

# Post-democratic governance in refugee camps versus newcomers' architectural housing commons in Athens and Thessaloniki

# Introduction

In 2016 after the EU-Turkey Common Statement, the European countries sealed their borders and thousands of refugees found themselves stranded in Turkey and Greece.

The presentation is based in participatory ethnographic and militant research and aims to highlight that acts of solidarity have opened up new possibilities to challenge State and EU migration policies while aim to unveil three questions

- **post-democratic governance in refugee camps**
- **newcomers' commoning practices and decolonial common spaces**
- **newcomers' right to the city and the right to move**



# Solidarity Cities

The refugees' right to the city, to housing and to public services is recognized by several international, European and national statements, agreements and laws.

Also, during the last decade several cities in the Global North are promoted as “tolerant”, “cosmopolitan” and “superdiverse” cities and embrace migration and diversity as an asset that strengthens their global positioning

Some others endorse pro-immigrant policies in ways that allow them to self-proclaim “**solidarity cities**” (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Christoph and Kron, 2019) in Europe or “**sanctuary cities**” in UK, USA and Canada (Bagelman, 2016; Darling and Bauder, 2019). The common feature of these cities is that they advocate for refugee inclusion at the urban scale, sometimes in the absence of a national response or against restrictive state immigration policies.

# Solidarity Cities

The concept of solidarity cities usually refers to:

- a) **grassroots self-organized practices of solidarity,**
- b) **humanitarian and civil society activities and**
- c) **municipal and local authorities policies that undermine restrictive state migration policies.**

These three aspects of the solidarity city correspond to a form of **autonomous solidarity**, a form of **civic solidarity** and a form of **institutional solidarity** (Fisher and Jørgensen, 2021).

# Post-democratic governance in refugee camps

‘**post-democratic society** is one that continues to have and to use all the **institutions of democracy**, but in which **they increasingly become a formal shell**’ (Crouch 2013)

‘**post-democratic arrangement** [...] **has replaced debate, disagreement and dissensus** with a series of technologies of governing that fuse around consensus, agreement, accountancy metrics and technocratic [...] management’ (Swyngedouw, 2009)

‘although the **formal institutions of democracy remain**, **its living substance is being exhausted** in favour of a different regime that can no longer properly be called “democratic”’ (Esposito, 2019)

# Post-democratic governance in refugee camps

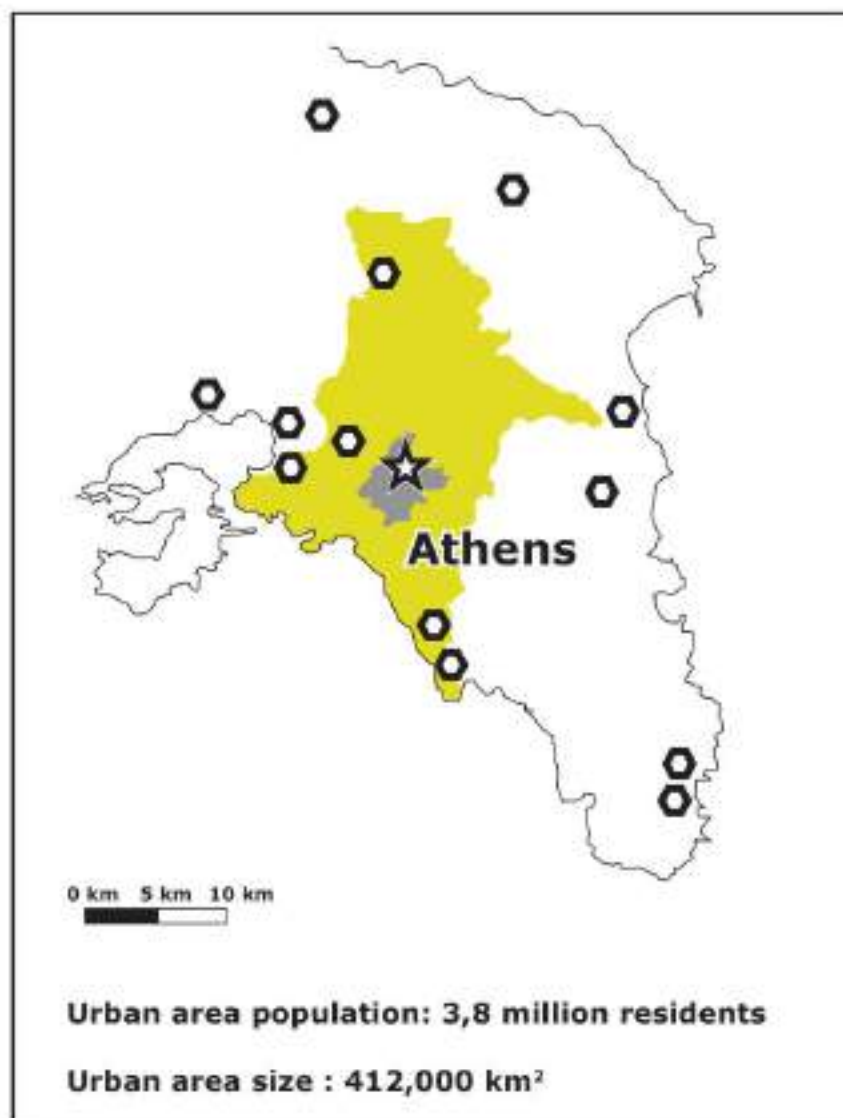
- the diminishing role of the state in guaranteeing universal rights of citizenship (Crouch, 2004)
- the intensification of mechanisms of policing, control, and surveillance (Swyngedouw, 2011)
- the replacement of public participation by an expert-centric administration (Žižek, 2005)
- the exclusion from participation processes especially of residents who have been deprived of a voice (Mullis, 2021)
- and the increasing fragmentation, splintering, and depoliticisation of urban space (Swyngedouw, 2011).



# State-run camps

Several scholars depict migrants' camps as state of exception, regimes of control, marginality and invisibilization of displaced people (Agier, 2011; Turner, 2016; Wacquant, 2007). Bauman already from 2000 argued that the twentieth century was “the century of camps”. In the so-called “camp studies”, several scholars (Diken and Laustsen, 2004; Edkins, 2000; Pasquetti, 2015), inspired by Foucault's “panopticon” theory and by Agamben's notion of “bare life”, conceptualize camps as biopolitical structures of confinement, securitization and foster control over migrants. However, in recent years a conceptual shift emerged as many scholars (Katz, 2017; Martin et al., 2020; Sanyal, 2010; Sigona, 2015; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022; Turner and Whyte, 2022) focused and highlighted the potentialities for agency-building and subjectification of migrants inside the camps. In light of this turn, many scholars propose that the camps constitute “hybrid”, “contested” and “ambiguous” spaces (Kreichauf, 2018; Maestri, 2017; Oesch 2017; Ramadan, 2013).





⬡ State-run camps

★ Area with refugee squats

■ Central Municipality

■ Urban area



‘Overall, the situation in the camps is completely unacceptable. Spaces are very dirty and disgusting. The refugees are not provided with food and clothing and water is often unsuitable for drinking or washing. Hot water is not provided. There were very few toilets, and they were always dirty. It felt like they just dumped refugees in tents and as refugees usually say “the camps are a slow death”. People who leave the camps have psychological problems and traumas, because they spent most of the time inside the tent looking out through the little windows, like prisoners, desperate, disappointed, without having anything to do to keep themselves busy and distracted.’

(Personal interview, September 5, 2020).







**Location of State-run camp Skaramagas (Athens)**

0 km 0,2 km 0,4 km



**Location of State-run camp Softex (Thessaloniki)**

0 km 0,1 km 0,2 km





„Life” in darkness: Most of the refugee camps are hidden away in abandoned and dirty old factory warehouses.





State-run refugee camp Diavata - Anagnostopoulou in Thessaloniki





Surveillance cameras and walls in the perimeter of Diavata-Anagnostopoulou state-run refugee camp in Thessaloniki



UN

We are not caged  
animals

WE ARE HUMANS







DOWN WITH THE  
WALLS  
DOWN WITH THE  
PRISONS  
✿

HOUSING  
PAPERS  
FREEDOM

# **Newcomers' commoning practices and decolonial common spaces**



# From the right to squat

‘Here, in Spirou Trikoupi 17 we have lived more than 2.000 people, coming from more than 10 different countries, and that we have crossed, at least, 3 borders till here. This wall that the State is building to seal the entrance will never be able to stop us!

Exarcheia is more than a place of immediate shelter and basic humanitarian aid for migrants and homeless. It is a place where the vulnerable can find community. Where those that have been robbed of all agency and ostracized by the State can decide - together - how they wish to live their lives.’ (squat residents’ public announcement Sep. 2019)



# ... to the Common space

**Common space needs to include newcomers**, and this objective reconfigures it incessantly as a network of contested, reinterpreted and re-evaluated spatial relation.

[Common space] ‘happens’ in specific sociohistorical contexts and it expresses the intricacies of its emergence in and through commoning practices which have to struggle against dominant practices of enclosures. (Stavrides, 2016, p. 262)

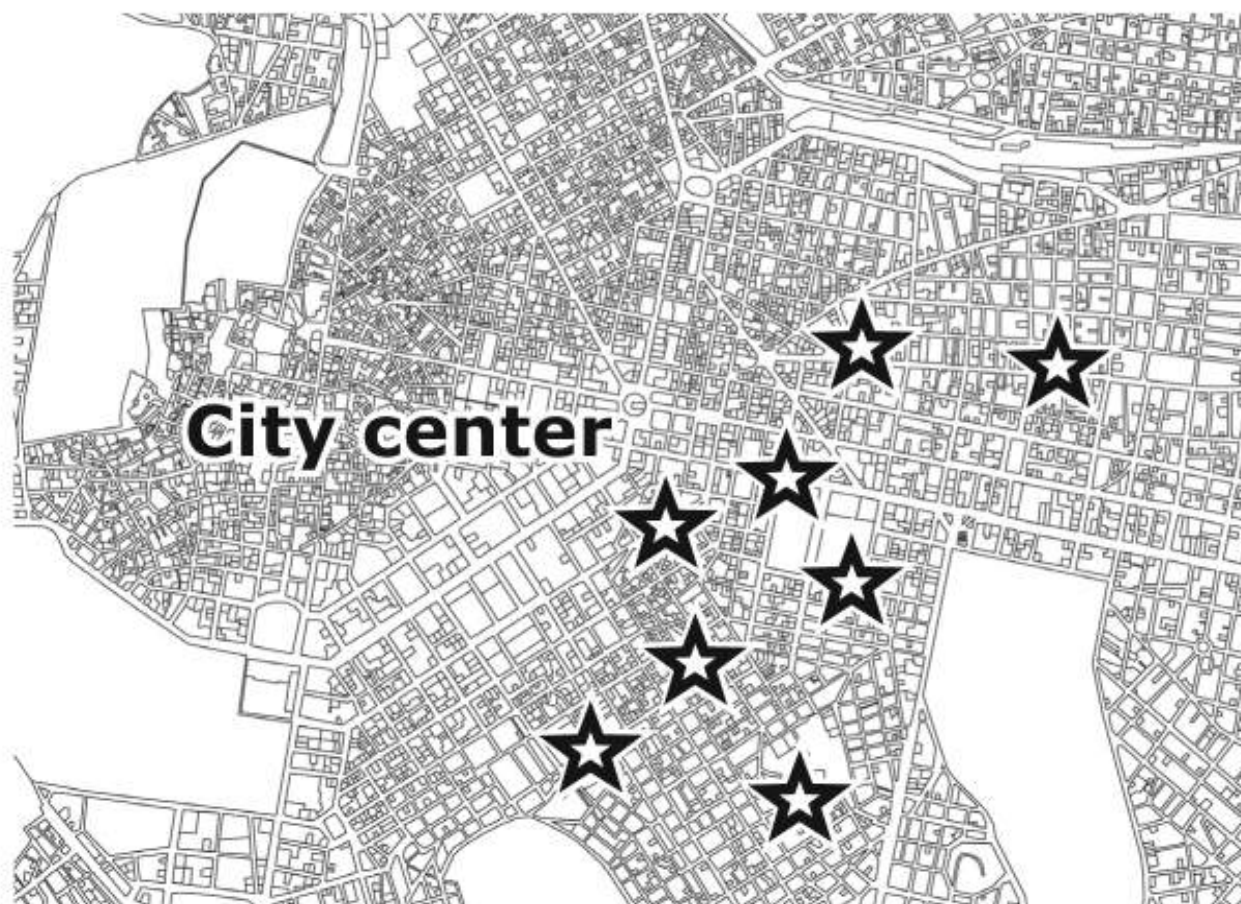




‘At the squat we are like the fingers of a hand. Each finger is different from the other, although all together create the palm. Thus, we have different countries, languages, religions, genders, but we are all together, united, we are fighting together, so we are not weak. If you are alone in an isolated camp out of the city, you are weak. There is care and love here, people care if you need a lawyer, if you need a doctor and most of all they look you in the eyes with love. The walls of your container residence in a camp will never look at you with love.’ (Personal interview, April 12, 2019).







**Athens**

0 km 0,5 km 1,00 km



★ Refugee housing squats and common spaces



**Thessaloniki**

0 km 0,5 km 1,00 km



Newcomers' squats broaden and extending the concept of commons. Usually commons refer to homogeneous social groups, in terms of ideology-ethnicity-citizenship-social position and there is a relatively lack of examination of commoning in relation to intersectional interrelations across the social categories of religion, ethnicity, language, race, and culture. Thus, our case studies refer to non homogenous groups, actually they are based on heterogeneity-otherness.

Housing commons do not entail an absence of governing principles and rules, but they invent their own 'institutions of commoning'. In contrast to the top-down management model of state-run camps, the principles here are co-decided and there are mechanisms developed and established in order to prevent the concentration of power, through for instance the constant rotation in roles and duties, co-responsibility, and collective accountability



‘I suffer from psychological problems. My doctor instructed me to not stress myself. Yesterday in the morning we woke up by the sound of shouting and suddenly ... police entered the place we were sleeping in. Some of us got pushed. I had two panic attacks the last two days. Half of my body got paralysed from the fear. I am still under shock’ (Personal Interview, 2019).

**September 2019 / Athens**

**Police Pogrom against Migrants’ Squats**









Eviction and  
demolition of  
migrants' squat  
Orfanotrofio in  
Thessaloniki

**Solidarity** can be enriched by the concept of **mobile commoning**, which can be perceived as **‘actions that are shared through acts of co-mobilization’** (Sheller, 2018, p. 169), hence, they are commonly produced by people on the move and according to Papadopoulos & Tsianos, (2013, p. 179) they are based on **‘shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants when they are on the road or when they arrive somewhere’**.



**On égaliberté commoning**

The fall of the Berlin Wall was supposed to signal the advent of the single world of freedom and democracy. Twenty years later, [...] the world's wall has simply shifted: instead of separating East and West it now divides the rich capitalist North from the poor and devastated South. New walls are being constructed all over the world: between Palestinians and Israelis, between Mexico and the United States, between Africa and the Spanish enclaves, [...]. The price of the supposedly unified world of capital is the brutal division of human existence into regions separated by police dogs, bureaucratic controls, naval patrols, barbed wire and expulsions. (Badiou, 2008, p.38)

[Post-democracy] is as if from that point onward the kratos of democracy no longer referred to the demos but to a bios, or even to a ghenos. (Esposito, 2019, p.319)

Therefore, a potential re-invention of demos, in direct democracy terms, entails the recognition of refugees as equal people who can participate in the design and governance of their shelters.

At this point we must highlight that **not only equality, but also liberty** is the sine qua non of co-design and co-governance. Admittedly, liberty is also the cornerstone of commons; liberty from enclosures, liberty from state-led or private-led property regimes, and liberty from hierarchies and associated power inequalities. This is also echoed in the main slogans used by refugees when they demonstrate in state-run refugee camps: **“hurrya, asadi, freedom now”** (freedom in Arabic, Farsi, and English).

the idea of **égalité**, employed by Balibar points to the unity of egalitarian relations – equality and liberty – in which ‘the former [is] defined as the absence of discrimination and the latter as absence of repression’.

Overall, we firmly believe that urban governance and architecture based on **‘égalité commoning practices’** could open new horizons for less discriminatory and repressive societies.



Thank you for  
your attention