

Solidarity urban commons vs resilient cities. Newcomers' right to the city in Athens and Thessaloniki

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Abstract.

The cities in their historical path are constantly shaped by newly arrived populations, especially Athens and Thessaloniki are characterized throughout time by multiple stories of arrival of refugees and migrants. In this paper, the arrival of newcomers from 2015 onwards, state housing policies as well as self-managed housing commons are studied. Usually the movement of more than a million people from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa to Central and Northern Europe through Greece in 2015-2016 has been characterized as a “refugee crisis” and therefore raises the question of whether cities of arrival or transit are resilient enough to respond to such “humanitarian crises”. However, the question of why migration is a moment of crisis for cities and how exactly the concept of resilience is linked to migration is an open research question. The aim of the paper is the critical confrontation with the rhetoric of the concept of resilience in relation to migration and its comparison with the transformative possibilities of the solidarity urban commons of the newly arrived populations

Keywords: solidarity, resilience, commons, newcomers, Athens, Thessaloniki

1 Introduction

The cities of Athens and Thessaloniki were in the last decade at the center of the so-called “refugee crisis”, as the largest part of the displaced populations that crossed Greece on the journey to the countries of Northern Europe, stayed in Athens and Thessaloniki for long periods of time and some of them settled permanently. At the same time, the Municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki have been participating for the last decade in the “100 Resilient Cities” international network. Also, the two cities are founding members of the European network “Solidarity Cities with Refugees” (Eurocities network, 2016). However, focusing more specifically on the institutional housing policies implemented in Athens and Thessaloniki, these include settlement of refugees in housing structures - camps, which are located at a great distance from the urban fabric, in areas unsuitable for residential use. Also, refugee housing schemes in rented apartments within the urban fabric were terminated in 2022 and a significant number of refugees are at risk of eviction and homelessness. Therefore, at this point serious doubts are raised as to whether these policies promote the integration or inclusion of refugees and not their exclusion and marginalization. Also, at this point it is worth noting that in parallel and often in opposition to the above institutional housing policies, a wide variety of self-organized housing structures and self-managed solidarity projects were created within the urban fabric of Athens and Thessaloniki, which can be perceived as urban and housing commons of newcomers. In these self-governing structures, refugees have more freedom to co-shape their living conditions, direct access to the city center, as well as more opportunities to contact, socialize and interact with the city's residents. The aim of the text is the critical confrontation with the rhetoric of the concept of resilience in relation to migration and its comparison with the possibilities of the solidarity housing commons of the newly arrived populations. The aim of the text is the critical confrontation with the rhetoric of the concept of resilience in relation to migration and its comparison with the possibilities of the solidarity housing commons of the newly arrived populations.

2 Resilience and the newcomers' right to the city. A critical encounter

Resilience is presented as a popular concept addressing risks, threats and crises. Many times it acquires an umbrella character to indicate the ability of a system, a city, a community or even an individual person, to shield but also to adapt to new conditions, so that it then returns by recovering to its original state after a crisis or shock.

At this point it is worth noting that the genealogy of the concept of resilience (Walker and Cooper, 2011) has its origins in the biology and ecology of the early 70s but also in the oil crisis of 1973 and has subsequently expanded to a set of natural and social sciences as well as governance models that examine risks, threats and crises. Migration has recently included in these risks and crises (Rast, et al. 2020). Therefore, until recently resilience was concerned mainly with economic and environmental-natural disasters, however the inclusion of migration shifts perhaps for the first time the concept of risk and threat from an economic-natural-environmental phenomenon to an anthropogenic condition, that of displacement populations. So here an important conceptual and epistemological question arises. Is it possible to interpret the movement of populations in terms of interpreting and dealing with natural phenomena? The transfer from the natural to the anthropogenic environment is not new, yet it is usually relegated to biologism, following the long tradition of environmental determinism and the ecological fallacy (Peet, 1985). This line of thought was founded in the early 20th century Chicago School approach of human ecology, which had its foundations in the German tradition of determinism and 19th century social Darwinism. The Chicago School, without considering the approach of the French school of possibilism that countered German determinism, claimed that the city as an ecosystem is metabolized according to the adaptability of population groups. To strengthen its arguments, it was used terminology and laws 'found in higher animal species [such as] competition, symbiosis, exploitation, invasion, succession' (Leontidou, 2017: 82).

Today, in linking resilience to migration we can find several similarities with the tradition of environmental determinism. In particular, biologism in the Greek case is quite visible as newly arrived refugees are often likened in public discourse as "invaders" and the most common reference term for the movement of refugees is the so-called "refugee flows", referring to threatening natural phenomenon, such as some impetuous flash flood or possibly a threatening tsunami. At the same time, the above naturalizing metaphors, in addition to social stigmatization and the reproduction of xenophobic stereotypes, lead to the homogenization of newcomers by silencing the uniqueness, culture, abilities and desires of each individual mobile subject. So here comes the crucial question: Is migration a problem and a risk, and why are policies of resilience needed to address it?

Against the above considerations, an ever-growing literature of critical approaches to resilience (Evans and Reid, 2015; Kaika, 2017) points out that resilience constitutes a renewed concept of development, as it promises that crises can be overcome in the direction of a new normality of development. Also, the above thinkers argue that the rhetoric of resilience takes the discussion away from the causes of crises, depoliticizes social relations, does not raise questions about the various power relations and does not problematize the role of the state and the market. In more detail, Slater (2021), on the occasion of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the local "stop calling me resilient" campaign, which opposed rehabilitation programs that strengthened the interests of corporations and large landowners, emphasizes that in terms of cities, the most resilient system today is the neoliberal urbanism that displaces those residents it does not consider sufficiently resilient in the name of regeneration of cities. Bourbeau (2015) focusing on migration policy in France argues that the rhetoric of resilience has been linked to the debate on the protection of national security by reinforcing the perception of immigration as a threat to social cohesion. Finally Fawaz et al. (2018) studying the case of Syrian refugees in Beirut argue that the invocation of resilience should not hide the conditions of social and economic deprivation, nor objectify the lives of displaced populations.

More specifically and focusing on the policies applied regarding the management of refugees, there is a growing trend from international organizations and humanitarian organizations that propose resilience strategies. Specifically, urban resilience in relation to refugees concerns housing, health care, infrastructures, employment opportunities, economic development, political and social cohesion, and the management of risks of violent behavior (Kirbyshire, et al. 2017). Also according to UNHCR, resilience is defined as 'the ability of individuals, households, communities, national institutions and systems to prevent, absorb and recover from shocks, while continuing to function and adapt in a way that supports long-term prospects for sustainable development, peace and security, and the attainment of human rights' (UNHCR, 2017). The above statement

and its application in the case of refugees has not yet been sufficiently clarified and remains more of a declarative goal.

Finally, it is worth noting that several cities in both Europe and North America project themselves as “cosmopolitan”, “tolerant” and “pro-diversity” (Hatziprokopiou et al., 2016; Hassen and Giovanardi, 2018) and identify “immigration and difference as a resource that strengthens their economic and global position” (Belabas et al., 2020: 2). Also, other cities cultivate practices of hosting refugees and adopt immigrant-friendly policies in ways that allow them to define themselves as “Solidarity Cities” (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019; Christoph and Kron, 2019).

However, such policies seem to be quite limited or even absent in the cases of Athens and Thessaloniki. It is even worth noting that the Municipalities of Athens and Thessaloniki joined in 2016 the European network of “Solidarity Cities with Refugees” within the framework of the Eurocities initiative (Eurocities network, 2016). The network was created after the initiative of the Municipality of Athens and had as its main objective the movement of refugees from cities of the European South (Greece, Italy, Spain) to cities of Northern Europe, as well as the pressure on the European Commission to increase the funds for the refugee housing infrastructure. Therefore, the use of the term “solidarity cities” in the case of the Eurocities initiative network, and in particular for the cities of Athens and Thessaloniki, is probably misused as it refers more to the logic of N.I.M.B.Y. (Not In My Back Yard) (Pechlidou, et al. 2020), i.e. the transfer of hosting responsibility to other European cities, rather than the adoption and development of policies of protection, inclusion, active participation and meeting the needs of newly arrived refugees.

3 Resilience as a return to an earlier state. State refugee housing policies

The Greek state, in order to manage with the so-called “refugee crisis”, after the joint statement-agreement between the European Union and Turkey, in March 2016, (European Council, 2016) and the closing of the borders in the Balkan corridor, constructed 13 accommodation centers – camps in the perimeter of Athens and an equal number in the perimeter of Thessaloniki. These sites are abandoned former military camps and abandoned factory-industrial sites. In the following years, several of the camps were closed and today there are 5 camps operating in the greater area of Thessaloniki and 4 in Athens. From the summer of 2021, the camps are fenced off with high concrete walls, preventing visual contact, reinforcing the feeling of isolation among the residents and even symbolically transforming from open-type structures to closed-type camps. According to several scholars (Gemenetzi and Papageorgiou, 2017; Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2020; Papatzani, et al. 2022) it is pointed out that the camps violate the Greek urban planning legislation, as they are located in areas that are not allowed for residential use. In addition, camps are places of exclusion, as there is considerable difficulty in accessing places of education, health, employment and minimal possibilities of interaction with local communities. At the same time, from the end of 2015, accommodation programs were launched within the urban fabric, under the management of the UN High Commission in collaboration with NGOs and municipalities. However, the accommodation program ended at the end of 2022, and several thousand asylum seekers and refugees are under threat of eviction and facing homelessness.

Therefore, in terms of urban resilience, the choice of the Greek state to end the housing program in rental apartments within the urban fabric and the choice to maintain only the closed camps outside the cities seems to not correspond to the perception of inclusion and solidarity. On the contrary, state policies can be interpreted with the narrow term of resilience, as a return to the previous situation, i.e. before the arrival of the refugees, without paying attention to the inclusion of the newcomers. They remain in the category of the unwanted foreigner, for whom a kind of “military humanitarianism” is foreseen (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2020), as expressed in the Greek case by the marginalization and invisibility of refugees in camps.

4 Beyond resilience. Inventions of solidarity commons

Against the aforementioned state housing policies, alternative housing projects were created in Athens and Thessaloniki, seeking on the one hand to respond to the immediate needs of newly arrived populations and on the other hand to experiment with forms of coexistence and symbiosis within the urban fabric of the cities. These are forms of housing commons that according to several scholars (Lafazani, 2018; Tsavdaroglou and Lalenis, 2023; Tsavdaroglou and Kaika, 2022) are characterized by practices of reciprocity, inventiveness and solidarity. Specifically, in Athens and Thessaloniki, since the fall of 2015, a series of abandoned public and

private buildings within the urban fabric were occupied by groups in solidarity with the newcomers and transformed into housing commons.

At this point it is worth noting that the concept of commons and specifically urban commons has in recent years been linked to the practices of mobile populations. As urban commons in the international literature, a wide variety of projects can be found including urban gardens, housing structures, cooperatives and self-organized health, education and work structures. Blomley (2008: 320) claims that commons ‘are not located somewhere, but are produced (...) commons are a form of place-making’, while for understanding the connection of commons to refugee practices, is useful Stavrides (2014: 548) proposal that common spaces emerge as “thresholds”, which are ‘open to use, open to newcomers’. In particular, with regard to the commoning practices of mobile populations, Trimikliniotis et al., (2015: 19) have proposed the term “mobile commons”, which refer to ‘shared knowledge, affective cooperation, mutual support and care between migrants when they are on the road or when they arrive somewhere’. The above characteristics are evident in the cases of the self-managed housing projects in Athens and Thessaloniki, as the housing commons were inventive thresholds for the entry of refugees into the city, and they experimented with forms of equality, participation, coexistence and negotiation of the various identities and social borders. Of course, it should be noted here that the above projects are not utopian locations, as they are constantly faced with a multitude of challenges and difficulties and several times fail to constitute permanent and safe places of residence for the newcomers. The most important confrontation was with state policies as expressed with the evictions of dozens of squats that took place in the years 2016-2020. The violent police evacuation operations of self-organized housing projects in the centers of Athens and Thessaloniki and the transfer of their residents to state-run camps outside the cities, confirm that urban resilience in relation to refugees and migrants in the Greek case is understood as a mechanistic return in the former state before the arrival of the newcomers.

5 Conclusion

The issue of migration is dealt with by most European states, but also in Greece, primarily as a matter of security and humanitarian interventions. In fact, it increasingly takes the form of military humanitarianism, where newcomers are perceived on the one hand as helpless in need of humanitarian aid and at the same time as unwanted foreigners who are hosted in terms of military rule, i.e. through technologies and mechanisms of control, discipline and settlement in state-run camps. The above policies constitute the context in which the rhetoric of urban resilience in relation to migration is installed.

Although the concept of resilience has moved away from the initial mechanistic approaches of returning to the previous situation, and now emphasizes the dimensions of adaptability, decentralization, participation and inclusion, however in Athens and Thessaloniki it becomes clear that this is not the case.

Against the policies of exclusion and marginalization, but also beyond the humanitarian compassion, the self-organized practices of newcomers in self-organized solidarity urban commons opened a new horizon of inventions of coexistence and solidarity. The inhabitants of these projects opened new transnational modalities and transformative territorialities within the urban fabric. These are spatial inventions of personal and collective empowerment, cohabitation and claiming the right to the city.

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