

DIALOGUES: CITY+CRISIS INITIATIVE

A CONVERSATION WITH DIMITRIS DALAKOGLOU ON THE QUEST FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE CITY

This is an edited transcription of an hourly conversation that took place on Monday 28 April 2014. To reproduce any parts of this transcript in any form please contact Grigoris Kafkalas at gkafkala@arch.auth.gr.



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Grigoris Kafkalas. Thank you for accepting this invitation to discuss the theme of the quest for a just and sustainable city. The umbrella theme is City and Crisis. Let me start with a first question and we may expand as you move on. We are already five years after the outbreak of the crisis in 2008. Has the crisis affected cities differently than their respective national economies? Do cities differ in respect to their resilience and/or vulnerability against the impacts of the crisis? What is your response to this question?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. I have to think about this question in the light of the current situation where the old urban-rural divide is the weakest than ever had been. What I mean is that over half of the world population lives in cities. Even the people who do not live in the cities necessarily and have what could be considered an agricultural economy or they live in an area outside metropolitan areas, still live

urban life styles, at least in the case of Europe.

Remember, I am an anthropologist and I always try to ground ethnographically my answers. Though there are many parts in the world where this urban-rural divide can be applied, in the case of Europe I think that the divide is the weakest than it had ever been. Why? Because everything or at least in the majority of areas resembles urban life styles. For example we have fully monetary economies, have fully urban styles of inequality and even urban kinds of marginality etc. So I think that the crisis affects the urban areas and rural areas and the urban life in similar ways.

Now talking about ethnographic grounding we see the crisis, together with pre-existing conditions, leading to a narrowing of the divide between rural and urban. Today we see people in Greece that are actually moving towards rural areas...or what could be considered abandon the metropolitan centers where they have grown up and are moving towards the village of their family origin where they start doing small agricultural activities: small agricultural production of self-sufficiency, we even see hunting and fishing as part of making a living.

Grigoris Kafkalas. I see this point, this is very interesting, if there is no visible difference between rural and urban areas especially in the European context, and

then the meaning of the question how cities differ takes a different meaning. I don't think that we should wither the idea of the city altogether because of this mixture of ways of live or modes of living but your response highlights a very important point. Let's proceed then. Cities are considered to be the centres of socio-political evolution for either the consolidation of the established regimes or their overthrow. Does the crisis weaken or strengthen the significance of cities as arenas for the orientation of social change? What is your impression?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. Now you will force me to actually refuse my answer to the previous question. Talking about social change, we should always bear mind the various types of social change that may happen, it might be radical, fast, rapid social change via revolutionary means or it can be a social change much more transitional or something that may have very explicitly political characteristics but not necessarily radical or revolutionary ones. For example as we have already a social tendency of moving outside the cities and starting agricultural production in rural areas, this could be a potential source of social change if it takes massive characteristics, but again this potential has to be linked very explicitly with parallel changes in the urban terrain, for example we have direct producers/consumers networks the so called movement without mediators or potato movement. So changes need be linked and take an ideological context if we want to see deep social change.

So it is from the links between the so-called rural and urban or to phrase it better the metropolitan and the non-metropolitan, where we see some very interesting tendencies for social change occurring.

At the moment there is an underground change that very few social scientist have noticed: several thousand tons of agricultural products reach the consumers without the intervention of supermarkets, merchants or any of the parasitic professions of capitalist society. After the closing down of most independent small stores, the supermarkets control the majority of agricultural sector so the movement without mediators.

Moreover, we see the farmers the last few years emerge as a radicalised social group that within the last couple of decades have managed to force various governments to change agricultural policies by road blockades or other kinds of protests.

What we are seeing today in the context of crisis is the outsourcing of the urban damage outside the core of the metropolitan areas, for example in the case of Athens the landfills are about to be moved in Keratea. Local non-metropolitan Communities are revolting. The protest started with arguments about local ecology, local community and then evolved into more political argument which challenge directly the governmental decisions, austerity and the system of governance more widely. So in the case

of the Keratea was the first time that we saw such extreme police violence after the agreement with the IMF. Precisely because what looked like a minor local protest emerged into a direct challenge to the form of governance. Again we saw that this critical phenomenon is taking place in reference to the flows (of garbage) between the metropolis and the surroundings.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Do you see any sort of convergence in these reactions that are occurring around specific issue or in specific localities? Perhaps one common element is their revolutionary character against governmental decisions. But do they converge to a more global view of change? You have already said they are localised and not necessarily take a view of what direction social change should take. Despite the fact that they might be localised they might also converge towards a broader cause of change. What do you think?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. Yes, I think definitely yes. I have been involved in the Keratea landfill struggle both as a researcher and for political reasons and I follow also very closely the events around the gold mine investment in the case of Halkidiki. I think there are convergences, but the question is about the scale we are focusing at. In the case of Keratea we show the first serious challenge of a governmental decision after the agreement between the IMF and the ECB and the EU was signed. The government was determined and even sent enormous police

forces and actually made it a full battle for months. And the same happened in the case of Halkidiki. There are similar gold mine investments in Latin America and in other peripheral countries of Europe and even in Africa, which is a quite different story to an extent. But if you connect the dots you see very few gold mining companies being active all around the world and a lot of communities struggling against these companies without necessarily consciously connecting their struggles.

Because this conversation started from the movement against intermediaries, I want to add that again it matters how you are connecting the dots. To create a network between producers and consumers without the intervention is a very important step. And it can be combined for example with the existing anti-landfill struggles, because the waterbed of Attica is the same. So I think that there is ground for convergence on a global scale or in the country wide national level if you like.

Grigoris Kafkalas. OK, lets now turn to how the interplay of local and global forces forges the profile of cities. Do you think that the forces unleashed by the crisis favour a uniform post-crisis urban condition by eliminating the differences? Do you see any flattening effect here? Alternatively, do cities respond and/or adapt to the crisis on the basis of their own particular profiles? Again it is about convergence or eliminating the differences. Do you see any flattening effect or because of the crisis cities have to rely more on their particularities?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. This is the best question someone should ask at the moment. What we are watching is the extension of extreme neoliberalism to Western Europe, because in Eastern Europe extreme neoliberalism took hold already by the early 1990s. I have lived over a year in Albania working ethnographically on urban development of post-socialism and infrastructure construction. The agreement between the EU and the Albanian government in the late 90s for the provision of financial ‘aid’ and the recent agreement between the Greek or Spanish governments and the IMF/EU are very similar. What was happening in the East of the continent was similar with what had happened before in the so-called global South.

It is capitalism flattening the social landscapes and the urban landscapes and creating new ones on the ruins of the previous condition. In the case of Athens, it is amazing how the crisis comes together with governmental policies to regenerate the centre of the city with the project Rethink Athens, to regenerate the seafront, which of course implies complete destruction of the material forms and rebuilding of them as privatized places of exclusive uses. This is the source of capitalist development in many other places, complete destruction and reconstruction anew of entire cities if necessary.

However the city becomes the battlefield per se against these forces of capitalism. This is phrased within the particular context but I think that what we saw in the so-called squares movement (Gezi, Tahrir, Del Sol, in the case of Athens the Syntagma square movement, even the Occupy Wall Street and City of London movements) was exactly that: a global movement phrased according to local concerns. It is important to say that this was a far more global uprising, in comparison to the anti-globalisation movements of late 90s-early 2000s. Why? Because at the time of anti-globalisation movement, in early 2000s late 1990s, we had a few Global South activists; a lot of European and North American activists against global capitalism, but global injustice and State-directed violence and poverty were not yet as concretised experiences for the majority in the West as they are today. Now we have the concrete form of extreme neoliberalism in the Western Europe, which used to be champion of social policy and we see all these things that were taken for granted in capitalism of Europe being vanished. Back in late 1990s that process was still undergoing, now it is much more advanced.

So I think that these are part of a similar anti-capitalist force, but at the same time all of them have been raised socio-culturally within their particular contexts, for example the Tahrir square movement

wanted Mubarak to leave the government, the Syntagma Square movement was against austerity and the Spanish were against the government and austerity, the Occupy Wall Street was demanding free health care, but they all somehow were expressing anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal senses.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Now, the achievement of a just and sustainable city seems to be a widely acceptable moral and political vision. Does this vision remain a priority during the crisis or other issues tend to take its place (i.e. attraction of new investment, competitiveness of the economy, quality of the urban environment, security for citizens, etc.)? Do you think that the quest for a just and sustainable city has been undermined? If things go well it seems perhaps easy to agree around some nice options. But now that we have the crisis is still possible to have unified responses towards some common cause against for example this capitalist catastrophe as you said earlier?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. My first answer is yes. The just and sustainable city is and must be a vision for the future. The question is how this might happen by the political forces promoting neoliberal capitalism, which are ontologically opposite to justice or sustainability, which have hijacked this concept. So for example we had for several decades social-democratic governments of third way social democracy talking about sustainability or social justice while they were basically un-toothed both terms and giving us the capitalism that Margaret

Thatcher wouldn't dare to apply. So you need to be very careful what we mean by just and sustainable city because there is still a semiotic war going on in determining and defining the concepts and what we mean by them. For example the sustainability argument was replaced by economic (supposedly) 'sustainability' that was prioritised over everything, 'let's attract new investors' etc. as you said earlier, supposedly the investors 'will bring investment and jobs and consumption and then people will be happy' and so on. Thus that in the case of Greece implies new highways and new airports and to liberate prices and highway tolls etc. We are seeing a situation where they use these concepts in order to mask the worst aspects of neoliberalism that of course have taken very violent dimensions. How can we talk about just and sustainable city in a city where its centre is dwelled by wretched people who are forced to live illegally and without documents by the government itself? In Athens the idea of sustainability is promoted by the new proposals for new investments to gentrify e.g. Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio and the regeneration of Panepistimiou Street. It is these proposals that use the term 'sustainability'. What they mean is that the homeless people who for example have squatted building or the poor ones who rent cheap property in Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio have to leave or kicked out because these will need to be sold in good price. The

homeless might vanish from the 'gentrified and rebuilt' Panepistimiou Street in the centre of Athens, but who knows where they will go? So this sustainability of Rethink Athens of the developers, it also means that we will build walls for the poor like the detention centres in Amygdaleza where we concentrate in camps the ones we want to keep invisible and away from our supposedly 'clean' and 'sustainable' city in order to make it aesthetically beautiful. Since aesthetics seem to pre-occupy all these conversations about the sustainable city of the mayors and contractors.

Grigoris Kafkalas. As you said this hijacking of the concept that tends to aestheticize its content and instead of an equitable and just city it promotes its beautification. This gives us the opportunity to go a step further in our discussion. Is still valid the idea of a just and sustainable city in the sense of trying to achieve real equality via redistribution of income or this is something that has gone ashtray towards different directions? How we can reinstate the true meaning of the concept? Trying to achieve consensus through conflict or by expecting this to come as a project from above? Is there any revolutionary potential for the quest of a just and sustainable city?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. It is very important to reallocate income, very important to

aim towards equality, very important to have collective grass root initiatives, which give access and opportunities of employment and services etc. The question is how we can achieve that? We have to see the current crisis as a very systemic part in the history of capitalism in Greece, but also more generally. For a long time capitalist sovereignty was waiting and was organized in order to happen and they will not let the opportunity to go, we have huge interests and big business being involved into the various public works, to the gentrification of parts of the centre of Athens, where for instance one company owned a great proportion of the real estate stock in the area. That is the opportunity they were waiting for. The whole airport of Helliniko was sold for a ridiculous amount of 140 euro per sq. meter. It is a great opportunity that local and global capitalists were waiting to start exploiting to the extreme; they have cheap land and cheap labour. So yes it is a right question that is an emergent demand to have a just and sustainable city. The problem is that the ones who are in charge, the elites are going to exploit this opportunity and they will fight if even the most reformist demand, for example for little more social care. You can see the State apparatuses proceeding quickly eliminating any potential forms of resistance to their plans in advance. Like they did with the squatted social centres in the centre of Athens and other cities in Greece. They just tried to

take away from the anti-authoritarians and anarchists their spaces in the centre; they are arresting and locking up migrants doing basically a form of political and social cleansing of the city centre.

Grigoris Kafkalas. If this change in respect of the true meaning of a just and sustainable city will not come from above because it seems that anything coming from above favours the increase of profitability of capital and not the true meaning of sustainability then the only option is to achieve or impose this as an outcome of social and political conflict. Is there any sign that this unrest could actually win something in the end, is it possible to agree on a project that might gain some influence vis-a-vis the immense power of the system. If the hegemonic project from above is something that will not bring any good to the idea of sustainable city the only hope is then from below. How do you comment on this?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. There are so many new initiatives and new ways of organising and cooperating in the grassroots level ignoring the power game that is going on above that we can be also hopeful. We have seen typically communities of people emerging from the very small groups e.g. we see reactivation of kinship relationships to support each other until to larger scale movements at the neighbourhood level who create new social centres and new decision making processes. For example the events in Syntagma square in 2011 led to social actions and behaviours that later moved to smaller scale in the urban neighbourhoods linked to emerging alternative economies

such as the movement without super markets. We also saw new forms of political action including forms of organization and solidarity activities. However the state is being really ruthless against such initiatives it is not only the explicitly anti-authoritarian social centres that were attacked and evicted, the police attacks to open air markets run by direct producers-consumers movement which were ensure cheaper products due to the lack of medians.... Indeed the neo-Nazi violence is part of that state-run violence against any forms of resistance or just solidarity. So people movement should be ready to defend themselves against such attacks. Exactly like they defend communities from the structural violence of poverty they need to be ready to deal with police, Nazis and the rest of the capitalist's State apparatuses.

And yet, new initiatives and new forms of solidarity are emerging. Social scientists sometimes talk about the 'sitting on the sofa' theory pointing to the fact that people tend to become indifferent and inactive. But on the contrary I think that people are active and we see completely new forms emerging, forms that perhaps we could not understand as yet with our current analytical/political tools. We are all part of a previous system of reference, which is collapsing. We need to understand the new subjectivities, the new social agents and see how we will act together with them. Though it makes a

difference whether you have a coalition government with Nazi participation or not, this is not something that could be resolved hierarchically from above it is much bigger, it is a paradigmatic change that crisis brought.

Grigoris Kafkalas. One thing is intention, for some might be good, the other is whether there is any interest on behalf of the system to keep the catastrophe within limits, though this is not much hope for real change to happen. But in any case there should be something like a safety valve on behalf of the system. I see now how appropriate is your anthropological approach especially as the situation deteriorates and the different approaches and responses of the various groups as you have described, resemble even more with specific anthropological groups or I might say modern tribes. In any case they respond and the question is whether there are any ways to orchestrate this response into a movement with some recognisable direction to move in the future. In a sense we have come to the end and you have already mentioned many time examples drawn on the Greek situation. Thus I am going to ask if you wish to add any comment on whether and how Greece differs from other European countries not only those under the same processes but even with countries of the European North, the UK, the Netherland or Belgium for that matter, the are also under the austerity regime of neoliberalism, so what if anything id different about Greece?

Dimitris Dalakoglou. After the Second World War several social provisions of goods and services funded by the governments in order to control the consequences of extreme capitalism that have led to the Fascism and Nazism. Today we are in a historical situation

where the 'happy period' of Western European capitalism is ending. We are in the middle of an on-going capitalist experiment. The aim is to expand across Western Europe extreme neoliberalism as it has been applied already in other countries.

We are now in a situation that actually the European elites or European capitalism is taking back all the rights, which were awarded to lower classes after decades of struggle and fights. The problem is that as Western European we didn't react when this was happening in the global South. In the best case scenario the great majority of Europeans were thinking of themselves as philanthropic, in worst case scenario Western Europeans identified with their governments and implied that Eastern Europeans or postcolonial subjects etc. deserved to suffer because they had done historical mistakes, which is a completely false idea, but arguably was prevalent.

Nevertheless it was only a matter of time until the post-socialist Bulgarian salaries expand to the neighbouring countries of 'Western' Europe. We didn't react to the growth of Western European economies that was based upon profits made upon cheap East European labour and cheap Eastern European real estate. Now we see all around Europe movement towards plain Fascist parties, while various other parties and governments do not seem to bother collaborating with them. So yes,

Greece is an extreme example and it does differ from other Western European countries in the ways that crisis-led governance works. However, it is just a process implemented clearly in much more global historical stage of late capitalism that seems to affect everyone else in the West and it will have unprecedented impact. So the question I think is not how we compare the various forms of this crisis-led governance, but how we grasp the opportunity to un-root from its social consent neoliberal legitimisation and go forward towards a future without exploitation and power.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Thank you very much indeed; it was a quite enjoyable and informative discussion and we will try to make the best of your views.

Dimitris Dalakoglou. Thank you very much for the questions and the discussion.