03 2025

“I Have No Oxygen”: Embodied Resistances in Post-Tempi Greece

Vasiliki Polykarpou

Note to the readers: *This text is a work in progress, reflecting the protests that followed the Tempi train crash in Greece.*

During the days that this text was being written, the slogan *"I Have No Oxygen"*[1] is going viral throughout Greece and the Greek diaspora while simultaneously attracting the interest of a large part of the international press. The call for participation in mobilizations and the student protests that took place on the 26th of January and the 6th of February respectively have brought the case of the Tempi train crash to the center of political debate in the country, putting pressure on members of the government involved in key points in the management of the case or various stages of the investigations surrounding the collision of the two trains. As we are living in the aftermath of these mass demonstrations in memory of the victims of the Tempi train crash, the connotations of this slogan are directly linked to this mournful and obscured case. The reference to oxygen here is related on the one hand to the last sentences of some of the victims (who literally shouted in their final moments "I Have No Oxygen", as recorded and leaked to the media) and on the other hand to the suffocating

condition of social injustice, corruption and the interconnected forms of violence that come to the surface through the explosive point of recognition of the socio-political impasse in Greece revealed through the Tempi affair.

The universal dimension of breathing and breathability, however, is related to the mass character of these demonstrations and the great interest of society in the case, which were followed by moments of hope, even though we are going through a period of social decline, democratic impasses, and the rise of alt-right politics all over the country. Not only the victims of the collision could not breathe due to lack of oxygen, but also the part of the society that has been following the case for the last two years and suspects - if not convinced - that this case will be covered up to avoid the responsibilities of the guilty parties. The need for breathing is expressed here as the need for justice at a culminating moment after a series of violent cases and systemic politics of exclusion reproduced by the Greek state.

Slogans related to breathability and suffocation have gone viral internationally in recent years mainly through intersectional struggles, such as anti-racist demands around cases of police killings of black citizens (Athanasiou 2020) or feminist and environmental justice politics (Gorska 2016). Breathing and breathability can be also read as part of the embodied responses of the protestors and all those who support the demand for justice, for refusing to cover up the case, and for resisting the forgetting and silencing of the factors that led to this state crime.

Going through a so-called "post-crisis" era in Greece, the residents of the country are sinking into financial difficulties with the indicators for poverty[2], unemployment[3] and housing conditions[4] often placing the country in the lowest positions

among the EU countries. Incidents of gender-based, racist violence and violence against children are accumulating while society, with the consent of the state, fails to manage them or implement prevention policies. Furthermore, the political forces of the left continue the long tradition of splits, unable to build strategic alliances, while new alt-right political parties enter the Greek and the European parliament. Mapping all of the above in the context of the current state of the country, the literal reference to the lack of oxygen, which comes from the audio documents of the 28th of February, 2023 at Tempi and went public a few weeks ago, is directly linked to the demands of the protestors that reproduce the slogan. The phrase “I Have No Oxygen” addresses the impossibility of breathing or experiencing a breathable and respectful life, as evidenced by the everyday living conditions of a large part of the country's population.

Feelings of loss, mourning, anger and disappointment coexist with forms of social and political suffocation that became even more present after the pandemic COVID-19, its management by the government and the ever-increasing police presence in public spaces. As Ulrika Dahl underlines, attention must be paid to how the new forms of surveillance established during this period “brought about by monitoring the pandemic will shape and affect our freedom to assemble, write, act and speak up against continued injustice” (2022, 6). The co-existing and intertwined crises plaguing the country are silently returning, but with accumulated intensity, to today's political agenda through the case of Tempi. Many of the public debates on Tempi, brought back to the fore the Pylos shipwreck on June 14th 2023 and the wildfire in Mati in July 2018, opening up discussions around the state crimes of recent years that have endangered and continue to endanger the lives of those whose lives are not considered worthy of protection. Right-

wing political powers that dominate the European political scene, nationalist rhetorics and Trump's recent win in the 2024 US presidential elections, intensify the dark atmosphere and the urge to address the backsliding of democracy.

Everyday acts of solidarity, local activist actions and small-scale collectives seem to reflect the contemporary struggles in these turbulent times and especially after the political events that followed the Tempi train crash. The attempts to create some spaces of breathability and co-existing are reminiscent of what Sara Ahmed was talking about when she was describing the struggle for a bearable life as the ability to have space to breathe while at the same time, she considered breathing as a prerequisite for imagination and possibility (2010, 120). Demanding breathable spaces or demanding justice seems to be somehow synonymous in this context, as the two-year anniversary of the Tempi train crash arrived and these mobilizations could be seen as an opportunity to open up a field of political hope despite the socio-political impasses mentioned above.

References

Ahmed, Sara (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Apata, Gabriel O. (2020). "'I Can't Breathe': The Suffocating Nature of Racism." *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 37, no. 7–8: 241-54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420957718.

Athanasiou, Athena (2020). "(Im)possible Breathing: On Courage and Criticality in the Ghostly Historical Present". *Redescriptions:*

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory, vol. 23, no 2.

Dahl, Ulrika. (2022). “Open forum: The politics of gender (research) in a global pandemic”. *European Journal of Women's Studies* vol. 29, no. 3, 13505068211065138.

Górska, Magdalena (2016). *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability*. Linköping: Linköping University Press.

---

[1] The slogan “I Have No Oxygen” («Δεν Έχω Οξυγόνο») is central during the mobilizations in the memory of the victims of the Tempi train crash. The crash happened just before midnight on February 28th, 2023, when a freight train and a passenger train crashed head-on on the line linking Athens with Thessaloniki. The collision triggered mass protests across Greece, and other countries, with many people saying the collision showed the years of neglect of the rail network after a decade-long financial crisis. Also, some of the representatives of the victims’ families claimed the freight train was carrying an "illegal chemical cargo" which caused the fire after the crash. The protestors still demand justice for the 57 people who were killed and the numerous injured while an open call for mass mobilizations invites everyone in the streets on the 28th of February 2025.

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Subjective_poverty_statistics

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/3-07012025-bp

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_housing_and_renting_difficulties