03 2021

Against the Bodies: Notes on Isolation and State Repression in Greece

Sofia Bempeza, Diana Manesi

In the afternoons she* takes notes on the social, affective and political impact of the pandemic in Greece, while her* body, her* friends, her* lovers and fellow accomplices are affected in many ways. As the lockdown months go by she* feels an urgency to tackle the challenges of the recent political and social order directed against the bodies. At the moment greek society experiences not only a deep social division due to the perennial austerity but also a “new” political order coming forth through the impacts of the pandemic.

To put it briefly, the right-wing government of Nea Dimokratia exercises authoritarianism in the management of the state while pushing a strong neoliberal agenda sustained by clientelistic politics. On the one hand, the government fails to cope with the effects of the pandemic (such as massive lack of health system resources, harsher economic meltdown, marginal state support and organisational inefficiency) while at the same time it makes space for an alarmingly obscure authoritarianism. On the other hand, the state management of the social and health crisis proves to be a terrain for right-wing symbolic politics, constructed by a perpetual and biased media narrative, which reads as *we-are-doing-our-best*

performance. Yet the king is totally naked. The health system is exhausted – since the beginning of the pandemic public hospitals and care workers are left with minimum resources. People with low income and/or without home-office-jobs are forced to travel in loaded public transportation whereas being dictated, or even blamed by the state authorities, for not keeping social distance. And also public education malfunctions has become the *new normality*, as pupils and educators struggle to "stay online" on the insufficient web-teaching-platform provided by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Above all, in the midst of the pandemic, and it's social and economic impacts, the right-wing government puts in risk the human condition of major parts of society, and invests in the demolition of civil rights and democracy.

Scene 1: Soft Citizen and State Repression

It seems that there is only one behavioural recipe promoted by the state rule in the COVID pandemic, namely that of the "normal" (middle-class) individuum. An affirmative individuum to the authorities' policies, in other words, an individuum translating into three accomplishments: advanced internet user, purposed (on-line) consumer, and *soft citizen*. In the first case, it is expected to have at one's disposal all necessary technology and the know-how for accessing different on-line commercial and public platforms for managing the individual self. Since work, communication, education, child care and the care of vulnerable persons are parts of the so-called "home-office" everyday routine, advanced internet users are key for many kinds of societal and economic activities. In the second case, the figure of the (on-line) consumer becomes predominant within a narrative that implies both the boosting of the economy and the pleasure of consuming, since other social

activities are prevented. Web users, white collar workers and consumers that have access to commodities and services, this is what sets the standards of a *good life* within the pandemic in Greece and elsewhere. As for the third case, the figure of the *soft citizen* within the public sphere, we can observe a political transition progressively taking place: people are expected to have no other political agency within lockdown restrictions except for following the governmental measures no matter what. All differing attitudes to this morose model of the "normal" and responsible individual are to be contempt as non-conform, troublesome or wayward. In that sense, political interventions are considered a threat to the current governmental state of order. Students' protests, political movements, self-organised spaces and grassroots gatherings are restricted but still active in different ways, whilst the institutional violation of democratic rights during the pandemic is in progress.

She* thinks where to start. The numerous incidents of state repression and police violence pop up regularly. A peaceful protest by women activists ended through police intervention: eleven feminists have been arrested on Syntagma square for holding banners on November 25th, the *International Day for the Elimination of Violence against* Women, beyond any violation of health protocols. On November 17th – the commemoration day of the Polytechnic uprising against the greek military Junta – leftist people, unionists and politicians were fined and arrested for approaching the Polytechnic School Memorial with flowers. Extensive police patrolling and prohibition of gatherings took place also on December 6th, where leftists and autonomous groups/ individuals gathered at (or passed by) the spot of Alexis Grigoropoulos murder by police officers in Exarchia[1]. In other words, since the start of the pandemic political gatherings in public spaces are prohibited or banned through anti-constitutional

endeavours. For example, the leader of ELAS (greek police), in consultation with the Minister of Citizens' Protection, decided to forbid demonstrations on the days of the anniversary of the Polytechnic, although the "Committee for the Protection of Public Health" in its meeting of 4/11/2020 did not propose any ban or prohibition of outdoor gatherings.

> *Police harassment snapshot ----- She* decides to partake in the 17th November demo. It was the announcement of the Head of police who banned all gatherings for the next three days that urged her to brace herself and leave the house. She* is afraid she* will be arrested or even worse beaten. She* cannot reach the demo, every corner is patrolled, she* turns right, left, she*'s pretending she* is an "innocent girl." She* hears a police officer cat-calling her, she* ignores him, he shouts "hey, doll! hey doll! hey doll! where are you going doll!". She* keeps walking until his voice stops. It only took 15 minutes for the police water cannons to come out and dissolve the crowd. She* went home, safe and sound, glad that she* ignored the policeman's interpellation.*

Another crucial example is the case of prisoner Dimitris Koufontinas, convicted in the case of the organisation November 17th, who has been on hunger strike since January 8th 2021 in protest against his treatment in prison, as ordered by the Nea Dimokratia government. The government's actions constitute a breach of the law and a disregard for the Greek Ombudsman.[2] Koufontinas democratic demands, as provided by law, are neglected, while the extended solidarity to his cause by anarchist, autonomous and leftist movements, lawyers, artists and many others is faced with police repression. Apart from Koufontinas case, one can notice the authoritarian shift since the new education law passed in February 2021 by the ruling right-wing party Nea

Demokatia and its right wing alliance ‘Greek Solution’ party. This education law installs a special police unit in the universities, restricts the number of students accessing higher public education (no tuition fees) and reduces the average time of studying.[3] This change in the education system faced strong objections by the Greek University Rectors Council and the Hellenic Federation of University Teachers’ Associations and gained international attention and support while the students' movement counts massive demonstrations across Greece.[4] Overall, the greek right-wing government scores major violations of democratic standards proving an authoritarian state of rule, similar to countries like Turkey, Serbia and Belarus, according to the Pandemic Backsliding Database.[5]

Scene 2: Movements and Solidarity Structures

A few months before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, in August 2019, the right-wing government carried out a series of massive raids targeting immigrants, anarchists and autonomous spaces; it revoked the autonomy (*Asylo*) previously granted to universities[6] and introduced a wide range of repressive measures. Various squats and social centers that hosted solidarity structures for immigrants and refugees offering medical care, food, clothing, greek lessons etc. were evicted and sealed with bricks (i.e. Koukaki Squat Community, Rosa Nera, the refugee squat of Spirou Trikoupi and the neighbouring Transito squat, Dervenion 56, Themistokleous refugee squat). These were spaces where many autonomous, anarchist and anti-authoritarian groups found shelter to organize their struggles and hold events that had anti-fascist, (queer-)feminist, and ecological content. In September 2019 the government issued a 15-day ultimatum to the squatters’ who were occupying buildings in the greek territory to evacuate the premises:

"*Those who have illegally occupied buildings, public or private, are called upon to evacuate them. If asylum seekers or third-country nationals are housed there, they should be informed that they will be transferred to the mainland's residence structures…"* declared the Minister of Citizen Protection.

The aforementioned targeting of squats and social spaces went hand in hand with the gentrification of the city centre through the massive selling of empty spaces and neighbourhood blocks to foreign investors followed by the acquisition of "golden visas"[7], the uncontrollable Airbnb market and the unprecedented increase of rents in the city centre (e.g. Exarchia, Kypseli). A recent gentrification example (Alexandri: 2018,[8] was the "big walk of Athens", a so-called "pilot" project, launched in May 2020 by the city's mayor, with the aim to "cleanse" and "beautify" the city. The project received a tremendous amount of 2 million euros, only to be dismantled three months later, whilst hospitals remain under-staffed, lacking equipment and financial support.

> *Gentrification snapshot ----- She* is searching for a flat in the midst of the pandemic. She* meets a broker at Exarchia. He starts bragging about the "quality" of his office which collaborates with other brokers in London, Paris and Dubai. She* nodes mechanically and tries to ignore him. She*is afraid he will make a racist comment. She* sees it coming. He does: "…the landlady is UK- based and I think all these people that buy old apartments, renovate them and rent them out make our neighbourhood better. Here, you don't have immigrants ("xenous") living all together in a flat … now they go in other central neighbourhoods."*

What needs to be noted, is that the political climate before the pandemic was already torpedoed. Policemen raided coffee shops in Exarchia, beat, arrested and tortured citizens in an unforeseen

exercise of state control and police brutality. In one of these raids, a policeman while beating and arresting a male citizen shouted "*In Exarchia there is junta, we are in control here!*"[9] Above all, there was a widespread feeling amongst leftists and anti-authoritarians that policemen have the green light to act as they want with no governmental control or accountability: they arbitrarily slur, grab, beat and arrest people (migrants/refugees, anti-authoritarians) found loitering in the city centre. More specifically, migrants and refugees with no ID cards face the danger of being arrested given the intense police patrolling and ID controls. Greek authorities have been pushing an anti-immigration agenda that fits neatly with a years-long european effort to deter, deny, and disregard asylum seekers and refugees. Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants remained on the islands in August 2020, when a second wave of COVID hit Greece. COVID-19 reached the RIC on the island of Chios first and Moria RIC in Lesvos soon after. Authorities responded by intensifying camp lockdowns, creating fear and confusion. In Lesvos, protests ensued and massive fires broke out, burning Moria to the ground on September 9, 2020. In March 2021, the two unaccompanied adolescent boys who were arrested were found guilty for "arson with risk to human life" and sentenced to 5 years imprisonment. Their conviction is another outrageous example of how people on the move are criminalised while European actors are cleansed from the ethical and political responsibilities for the existence of such a camp like Moria and the current Kara Tepe.[10]

All of the above build the political climate within which grassroots networks find themselves in the break of the coronavirus crisis. During the on-going lockdowns (March 2020 till present) scattered, yet important, grassroots initiatives were set up with the aim to offer help and support to queer, women* and precarious

individuals, indigenous and migrant, who face financial difficulties, health problems and/or lack of access to resources. To mention just a few: queers against the pandemic, Emantes International Lgbtqia+ Solidarity network (for immigrants and refugees), feminist actions in solidarity to Poland, United African Women Organization Greece, social solidarity kitchens and online solidarity groups. Apart from initiatives aiming to support the mental and physical wellbeing of people in need, sporadic social gatherings took place in support of refugees and against the government's repressive policies, that aim to close down camps (for e. g. the forced closure of the self-organised space Lesvos Solidarity-Pikpa) and drive refugees to an imprisoned condition of "partly living, partly dying."

Scene 3: Social Isolation and Care from a She* Perspective

It's 4am. And here she* is, staring at her article. If she* doesn't get it read and annotated, she'll fall further behind. But it's hard to remember why that matters anymore. She* keeps working on job applications. During the first lockdown (March 2020) in Greece the internet was fuelled with images of empty streets, where she* would either remain silent or break out in rage, whenever the next small talk (i. e. in the taxi, on the phone with landlords, with her uncle) would reveal racist and sexist comments. The pandemic has produced an affective restructuring of her* inner and outer world, it has brought to the fore a mosaic of feelings ranging from fear, desperation, loneliness to a need to be more tender, affectionate and thoughtful of her* health, her* spaces, her* communities.

In November 2020, the government announced that "we", herself included, will not be allowed to walk around the city after 9pm, she* can only visit close relatives in need, and she* has to report

her every move to “Big Brother”, the state panopticon, the police, the government - call it as you wish. The government reproduces a unitary biopolitical narrative which presumes that “we are in a war”, “we have a common enemy” and “we should obey the government measures for our health and safety.” The further life activities get pushed back, the more she* feels depressed. She* glimpses through photos of upper class Greek celebrities going for Christmas at Dubai, the prime minister going cycling at Parnitha, she receives a call about her friend’s K. suicide attempt, and talks endlessly on the phone with her other friend L. who is still seeking for a job. Her* home feels like a haven with many boats: home office, home researching, home schooling. For someone like her* who appreciates one-to-one personal interactions, hugs and kisses as opposed to large lost-in-crowd gatherings, to feel connected while maintaining a virtual social bond is rather difficult. While capitalist web-technology quickly found a substitute for ‘human-disconnectedness’ in the form of Zoom and other virtual platforms she* is trying to maintain emotional bonds and combat loneliness. Momentarily, she* finds attachment in detachment, in the sense of being in a physical space with her* senses floating and the material objects in the room offering the comfort of touch.

“All the women* in me are tired”, she* reads on a graphic picture in social media. She* feels exhausted too. She*, an educator teaching on-line, a social researcher, a queer-feminist activist. How to keep up the pedagogical interaction through digital communication tools? Students and teachers, more or less precarious, socially isolated and worried. Some of them care for children and elderly at home, many lost their mini or day jobs, others moved back to their parents. Scattered voices are coming into her* living room from other semi-private rooms. Talking heads on screens, no legs, no bodies, no tenderness, no gatherings

around the table or the smoking corner. Digital seminar communities, or activist meetings or working sessions, or just friendly gatherings happening on-line. So it is, virtual social bonds become eminent and domesticity invades time and space. And forced loneliness, no sexual encounters or dating, even more a deterioration of mental health.

There she* goes again practicing all her* activities in the kitchen or the bedroom: learning, cooking, reading, teaching, organising, talking on the phone, drawing. Her* kitchen is situated, and keeps a lot of stories. Love stories, polished stories, messy stories, and stories that are dirty. In January 2021 sailing champion Sofia Bekatorou opened up the dialogue on sexual harassment and gender-based violence in sports. Bekatorou's words initiated the greek #metoo[11], that set in motion other female voices to report rapes and many types of gendered abuse beyond sports, like in theater and other cultural spaces. It seems that the time has come to address gender-based violence and rape culture not only in everyday conversations but also in mainstream media and on TV. The former director of the Greek National Theater, Lignadis – appointed as National Theater artistic director by the Cultural Minister, is accused for sexual harassment and abuse of underage persons. Several men report that they have been abused as minors, teenagers or adults, and the matter is passed on to the state prosecutor. The National Theater director resigned (6.2.2021), after the Ministry failed to cover up the scandal, and Lignadis finally got arrested facing rape charges[12]. Cultural Minister, Mendoni, is being harshly criticised for her institutional role both by the Actors' Association (S.E.H.), and many people/cultural workers demand her resignation[13]. Thus, it's relevant to notice that the cultural minister and the prime-minister, both personally related to the theatre director in the previous years, hypocritically claimed

that they were/are not aware of his “private activities". At the same time, other renowned theater male directors and actors face accusations for abuse and gender-based violence as reported by many women actresses. Nonetheless, several reports on sexual harassment and abuse have been made against teachers in the Art School of Athens, as the newly-formed “Student’s Initiative for the Registration of Harassment at the Athens School of Fine Arts” disclosed publicly in social media[14].

There is no beginning or end in contending gender-based violence at this particular moment. Everything looks connected: the long-lasting patriarchal structures in the cultural scenes exercise their power to suppress vulnerable individuals and legitimise the omerta while they strive to render critical voices more or less invisible. The narrative of this hegemonic system is culminated by the “normalization” of gender-based violence, as an unavoidable part of cultural working spaces and arts education. The collective her*dissent in the “Call for Support: Against Gender-based Violence in Art Education” states:

> *“An established system of discriminations and invisible legislations is being used to define, distribute and impose not only the relations of power and visibility, but also the content of the field. In addition to that gender-based violence within the cultural field is justified through the mythical function of the Teacher/Art Master and the performance of the "sacred talent" of the Artist. The great male Artist's misogyny and sexism, especially towards femininities and other subordinate subjects, while it is often obvious and overt, it gets systematically covered and "legitimized" within the power games related to the artistic career. As careers are shaped through the access (or lack of) to important art scenes, the legitimation of this*

apparatus determines to some extent the very value of the work of art. "[15]

All discussions on gender-based violence in a deep patriarchal (greek) society come with a cost: victim blaming, pink-washing, homophobia and a lot of trauma that reappears. But the hegemonic male (macho) figure seems already "tired" after one month #metoo discussions in Greece. Female voices get silenced again, whether for talking too much or too little. You can never please the Masters. You cannot be heard by those who consider feminism(s) old school relicts and contempt #metoo and feminist activism as just another fashion coming from the States. Regardless of the anti-feminst and authoritarian state practices she* becomes now even louder, within her* silence(s) and through her* voice. Against all odds, against sexism and misogyny, against toxic masculinities of all types, she* speaks and writes.

Epilogue

As we started writing this text in early December 2020, we had in mind the impacts of the second harsh lockdown in Greece as well as the socio-political and economical situation since last summer. While processing the pandemic impacts on our lives we came across new political events and social emergencies. Already since January and throughout March our weeks became harsh, more intensive, full with the political events that keep going. We were re-writing parts of the text every couple of days, trying to follow up the accelerated events: greek #metoo, Koufountina's hunger strike, police brutality, education law, health system breakdown, anti-refugee/anti-immigration policies. Though these events may seem scattered, they are not disconnected from each other, they form a

prevailing condition of authoritarian governmentality which is alarming and worrisome.

The fear of the pandemic and its state management functions as a biopolitical tool that exhaustively intensifies the capitalist terms of working with and through burnouts and depression. The state avenges its citizens for non-conforming to its rules or performing badly in becoming the compliant *soft citizen.* Citizens experience the discomfort of "lack of air" as the city no longer belongs to them and their constitutional rights are temporarily suspended.

It's not the first time that constitutional rights are jeopardised in the history of the Greek state (see the Greek junta 1967-1973), yet it's the first time that the violation of civil rights (e. g. freedom of movement, right to protest) is not named as such, and instead it is branded under the foreign word 'lockdown', which hides the political connotation of the Covid-measures.

What is certain is that depression as a *common ground,* police controlling, intensive home-working and growing unemployment - to name a few elements of the everyday condition - are here. While being more or less socially isolated, the activist subject finds itself in a state of limbo when taking part in demonstrations and at the same time feeling "weird" among fellow demonstrators who could possibly infect each other. We know that the capacity of the intensive care unit has reached its limits, that nurses and doctors are overworked and left with no support by the government. But it's exactly this governmental social apathy, its class-based underpinnings and the "law and order" dogma that we need to confront in all possible ways. As witnessed with the massive daily demonstrations sprang end of February 2021 in support of Koufontina's hunger strike, to partake in a demonstration feels more fearful than ever, yet as a fellow queer-activist told her*, *"it's*

the only breath of fresh air I can get from the outside world.". Whether we will manage to sustain ourselves in these conditions, to protect our health and rectify the losses of democratic rights remains to be seen.

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