighbourhood through the infamous *asfalites*, the secret police in civilian clothes that constantly attempted to infiltrate Exarcheia, but whose presence was widely known and regularly spotted by locals.

While the need for a cleaner neighbourhood is evident in my interlocutors' interviews, the municipality's interventions at the square were also met with conflicted emotions. Although regarded as yet another 'arm' of the state, the municipality is nonetheless expected to service the neighbourhood by collecting the rubbish, trimming the trees, and fixing broken pavements and streetlamps. Conversely, as the incident at the Square showcases, such attempts to 'beautify' can also be treated with mockery and suspicion and reprimanded as superficial or even invasive. The latter pertains mainly to the eradication of certain urban elements that are typically considered a quintessential part of Exarcheia's political historicity, namely its graffiti and the local squats<sup>141</sup>. At the same time, I believe that coupled with the intensifying rumours about the construction of a metro station on the square, these minimal interventions were viewed as precursors of an unwanted gentrification.

Political scientist Timothy Mitchell argued that "state-society boundaries are [...] distinctions erected *internally*, as an aspect of more complex power relations" (1991: 71, emphasis mine). By emphasising the internal production of boundaries, Mitchell reminds us that boundaries do not precede the entities they separate. They are the malleable byproducts of the emic understanding of the roles and functions that separate

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<sup>141</sup> These sentiments can also be better understood within the context of touristification and gentrification that is explored in the following chapter.

what is perceived as a 'community of citizens' and what is perceived as 'the state'. The production and reification of this boundary rely on a *belief system* upheld through vernacular discourses and everyday practices of imagining. The state as a discursive, tangible and affective reality emerges from a complex network in which social actors constantly negotiate power and meaning in an endless number of situations.

Following Mitchell, the sharp distinction between state and society was further problematised by a number of academics (Alonso 1994; Brown 1995; Gupta 1995; Borneman 1998; Aretxaga 2000; Trouillot 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002) until it was finally altogether dismissed. As anthropologist Begoña Aretxaga writes:

"The separation between civil society and the state does not exist in reality. Rather, the state as phenomenological reality is produced through discourses and practices of power, produced in *local encounters at the everyday level*, and produced through the discourses of public culture, rituals of mourning and celebration, and encounters with bureaucracies, monuments, organisation of space, etc." (2003: 298, emphasis mine).

By broadening the notion of 'political practice' to encompass those quotidian and mundane elements through which the state is *imagined* (Aretxaga 2003; 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2002; 2012), Aretxaga kicks 'the state' off its high horse. Similarly, in her study of the state in the Peruvian Andes, Penny Harvey argues that anthropology's "critical purchase" is located precisely in its intimate engagement with local specificities (2005). Through her work, we are reminded that spatial proximity grants anthropology a lens through which the broader significations of the various concepts of public life can be

examined. She invites us to reject the “scaled relationship of encompassment” that views the local as empirically inferior or analytically less satisfying than a translocal whole. Asking ‘who is the state *in Exarcheia*’ instead of simply ‘who is the state’ (in general) speaks itself to this “renewed commitment to spatial proximity” (ibid: 127).

Mitchell’s other important argument was that “the importance of the state as a common ideological and cultural construct [...], should be grounds not for dismissing the phenomenon in favour of some supposedly more neutral and accurate concept (such as political system), but for taking it seriously” (1991: 81). Hence demystifying the state is important not because when we do so, we are going to uncover some hidden reality. A process of demystification ought not to erase the state but accept it as an *acquired reality*. For the ethnographer, at least, taking the state seriously means interrogating its existence in light of the subjective and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) encountered in the field. In order to understand how its reality is acquired, we need to unpack its local significations and treat its varied manifestations as a reality (Navaro 2002; Harvey 2005; Reeves 2018). I also argue that taking the state seriously within the context of my research means taking Exarcheia seriously. For, how can one discuss Exarcheia without discussing the (Greek) state – a symbol that continuously informs and infuses discourses and practices that assemble the neighbourhood as a contested, radical political topography?

In many ways, Exarcheia and the Greek state are each other’s “constitutive outsides” (Staten 1984); that is, each appears to be dependent on the other for its formation and identity (Howarth 2006). I believe that the state uses Exarcheia (among other places) to perform and *triumph* itself into existence. Indeed, a retrospective glance at the early

post-Metapolitefsi years suggests that Exarcheia's construction into an 'ávaton' of anomie was perhaps not incidental. The oscillation between demonisation and 'brooming' was methodical and intentional. First, it affirmed Exarcheia's role as the breeding ground for the ideologies and activities of anarchists and leftists and responded to their demands for the freedom of thought and expression that the anti-communist autocracy had been suppressing since the Civil War. At the same time, however, it was seen as a strategy of confinement used to restrict the activities of dissidents within the premises of Exarcheia, turning it into a scapegoat for the failures of successive governments and politicians. But more importantly, I argue that by constructing and affirming Exarcheia as the locus and retreat of the (political) "enemy within" (Panourgia 2009), the state was then able to prove itself as a real, legitimate and indisputable entity. Much reminiscent of Baudrillard's remark that "power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy" (2021 [1981]: 19), the Metapolitefsi state in Greece found through Exarcheia a way to inject its own poison only to then administer itself the antidote: (the problem of) Exarcheia would always be there to provide political purpose and an excuse for pompous mantras for party candidates before elections and other, more mundane, political rituals through which the state performs itself into being (Trouillot 2001; Harvey 2005). In other words, 'constructing' the 'problem of Exarcheia' (poison) while successfully failing to resolve it implicitly and gradually paved the way for moralising interventions that ranged from police "sanitisation crusades" (Tsimouris 2014) to gentrification (antidotes)<sup>142</sup>.

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<sup>142</sup> The extent to which the state is involved in gentrification procedures in Exarcheia is discussed in Chapter 7.

Having seen how the state performs itself into being by *imagining, constructing and maintaining Exarcheia* as its oppugnant and undesirable topography, I further argue that the state was also very much alive in the consciousness of those in Exarcheia who fervently contested and rejected it. In other words, ‘constructing’ the state was a two-way process of imagining. Known as a hub for radical leftists, Exarcheia’s position towards the state has historically been an antagonistic one. Its whole political economy, its discourses, spaces and materialities have all been organised in a way that polemically resists and subverts the workings of the neoliberal state. In her work on the Turkish state, Navaro-Yashin argues that “the signifier ‘state’ can remain intact, in spite of public consciousness against it” (2002: 171). I would rather suggest that the ‘state’ as a signifier exists not *in spite of* public consciousness against it but *because of it*. In Exarcheia, at least, this becomes evident in the way space is restructured to subvert the socio-spatial and economic organisation of the neoliberal state. This is evidenced in its squats, social centres, soup kitchens and other such grassroots initiatives and autonomous spaces that attempt to construct a vision of polity that is an alternative to the neoliberal and bureaucratic techniques of the state.

The importance of being absent

As Alexandri puts it, “even non-action by the state, or absence of direct intervention, is a phenomenon forming part of this conflicting structure of the state” (2018: 47). In this final section of the chapter, I have examined how the strategies of intervention vs non-intervention that the Greek state adopts in Exarcheia, combined with the ever-powerful

media demonisation, create and maintain the neighbourhood as a 'problem area'. This tactical absence is a quintessential characteristic of the neoliberal state, which, in Poulantzas' words, "bears the stamp of the development of the bourgeoisie and of relations among its various fractions" (2003: 80). Simply put, its selective strategies are ultimately there to satisfy the needs of the middle classes (Alexandri 2018). To answer whether that is indeed the case in Exarcheia -a neighbourhood whose discontented residents are, in fact, middle-class in their majority- we need to understand what sets Exarcheia apart from other, currently gentrified Athenian districts.

I have discussed the various competing Exarcheian visions and narratives held by residents, businessmen, regulars, anarchists, the state and so forth: there is the Exarcheian vision imbued with middle-class nostalgia; the vision of those residents with anarchist convictions who partake in the local solidarity initiatives; a vision of a more communist-inspired order in the neighbourhood, held by some old-school anarchists; the more Dadaistic vision of *bahalákides*, for whom Exarcheia is a sandpit for revolutionary practice. However, I argue that what remains a predominant characteristic in the neighbourhood is its resistance to middle-class aesthetics and the neoliberalisation (see privatisation) of urban space.

Exarcheia's case exemplifies that the state is not an all-powerful, autonomous entity. Here we need to regard Foucauldian notions of governance and think of political power as omnipresent, produced not only by institutional functions but also by individuals operating across a translocal network. Only then can we understand the utility of the state's absence and its pervasive presence, its selective remembrance and strategic forgetfulness.

Policies of abstention versus intervention in Exarcheia adopted by successive governments are seen by my interlocutors as part of “a vicious circle [whose] circularity is an invasive force serving dominant economic interests” (Lefebvre 1996: 375). These - as I discuss in the following chapter - are predominantly the interests of global and local investors and the elite (Poulantzas 2003; Paton & Cooper 2016; Alexandri 2018). *State presence* and *state absence* in Exarcheia emerge as different sides of the same coin that do not oppose but complement each other: docile police units and regular police raids are viewed as two different means for meeting the same end: spatial domination.

## CHAPTER 7

### Exarcheia as an ‘authentic experience’: crisis, tourism and the ruins of gentrification

The romantic rediscovery of Greece by both tourists and intellectuals following WWII saw a transition in the idealisation of the Greek landscape from an imaginary Hellas as the “sacred topos of ruins” to Greece as a modern Dionysian place (Tziovas 2014: 110). But despite the romanticisation of the country and the praise of its quasi-oriental pleasures, its inhabitants, modern Greeks, were viewed not as lucky bon viveurs but as ungrateful self-indulgent revellers, who gave in *too much* to the sensual gratifications their country had to offer – namely, its food, weather and the sea. This disdainful perception of ‘what being Greek means’ intensified during the 2008 ‘Greek debt crisis’. In the sensationalist rhetoric of many western news outlets, the self-indulgent, idle Greeks who liked to doze and drink their iced frappe leisurely under the sun while their country was crumbling into ruins had to now reap what they sow – namely, a Golgotha of ruthless austerity measures (cf. Stavrakakis and Galanopoulos 2019; Kirtsoglou 2021).

Ironically, the financial meltdown of 2009 saw the surge of a so-called crisis-tourism (Plantzos 2018), defined by the arrival of individuals interested in the ruins of Greece that lay not underneath the ground but above it. It was a tourism fascinated with the urban subaltern. Exarcheia, with its significant role in alleviating the consecutive

financial and humanitarian ‘crises’ that hit Greece, found itself becoming an object of attraction for a tourist industry now craving not the pristine but the ‘alternative’ and the ‘seedy’: it seemed that ‘wretchedness’ had coined its own version of the ‘attractive’.

In this chapter, I explore the ramifications the proliferation of tourism had on the urban landscape and social fabric of Exarcheia and the role of the ‘absent’ state in facilitating gentrification processes ‘from below’. I discuss how the increased number of tourists coincided with and led to the expansion of short-term rentals in the neighbourhood and interrogate how the commodification and capitalisation of its history and social struggles turned it into a “colonial spectacle” (Tziovas 2020). My conversations with locals and tour guides and a close examination of news articles and travel ads on Exarcheia illuminate how ‘crisis-tourism’ becomes yet another conceptual platform for enacting the politics of authenticity<sup>143</sup>. My primary aim in this chapter is to explore these multiple ways in which authenticity is realised, both materially and affectively - in competing neighbourhood visions.

### Laissez fair gentrification

As a number of studies indicate, times of crisis can provide a fertile ground for gentrification (Alexandri 2014; 2018; Janoschka et al 2014; Semi 2015). Contrary to the anglophone discourse that views gentrification as a primarily state-led process (Paton & Cooper 2016; Watt 2013; Hodkinson 2011), the emergent urban restructuring patterns

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<sup>143</sup> I say ‘another’ because the notion of authenticity has been also explored in Chapter 5 where it is examined through and linked to local perceptions of apoliticisation, political authenticity and subsequently Exarcheia’s authenticity as a place.

observed in Mediterranean cities following the global financial crisis of 2008 show that gentrification can also occur in the 'absence' of the state (Alexandri 2018). Far from 'ungentrifiable' (Maloutas 2007; Karachalis & Defner 2012), several districts in the heart of the crisis-stricken Athens became ideal candidates for an urban restructuring process, this time driven predominantly by the private sector.

The austerity measures imposed on Greece during the crisis caused "a fall in incomes, [the] withdrawal of welfare support and soaring unemployment accompanied by the dispossession of public assets and land" (Alexandri 2018: 36; Hadjimichalis 2014). The Greek state's "loss of sovereignty", as Alexandri puts it, saw gentrification emerging "from the fractures of a spasmodic planning system – a system in which politically networked social groups and the elite are able to change the planning framework and impose their own rhythms upon space production" (2018: 36-37).

In an entirely different context, taking Harlem and Williamsburg as their field sites, Zukin et al. (2009) compare and contrast two distinct cases of gentrification. Harlem, a district that has throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century been a metonym for black America, found itself since the 1990s at the forefront of scholarly interest as "both a test case of, and a challenge to, gentrification" (ibid: 50). Its case, the authors argue, exemplifies a specific kind of state-sponsored urban restructuring where "a panoply of state agencies", propelled by corporate and private interests, halted the protracted period of disinvestment and came in to support investment through funding and rezoning strategies that literally *paved* the ground for retail shops and high-rise apartments.

On the other hand, Williamsburg, a post-industrial neighbourhood in northern Brooklyn once occupied predominantly by Polish and Latinos, reflects an instance of market-led gentrification. Following several failed renewal attempts since the 1960s, the 1980s saw Williamsburg becoming a hip destination for artists and a younger – typically whiter – crowd that gradually transformed its abandoned warehouses and factories into art galleries, performance spaces, cafes and bars. Until approximately the early 2000s, no state subsidies or special zoning designations were granted to assist the gentrification process in Williamsburg. Indeed, “the state did not try to intervene in [its] economy except by its *absence*” (Zukin et al 2009: 53; emphasis mine).

State-absence-as-intervention could be seen as a conscious strategy of a broader *politics of neglect*. The main argument expressed by Zukin et al. concerns the ‘remarkable similarity’ between the commercial gentrification processes in Harlem and Williamsburg. Whether state or market-led, the end result of both kinds of gentrification is a notable increase in chain stores and boutiques and an equally sharp decline in old local retail stores (Zukin et al 2009). The resulting urban landscape is marked not only by the new, ‘visible’ public space (shops, cafes, boutiques) but by a new social space; a new crowd of people whose needs, tastes and cultural capital guide the way the neighbourhood is restructured creating a “new sense of place” (ibid: 62). I argue that the upmarket landscape that successfully emerges in both cases should serve as a reminder of the utility of the state’s absence and prompt us to reconsider the clear-cut separation between state and market-led gentrification. This distinction is reinforced by the idea that the neoliberalist economy has to be one in which “the government excuses itself from the workings of the market in order to advance the freedom of economic actors to maximise their own profit” (Fraser 2004: 442). Those who embrace the

neoliberal agenda believe that state intervention will not only curtail one's right to use their money as they please, but it can also undermine the efficiency of the economic system as a whole. On the ground, things play out quite differently. As Fraser explains, "it is both difficult and undesirable to rid the market entirely of the state, and neoliberalist initiatives tend to play out in scenarios in which government is, in fact, a key actor" (ibid); 'a key actor', even in absentia if I may add. Irrespective of the police raids in squatted industrial lofts, I believe that, in the long run, Williamsburg's gentrification was encouraged by the state's absence. Once the ground was paved, the state's active intervention in the early 2000s expanded and accelerated the restructuring process by effectuating the usual zoning changes, development, and policing strategies (Zukin et al 2009).

A characteristic example of gentrification in the 'absence' of the state in Greece is undoubtedly that of the central Athenian district of Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio (henceforth KM). The case of KM drew considerable academic interest because the area was viewed as a prime example of how gentrification can utterly transform a district from an ex-industrial, deprived working-class area to an artsy, fashionable, middle-class hub (Avdikos 2015; Alexandri 2018; Vavva 2020). Citing Cohendet et al (2010), Vasilis Avdikos argues that the creative milieu in KM was formed through three layers: the underground, the middleground and the upperground (2015). The interaction of the creative individuals, or "the creatives" (Alexandri 2018), with firms and institutions (upperground), within a locality subsequently gave "birth to the local collective symbolic capital of an area, namely innovative products and services - the middleground" (Avdikos 2015).

Such relational interactions in KM in the mid-1990s propelled gentrification processes. Affordable renting prices made the abandoned industrial buildings readily available for incoming theatre companies. Not unlike Williamsburg, KM's growing reputation as an up-and-coming alternative theatrical hub attracted even more actors, musicians, painters and dancers. The gatherings of artistic crowds saw the launching of even more art studios, galleries and theatres and organically led to the demand and proliferation of bars and cafes whose low prices and unconventional style set KM apart from other districts (Avdikos 2015: 120). During the years of harsh austerity and financial insecurity, KM had provided a space of hopeful escapism to the young people it drew in from every part of Athens.

The state in KM was allegedly inactive during the aforementioned gentrification procedures. After examining its case closely and interviewing several city planners, realtors, gentrifiers, entrepreneurs, residents and politicians, Alexandri concludes that "gentrification may not only be the outcome of direct state action but also state-elite interaction" (2018: 47). As the case of KM indicates, the state can become, *in absentia*, a useful apparatus of spatial domination deployed by the middle-upper classes, who, using their power and influence, can manoeuvre their way out of official planning regulations. The state's ostensible absence or inaction is not the *cause*, but the *symptom* of an implicit culture of clientelism that overlooks direct legislation in favour of indirect planning acts, setting gentrification in motion and seeing the formation of exclusionary middle-class landscapes. Drawing from Zygmunt Bauman's notion of liquid modernity, Alexandri argues that "the non-action of the state comprises [...] a liquid strategy promoting gentrification, tolerating speculation and overlooking displacement" (ibid: 36).

Hence, it is not the absence of the state that is required for the neoliberalist economy to work but rather its intermittent presence, its liquidity and its ‘under-the-table’ interactions with the elite. This is the essence of what Fraser shrewdly refers to as a “public-private partnership” - a collaboration in which “state and private corporations work together toward the common goal of increased profit for each” (2004: 442). Zukin et al (2009) touch upon this briefly when they argue that “the constructed multicultural urbanity of upscale, cosmopolitan restaurants and shops may complement neoliberal strategies of growth expressed by city governments support for new, market-rate housing” (49; cf. also Hackworth and Rekers 2005: 232). Indeed, it is through this complementarity that gentrification processes work. In both Williamsburg and KM, a ‘commercial’, privately-led gentrification preceded residential gentrification (aka displacement of lower-class residents), while in Harlem, gentrification was primarily residential and state-sponsored. As we will see, there are more than ‘two paths to gentrification’, which is historically recurrent yet contextual, processual yet nonlinear. It is, in Kate Shaw’s words, “a continuum” (2008: 17).

Following their own gentrification trajectory and through ‘private-public partnerships’ of various combinations, one by one, the districts of central Athens fell into the hands of investing companies and private stakeholders, whose projects gradually displaced impoverished households and transformed formerly industrial, working-class areas into “24-hour playgrounds of entertainment” (Alexandri 2009: 20). Today, most districts of central Athens resemble those of other European and US cities in their abundance of gourmet restaurants, brunch eateries, bars, overpriced coffee shops, chain and upmarket clothing stores. Exarcheia constitutes one of Athens’ most recent and,

therefore, least examined cases of gentrification. The historical and cultural particularities that shaped Exarcheia's conceptual and tangible existence as an anarchist neighbourhood see gentrification unveiling itself in new ways and as something else besides the transformation of low-status neighbourhoods to upper-middle-class playgrounds. Bearing in mind its stigmatisation as a 'problem area' discussed in the previous chapter, I argue that Exarcheia provides a perfect – and in some ways unique – case in demonstrating how neighbourhood 'upscale restructuring' takes place within 'ideal' urban environments that are both found and *created*.

Narrowing down: gentrification in Exarcheia

The infrastructural frame of Exarcheia, consisting of a central square surrounded by a mixture of residential, commercial and recreational buildings, with its narrow streets and trees poking through its cracked pavements, doesn't significantly differ from that of the nearby districts of Koukaki or Kipseli. However, contrary to the aforementioned districts' industrial and working-class past, Exarcheia has since its early days been a middle-class neighbourhood and perceived as the capital's intellectual centre – a character it retained for decades owing to its location between three universities. Nowadays, Exarcheia's middle-class characteristics are reflected in its demographics and its retail landscape. Exarcheia is still home to many students and professionals and accommodates twice as many artists as any other neighbourhood of Athens (Vasileiou 2009). Despite its small size, it hosts today more than 40 different publishing houses, and most of the area's economic activity revolves around the production and

consumption of books. These facts alone already challenge gentrification's role as "a generalised middle-class restructuring of place" that encompasses "the entire transformation of low-status neighbourhoods to upper-middle-class playgrounds" (Shaw 2008: 2). The questions that lead my discussion are thus the following: what ultimately makes Exarcheia a 'gentrifiable' district? How does gentrification occur in neighbourhoods that do not fit into this upscale restructuring pattern? What are the (other) reasons behind the gentrification attempts of Exarcheia if not a class 'upgrade'?

In answering these questions, one must remember that more than a beautification project, gentrification in Exarcheia has always been a political one. Urban planning has been historically used as a means of keeping 'dangerous' or unwanted 'Others' in abeyance and under control (Koutsoumpos 2019). As we will see, the historical trajectory of Exarcheia only exemplifies this further. In the 1980s, the Operation for the Reconfiguration of the Urban Plan (ORUP) in Athens was an attempt by the government to "suppress the city's anarchist and far-left political spectrum by means of urban planning" (Tsavdaroglou & Makrygianni 2013: 25). By process of elimination, this could not have meant the gentrification of any other neighbourhood but Exarcheia - the district that had since the 1980s been Athens's undisputable cradle of radical political mobilisation. This places Exarcheia in the crosshairs of 'regeneration' projects much earlier than other Athenian districts like Kerameikos-Metaxourgeio and Psiri, whose transformation began sometime in the 1990s (Avdikos 2010; Goudouna 2014; Alexandri 2018).

Today, 'regeneration' projects in Exarcheia do not take the form of newly constructed buildings but of the reappropriation of old ones. The visible imprint of gentrification on

the neighbourhood's built environment is evidenced in the bars, coffee shops, restaurants, organic grocery stores, and Airbnb apartments that have multiplied in the last six years. Exarcheia's international recognition as the epicentre of social movements and insurrection following the December 2008 uprisings (Pettas et al 2021), its increasingly commodified landscape coupled with the international community's renewed fascination with an 'exotic' Greece in financial 'ruins', granted the "cultural means of social distinction" to an emergent middle class and a new kind of tourist entertained by alternative tours and urban "seediness" (Zukin et al 2009; see also Featherstone 1991; Zukin and Kosta 2004).

The ruins of the crisis: Greece's post-2008 rediscovery as a colonial spectacle

*"One afternoon, I was walking down Stournari St., and I saw a tourist. He must have been German for sure, cause he was wearing shorts and sandals with socks, holding a camera, had a hat on... a proper caricature! And I thought to myself, dude, what the hell are you doing in Stournari?!"*

Sotiris was a 32-year-old archaeologist who had been living in Exarcheia since 2012. With a chuckle, he told me how he then took a photo of the tourist and sent it to his girlfriend. Being observed while observing, the unsuspected tourist had become himself an object of curiosity in an otherwise unremarkable setting of everydayness in Exarcheia. Sotiris was amused at the sight of a man so fitting to the tourist stereotype that he was, quite literally, *out of place*. In this case, 'place' could be Plaka or

Monastiraki, two quintessentially touristic neighbourhoods in Athens, where sandal-wearing, camera-holding tourists swarm about enthusiastically, pointing at the Parthenon. But for Sotiris, an excited tourist curiously gazing around Stournari St. in the heart of Exarcheia, felt *strange*.

Stournari was no different to most streets in Athens. It was a street in Exarcheia running parallel to the square, passing by a series of condominiums whose ground floors hosted cafes, taverns, bookstores, electronics and clothing stores before finally intersecting with the 28<sup>th</sup> October Ave. For the historically and politically uninformed eye, the only significant sight on Stournari is the Polytechnic which, despite its graffiti painted walls and neglected courtyard, stands imposing. What Sotiris had found curious and amusing was that the tourist's attention was drawn not to the imposing Polytechnic but to the old, dreary buildings and graffiti. What then was so interesting about Stournari?

There is no question as to why one might fix their eyes on the Acropolis in awe or why one poses amid the narrow alleys of the Anafiotika for a photo. The former is magnificent, dignified and opulent. The latter is colourful, picturesque, strongly reminiscent of Greek islands and appealing to the tourist's romanticised imagery of Greece. But, as a friend once remarked, there is also something bittersweet and enchanting about buildings in a state of decay - a kind of morbid fascination if you like. In the Greek context, this can be better understood in the aftermath of the economic crisis.

The post-2008 years saw Greece becoming a cheap destination leading to a gradual increase in tourist arrivals. From 2008 to 2011, the number of arrivals rose from 14 million to 21.1 million. Indeed, the financial and refugee ‘crises’ saw the insurgence of a different kind of international interest in Greece (Tziovas 2020) and, as such, the arrival of a different type of tourist. No longer was Greece interesting merely as the “sacred topos of [archaeological] ruins” or the “sensual paradise” (ibid 110): Greece had been rediscovered as a “colonial spectacle” and as Tziovas aptly puts it, “the ruins of the crisis” had now “upstaged the ancient ones on the ground” (ibid: 114). While the EU (see German) governments reprimanded and criticised Greece for mishandling its finances, EU tourists and intelligentsia were eager to visit and draw inspiration from its landscape of desolation.

The connection between the so-called crisis-tourism and the colonial condition is identified in the perceived civilisational (and financial) ‘superiority’ of the tourist-visitor against the citizens of a ‘wretched’ EU nation like Greece, which despite its failed attempts at modernity, it can at *least* offer some educational, vicarious experience of poverty to all those tourists that willfully visit it to sympathetically gaze upon its ruins on the ground.

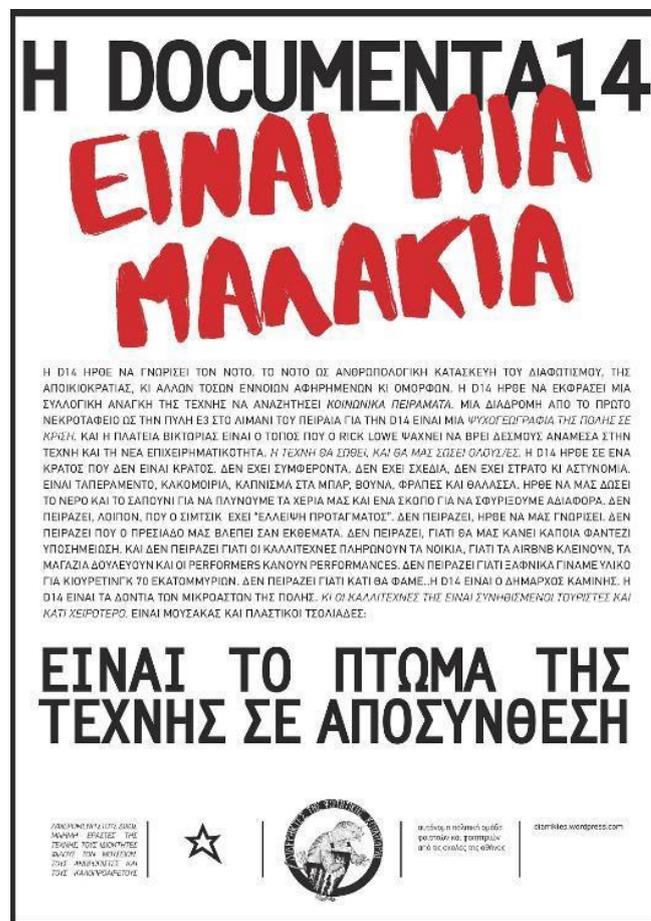


**With the Acropolis visible in the backdrop: 'Welcome and enjoy the ruins.'**

The epitome of this was evidenced in the case of DOCUMENTA 14, the German modern art exhibition that in 2017 chose 'subaltern Greece' as a source of inspiration. Equally well-known to the D14 exhibition in Athens is the backlash it received from locals who accused it of aestheticising the Greek crisis – an accusation that took the form of this (in)famous poster (featured below). This poster (see photo below), created by an ANTIFA group operating within Exarcheia, quickly infested every wall in the neighbourhood and beyond, sometimes overlaying the actual Documenta posters. The text in the poster, in its denunciatory, sarcastic tone, poignantly captures and exposes the essence of Greece's crypto-colonial condition (Herzfeld 2002):

*"D14 came to meet the South. The South as an anthropological construction of Enlightenment, of Colonisation and other such beautiful and abstract concepts [...] D14 came to a state that is not a state. It has no interests, it has no plans, it has no army and*

*police. It is temperament, misery, smoking in bars, mountains, frappes and sea [...] It doesn't matter that we became material for a 70 million curating project. It doesn't matter because we will 'eat'. [...] D14 is the teeth of the city's petites bourgeois. And its artists are the usual tourists and something worse: they are moussaka and plastic tsoliades<sup>144</sup>. THEY ARE THE CORPSE OF ART IN A STATE OF DECOMPOSITION."*



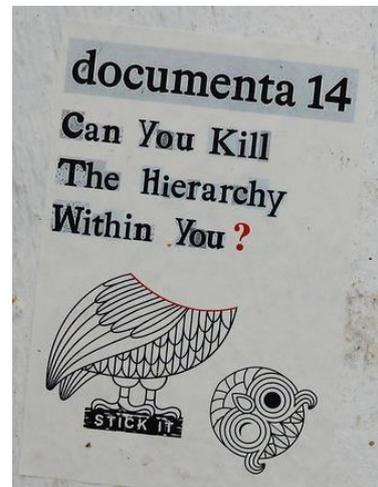
<sup>144</sup> Plural of 'tsolias' (τσολιάς), the colloquial word for the Evzone soldier. Once, tsoliades were the elite light infantry and mountain units of the Greek army. Today, they are members of the Presidential Guard, a ceremonial unit that guards the Greek Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Presidential Mansion in Athens. They are known for their distinct uniform, consisting of a fez with a silk tassel, a fustanella - a kilt-like garment- white wool leggings and tsarouchia - a type of shoe with an upturned toe usually covered by a large woollen pompon. The Changing of the Guard Ceremonies that take place at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier below the Hellenic Parliament, are one of Athens' most popular tourist attractions.

Other reactions towards Documenta 14 were vocalised on the walls of Athenian neighbourhoods:

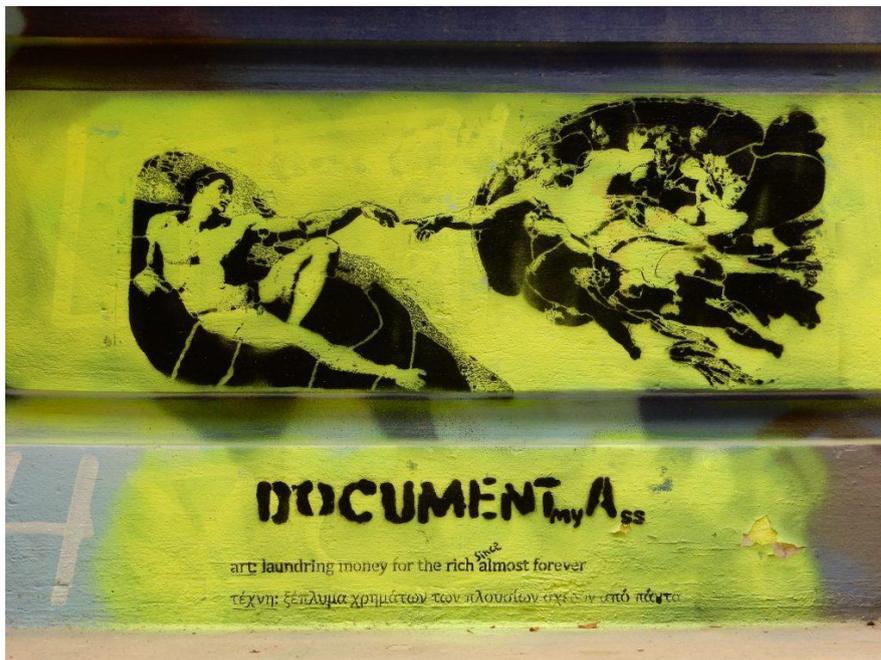
*(Photo credits: Julie Tulke. Source: <https://aestheticsofcrisis.org/2017/sincerely-the-indigenous>)*



Stencil at Omonoia square in Athens- "I refuse to exoticize myself to increase your cultural capital."



"Can you kill the hierarchy within you?" sticker at the Athens School of Fine Arts.



Stencil in Exarcheia: "Documenta my ass - art laundering money for the rich since almost forever."

The aestheticisation of the Greek social struggle also became blatant in a 2018 Guardian article - subsequently removed- inviting its readers to take a tour “to learn about the impact of the financial crisis and migration in the southeastern European country”<sup>145</sup>. In similar articles and travel guides promoting this kind of ‘crisis-tourism,’ Exarcheia was featured as the must-visit epicentre of protest, resistance and unrest. One travel guide that I came across featured a number of useful phrases for tourists arriving in Athens. Among sayings like ‘Kalimera’ (*Goodmorning*), ‘Yamas!’ (*Cheers!*) or ‘Pou einai to mouseio tis Akropolis?’ (*Where is the Acropolis museum?*), the question ‘ginonte epeisodia?’ (*are there any riots?*) was interestingly enough, also deemed helpful and culturally relevant for visitors.

With all the above in mind, perhaps the presence of a sandal-wearing, camera-holding tourist in Exarcheia - a neighbourhood so often dubbed as ‘dangerous’ and ‘off-limits’ by mainstream media - is hardly a paradox.

Exarcheia’s gentrification: (anarcho)tourism and the Airbnb fever

Certainly, tourism in Exarcheia is not a new phenomenon. Since mainly the late 2000s, politically motivated individuals from abroad had been arriving in Exarcheia (Pettas et al 2021). The term ‘anarchotourist’ has been used to describe those travelling to visit the squats and partake in street protests as an act of solidarity towards fellow anarchists in the united struggle against state oppression (Apoifis 2017). Dennis Tolkach’s insightful study of tourism’s relation to the different branches of anarchism

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<sup>145</sup> Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/31/the-guardian-apologises-for-controversial-greece-poverty-tour> (last accessed 23.8.2021).

presents “activism, solidarity and education” as the dominant motivations for anarchists visiting Exarcheia (2017:294). Other visitors who fall under what Bianchi (2009) calls “revolutionary tourism” tend to view autonomous communes like Exarcheia as experimental and exhibitory and visit them to “simply gaze upon” and enliven their travelling experience (Tolkach 2017: 294; Bianchi 2009).

With the onset of the so-called refugee crisis and the proliferation of refugee squats in Exarcheia, the term ‘anarchotourist’ re-enters the local vernacular. It is sometimes used to describe young volunteers possessing a “vague anarchist ethos” (Astrinakis 2006: 302), who come mainly from Western Europe and the US and who, following the “long summer of migration” (Düvell 2018), arrived in Exarcheia to assist with the organisation and the day-to-day running of the squats.

The foreign volunteer was perceived with mixed emotions. On the one hand, there seemed to be a genuine appreciation for the support received from these individuals, albeit short-term. On the other hand, their ephemerality raised suspicion about the genuineness and depth of their interest in the local problems. Sometimes the term ‘anarchotourist’ was itself used as a metonym for opportunism. At the same time, on a few other occasions, people referred to anarchotourists as ‘holidayarians’ (as opposed to solidarians<sup>146</sup>) - a term whose negative connotations echo those of the ‘voluntourist’. Although often lauded in literature as a way of ‘making a difference’ and fostering cross-cultural understanding through meaningful interactions with people (McIntosh & Zahra 2007; Raymond & Hall 2008), voluntourism has also been criticised for causing the reverse, namely, reinforcing stereotypes of ‘unfortunate Others’ and perpetuating

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<sup>146</sup> The word was in fact uttered in English.

patronising mentalities (Simpson 2008; McLennan 2014). For some, voluntourism “fits neatly with neoliberal ideology” since it employs a simplistic discourse of goodwill to secure individual accomplishments that would look good on a resumé while in reality, it does little to undo (neo)colonial relations of power (McGloin & Georgeou 2015: 415).

Such were also some of the negative perceptions embedded in the coinage ‘holitarian’ – a typically young individual from western Europe or the US who used solidarity politics as a ‘ticket’ for an alternative holiday experience. Vicky scoffed at the holidarians’ time in the squats as a “two-month solidarity internship” (*dimini praktiki stin allilegii*), while Zacharias, who volunteered daily in the local squats, referred to the ‘counterfeit’ solidarians as ‘anarchotourists’:

*“Some are conflating the solidarian with the anarchotourist. Let’s not fool ourselves. Anarchotourism exists here, and it is also quite profitable for many people, but mainly for the anarchotourists themselves. We have often caught people coming from abroad who pretend that they want to help and all that. They get to stay in a squat for free; they have some university funding for their project, which they spend by drinking and eating out all day. And their greatest help has been to play with the children for half an hour a day. Wow! And then take pictures to show that they have helped. Nevertheless, I don’t want to wrong everyone. There are certainly those who truly break their backs helping the refugees. But I can count them on one hand, and I know them personally.”*

Whatever the nature of their intentions, the influx of young volunteers in Exarcheia undoubtedly coincided with (if not propelled by) a sudden increase in the number of

Airbnb apartments. Following its timid appearance in Greece in 2009, Airbnb's fast-expanding footprint in the mid-2010s became a catalyst for rocketing rent prices and resident evictions, and the government did very little to stop it. The government's current legislation on short-term rentals does not pose any limitations on the availability and multilisting of properties, while the current Mayor of Athens, Kostas Bakoyiannis, has openly expressed his support to the owners of short-term rentals (Pettas et al 2021). In an interview I conducted with him back in October 2019, I had the chance to ask him about the role of Airbnb in the gentrification processes in Exarcheia. His response was swift:

*"Gentrification occurs because Airbnb drives up rent prices. That does not happen only in Exarcheia. If you ask me, that's a bigger problem in Petralona or Koukaki. It's less of a problem in Sepolia or Thimarakia. Airbnb requires a holistic, non-horizontal regulatory framework. There is no distinct policy for every district. One must take into consideration the location of every neighbourhood and set limits based on how much one neighbourhood can take. Rouf could take more Airbnbs. Ayios Pavlos, Stathmos Larissis could also take more. And they may want it too. Omonoia could take more Airbnbs. But as I said earlier, Petralona, Koukaki and Kolonaki cannot<sup>147</sup>. In those areas, Airbnb should be restricted."*

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<sup>147</sup> The names are names of central Athenian districts.

## Resistance to gentrification

Much like the reaction of citizens in other districts of European capitals like Lisbon and Barcelona, currently experiencing gentrification, Airbnb evictions in Athens were met with resistance. Early in 2018, Exarcheia's information boards - its walls - began to fill up with angry murals and graffiti calling for the eviction of Airbnb and telling tourists to go home 'or else'.<sup>148</sup>



Always up to date: A 2016 political mural in Exarcheia showing the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras holding a baby Barack Obama (left) was in 2018 replaced with an anti-Airbnb mural headed 'EXARCHEIA TOURIST GUIDE'. The mural showed a map with Airbnb apartments on fire followed by the caption 'FIRE BNB' (photos taken by the author).

<sup>148</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-50075503> (last accessed 25.7.2021).

A wryly-named group called “Exarcheia Tourism” was created on Instagram in August 2019 to warn “hipster tourists” off Exarcheia. Responding to the Exarcheia tour ads featured in various travel blogs, their first two posts read: “Exarcheia is an anarchist stronghold, not a museum or a vibrant artistic place” and “you’ve lost your mind thinking that Exarcheia will be a ‘vibrant’ experience for your Airbnb tourists. How many tourists have found out the hard way?” The virtual warnings took material form, and a big banner soon appeared on Tzavella St. (it was later moved to the Square) stating: *Airbnb Supporters go home. Here we have class war.* A month later, in 2019, the doors of Airbnb apartments in Exarcheia were sprayed with graffiti, and their locks were jammed. The growing contention about the rental company in Exarcheia reached international news platforms when the BBC published an article in October 2019 on “How the Airbnb angered the Greek anarchists”.

In November 2019, Exarchiots and Exarcheians mobilised themselves and protested on the Square against Airbnb and the persecution of migrants and refugees in their neighbourhood. In a pamphlet distributed during the demonstration, they stated:

*“We get out of our homes (before they kick us out) for the Exarcheia of solidarity and co-existence. Our neighbour isn’t the enemy. Refugees are welcome. We want the police out. We invite you all to a musical procession in the streets of the neighbourhood. We hang the red flags on our balconies and sing. We live and act in Exarcheia, and it’s not a crime!”*

The protest, led by the Exarcheia Residents Committee, was not only a display of politics of discontent against Airbnb and gentrification but also a powerful display of solidarity

politics. In their demonstration, the residents stood alongside refugees and migrants in light of their shared precariousness, demanding the end of the Airbnb and police-led squat evictions in their neighbourhood. The red flags - the material reminder of the neighbourhood's historical connection to anarchism and anti-authoritarianism - and the musical procession around the streets of Exarcheia were an attempt by locals to glue back the wrecked social fabric of their neighbourhood and boost its spirit of collectiveness and autonomy. The locals challenged their stigmatised image as the second-class citizens of a 'problem area' (see Chapter 6). Through dynamic grassroots organisation, they reasserted themselves as a "legitimate community" (Fraser 2004) that would not succumb to the whims of a capitalist state.

During his interview and in a live debate between mayoral candidates a month before the elections, Kostas Bakoyiannis stressed the importance of implementing a regulatory framework for short-term rentals that would follow the needs and capacity of each district. Despite this, and even though the government is permitted by law to set time and other restrictions on short-term rental properties for specific geographical areas, such reconfigurations had not yet been implemented.

As a local tour guide, Aliko wanted to share with me her thoughts about the current Airbnb situation:

*"I understand why someone would want to rent their flat out. If I had an apartment and I was in great financial need, I would consider going to live with my cousin and rent out my flat as Airbnb. I don't have a problem with that. But I think the problem is with corporations buying whole buildings and*

*turning each flat into an Airbnb. So that's basically like making a hotel. This is a problem. Corporations are going to be greedy. We know what they are like. They are going to drive up the market. And the government is not regulating them. That is at least the case in the States."*

Today Exarcheia hosts the second-highest number of Airbnbs in Athens. While switching to short-term rentals in the aftermath of the financial crisis was undeniably a survival mechanism for many landlords, their uncontrollable growth has turned them into a stalking horse for the displacement of long-term residents. Moreover, while Aliko was not aware whether large corporations had made similar investments in Exarcheia, daily evictions coupled with rumours about the mass purchasing of properties by outside investors were enough to spread fear and uncertainty amongst residents. The latter refers to the (by now) notorious Chinese investor who allegedly bought 100 properties in Exarcheia in 2017 – a story that had become somewhat of an urban myth amongst locals. A journal article<sup>149</sup> published at the time stated that after using them as short-term rentals, the investor sold the apartments as an investment portfolio to another foreign investor. Irrespectively of the details of this particular case, the real estate market in Athens became indeed of interest to foreign investors. Scarce public investments and the state's weak intervention in Exarcheia (literally) left room for private capital to invest in short-term leasing (Pettas et al 2021). Aside from foreign investors, the Airbnb landlords who once left Exarcheia for the more affluent parts of Athens and who could afford *not to sell* their properties in the neighbourhood certainly benefited from the state's 'absence' and the lack of regulation.

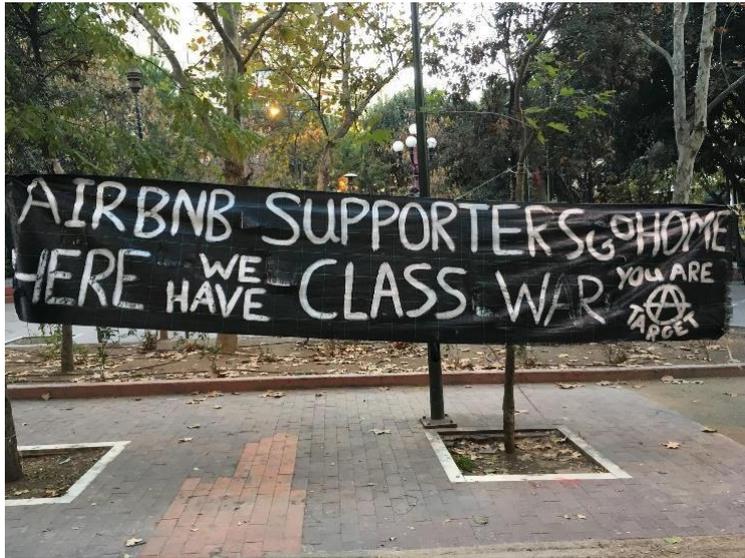
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<sup>149</sup> Source: <https://www.kathimerini.gr/economy/local/931298/100-diamerismata-sta-exarcheia-akorase-kinezos-ependytis/> (last accessed 17.7.2021).

Sitting on a chair outside his grocery store, Loukas pensively remarked:

*“Exarcheia always had a good urban mix of youth, collectives, organisations, people who were a little bit crazy, artists etc. Exarcheia is an old middle-class neighbourhood. It wasn’t a working-class neighbourhood. It just had a lot of young people and students, and perhaps that disguised it a bit. Now, these people are either dead or have left Exarcheia. We are in a transitional phase, like the rest of the centre. The effects of tourism and Airbnb can be felt everywhere, but in Exarcheia, they are especially strong. Its landscape is in transition. You can’t be certain which direction it might go.”*

Demos argued that the Airbnb-led gentrification of Exarcheia and the resultant expulsion of its long-term residents would eventually lead to the social desertification of the area – a phenomenon that has been observed in many other European city centres (Semi 2015). “When the Airbnb stops, neighbourhoods will be left with empty squares and deserted condominiums”, he said, as if he could foretell that only six months later, the global COVID-19 pandemic would put a temporary halt on international travelling and make the desertification of city centres all the more visible.



**Still there: the Anti-Airbnb banner on the square of Exarcheia, January 2020. Photo taken by me.**

Crime & tourism: where the state vilifies the market commodifies

Along with its mention of the Chinese investor's ventures in Exarcheia, the *Kathimerini* article made another brief explicatory statement that I wish to highlight here. According to its author, the reason behind the foreign investors' purchasing-confidence in Exarcheia "[was] the incredibly low real estate prices and the availability of sale, due to the 'ghettoisation' of the neighbourhood and the rise of *security deficit* in recent years" (my emphasis). The terms 'ghettoisation' and the rather technical term 'security deficit' (*elleimma asfaleias*) indicate the paradoxical entanglements between increased insecurity and tourist-led gentrification. The empty apartments left behind by dissatisfied and uneasy residents would be turned into readily available Airbnbs. Ghettoisation, stigmatisation and touristification of inner-city neighbourhoods can then operate in a complementary fashion.

Although the aforementioned connection is rather apparent, crime tolerance as a tool of gentrification has not been granted adequate academic attention in the Greek context and elsewhere. Most literature focuses on the ways gentrification impacts on crime rates rather than the ways increased crime propelled by a politics of neglect, and territorial stigmatisation might succeed in paving the ground for gentrification in areas that were previously considered ‘ghettos’ or ‘ungentrifiable’. While touristification as a mode of transnational gentrification is important to grasp in the context of Exarcheia (cf. Pettas et al 2021), interrogating the underexplored link between crime stigmatisation and the gentrifying processes in seemingly ungentrifiable districts is equally pertinent. Once this connection is understood, it should be easy to grasp *why* while residents are complaining about the increased criminality in their neighbourhood, the number of glamorous businesses is multiplying; *why* while residents are being evicted from their homes in favour of short-term rentals, excited backpackers are roaming the alleys of Exarcheia; and finally, *why* while some refer to Exarcheia as ‘Exathleia’, others compare it to ‘Montmartre’. I am here referring to a statement made by the conservative deputy minister of citizen protection Katerina Papakosta in April 2019:

*“For me, Exarcheia is a historical neighbourhood of Athens. It is a centre of art and culture that my own political perspective sees it as the Montmartre of the capital – not as a long-suffering area.”*

Her comment sparked a series of satirical remarks and posts which compared the real Montmartre in Paris with the ‘Montmartre’ of Athens. In the backdrop of weekly clashes with the police, many contrasted pictures of *báhala* and empty, scorched streets in

Exarcheia with colourful, picturesque images of Montmartre. However, some did not perceive the statement linking Montmartre – a hypergentrified area- to Exarcheia as a mere example of the ridiculous naivety of a minister who chooses to downplay state oppression in the neighbourhood. On the contrary, for both Exarchiots and Exarcheians, this was an ominous statement that, coupled with the continuous evacuation of squats by SYRIZA during that time, revealed the state’s intentions for the economic exploitation of the political history of Exarcheia. Thus equating Exarcheia to Montmartre did not reflect a naïve and false perception of Exarcheia’s reality but rather a future vision of what it could become.



One of the Twitter posts satirising Papakosta’s comparison of Exarcheia with Montmartre reads: ‘Papakosta: Exarcheia is the ‘Montmartre of the capital’. Picture of Montmartre and Exarcheia. Be careful. Don’t mix them up and find yourselves in the wrong place.’

“They always wanted to change Exarcheia”, said Marinos while giving me the kind of look people usually give to suggest that something is common knowledge. I intuited that ‘they’ was a reference to the nexus of actors and institutions that my interlocutors conceived as ‘the state’ (see Chapter 6). By ‘change’, Marinos was referring to attempts made to ‘transform Exarcheia to a tourist-friendly space, like the famous Plaka and integrate it into the system’.

Plaka, an old historical neighbourhood in the centre of Athens, located on the slopes of the Acropolis between Syntagma and Monastiraki, was used by Marinos as a metonym for a highly touristic area, owing to the hundreds of thousands of tourists that visit it every year. “It is a district”, he explained, “that once had a character”, but that was now a hypertouristic commercial hub. Talking about Exarcheia’s transformation into ‘a Plaka’ Marinos reflected his grounded understanding that Exarcheia risked a similar fate; one where its “political and cultural identity would be sacrificed on the altar of tourism and commodification”.

‘Always’ was used figuratively by Marinos to highlight that attempts by successive governments to exert power and control over Exarcheia had been the status quo for what seemed like ‘forever’. This appeared to be the belief of most of my older discussants, too, for whom the tensions between ‘the state’ and Exarcheia stretched as far back in their lifetime as they could remember. But as we have already seen in Chapter 6, the genesis of the ‘problem of Exarcheia’ and the police crusades initiated to combat it emerged during the Metapolitefsi years, sometime in the 1980s (Vradis 2015, Pettas et al 2021). Before that time, Athens’s ‘immoral’ topography was located elsewhere. According to Loukas, between the 1960s and the 1970s, “Plaka was the

Exarcheia of Athens". "At the time", he noted, "everyone knew drugs were to be found mainly in Plaka". Indeed, I was amazed to discover that in a 1966 newspaper, Plaka had been compared to London's Soho, which had been during the 1960s notorious as the capital of sex and drug crime in London. In the 1980s, Soho underwent major urban restructuring and is today globally considered "the most emblematic of artist-gentrified neighbourhoods" (Skuda 2015: 1013). Other quintessential cases of gentrification processes in 'immoral', dangerous topographies are those of the Times Square and Harlem in Manhattan-New York, Hackney and Brixton in London and Kreuzberg in Berlin (Butcher & Dickes 2016; Khoder 2017; Howarth 2002; Stehle 2006)

When in 1973 Kreuzberg was first introduced as a 'ghetto' in a still divided Germany, *Der Spiegel* published an article comparing it to a 'decaying' Harlem, with its "first Harlem symptoms [being] already visible" (Stehle 2006: 50). A metonymy of this ilk is also the one made between Exarcheia and Plaka. Interestingly, while Marinos used 'Plaka' as a metonym for 'a sterile tourist bubble', Loukas' use of 'Exarcheia' intended the opposite: to describe Plaka as the once infamous hub of drug dealers and criminals. The metonyms and their meanings had been reversed.

The comments by Loukas and Marinos reveal a pattern in the seemingly incongruous relationship between crime, stigmatisation and touristification. The fact that a formerly crime-ridden, denigrated neighbourhood was now one of Athens' most touristic areas, coupled with the ostensibly paradoxical co-existence of crime and increased tourism in Exarcheia in recent years, indicates that the *persistence* of crime in the neighbourhood orchestrated a prelude to gentrification. It was a prelude both because it invited gentrification as a *supposed* social 'corrective' against it (cf. McDonald 1986) and

because it enabled gentrification by undermining the affection locals felt for their neighbourhood and subsequently by driving them out.

As discussed in the previous chapter, my interlocutors interpreted the intentions behind the state's non-action towards crime in Exarcheia as a strategy of confinement. The state overlooked local demands for a safer neighbourhood. The eternal, so-called problem of Exarcheia was conveniently used to absolve successive administrations of their mistakes and failures and to legitimise their power by fixating on and attempting to combat 'political' crime in the area. The state's intermittent presence in Exarcheia maintained the neighbourhood's role as a scapegoat and gradually enabled the materialisation of a gentrification pending since the 1980s (Tsavdaroglou & Makrygianni 2013). Turning a blind eye to both crime and Airbnb's expansion constituted a twofold strategy of 'taming' a 'dissident' district while at the same time finding ways to inject capital into it. Thus, a public-private partnership relies on the state's willful 'absence' and its encouragement of private investment in tourist accommodation rather than long-term secure housing.

Exarcheia as an 'authentic experience'

Indeed, increased insecurity in Exarcheia (as a response to what *Kathimerini* dubbed 'security deficit') and its post-2015 rediscovery by 'alternative' tourists and digital nomads prepared the way for its touristification and commodification through the capitalisation of its anarchist history. This was evidenced not only in the concurrent

mushrooming of Airbnb flats but also in the emergence of online platforms attempting to “repackage the neighbourhood’s insurrectionary spirit as vapid, marketable cool” (New Yorker 2020)<sup>150</sup>. My interlocutors were well aware of the so-called alternative tours and ‘cultural walks’ that promised to guide visitors through ‘life in Exarcheia’.

Many of these tours are promoted on Airbnb, among other platforms. The short-term rental company recently decided to extend its market beyond accommodation. In 2016 Airbnb launched a new service to provide users with the choice of booking ‘immersive’ travel experiences, which included tours and activity packages, all tailored to fit their interests, ranging from history to food, music, art, fashion and sport. Airbnb’s new addition consolidated the commodification of a new kind of product that the market had begun to realise was even more important to people than material goods: *authentic experience*.

Under the category ‘Experience’ on *Airbnb.com*, the word ‘Exarcheia’ generated a series of tour ads calling tourists to ‘forget all about Greek clichés and antiquity’, ‘boring sightseeing and historical lectures’. Exarcheia here emerges as what MacCannell – inspired by Erving Goffman (1959) – would have referred to as the “back region” of the Greek tourist setting (1973), that is, the backstage where one can have an insight into the ‘*actual* issues of the country’ whilst exploring its ‘capital of Anarchy’. A French tour guide offered ‘graffiti tours’ around Exarcheia’s politically charged murals, squats and houses of famous Greek artists and writers. Another tour under the name “Sweet Anarchy” organised by a group of residents, aimed at offering tourists a multi-sensory

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<sup>150</sup> Source: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-attack-on-exarchia-an-anarchist-refuge-in-athens> (last accessed 17.7.2021).

experience by combining sightseeing and funny anecdotes with gastronomic adventures through “ventur[ing] into the ‘forbidden’ rebellious neighbourhood of Exarcheia’ and visiting three different dessert shops for an ‘unforgettable Greek sweet delight experience”<sup>151</sup>.

The existence of these tours demonstrates and responds to a cultural reversal in values where the tourist-consumer, is expected to reject the luxurious, the pretentious, the sheltered, the mainstream and seek the rough, the humble, the sordid, the disreputable and the unconventional. In Zukin’s words, seediness is no longer ugly but a sign of *authenticity* (2008: 727) - what in today’s terms would be referred to as ‘instagrammable’<sup>152</sup>. Yet while these tour ads respond to the sightseer’s “desire to ‘see [and capture] life as it is really lived” (MacCannell: 1973: 592), they also perfectly exemplify what Shepherd calls the “central touristic paradox” – the belief that tourism contaminates and destroys authenticity - the very thing it allegedly craves for (2015; Theodosopoulos 2013; MacCannell 1992). MacCannell encapsulated this paradox in his concept of “staged authenticity” (1973). For him, the authenticity of a performance either exists or doesn’t, and the oxymoron ‘staged authenticity’ suggests that even when a person thinks they have achieved an authentic experience, if it’s ‘staged’, it is superficial and therefore *inauthentic*.

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<sup>151</sup> Source: <https://www.airbnb.gr/experiences/652863> (last accessed 23.7.2021)

<sup>152</sup> Virtual galleries on social media platforms like Instagram ironically aim to capture and mediate authenticity while failing the very moment they attempt to do so. Yet for all its synonymisation with fakery and inauthentic representation, I argue that the ‘instagrammable’ picture remains potent in its ability to reflect and create what is worth sharing with the online community. As such instagram trends concurrently kill, mediate and *create* ‘the authentic’. Online trends on Instagram fuel the offline nostalgic search for a sense of gritty authenticity amongst a new, global middle class that is no longer satisfied with the pristine.

I was reading through some of the reviews satisfied tourists left on one of the many 'Exarcheia Street Art Tours':

*"This is an authentic experience in immersing yourself in one of the local cultures of Athens. You will feel local passion, community commitment, alternative ways of looking at today's issues...all while walking the streets of Athens."*

*"I'm so glad my daughter and I did this. If you're looking for a unique experience that will connect you to the real Athens, then give this a go. You'll come away with an altered perspective, appreciation for the local community spirit and lots of rich images you might have otherwise missed."*

*"This is not a tour about long and famous Greek historical monuments but about the small and somewhat unseen street artworks and the stories behind them. We spent with our tour guide almost half of the day walking and discussing murals, contemporary art, books and music. It was a great experience and I would definitely recommend this tour and the guide."*

Unlike MacCannell, I cannot argue for an "aura of superficiality" (1973: 595) in these reviews and reject a tourist's experience as inauthentic, particularly if the latter truly 'felt like a local'<sup>153</sup> and if they thought that their encounter with Exarcheia was 'meaningful'. While unable to guarantee the genuineness and true authorship of these online reviews, I argue that what ultimately matters is the kind of narrative they

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<sup>153</sup> Source: <https://www.guruwalk.com/walks/3841-street-art-walk-exarcheia-neighbourhood> (last accessed 27.7.2021).

construct and propel: one that speaks of the modern individual's desire for a real, unique, authentic experience.

A counterargument to MacCannell's theory could be that all culture is invented and performed, and therefore all culture is, ultimately, *inauthentic*. Turning this reasoning on its back, we could also suggest that if nothing is authentic, then everything is. This might appear to free us from the supposed limitations of a binary logic. However, taking cue from Dimitrios Theodossopoulos' (2013) approach to authenticity, I chose to accept and embrace its binary logic as an 'opening' to understanding the local specificities that inform it. Consciously studying authenticity's dichotomous contestations within the contexts they are situated might indeed be a more astute way of "unpack[ing] [its] local meaningfulness" (ibid: 347). This 'unpacking' is my objective in the following section.

Emergent and conflicting authenticities

*"Exarcheia – an authentic Greek setting."*

*"Why does Exarcheia remain one of the most authentic neighbourhoods of Athens?"*

*"... visit the authentic side of the Greek capital..."*

*"Exarcheia is an artsy and authentic old Athenian neighbourhood."*

*"Exarcheia is a vivid, artsy and authentic neighbourhood."*

Authenticity is a word quite hefty in meaning. The confident assertion with which travel guides and articles deploy it almost makes us forget to ask: what *is* authenticity in the

first place? In contemporary discourses and everyday rhetoric “the word ‘authentic’ is one of an overlapping set of evaluations that includes sincere, true, honest, absolute, basic, essential, genuine, ideal, natural, original, perfect, pure, real and right” (Lindholm 2013: 362). In the social sciences, specifically anthropology, authenticity has become the barometer with which the quality of culture, tradition and experience are measured. Undoubtedly, the subdiscipline most preoccupied with the concept of authenticity is that of the anthropology of tourism (see among others Wang 1999; Bruner 2001; Richman 2008; Shepherd 2015), where it has been problematised in various contexts such as museums (Chhabra 2008; Field 2009), theme parks (Fjellman 1992, Holtorf 2005) and heritage sites (Gable and Handler 1996; Zhu 2012). Academic research saw authenticity moving beyond the interiorities of the individual human being and entering the world of materialities and performances. The ‘authentic’ was now preoccupied with accuracy and representation sought in acts and artefacts and in phenomenological distinctions between the real and the fake (Duranti 1995; Shepherd 2002; Chhabra et al 2003; Orvell 2014), the original and the counterfeit (see Navaro-Yashin 2012).

At the same time, the aforementioned adverbs somehow cannot make a worthy replacement for the word ‘authentic’ and the claims to an unordinary existence it so gallantly makes (Lindholm 2013). In other words, a rigid, essentialist authenticity cannot exist. However, what does exist is a context-specific, polysemic authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013). In the Exarcheian context, authenticity is asserted in the various blogs and articles that provide an equally idyllic description of the neighbourhood as a unique place of politicised riots and molotov cocktail-throwing far left gangs, but which is nonetheless (or therefore?) a ‘cultural must’ (Miari 2018). An “authentic neighbourhood”, “an architectural maze, packed with bohemian shops,

hidden courtyards and squares” where “you can explore paved alleys with street art, politically-charged murals and some of the most unique shops in Athens”<sup>154</sup>. The ‘authentic’ in these texts is celebrated as an escape ticket from the dull everydayness. These articles exude a nostalgic vibe, locating authenticity in the elements of a longed past reproduced in the present, such as the old school jazz music of certain coffee shops, the neoclassical houses, the kafeneia and the Kallidromiou open market. At the same time, they reorient authenticity’s meaning. Media and popular exoticisation of the social and political struggles in Exarcheia, the romanticisation and commodification of its politics through ‘alternative’ tours, generate a process that sees authenticity turning from the desired quality sought by locals to a desirable commodity sold by gentrifiers and consumed by outsiders (Zukin 2008).

In academic and popular accounts, ‘authenticity’ often accounts for ‘uniqueness’ and ‘exemplarity’. These attributes are defined through Exarcheia’s ‘alterity’ as a self-organised “heterotopia of resistance” (Chatzidakis 2012) against state oppression and neoliberal politics, particularly in comparison to its next-door upmarket neighbourhood of Kolonaki. As we saw, Exarcheia accommodates various autonomous spaces that operate upon egalitarian, non-capitalist solidaristic forms of political, social and economic organisation. Its name has been associated with opposition to the status quo – a role that has, since the onset of the financial collapse, been extensively discussed by academics (Chatzidakis & McLaran 2012; Chatzidakis 2013; Vaiou & Kalandides 2016; Arampatzi 2017).

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<sup>154</sup> Source: <https://www.urbanadventures.com/blog/locals-guide-exarchia-athens/> (last accessed 27.7.2021)

In recent years voices of concern about the transformation of Exarcheia into an exoticised, “commodified Disneyland” became louder (Chatzidakis 2013: 462). Detached from its original intent, MacCannell’s concept of ‘staged authenticity’ can be used to refer *not* to an authenticity that is ‘staged’ in the sense that the performer consciously acts it out for the sake of the onlooker, but an authenticity that is arbitrarily placed on a stage and turned into a spectacle for the onlooker - irrespectively of what the performer wants. In Exarcheia, political *performatives* such as the *báhala*, solidarity action, or commemorative marches are reduced to performances through aestheticisation (see Chapter 5). This ‘placing onto a stage’ is also executed by the tour guides, who locals and anarchists blame for the *spectacularisation* of urban life in the neighbourhood. Protests took place opposing the “turning of [Exarcheia’s] political structures, its people and clashes with the police ‘into an alternative fantasy that will transform [it] into a kind of urban zoo”<sup>155</sup>. Banners were put up in the square and the walls of the surrounding streets reading: “*Insurrection is not a spectacle, Exarcheia is not a museum*”. This remonstrance highlights the difference and tension between Exarcheia as a *conservatoire of histories* and a *live archive* that informs and moulds political subjectivities versus Exarcheia as a curated museum exhibit (see Chapter 4). Apart from the top-down asymmetries the latter signifies, the representation and treatment of Exarcheia as a museum also implies a *performed* authenticity that tallies with the landscape of state-favoured consumerism that gentrifiers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the cacophony of Exarcheian representations does not simply articulate a competition in taste or social distinction between different stakeholders. Conflicting

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<sup>155</sup> Source: <https://mpalothia.net/athens-greece-against-the-touristization-of-exarcheia/> (last accessed 27.7.2021)

neighbourhood visions ultimately reflect *differing versions of authenticity*; notions of *what* a place should mean culturally, politically and economically.

As an archival space and a conservatoire, Exarcheia perpetually retains and expresses a polemic narrative of leftist resistance to oppression and marginalisation. Authenticity, as such, is a political ethic with material articulations that are there to provoke, resist, subvert, inform, remind and haunt, and not to be *commodified, bought and sold*. Nevertheless, this authenticity does not escape its transformation into a commodity. The archive is rebranded into a museum; for museums bring money, archives don't. The very resistance to this 'rebranding' feeds into a cycle of spectacularisation in which anti-touristification banners, political posters, murals, solidarity spaces, anti-consumerist collectives and *báhala* fit neatly into the imagination of Exarcheia as an alternative tourist destination.

Geographic imaginations of Exarcheia are not concerned merely with the built environment of a place but also with "the constitution of urban life and the city dweller" (Weszkalnys 2010: 68). As Gisa Weszkalny's ethnography on Berlin's Alexanderplatz showcases, the physical modification of urban landscapes does not necessarily induce a change in their social composition. Not unlike Alexanderplatz in a post-reunification Germany, Exarcheia's post-1974 trajectory sees its emergence as an active place of contest situated in a knot of social, political, aesthetic and ethical elements of public life impossible to disentangle. It is these intimate entwinements that give rise to contemporaneous place authenticities and representations at a permanent deadlock.

Katia, a Greek-American performance artist from New York, who now earned a living as a graffiti tour guide in Exarcheia, explained that launching her tour was not an effort to 'sell authenticity'. Instead, she argued that 'authenticity is not exclusive to Exarcheia. "I think that is any place in Greece is authentic" she told me and continued: "I mean, my own neighbourhood is authentic. It is a very blue-collar neighbourhood, they are not interested in intellectual ideas at all, but I have to say they are great neighbours. I'm not going to get my intellectual stimulation from them, but I'm going to get support and benevolence".

When I insisted that 'authentic' is an adjective often featuring on tourist ads about Exarcheia, she laughed:

*"Well, as Public Enemy says, 'Don't, don't, don't, don't believe the hype!' This is what people do to try and get people to come to an area that tourists are told 'don't go'. I think that that's the reason. It's an advertising slogan. Authenticity is real. Real can be all different kinds of things. There is no one truth. The truth is comprised of so many different viewpoints. We can't even comprehend what really truth is. We cannot be that objective."*

Granting me her own truth, Katia added that despite the lucrative opportunities life in the U.S had given her, she "chose not to be wealthy". *"I chose to be an artist and to stay true to my convictions and my principles. I'm older now, so it gets harder, but I have not backed down from it. So you can't judge a whole. You can't vilify everyone"*, she insisted. Since she moved to Athens three years before, finding a job as an artist was impossible. *"I'm not a classical artist"*, she said to me, *"so things were even more difficult. I didn't need*

*a lot, but I needed to make some money for food and bills. So after discovering Exarcheia and spending days exploring the area on my bike, I decided that this is the place. And that's how I came up with the idea of starting the tours."*

I asked how she perceived messages from anarchist groups such as "Insurrection is not a spectacle, Exarcheia is not a museum", whose anti-tour and anti-touristification sentiment was bold and clear. Her response was prompt:

*"I think if you are going to try and control this [tours and tourism], then you are just like New Democracy but on the opposite end (laughs). I am not interested in that. And if you don't think that people need to see Greece in a different light than just the Acropolis and this kinda stuff, then you are an asshole; you are a jerk. You are not a true anarchist. A true anarchist wouldn't care."*

One might still wonder: why do these tours cause such discontent? What is so threatening about taking a few tourists to walk around Exarcheia and share some historical knowledge while enjoying delicious homemade loukoumades<sup>156</sup> at the local store while discussing the meaning of murals and graffiti?

I argue that the perceived threat was not the tours or the tourists *per se*, but rather the touristification of Exarcheia as a *continuous process* leading to its gentrification and commodification taking on at an unprecedented pace. The threat was also perceived in the blatant irony of Exarcheia's inevitable absorption into the very political economy it

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<sup>156</sup> Traditional pastries made of deep-fried dough soaked in sugar syrup or honey and cinnamon.

is trying to reject - an economy where the struggles of residents and political groups are deemed a worthwhile tourist attraction. By carving out “spatial narratives” (Zukin 1990) and walking tourists through an itinerary of multiple consumption opportunities and imagined historical signposts, whether intentionally or not, the creators of these tours were promoting the transformation of Exarcheia from a radical enclave to a “tourist enclave” (Edensor 2000). A 2019 critical piece published in *The Nation* argued that “Exarcheia’s anti-capitalist characteristics are ironically propelling the neighbourhood’s transformation into a capitalist’s dream”<sup>157</sup>. A ‘prime example’ of this, according to the article, was the “Sweet Anarchy” tour, featured on Airbnb and which allegedly received a lot of negative attention from locals.



Ad for the Sweet Anarchy Private Tour in Exarcheia. Photo: screenshot from Airbnb.com

<sup>157</sup> Source: <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/exarcheia-athens-greece-anarchists/> (last accessed 28.7.2021).

However, other news agencies, like the Independent, seemed to endorse this kind of tourist-led gentrification of the area. In their article titled *“Exarcheia: The Athens neighbourhood that’s gone from riots to art galleries”*<sup>158</sup>, the Polytechnic Uprising, Grigoropoulos’ murder, and subsequent riots emerge fleetingly at the beginning of the piece as the important historical highlights necessary to pass the message: this is a neighbourhood like no other. The social and political struggles of the past become here the bait of the modern tourist before the author swiftly cuts to the chase and proceeds in praising the neighbourhood for its authenticity and alternative spirit, its numerous cafes and cocktail bars, its restaurants and its street art tours.

#### Locals’ perceptions of Exarcheia’s authenticity

As we saw in Chapter 5, Exarcheia’s (in)authenticity was conceptualised as an affective experience often tied to perceptions of individual authenticity, particularly vis-à-vis the area’s political historicity. Discussions on the gentrification and commodification of their neighbourhood in the backdrop of a protracted ‘crisis-tourism’ emphasised my interlocutors’ conceptualisation of authenticity and its ‘preservation’ as a form of resistance. As a political tool, Exarcheia’s authenticity was situated in modes of anti-neoliberalist praxis evidenced in its collectiveness, anti-consumerism, and solidarity structures. While still acknowledging the ‘anti-social phenomena’ in their neighbourhood – namely *báhalá*, knife and drug crimes - some interlocutors felt proud and often emphasised Exarcheia’s community feeling. They would describe their

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<sup>158</sup> Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/europe/exarcheia-athens-riots-bars-galleries-restaurants-things-to-do-hipster-greece-a8307631.html> (last accessed 14.7.2021).

neighbourhood as an 'urban village' where one 'goes everywhere on foot', 'says up to twenty good mornings while walking down the street', 'knows their neighbours' and 'goes for a drink at the bistro next door'.

A common remark made by participants in my research was that Exarcheia exuded a feeling of *neighbourliness* (*exei esthisi gitonias*). Loukas argued that this was not easy to find in other parts of Athens, while Elena, the lawyer, assured me that she had not experienced this kind of feeling anywhere else in the centre. I recall Leonidas once dubbing Exarcheia "the last neighbourhood of Athens". For him, 'neighbourhood' was understood not as the urban enclosure within which a community forms and interacts but as the community itself. In his perception of 'neighbourhood', the word 'neighbour' seemed to retain its connotations of affection and intimacy.

I am using the word 'retained' consciously because I was often lucky enough to hear from people much older than me stories and wistful recollections of a time when many parts of Athens radiated a sense of community, partly due to their smaller size but also due to the close-knit relationships formed between the people that inhabited them. Although it is easy to view these reminiscences as a mere *nostalgification* of the past, they were nonetheless reflective (Boym 2001). My discussants were not putting forward an idealised version of their past, leaving the hardships and deprivations they endured in the background of lived experience. On the contrary, they were able to refer to 'the difficult times' (*dyskoloι kairoi*) with a concurrent appreciation for the solidarity and trust that was often established between fellow neighbours - a feeling exemplified in a phrase my generation hears way too often: 'We used to leave our doors unlocked'.

Demos (in his late 60s) was old enough to recall the tangible transformation of Athenian districts, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards. The sense of neighbourhoodness

had already begun to collapse with the condominium era that saw thousands of houses being demolished and replaced with blocks of flats. This kind of *ruination* was not only about the physical demolition of steel and concrete but also the breaking of social bonds. Urbanisation distanced and isolated citizens in homes with no porches and flowerpots on balconies instead of gardens. The familiar loci of socialisation that remained were now the local stores in between: the grocery store (*manaviko*), the barber's, the bakery, the hairdresser's, the butcher's. Yet, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, amid Greece's "Europeanisation dream" (Vradis 2012), many small, long-standing local businesses were 'swallowed' by supermarket chain stores and malls that further altered the urban fabric and the way people interacted with each other. "You don't know the person next door and they don't know you. Things have become more fast-paced, more impersonal", remarked Leonidas. "Your local *hasapis* (butcher) and *manavis* (grocery store owner) that you knew since you were a child, have now disappeared".

Although Exarcheia's urban landscape is very similar to other central districts, a notable distinction is that to this day, one will not encounter any major corporate retail capital (chain stores). The neighbourhood is full of small local retail, grocery stores, bakeries, cheap eateries and organic food stores that exist alongside anti-consumerist freeshops<sup>159</sup> and freetrade ventures. At the same time, certain types of retail, such as organic food stores, are today viewed as heralds of a commercial gentrification that respond to the new (healthy) taste of the middle classes (Anguelovski 2015; Alkon & Cadji 2020 ). However, it is worth noting that some of them had been around at a time when the organic food market was still relatively unknown. For instance, Loukas

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<sup>159</sup> Freeshops are collectives, like *Skoros*, where items are not sold for money but gifted or given away in exchange of another item.

opened his in 1985. “It was”, as he explained, “Exarcheia’s eccentric trends and behaviours” that inspired him to open it.

*“When we opened the store back in 1985, it was not a coincidence that we chose to do so in Exarcheia. No one in Athens was familiar with bio-products at the time. But we believed that in Exarcheia there would be greater interest.”*

Loukas was not a gentrifier in the sense that he did not seek to establish a new ‘cultural’ community in a disinvested neighbourhood, but rather someone who chose to appeal to a *pre-existing* community and invest in something he knew locals would appreciate. Indeed, as a “heterotopia of resistance” that experiments with alternative, subversive forms of social organisation, Exarcheia embraced spaces and practices of green and ethical consumption (Chatzidakis et al 2012). These were a form of radical political praxis and thus part of the broader socio-spatial dialectics (Soja 1980; Lefebvre 1991) in a neighbourhood that continuously sought to resist and denounce a capitalist and consumerist logic (Chatzidakis et al 2012). In Exarcheia, one would find spaces that operate in an ethos of solidarity and mutual respect, and which aim to establish and maintain a close-knit, affective community – namely the *stekia* (*politicised social spaces*), the social centres and the squats.

These spaces do not simply cultivate trust but rely upon it to function while they continue to exercise alternative modes of organisation and sociality. The affective interactions these induced, along with the fact that historically the area has attracted like-minded people who now have a shared memory of events and social struggles,

further entrench this sense of neighbourhoodness. Exarcheia's affectivity as a neighbourhood that I'm trying to draw attention to here, indicates that the quest for 'the authentic' is not a need or a demand that arises solely in conditions of geographical mobility. It is not only measured nor is its attainment a goal solely of travellers and tourists. It is also the angst and desire experienced by locals in *their* locality and which can ultimately influence their relationship with that locality. In other words, authenticity is not merely sought in the everyday of the 'Other' in faraway exotic(ised) places but in the everyday of the Self and the in-between lines of the banal and the ordinary of urban life.

Concluding note: the ruins of gentrification

This chapter has narrated how Exarcheia found itself at the epicentre of a new 'crisis-tourism'. Exarcheia was promoted in articles and travel guides as Greece's 'alternative capital' (Pettas et al 2021) and became the place, as an American tour guide told me, where one could learn about the *realities* of Greece, not just its beauties. Another tourist guide from France called Exarcheia, 'an entry point into learning more about Greece'. But that Greece, he argued, is not the Greece of the Acropolis, nor the Greece of 'sun, olive oil and feta'. The same tourist guide went as far as to say that Exarcheia is *not* Greece, admitting, perhaps unknowingly, his own imagination of 'real' Greece as some kind of chronotopic hybrid of a glorious Hellas and a Dionysian land of pleasures (Tziovas 2020).

Exarcheia's resistance to these imagined national topographies became the prime material of its own touristification and gentrification. The authentic glimpse Exarcheia is thought to offer to the 'real' or the 'other', 'unknown' Greece turned into a desirable commodity sold by gentrifiers and consumed by outsiders. The irony embedded in the capitalisation of Exarcheia's anti-capitalist spirit is almost too obvious to mention. However, I argue that its gentrification case perfectly exemplifies capitalism's "system of equivalence" (Fisher 2009: 4); simply put, its ability to subsume and consume everything, including the very structures that attempt to resist it. Exarcheia's case reminds us that capitalism is post-ideological, for it devours ideologies and beliefs by exploiting them and turning them into lucrative elements and aesthetic artefacts.

Nevertheless, this chapter is by no means a complete account of Exarcheia's gentrification. Instead, it has captured fragments of facets and different experiential understandings of Exarcheia's transformation into a popular tourist destination. The emergence of 'alternative' tourism and the expansion of short-term rentals have emerged in my discussion as both mechanisms and elements of a tourist-led gentrification that has brought unprecedented – and possibly irreversible – changes in the neighbourhood: the proliferation of bars and restaurants, commodification of culture, displacement, loss of affordable housing and for some *loss of authenticity*. The latter has been identified as an intersubjective and affective experience.

In some ways, Exarcheia's gentrification story differs significantly from other Athenian districts. The case of KM and that of other districts like Plaka, Psiri and Koukaki, albeit challenging to the anglophone discourses that see the state as the primary orchestrator of urban restructuring, they nonetheless correspond with gentrification's widely

accepted definition as the “generalised middle-class restructuring of a place” (Shaw 2008: 2). Unlike other gentrified neighbourhoods, Exarcheia’s transformation from a working to a middle-class area occurred organically through its proximity to universities and the political and social contingencies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that established it as an intellectual centre and a hotbed of radical politics. I have argued that its case is unique in that its gentrification was politically-motivated and not simply an upscale restructuring process. Furthermore, while the symbolic capital of districts such as KM was recently imported, the symbolic capital of Exarcheia and its “underground” (Avdikos 2015) have long constituted elements of Exarcheia’s historicity. When earlier attempts failed, it was through the commodification of its political history and the reappropriation of its urban landscape that gentrifiers, in Sotiris’ words “*managed to do within a few years what the state and the police failed to do for decades: to rid the neighbourhood of all the political elements who mobilise themselves in its spaces*”.

Indeed, gentrification in Exarcheia happens in the absence of the state but not without its ‘blessings’. Its politics of neglect facilitate gentrification by devaluing the area and thus incentivising private investment. The neighbourhood’s *inherent* symbolic capital makes it easier for the workings of this *laissez-faire* gentrification (cf. Alexandri 2018) to be played out both from *within* and from *without*. Amateur tours guides, landlords, artists, micro-entrepreneurs and private investors who either did or did not live in Exarcheia saw the strong economic incentive in turning it from an archive to a museum and from a residential neighbourhood to a tourist hub.

For this reason, for many Exarchiots and Exarcheians in my field, gentrification is a process that *ruins (katastrefei)* their neighbourhood and which compromises their

affection towards it. By definition, 'to ruin' means to inflict or bring great pain and irretrievable disaster; to destroy agency; to reduce to a state of poverty; to spoil or to demolish completely. With its myriad faces across the globe, gentrification has been responsible for all of the above at the same time. I argue that its consequences -the physical demolition of buildings, and the demolition of livelihood of those whose presence is incompatible with the gentrifier's vision- constitute gentrification a process of *ruination*. In her work in occupied Northern Cyprus, Navaro-Yashin studies the houses, objects and land left behind by Greek-Cypriots as *ruins* (2012). For her, ruination is not only physical but also *affective*. Clothes, furniture, jewellery, and other tangibilities left behind by the Greek Cypriots, albeit cleaned, well-preserved or valuable, have nonetheless acquired for their new owners, the Turkish Cypriots, an *object* quality. A similar kind of non-physical ruination is observed in Exarcheia, where gentrification has not (yet) taken the form of material destruction. Walking around the neighbourhood, one does not see residential buildings being knocked down to make space for private businesses or government projects. Plans for a new metro station on the neighbourhood square have been recently confirmed and its construction is pending. But for now, gentrification in Exarcheia is working quietly, leaving behind no material debris but a paradoxical state of precarity through affluence, where impossible rents, displacement and discontent exist alongside a market of 'alternative experiences', excited backpackers and homely short-term rentals.

Far from contradictory, gentrification's euphemism as a beautification process (Springer 2016) allows us to reconceptualise ruins as something more than the rubble left behind by time or a demolition. I posit that ruins in Exarcheia take the form of the pristine, sterile spaces of cosy Airbnb apartments. Their presence symbolises the social

ruination of Exarcheia but also points to another kind of ‘authentic’. One that is made authentic by a “history itself nostalgic and retrospective” in which “what is lost”, or rather, what is *ruined*, is the original (Baudrillard 1993: 99), namely, the Exarcheia that locals remembered.

One day I came across another article by iNews titled “Athens holiday guide: from ancient ruins to a hipster paradise”, this time written by a Greek. The author referred to Exarcheia as Athens’ “formerly anarchist stronghold, which has been rapidly hipsterfying in recent years”<sup>160</sup>. The term hipster itself, while initially intended to describe a subculture that laid claim to uniqueness and authenticity, paradoxically has come to strongly denote the opposite: inauthenticity (Schiermer 2014; Thody 2014; Michael 2015). A dominant perception of the hipster, as explicitly communicated in the online anti-gentrification platforms on Exarcheia, seems to be that of the shallow, apolitical individual whose engagement with the culture of Exarcheia is superficial and thus not expected to exceed the virtual world of social media and the posting of a few ‘instaworthy’ pictures. This perception of visitors in Exarcheia could also explain the use of characterisations such as ‘hipster tourists’ and ‘Instagram tourists’ encountered online and on graffiti.

Although I cannot be certain, I find it doubtful that the author of this article intended to be ironic, but this is perhaps what makes her comment noteworthy. Her reference to Exarcheia as a ‘hipster paradise’ is ironically juxtaposed with the discontent and exasperation of locals caused by a gentrification-imposed precarity. But after all, the

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<sup>160</sup> Source: <https://inews.co.uk/inews-lifestyle/travel/athens-holiday-guide-ancient-hipster-paradise-hammams-274781> (last accessed 28.7.2021).

author of the article has put it plainly: it is the hipster's paradise, not theirs. Moreover, the casualness with which she refers to Exarcheia as a 'formerly anarchist stronghold' currently under the process of 'hipsterification' points to a form of ruination that is *political*. By staging authenticity, the tourist-led gentrification of Exarcheia was jeopardising the neighbourhood's (sense of) community and threatening its character – a phenomenon affectively tied to local perceptions of inauthenticity. While the commodification of its historicity and political structures brings Exarcheia to the fore of international interest, it could be concurrently stripping it of its potency and salience as Athens' par excellence hub of radical political expression.

Perhaps, after all, this is the irony rooted in Exarcheia's gentrification story: the fact that its ruination does not intend to be absolute. In the logic that underpins those "private-public partnerships" (Fraser 2004) or "state-elite interactions" (Alexandri 2018), Exarcheia's ideal gentrification scenario is one where the neighbourhood is apoliticised *just enough* to remain under control, but not *too much* as to disaffect the tourist gaze. A familiar but concurrently idiosyncratic gentrification that, in its devoted attempt to accumulate a surplus for local and translocal elites, will transform Exarcheia into a place with just the *right amount* of 'disorder' and a place where the only 'authentic' that will eventually matter, will be the one people are willing to pay for.

## Conclusion

### ‘Athens’ last neighbourhood’



The ‘Beautiful Exarcheia’ poster.

For days, posters adorning the walls of Exarcheia had been informing passersby about an exciting upcoming event. For four days and four nights, from 29/8 until 1/9, the music festival “Beautiful Exarcheia” (*Ta Orea Exarcheia*) would take place at the square of the neighbourhood. The posters depicted the square’s famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century baroque statue – the “Three Little Lovers”, forming in this image the filaments of an oversized pink light bulb – set against a blue and yellow background. On the bottom right and left corners of the poster figured the names of the bands that were to perform during the festival and underneath those, the names of the various supporters of the event - Nosotros, Bibliotheque and *Eleftheros Typos* (Free Press) - among many others. The

festival was going to mark the end of the hot summer of 2019, combining music with a book bazaar, organised by various local independent publishers.

On the third night of the festival, with the square still packed with people and a band still singing on the stage, riot police stormed in and disbanded the crowd using tear gas. Since I was not in Greece at the time, I followed the events online on various news platforms and came across an interview with George, the owner of the square's only bookshop. According to his statement, "[the police] *cleared the square off innocent people, forcibly turned off the lights and handed over the square to drug dealers who appeared in groups half an hour later. Nobody believes us when we say that when they promised to clean up Exarcheia they meant they would 'clean' it from all those who actually prevent drug dealing*". Amid the commotion, the musicians on the stage continued to play until they finished their song. Finishing the song was their own statement against the police who, as George added sarcastically in his interview, "*continued to throw teargas even after the square had emptied – possibly for precautionary measures or to ensure that sleeping neighbours will feel safe as they inhale the stifling smell and dream of a paradise of normalcy*"<sup>161</sup>.

The incident was not covered by many mainstream news agencies, while left-wing articles interpreted the riot policy (MAT) intervention as part of the overall 'government dogma of "cleaning up the ávaton"'. George's facetious remark about a 'paradise of normalcy' echoed the views of many of my interlocutors in Exarcheia. Recurrent comments in their interviews expressed suspicion and disbelief towards the

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<sup>161</sup> Source: [https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/astynomiko/209197\\_xylo-kai-himika-enantia-stis-eleytheres-fones-ton-exarheion](https://www.efsyn.gr/ellada/astynomiko/209197_xylo-kai-himika-enantia-stis-eleytheres-fones-ton-exarheion) (last accessed 28/4/2021).

newly appointed conservative government's recent attempts to 'beautify' the square and to 'combat political crime' in Exarcheia (discussed in Chapter 6). Following the incident at the festival, I could only agree with their remarks that even a genuine citizen complaint about the noise could have served as an excuse for a government agenda already in force. On the pretext that the festival had not received the necessary permission, the police units decided to 'deal' with it in a forceful, riot-like way that seemed less like a response to a public music event and more like an occasion for the display of political power, strongly reminiscent of those experienced in Exarcheia since at least the 1980s<sup>162</sup>.

A set of rhetorical questions (re) emerged in public discussion forums in light of this incident. Was the problem the noise or the *content* of the festival? Was it a question of what (is done) or a question of who (does it) and where? Had this concert been taking place in another central neighbourhood, would a surprise teargas attack on civilians have been the common line of response? Recalling my argument in Chapter 6, one is tempted to answer 'no'. As I discussed, Exarcheia's treatment by consecutive governments has always been 'exceptional'. Stigmatised as a 'problem area', Exarcheia has for decades been the constitutive outside and scapegoat of a state that operationalises the neighbourhood in order to perform itself into being; whether that's through absence, 'beautification' interventions or police raids.

Throughout this study, Exarcheia manifests its decades-long legacy as an arena of political power struggles; a legacy that, as we saw in Chapter 2, is firmly rooted in the neighbourhood's long and turbulent history. Geographical and historical contingencies

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<sup>162</sup> Referring to previous police raids such as those seen in the 80s and 90s (see Chapter 2).

transformed Exarcheia from a quarter of construction workers and students in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a bohemian neighbourhood of artists and intellectuals in the middle war period. In the years of the Civil War Exarcheia's streets became a battlefield. During the dictatorship, its square became a haunt for putschists and its buildings became chambers for the detention and torture of dissidents. After 1974, Exarcheia developed into the hotbed of Athenian left-wing and anarchist activism that marked the era of the Metapolitefsi. Exarcheia's historical, political and cultural particularities filled its spaces with (im)materialities of oppression and resistance, creativity and destruction, freedom and fear, autonomy and anomie.

Today, multiple actors and institutions –the state, anarchist collectivities, leftist social movements, residents, landlords, businessmen, students, tourists, artists, gangs and drug dealers– claim Exarcheia as their own. One might ask, who *owns* Exarcheia? One of the first things that should have by now become apparent to the reader is that no answer to this question can remain unchallenged. 'Who owns Exarcheia?' has thus functioned less as a research question and more as an analytical departure point for this thesis, that has been primarily interested in the 'how'. That is, the ways in which the various subjects (re)claim space in Exarcheia and try to materialise their conflicting neighbourhood visions.

The emotively charged accounts of Exarchists and Exarcheians filled the pages of this thesis with descriptions not of one Exarcheia but of an 'Exarcheia multiple' (cf. Weszkalnys 2010). Their life histories, but also their *istories*, that is, their "differences" and "quarrels" (Herzfeld 2020: 54) constructed Exarcheia simultaneously as a refuge, a ghetto, an *ávaton*, a political topography, an anarchist playground, a drug-dealer

stronghold, a tourist hot-spot, a heterotopia and a gentrified bourgeois utopia. All these different and conflicting representations and visions of Exarcheia were not only discursively articulated but also corporeally performed and materially expressed through the various tangibilities that constituted the built environment of the neighbourhood. Treating the relationship between affect, subjectivities and objects as a continuum (Navaro-Yashin 2012), my ethnographic engagements in Exarcheia captured those intensities in the words spoken by individuals, those embodied in their “fleshly knowledge or codes of the body” (Brennan 2004: 136), as well as those transmitted by the non-human environment around me (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Bennett 2010).

In Chapter 4, my ‘mobile’ exploration of Exarcheia becomes a testament to the utility and potency of walking ethnographies (O’Neil & Perivolaris 2014; Yi’En 2013; Wunderlich 2008) in ‘reading’ urban spaces. Conceptualising Exarcheia as a socio-spatial assemblage (cf. Deleuze & Guattari 1987), born out of the quotidian affective interactions of individuals with the (in)tangibilities of urban space, I deployed “discursive walking” (Wunderlich 2008). These walking ethnographies, as means of exploring (cf. Lefebvre 2004) how actors (both myself and my interlocutors) attune to their surroundings, unravelled before me intersubjective and interobjective fields (Duranti 2010; Latour 1996). Interrogating those fields was key in understanding how political history, violence, collective and private memories shape and are *shaped by* urban space.

In the company of three interlocutors, I ‘walked’ the reader through different Exarcheian spaces and temporalities. Personal and biographical, the itineraries of Katerina, Vicky and Leonidas produced distinct narratives and animated the semantic

fields of visible and invisible materialities, mapping out potent affective geographies. I came to understand walking not as the means to encounter the different 'layers' of the neighbourhood but as the encounter *itself*. This was an encounter not merely with people, but also with visible and effaced buildings, loud and silenced histories, extraordinary and banal events, conspicuous and inconspicuous artefacts.

My Exarcheians were attached to Exarcheia by means of its material world, through memory and the social relations they had developed over the years. I understood their affective relationship with Exarcheia as an attachment to a past place in the present. It was, put differently, an antagonistic relationship between a remembered place in the past and an experienced place of the present, inducing feelings of disappointment and discontent, anger and sadness enmeshed with bittersweet sentimentality. For some, like George, the owner of Bibliotheque, gang threats and bullet messages did not have the power to drive him out of the Square or eliminate his love for Exarcheia, even if that love was sometimes accompanied by bitterness and exasperation. Despite the changes time had brought to the neighbourhood, residues of a particular *affect* had resisted *ruination* (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009), remaining deeply ingrained not just in its materiality, but also in the air of Exarcheia's square, the aura of its streets and, ultimately, George's memory.

Exarcheia is, indeed, a neighbourhood that resists all modes of ruination: material, historical, conceptual, memorial. Nothing ever really leaves Exarcheia. Everything that has ever occurred, somehow, somewhere continues to linger. For this reason, my ethnographic engagements dealt both with the tangible 'now' but also with present-absences or *ghosts*. Hauntings in Exarcheia are manifold: some emerge as hauntings of

injustice, taking the shape of the memories of those killed by the state; others appear nostalgic and redolent as the spirit of my interlocutors' restless youth; yet others – in a more Derridian sense – become the ghosts of the unfinished political project of the Left in Greece (and elsewhere), that remains for many a failed, aborted future (cf. Derrida 2006).

Throughout my research, apparitions and tangibilities presented themselves to me palimpsestuously (Miltiadis 2020) as historical, material, discursive and affective layers and as spatiotemporal knots. Exarcheia was a time capsule, except I did not use it to travel linearly to various timescapes, but stepped in it and experienced those moments in multitemporal, affective provisional chronotopes (Kirtsoglou 2021). Recall here, for instance, how the December events and the Varkiza agreement at the prelude of the Greek Civil War were spatiotemporally infused with the December events of 2008 in songs and slogans (Chapter 2). Similarly, the Polytechnic Uprising as a mode or resistance to cryptocolonialism (Herzfeld 2002) was evoked in murals and graffiti during the height of neoliberal austerity (Chapter 4). I came to conceptualise Exarcheia as an unwavering *archival space* that within its virtual boundaries conserves and bequests a specific historical narrative. The neighbourhood's innate pertinacity left no room for doubt as to what or rather *whose* that narrative was: it was the narrative that recounted the Struggles of the Greek Left, composed of the local but also translocal histories of the urban subaltern; of state oppression, violence, persecution, marginalisation and resistance. Through the interwoven *istories* and materialities filed within this archival space, Varkiza is not forgotten, "the Polytechnic lives on", and the death of Alexandros Grigoropoulos is commemorated side by side with that of Kaltezas and Berkin Elvan; the Terrace of Bouboulinas is pointed at although it is no longer there

and the words of heterodox communists, poets and lost heroes of times long gone are evoked in conversations and on the graffiti-infested walls.

Discursive, material and corporeal enactments of the Exarcheian archive, collectively produced different and competing Exarcheian (mis)interpretations and concurrently conflicting notions of authenticity. In my study, to be authentic did not simply adhere to a game of distinction or aesthetics in the Bourdieusian sense. The quest for authenticity amongst locals had little to do with pleasing sensibilities and more to do with an articulation of divergent political visions and uncomfortable histories that had their own distinct tangible and conceptual dimensions. Some individuals embraced a more ordered vision of Exarcheia; a vision of Exarcheia as a conscious counter-culture abundant in social centres and self-organised initiatives, publishing shops and independent bookstores. Others wanted an ordered Exarcheia of a different kind, that maintained only those elements able to reflect middle-class nostalgia. And others rejected order of any kind, embracing or benefiting from Exarcheia's grittiness and random chaos, its material and moral 'wretchedness'.

In Chapter 5, I discussed the sense of disenchantment towards the neighbourhood that was reflected in my interlocutors' interviews, impromptu remarks and conversations; a disenchantment that arose from their belief that Exarcheia's role as a potent political and politicising topography was declining. Conversations surrounding apoliticisation usually revolved around the *báhala* and the perceived inauthenticity of today's 'so-called anarchists' that taint the neighbourhood's reputation and treat it as a sandpit for pointless 'revolutionary practice'. Yet despite the political disenchantment and individual loss of affection towards Exarcheia, I have argued that the neighbourhood

remains Athens' par excellence locus for the production of politics of discontent. Exarcheia is a neighbourhood that, to recall Demos' words, never grows old or tired. It is recurrently rekindled with the energy of the next generation of rebellious, discontented youths that are attracted to Exarcheia's anarchist ethos and legacy. Exarcheian discourses and practices might appear banal, inauthentic, repetitive, self-referential and inadequate for people like Christos who have higher political aspirations. Christos was perhaps technically right. The meaningful unproductivity and incessant political fermentation in Exarcheia never seemed to be the means to an end but an end in themselves. This was exactly the point. Using Butler's definition of performativity (1992) I have demonstrated how that rebellious effervescence is rekindled through performative utterances such as the *báhalá*, that despite their ostensible banality and antipolitical nature (cf. Panourgia 2019), are latent in historical and political significations that express and maintain the political ethic of the struggles of the Greek Left.

As repetitive modes of 'revolutionary practice' street clashes, commemorative marches, long-winded, inconclusive meetings and debates, all derive their performative accomplishment not through their outcome but through their very repetition that *makes space* and *shapes subjectivities* (cf. Benson & Jackson 2012). Blazing cars and bins, barricades, molotov cocktails, tear gas, gas masks, hoods and streets are the *archived* micro and macro-materialities that have since the Metapolitefsi acted as props for a stage that was there to familiarise upcoming generations with the politics of the road (cf. Dalakoglou 2013; 2017). These materialities, subjectivities and practices make Exarcheia an archival space that tenaciously retains, bestows and enacts the political

ethic and historicity of the Struggles of the Greek Left and the corporeal memory of an absent-present revolution ‘against the system’ that may or may not come.

My study has also shown that, despite its activist ambience, Exarcheia shares some of the most common predicaments of metropolitan urban cities: drug dealing, robberies, vandalism and gang crime. These predicaments do not defy but affirm the urban conditions in the capital of a country that has faced consecutive financial and humanitarian crises. Although criminality is not significantly more prominent in Exarcheia in comparison to other central Athenian neighbourhoods, we have seen how the Greek state and conservative media treat Exarcheia as the feared topography of immorality par excellence (Koutrolikou 2016; Koutsoumpos 2019). Exarcheia’s problems are systematically used to construct a “geography of fear” (Koutrolikou 2016), where fear, as discussed in Chapter 7, is not only (re)produced but also contained within its authoritatively demarcated boundaries<sup>163</sup> through the scaremongering of the media and the state’s politics of neglect.

At the same time, gentrification processes in Exarcheia mirror those of other urban districts in Athens and other cities in and beyond Greece. Unregulated Airbnb expansion and private investment take place with the state’s blessings and are transforming Exarcheia into a commodified utopia for alternative tourists in search of ‘insurrectionary’ spectacles. In 2017 debates on what was a nearly decade-long planning of a metro station in the square of Exarcheia became public and articles circulated talking about “government attempts made to ‘wipe out’ the square” and how

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<sup>163</sup> I am here referring to the riot policemen traditionally standing on the virtual borders of Exarcheia with the neighbouring district of Kolonaki on Kallidromiou Street.

“the arrival of the metro will ‘clean up’ Exarcheia”. Protests on the square in early 2019 took place with banners stating “the metro is coming. Violence to the violence of gentrification”, intensifying pre-existing concerns over the various complications the construction of a metro in the riotous district of Athens (cf. Vradis 2012) might bring. Whether as a result of protests or not, the original plan was later reassessed, and it was decided to move the exits of the metro to the junctions of Stournara-Trikoupi and Tositsa-Trikoupi St., to avoid ultimately altering the character of the square<sup>164</sup>. However, as I am writing this conclusion, current updates on the upcoming metro, state that the metro station will indeed be built upon the Square. In an interview in March 2022<sup>165</sup>, the Athens mayor Kostas Bakoyiannis contended that:

*“It is very clear what some people are trying to do in Exarcheia, but the masks have fallen. They are trying – and this is an international first [pagkosmia prototypia]– to politicise and ideologise the metro station. As if there are ‘left’ or ‘right’ wagons. And you realise that this cannot be tolerated. Because the Municipality of Athens cannot allow – as I am sure the government will not allow – for the lives of the residents of Exarcheia to be instrumentalised, and for the residents themselves to be held hostage to micro-political or ideological interests. The municipality of Athens is present in Exarcheia, just like it is in the other 128 neighbourhoods of Athens’.*

The mayor is suggesting that the creation of a metro station will improve Exarcheians’ quality of life. According to him, the transformation is not politically motivated, but is

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<sup>164</sup> Source: <https://www.athenstransport.com/2018/11/exarheia-mouseio/> (last accessed 22.2.2022).

<sup>165</sup> Source: <https://www.skai.gr/news/greece/metro-se-kolonaki-kai-eksarxeia-tha-ftanei-i-grammi-4-karamanlis-pio-anthropini-athina> (last accessed 22.2.2022).

rather portrayed as an act of care, or more precisely, as a rescue operation that could inconvenience crime whilst concurrently granting residents easy access to the rest of the city and back to their homes.

Few would argue that the square of Exarcheia does not lack the glitz and openness that might characterise other urban piazzas in Athens and elsewhere. Poorly lit and especially unwelcoming during the night, it was not a conventionally attractive place in its own right. Some might regard the metro as a way of transforming the square from a den of criminal activity that everyone avoids, to a modern space that facilitates transport. Indeed, the majority of my interlocutors did not enjoy hanging out at the square and some even regarded it as ‘the worst part of Exarcheia’, particularly vis-à-vis its transformation into a gang and drug dealing hangout (Chapter 6). My interlocutor Thomas had referred to it as a ‘black hole’ whose existence doesn’t matter because “Exarcheia doesn’t live in the square nor in a cafeteria, nor in the Polytechnic” “The knife attacks” he continued, “between drug dealers that take place on the square don’t have anything to do with Exarcheia; Exarcheia doesn’t hang out on the square these days”. For Thomas, the ideologies reproduced in Exarcheia would remain a constant even if the whole place was turned “upside down by the government”. He believed that “nothing and nobody could ever change Exarcheia, and even if they did, more young people pour in again, connect to and revive its particular historicity”.

The square is indeed the place of many stories, myths, faces and emotions. The Three Little Lovers had been witnesses to myriad events, significant and mundane, funny and painful, glorious and contemptible. Despite Thomas’ optimism, I find it impossible to imagine an affective ecology removed from the urban materialities that inevitably

constitute it. I cannot imagine an Exarcheia with whitewashed walls, without its social centres, its collectives, without any of its remarkable and unremarkable tangibilities, let alone its square. There was something undeniably locked up in them that could be lost *along* with them – a quintessential part of that *affect-subjectivity continuum* (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Despite its size and its apparent decline, Exarcheia’s square (just like Exarcheia as a whole) shared similarities with other big urban squares such as Syntagma, Taksim Square and Alexanderplatz in the ways its significance had been imbued with affect and historicity made up of all the big and small moments that had unravelled on and around it (cf. Weszkalnys 2010; Leontidou 2012; Özgen 2014; Gül et al 2014). Contrary to other small neighbourhood plazas in Greece, it constantly emerged as a canvas upon which people inscribed their desires. Throughout my time in the neighbourhood, I saw it morphing from an uninviting locus of illicit activities into a pleasant hangout for friends, a place of entertainment, protest, politicisation, conflict, contestation and unification. The “Beautiful Exarcheia” festival of 2019 exemplified that it could often be all of the above, concurrently. I argue that while this multimodality reflected a number of broader societal problems, conflicts and ideologies, it also mirrored visions of neighbourhoodness.

I wonder then, *what kind of vision of neighbourhoodness does a metro station in the heart of small neighbourhood reflect? What kind of image of a future Exarcheia does it aspire to materialise? Is a metro station, and for that matter, gentrification, the only way to resolve the problems of a neighbourhood?* To answer these questions, one first needs to attend to the question of ‘what does neighbourhood mean?’

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German sociologist and philosopher Ferdinand Tönnies argued that the modern city does not represent a tight-knit *Gemeinschaft* (community), but rather “a loose amalgamation of individuals” (Fraser 2004: 438). The efforts of Exarcheians to preserve their neighbourhood’s “social robustness” (cf. Weszkalnys 2010) belie this conceptualisation. Observations and discussions with my interlocutors have pointed at a use of urban space in Exarcheia that reconceptualises the notion of ‘neighbourhood’. Interlocutors often defined ‘neighbourhood’ in emotive terms. For Leonidas, a neighbourhood was a place that you develop affection for, a place you feel comfortable in, and which attracts you. For Elena, Exarcheia had a ‘village feeling’ to it because everyone knew everyone, and for Panos, it was a place where people respected and helped each other (Chapter 6).

My interlocutors were not claiming space in Exarcheia as entrepreneurs or simply as Exarchiots - that is, as residents. Nor were they passive subjects that, as Mr Bakoyianis put it, were ‘held hostage’ in the neighbourhood. People in Exarcheia often (re)claimed their neighbourhood not as individuals and not *only* as members of various fragmented and opposing groups but as *Exarcheians*, that is as participants in a wider and united affective community. Put differently, ‘neighbourhood’ for them was not perceived topographically as an administrative district, but affectively as a community. In my interlocutors’ narratives, I recorded iterations of a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood that had developed performatively and not necessarily through time; a sense of belonging that suggested that the power of place might indeed not lie in inhabiting it but in *remembering it* (Riley 1992: 21). The belonging generated through performativity does not need to subvert the sense of belonging generated over time: the two can be interdependent. I argue that contrary to wider popular and nationalist

discourses that define belonging and attachment to a place in terms of time and rootedness, belonging in Exarcheia is primarily *performative*.

Shared emotions, or in this case, shared *affects*, played a vital role in maintaining social coherence and supporting the social fabric. Although the term “affective communities” has been more widely deployed to describe national communities that have undergone traumas of war and terrorism (Edkins 2002; Hutchinson 2010), I argue that on a microscale, for all its contradictions and contested spaces, the neighbourhood of Exarcheia remains an affective community built and upheld on the basis of shared memory, knowledge, history and political consciousness, and concretised through the events of a turbulent past. Deeply distressing events such as the EAT-ESA terror during the junta years, the events at the Polytechnic and the deaths of Michalis Kaltezas and Alexis Grigoropoulos in the heart of Exarcheia in 1985 and 2008 respectively, acquired a political and emotional potency that accumulated through time and propelled the construction of a political affective ecology.

I embrace here a broader definition of ‘trauma’, where the latter is defined not merely as individual suffering or a physical wound, but rather as “an inherently social and political phenomenon” (Hutchinson 2010: 35). Without intending to downplay the significance of the word ‘trauma’, I also argue in favour of a conceptualisation of *collective trauma* as sustained damage that is not necessarily always sudden, forceful and conspicuous. It can also be implicit and continuous with long term effects on the psyche of society. Trauma can remain inconspicuous, not instantly identified until larger, more explicitly harming incidents occur to incite an expression of collective dissatisfaction. One such example of inconspicuous trauma is the continuous decline of

accessible public spaces in cities in the name of development and beautification (Sibley 1995; Fraser 2004;). I believe that if there is any place in Athens in which people swiftly become aware, unite in discontent and react to such issues, that place is Exarcheia: the neighbourhood where locals turned an empty parking place into a park, where they openly resisted gentrification and moved to reclaim its square from delinquents using books and music. Thus, conspicuous and inconspicuous traumas are equally powerful in awakening potentialities and “draw[ing] individuals around shared meanings and common bonds” (Hutchinson 2010: 35), that can generate an *affective synchronicity*.

Numerous examples in Exarcheia’s recent history demonstrate this affective synchronicity: from student movements to solidarity initiatives and squat organisation to local attempts at neighbourhood cleanliness and dismantling drug piazzas. The “Beautiful Exarcheia” festival was itself an explicit attempt to override crime and state-led narratives of demonisation. It was not merely a space-making practice, but a space-making strategy, for it *took place on the square* but also *created space on the square*, constructing its own geography, on which Exarcheia was mapped as ‘beautiful’. ‘Beauty’ in this case was not necessarily defined in terms of middle-class urban aestheticism where the ‘beautiful’ was materially locatable, sterile and pristine. ‘Beautiful’ here pertains strongly to an aura; it is atmospheric and emergent through an ecology defined by an ethos of sharing.

Irrespectively of government claims that the construction of the metro on the square is not politically motivated, its ability to not only undermine but make impossible such collective efforts of *horizontal beautification* in the heart of the neighbourhood by utterly consuming it, renders it automatically a political act; an act that does not resolve

the problems of the neighbourhood but merely relocates them to appease voters. It is worth remembering here that these voters are not necessarily the people who frequent Exarcheia's cafes and social centres, or those who rent in Exarcheia. The voters might very likely be the ex-Exarchiots who have rented their properties out and moved to the suburbs, and who are now turning those properties into short-term rentals for tourists and digital nomads. Moreover, with Exarcheia being only a ten-minute walk from the metro station of Omonoia, the necessity of a metro station in Exarcheia is also put into question.

When the Mayor says that "the municipality is present in Exarcheia, just like it is present in the other 128 Athenian neighbourhoods", it is clear that for him the metro station symbolises the presence of the state. Yet I suspect that for many of my interlocutors this 'presence' is just another zealous 'reappearance' - akin to earlier small-scale interventions (Chapter 6) - put in place to appease Exarchiots by moving their predicaments 'out of sight' without actually solving them. Drug piazzas and gang activity will - as it often does - rotate elsewhere (cf. Vradis 2012) but could also possibly reemerge in the same places once the state withdraws again.

I argue that the upcoming metro will propel and 'seal' gentrification, for it will induce an increase in property value and rent prices, which might benefit landlords but put long-term residents in an even more precarious position. Their ability to commodify the character of a neighbourhood that has for decades denounced state oppression, consumerism and neoliberal capitalism, automatically renders gentrification procedures in Exarcheia a political act of erasure. But perhaps, in a way, the mayor is right. For, more than a political act, the construction of the metro station is a *neoliberal*

*technology* that does not indeed have ‘right’ or ‘left’ wagons, but wagons devoted to capital. And capital as I discussed in Chapter 6 is post-ideological. It is not interested in urban districts as communities, but as pockets of investment.

To recall Walter Benjamin’s famous adage, “construction, presupposes destruction” (quoted in A. Benjamin & Osborne 1994: x), and the destruction that the upcoming metro station would bring to Exarcheia is certainly more than material. It is historical, social, affective and possibly financial for Bibliotheque and for those cafes, and bars around the square that will fall within its construction site. It is also financial for those barely able to afford rent in the area since metro stations in urban districts everywhere cause property values to skyrocket. I argue that attending to the needs of locals should not be only about solving that which induces discontent. Rather, it is about maintaining what people enjoy about their neighbourhood. In the case of Exarcheia, this is its spirit of inclusiveness and solidarity, its values of self-organisation and autonomy, and through them, its ability to produce *anticipatory topographies* that represent an alternative relationship with the city.

Exarcheia is a neighbourhood, that like other urban districts, found itself caught up in the haggling between neoliberalism’s destructions and an affective community’s desire to retain and express its history and memories. However, amid Exarcheia’s mnemonic, archival spaces, the struggle for representation is accentuated. In Exarcheia the state’s selective forgetfulness and erasures are incessantly and vociferously exposed and decried. No form of ruination goes unnoticed. With the imminent arrival of the metro, what remains to be seen is whether the Exarcheia-as-archive will defy its own erasure and whether Exarcheians will continue to imagine and perform their neighbourhood’s

existence as an affective community so that it remains, as Leonidas' once poignantly called it, "Athens' last neighbourhood".

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