
The crisis swiftly turned itself into a political paradigm and a framework for legitimising violence and exploitation with the excuse of the emergency. Some violence was soon to record itself in the ways in which social relations are constituted – and therefore, in the everyday spaces where these relations are tested out. Public space in this way became a light-sensitive surface upon which one could discern the material imprints of the most structural and violent characteristics of the crisis: from the rapid impoverishment caused by the notorious structural adjustment and the rapid shifts in the natural and built environment caused by the catastrophic politics of development, all the way to the increased devaluation of the lives of migrants and the neutralising of social antagonisms and resistance alike. (p.14)

Yet another book about the Greek crisis and Athens, one might think when glancing at the title. But in the case of *Athens and the War on Public Space* they could be quite mistaken or possibly disappointed if what they wished to find were detailed descriptions and narratives about the economics, the politics, and the repercussions of what has broadly been defined as the Greek crisis.

And this takes us to one – perhaps the starting – challenge: how is what we refer to as the Greek crisis defined? How to we situate and anchor it within a time-space continuum?

Because it seems that if we cannot anchor somehow, then it becomes even more difficult to try to disentangle its impacts, its ascribed meanings, and its interpretative frames; it becomes more difficult to see beginnings and endings, define causes and attribute blame, and, in the end, position ourselves within its conundrums.

In some ways, this is also how the book begins; with a timeline trying to chronologically map these events considered crucial – albeit to different degrees – for the authors. This timeline seems to include almost everything and the reader

1 punctum books (https://punctumbooks.com) describe themselves as “an independent non-profit press”; this book is published with Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).
(especially the local one) could easily find themselves trying to see if s/he remembers them all and if one thing or another is missing. This is not a “neutral” timeline of events – could there be one in any case? – rather this time-map entails institutional representations of the crisis, spectacular events, as well as moments considered critical by the authors or other groups.

As expected, their effort to temporally map the crisis starts with the 2007 financial crisis in the USA and its spread throughout the world; an analysis that has been undertaken by many so far. Yet, interestingly it doesn’t “jump” to the declaration of bankruptcy by Greece but instead time-maps the period of the December 2008 revolt, which for many locals came to signify not just the “canary in the coal mine” regarding the looming crisis, but a defining moment for grassroots and antagonistic politics and politicization as well as for the state’s deployment of a “state of emergency” discourse and implementation of emergency measures. These emergency discourses and measures did not come from nowhere, but rather, in the case of Athens, one can trace them to the 2004 Olympic Games (or even further back).

Whilst one wanders through this timeline (and one’s memories), crisis comes to light not as an event that “broke onto history’s stage as an unanticipated rupture in a seeming continuum” (p.13), but as a continuum of events that constitute it – a range of moments, of different levels of significance, that can be combined in many different ways, thus providing divergent interpretations of “the crisis”. And these events not only took place in Greece or in the local space of Athens, but also at different scales in a number of places. This translocation is also reflected in the positions of the authors which, throughout the book, fluctuate between a distant theoretical one, a political analysis, and an experiential reflection. And this is clearly illustrated in Christos Filippidis’ first chapter (each of the three authors has two), “Biopolitical Narratives against a White Background: Medical Police as City Cartographer”, which takes us from the crisis-scape of Athens to that of Lampedusa, where in 2013 a boat carrying migrants capsized resulting in hundreds of deaths.
As the authors argue already in the Preface, “[w]hatever ‘truth’ exists would inevitably have to come from the lives of the most devalued and vulnerable populations, often showing that for many, this crisis has been around for quite some time” (p.14). Although in the public mediascape the dominant association of the Greek crisis is that of debt, austerity measures, and economic destitution of its population, another aspect of this crisis concerns migration and has been around for some time, and not only in Greece.

In some ways, the migration crisis (as much as others before it) is another continuum transferring us to the present of what has been termed as “Europe’s refugee crisis”. And this chapter, Filippidis’ “Biopolitical Narratives…”, raises some issues that are crucial not only for framing the Greek crisis (and who could be blamed) but also for framing the present European crisis (another one). The call for humanitarian values in order to defend operations and politics concerning migrants’ rights and lives vis-à-vis the European territory and populace has a long history. Following Didier Fassin, the authors observe that what we are witnessing at present is a disassociation of humanitarianism from politics and political action. And this disassociation is strongly illustrated by discourse of the universality of (human) rights and the realpolitik of the nation-state and its territory which tightly links rights with citizenship and establishes variegated categories of deserving subjects of rights (especially in the context of migration).

The authors argue that treating migrants as a threat to the national (in this case Greek) as much as the European body is intricately related to the establishment of a hygiene-related apparatus involving an array of medical technologies and related discourses. Representing Others as threats against the national body and using the excuse of this threat to push for particular measures is not a new tactic: “Humanitarian culture has been historically built precisely upon the notion of the ‘crisis’: that is, upon the imperative facts dictated by an emergency event” (p.57).

However, as already mentioned, the time-space of the Greek case illustrates the different concurrent and intersecting crises forming a crisis continuum. In this case, the threat of, and the emergency to deal with, it (i.e. debt, migration, deprivation,
etc.) not only works as the main interpretative framework but as a foundational notion for meaning – assigning, and delimiting, the horizon of plausible solutions. Either way, crisis – as an opportunity or intentional tactic – has been used for national “rebuilding” in times when particular national formations are severely challenged. At these times, the designation of “enemies” and/or threats and us-and-them divisions are solidified representationally, politico-legally, and materially.

All these aspects of threat/enemy designation, of the emergency to deal with it in order to protect the “Greek national body”, as well as the “hygienist” discourse and actions for charting and eliminating or isolating the presented threat, are condensed in the pivotal case of vilifying and persecuting HIV-positive female sex workers in 2012 in Athens. Through this discussion, what can sometimes be seen as theoretical abstractions become harshly (or even deadly) materialized and inscribed onto the lives and bodies of these women. At the same time they are inscribed onto the city, drawing new boundaries, spatial categories, and representations of space. In this as well as other similar cases, cartography becomes a power-laden tool for communicating dominant views and selectively interpreted information through easily digestible visualizations and map-images (see p.92). Such map-images simultaneously represent a “truth” whist conveying a form of scientific-ness and thus accuracy of the knowledge it represents (without opportunities for questioning or verification).

Yet, as many have argued, cartography can also be used in order to challenge power and counter dominant “regimes of truth”. This could be the case for “The City at a Time of Crisis” (http://map.crisis-scape.net), an online map (and the subject of Klara Jaya Brekke’s second chapter, “Mapping Racist Violence”) recording and locating attacks on migrants as well as relating them to the experiences of those who lived through them (see p.103).

As the book progresses it moves from the macro to the micro of the everyday and the personal. Both in “The Utter Violence of the Unuttered” and in “Metronome” (Antonis Vradis’ first and second chapters), the focus falls on the mundane and the prosaic rather than the spectacular. And as the author writes: “no element of everyday urban life shouts ‘routine’ more than mass transportation systems” (p.121), providing
another rhythm to the city and illustrating the co-habitation of spaces in our everyday lives.

At some point in this crisis, as the authors observe, there was silence. Not in the political or media arenas, which were becoming increasingly louder, but in many places of the everyday, silence was not uncommon. Silence can trigger uneasy-ness, uncomfortable-ness since, and as the authors point out, it raises the question of “what is wrong?”. And not only this question – silence can also signify that there is nothing left to say, whatever this means for each person.

As long as they are not severely cut, the routine of mass transportation continues irrespective of the changes caused by the crisis. It provides one of the city’s rhythms and, often, a sense of “normality” for its users; life goes on irrespectively. And during these routine routes, the passenger becomes a mirror upon whom we can project our thoughts, fears, and questions regarding not only ourselves and the people we have in front of us but also about society at large. To an extent, this seems to be what the author is doing in this case; reflecting on thoughts that are triggered by observing fellow passengers.

However, from reflecting on silence one can easily move to reflecting on absence; on what was there, but is not there any more, or on what could have been there, but is not:

In the environment formed, in return, by our language-less and inter-action-less coexistence, public space ceases to be such, and it is only seemingly resurrected in the form of its very own representation: the silent public becomes a spectacular swindle, a replica of its own self.

(p.111)

In the end, the book returns to an analytical distance in Filippidis’s second chapter, “Performing the State of Emergency In Situ”, which closes the book. State of emergency, as a notion and as a tactic, runs throughout most of the book. In this last part, state of emergency is analysed as a hegemonic meaning-assigning discourse for interpreting the crisis and restructuring the dominant representation and identity of the nation-state. It is also discussed as a performative act taking place in and against
particular places with “war-like” discourses and militarised police operations that not only concern the present but also aim at constructing lasting memories as well.

Although its title refers to public space, to a great extent this book as a whole is about disentangling dominant meaning-assigning processes that have shaped the respective interpretative frameworks regarding the broad time-space of the Greek crisis and which are, as expected, also spatially manifested. In doing so it draws from a wealth of readings and theories as well as from personal experiences and reflections. The authors are thus creating and offering other interpretative frameworks that wish to challenge and rupture the dominant one. Few can disagree with the picture they paint of the adverse repercussions of crisis-management and the bleak realities conveyed throughout this book. Yet, in some cases, one might wonder if the analysis provided overstates the power and potential of the state (for example) in order to clarify and strengthen the presented argument. Similarly, it also raises the question about the existence (and if so to what extent) of such well-orchestrated intentional strategic thinking (on the behalf of the state and the dominant political interests) that manages discourses and actions.

On the other hand, this book concerns not only Athens and the Greek crisis/es, but could easily speak to other “crises” that characterise our present, providing challenging analytical insights for those struggling to understand and change the processes structuring them.

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