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Research article

Dialogical encounter and the production of exilic space in Exarcheia

John Ryan Karlin

California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, USA, jkarlin@mymail.ciis.edu

Abstract

The neighbourhood of Exarcheia in Athens, Greece, has long been recognised as the socio-spatial epicentre of the Athenian anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu wherein several self-organised spaces, groups, and initiatives have thrived. I characterise Exarcheia as an exilic space within the capitalist world-system. Exilic spaces are paradoxical spaces of relative and precarious autonomy grounded in the principles of self-organisation, solidarity, and mutual aid. In this paper, I put my research into conversation with several themes explored by David Graeber, including militant research methodology, provisional autonomous zones, and dialogical encounter. While I highlight Exarcheia's exilic status, I also investigate significant internal tensions that I argue can be viewed as moments when dialogue breaks down or fails to manifest.

KEYWORDS: exilic space, Exarcheia, dialogical encounter, militant research, anarchism

Introduction

The neighbourhood of Exarcheia in Athens, Greece, has long been recognised as the socio-spatial epicentre of the Athenian anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu wherein several self-organised spaces, groups, and initiatives have thrived (Apoifis, 2016; Cappuccini, 2018; Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2011; Kitis, 2015; Kritidis, 2014; Ioannou, 2016; Pettas, 2018; Sagris & Schwartz, 2010; Vradis, 2012). In this paper, I contextualise the neigh-

bourhood in a broader sense as an example of a common phenomenon that has persisted throughout the history of the capitalist world-system, that is, as a perennial manifestation of autonomous organising referred to here as *exilic space*.

I have written extensively elsewhere about Exarcheia as an exilic space (Karlin, 2020). [1]Here as a tribute to the dialogical anthropology championed by David Graeber (2020), I would like to (re)engage my work with his own in a dialogical fashion. To begin with, one of Graeber's most outstanding contributions has been his works on and of militant research. His book *Direct action* (2009) is an exhaustive account of his time spent in the New York City chapter of Direct Action Network (DAN), in which he fleshes out in great detail fundamental aspects of self-organisation and militant engagement in the era of the alter-globalisation movement. Graeber also co-edited (along with Stevphen Shukaitis) *Constituent imagination* (2007), bringing together contributions from various militant subjects/researchers who utilise their experiences within social movements to display a fusion between methodologies, political action, and knowledge production.

Militant research is in itself dialogical, aiming to produce relevant and reflexive research regarding movement practices and logics (Apoifis, 2016; Gordon, 2007; Juris, 2007; Russell, 2015). Militant research dissolves the boundaries between researcher, activist, fieldwork, and subject through politically aligned immersion, engagement, and solidarity with the social movements and communities under study. Hence, questions of critical distance in terms of researcher and subject become irrelevant given that the researcher finds themselves on 'the same critical plane as the overt subject matter' (Harding, 1987, p. 9; see also Russell, 2015). Nevertheless, militant research does require critical commitment aimed at transformative action within the political milieu with which one is engaged (Graeber, 2009; Russell, 2015).

This paper draws on militant ethnographic research conducted between January 2016 and January 2020. Through my own embeddedness (Gordon, 2007) within the self-organised networks of Exarcheia, I have participated in a plethora of spaces, assemblies, demonstrations, occupations, squats, direct actions, and riots, beginning in January 2016. Living and participating in the neighbourhood for such an extended period provided me with an understanding of the most important entities, occurrences, and initiatives to focus on in order to properly analyse and map the predominant social and spatial relations of the exilic space. Hence, I was in a position to distinguish dominant actors and actions from marginal ones and thus able to 'give articulation to points that are judged

[1] Parts of this article are also included in *Battles for socio-spatial hegemony in the exilic space of Exarcheia*, which is to be published in an upcoming issue of *Antipode*.

to enjoy wide consensus' (Gordon, 2007, p, 282). However, I was not part of one specific group but rather engaged in typically short-term and even overlapping participation with many different groups. This fluid positionality exposed me to diverse and diverging perspectives within the exilic community and enabled me to relay first-hand accounts of various events and phenomena.

A key methodological component in my work on Exarcheia is the utilisation of official communiques of the most significant groups active in the exilic space. The vast majority of texts are published on Athens Indymedia, which acts as the primary medium that groups in the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movement throughout Greece utilise to disseminate information regarding organised actions, calls for assemblies, analyses, critiques, and relevant incidents. In my work, the archived configuration has enabled me to construct a comprehensive diachronic account (Gordon, 2007) using the timestamped Indymedia texts as empirical building blocks from which I could reference and cite precise details, including direct quotes from specific groups. Furthermore, utilising movement-based texts gives value to the idea of taking seriously the critiques and analyses of those involved in movement activity, thus undermining the classic role of the organic intellectual (see Juris, 2007, pp. 164-165). Athens Indymedia looks very different from the more journalistic version Graeber was familiar with during the alter-globalisation movements of the early 2000s; however, its importance is, as he pointed out, 'inestimable' (2009, p. 482), as it is without a doubt the primary organisational tool of the movement in that it constitutes a centralised location with which everyone involved in the movement can monitor and engage.

This paper will focus on several key themes. The following section will introduce the concept of exile as the dialectical counterpart to capitalist incorporation and apply this framework to Exarcheia, which I identify as an exilic space. I will discuss how the principles Graeber has continuously identified as quintessentially anarchistic are the primary principles upon which a successful exilic space is founded and illustrate how they have manifested in Exarcheia. Next, I will put Graeber's (2007) discussion on the spectral presence of the state in rural areas around the city of Arivonimamo in Madagascar into dialogue with certain perceptions and realities regarding Exarcheia's relation to the Greek state. Finally, in another nod to dialogical encounter, I will analyse how certain problematic behaviours within the exilic space both spurred dialogical encounter amongst the exilic community and also revealed cleavages wherein appropriate dialogue failed to manifest. Relatedly, I will propose that instances of dialogical breakdown

can be viewed as a general source of exilic tensions and use this as a lens to examine various moments of discord within the exilic space.

Exile, incorporation, and Exarcheia as exilic space

As the capitalist world-system has evolved, a process of *incorporation* has occurred whereby external areas have been rendered internal to capitalist circuits, logic, and accumulation strategies through transformations of nature, social relations, production processes, institutional arrangements, and structures of governance in an effort to create a specifically capitalist space (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982, 1987; Wallerstein, 1989). Zones of exploitation and appropriation (Moore, 2017, 2018) have been established via processes of primitive accumulation (Marx, 1976) and accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), while contemporary forms of deepening (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1987) and intensification (Harvey, 2001)—including those associated with the neoliberal turn (e.g., Brenner, 2004; Mayer, 2016)—also occur at a variety of spatial scales.

Despite the seeming teleological inescapability of these processes, incorporation has a dialectical antipode that Grubačić and O'Hearn (2016a, 2016b) have identified as *exile*, leading to the creation of *exilic spaces* (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016a, 2016b; see also Gray, 2004) wherein communities adopt particular strategies in order to achieve a certain degree of autonomy from the systemic incorporative pressures of state and capital. These 'black holes' that exist 'outside of world time' (Braudel, 1984, p. 46) include non-state spaces (Gibson & Sillander, 2011; Scott, 2009), communities of pirates and maroons (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000), revolutionary communes, reappropriated territories such as Zapatista-controlled Chiapas (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016b), and even maximum-security prisoners such as the Irish blanketmen, who despite heavily circumscribed conditions managed to construct a community based on exilic principles (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016b).

The term *exilic* thus refers to many disparate forms of autonomous activity that have existed throughout the development of the capitalist world-system. While controlling territory can be an integral aspect of an exilic space—such as with socio-territorial movements (Halvorsen et al., 2019)—it is much more likely that the escape is structural, involving 'attempts to create barriers between controls of state and capital' (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016b, p. 43)—such as through self-provisioning or squatting—and including extra-economic activities involved in social reproduction that lie beyond the formal economy but that are nevertheless constitutive of material life (Grubačić & O'Hearn, 2016a, 2016b).

Graeber has written extensively about fundamental anarchist principles such as self-organisation, direct democracy, horizontality, voluntary association, mutual aid, and opposition to all forms of coercive authority (see, for example, Graeber, 2004; Graeber, 2009). Ideally, these are also the fundamental characteristics on which a successful exilic space should be based. The following brief historical sketch will demonstrate that not only was Exarcheia birthed from direct action, but that these principles have been consistently implemented and act as foundational elements for Exarcheia as an exilic space.

The exilic formation of Exarcheia began in the dying days of the military dictatorship that lasted from 1967 to 1974. The historic (and brutally suppressed) November 1973 student occupation of the Polytechnic School in Exarcheia signalled the death knell of the junta. Exarcheia's position near several universities facilitated the concentration of a politicised and countercultural youth who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, revelled in the proliferation of punk rock, DIY culture, and political self-organisation (Ioannou, 2016; Kitis, 2015; Kritidis, 2014). Two distinct waves of squatting occurred in Exarcheia in the first half of the 1980s, as well as further occupations of universities. Over the years, several self-organised *stekia* (hangouts), social centres, and political groups located themselves in Exarcheia.

All of this, however, was accompanied by severely repressive episodes of police brutality—the most infamous was 1986's Operation Virtue—as well as the police murders of two 15-year-old boys, Michael Kaletzas in 1985 and Alexis Grigoropolous in 2008. While both sparked unrest, the murder of Alexis initiated the largest uprising in Greek history with almost a full month of agitation (The Children of the Gallery, 2009) that gave birth to a new era of self-organised activity (Dalakoglou & Vradis, 2011; Sagris & Schwartz, 2010). Of particular note is the March 2009 founding of one of the most important spaces in Exarcheia, the self-organised park, Parko Navarino, which was collectively created by the exilic community of Exarcheia by transforming an empty lot and former car park into a vibrant green space that over the years has hosted a multitude of events, such as concerts, movie screenings, and political presentations managed by an assembly that is open for anyone to participate (see, for example, Mitsomponou, 2014; Stavrides, 2016).

The four-year period from mid-2015 until mid-2019 was also a remarkable one for the exilic space. Spurred in large part by the refugee crisis (UNHCR, n.d.), more squats opened in this period than throughout the entire exilic history of Exarcheia. At its height, there were 23 occupied buildings in total, with 12 housing immigrants and the remaining occupied by anarchist or leftist groups. This period saw an influx of international solidarians who helped create spaces that sought not only to address the

immediate needs of refugees but to empower them to engage in collective decision-making through the establishment of non-hierarchical, horizontal relations, and directly democratic consensus-based procedures, all operating on principles of mutual aid and collective self-management (see Spirou Trikoupi 17, n.d.; Themistokleous 58, 2016).

Figure 1 outlines the broadest extent of Exarcheia as defined by major streets to the north, east, west, and Lycabettus Hill to the south (though the eastern portion beyond Strefi Hill is typically referred to as Neapoli). The map also notes the permanent presence of the MAT—the militarised riot police—in three key locations from 2016 to mid-2019, as well as the major squats and social centres that existed during this period. As can be seen, there is an extent to which Exarcheia Square is the symbolic centre and heart of the neighbourhood from where exilic characteristics and practices—or the likelihood of them—radiate outward. As one moves further away, the magnetic power weakens, and the effects break down.

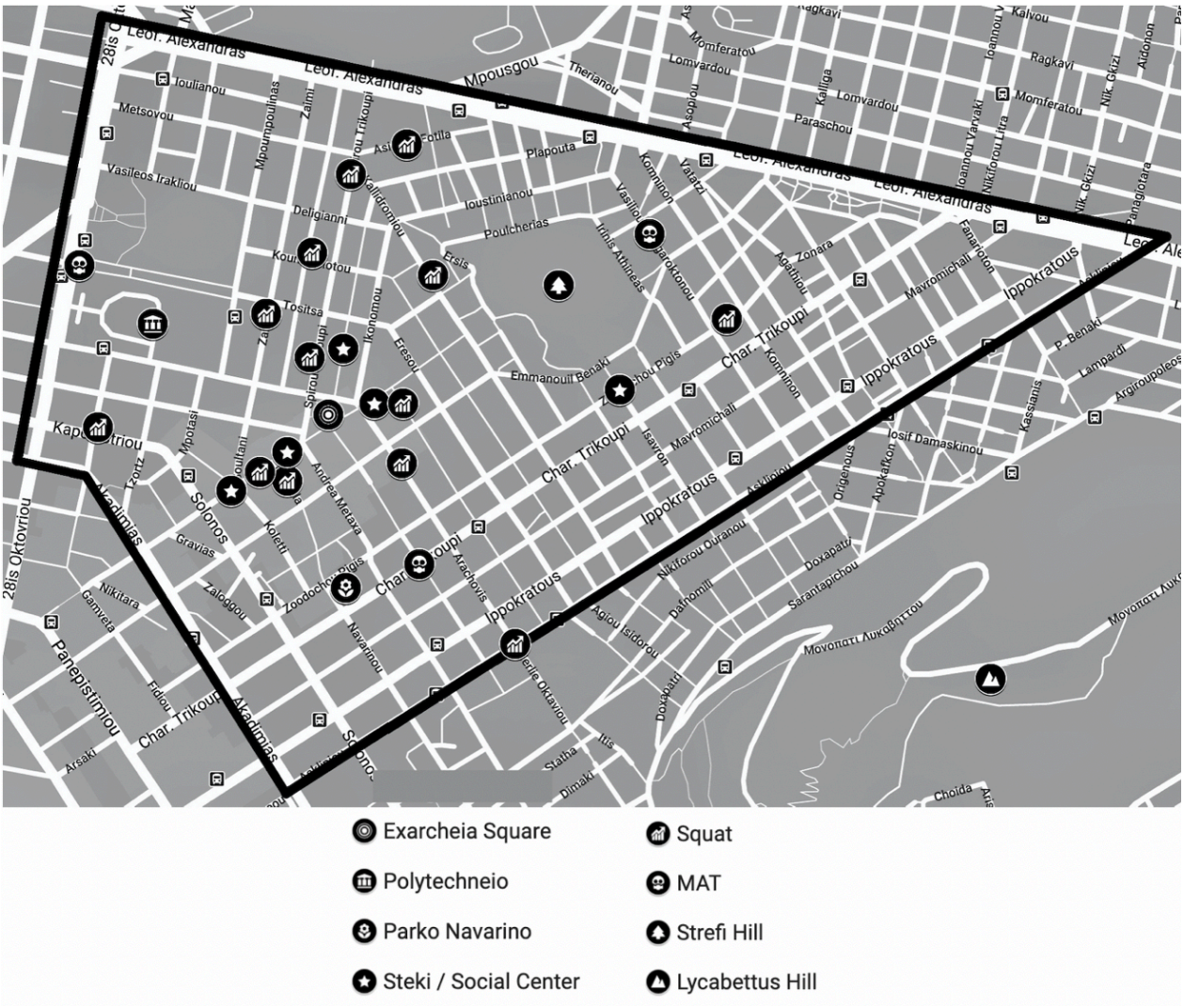

Figure 1: Exarcheia (Map created by author, map data ©2020 Google.)

Despite the successful enactment of exilic principles, we must also be careful not to overstate the autonomous status of Exarcheia. Like any exilic space, it inhabits contradictory locations. At the moment, Exarcheia is facing greater incorporative pressures than at any other time in its exilic history. The area is experiencing increased commercialisation and touristification as the neighbourhood is increasingly viewed as an alternative tourist destination wherein one can be shown political street art and historic landmarks of exilic struggle (see, for example, Airbnb, n.d and Alternative Tours of Athens, n.d). Emblematic of the creeping touristification is the explosion of short-term rentals, particularly Airbnb, which is pushing up rents and pricing working-class people out of Exarcheia (Balampanidis et al., 2019; Pettas et al., 2021).

Crucially, there are threats to several spaces vital for self-organisation, such as the plan to build a metro station in Exarcheia Square (Attica Metro SA, n.d.), redevelopment plans for Strefi Hill—long a place for self-organised events—that include surveillance cameras and a new cantina (Municipality of Athens, 2021), as well as a plan to renovate the movement-occupied Gini building on the Polytechnic campus in order to utilise it for offices, conference rooms, and accommodations for visiting professors (National Technical University of Athens, 2020). It should be clear that all of the above are elements of broader incorporative strategies, endeavoured both through co-optation of Exarcheia's exilic qualities, as well as through elimination of practically, strategically, and symbolically significant elements of the exilic space.

I identify the exilic community as being constituted by those who participate in the spaces, assemblies, and initiatives that produce and reproduce Exarcheia as an exilic space. Obviously, there is no official registration. It is an inherently open and flexible membership constituted by material action and general adherence to the exilic principles of self-organisation, solidarity, and mutual aid in a broadly united anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian perspective.

The term *exilic community* is thus used to display a certain level of cohesion and unity in a common struggle, and, in fact, many groups do openly collaborate for various initiatives. Hence, I am taking a rather ecumenical approach. There are, however, as we shall see, many theoretical and tactical disagreements—along with open tensions—amongst members of the exilic community, so we should not assume it to represent a homogenous concretion.

The primary form of decision-making within the exilic space is the assembly, which, as Graeber (2002, p. 70) points out, involves 'creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralised, non-hierarchical consensus democracy.' It is in assemblies that dialogue and negotiation transpire so that consensus can be reached across differences.

Assemblies are an omnipresent phenomenon in Exarcheia (and indeed the Greek movement generally) and are called for a wide variety of issues. While there are, of course, established groups and spaces with ongoing assemblies (some open, some closed), assemblies are frequently called for ad hoc or emergency purposes and can be done so by absolutely anyone. There is a robust movement infrastructure in Exarcheia, the major components of which are ample facilities to host assemblies—most notably the now-threatened Gini building on the campus of the Polytechnic School[2]—and the continued existence of Athens Indymedia.

In *Direct action*, Graeber (2009) went into great detail about DAN assemblies, providing detailed descriptions and voluminous transcripts to convey the organisation, flow, processes, and problematics involved. The most notable difference in Exarcheia assemblies (and again presumably Greek assemblies generally) is the lack of formalised procedural elements and roles compared to the highly stylised descriptions Graeber presents about DAN. There is something much more gritty about Exarcheia assemblies. There is certainly no hand twinkling. There is almost never a dedicated facilitator, and thus no facilitator training sessions. There are no icebreaking introductions, timekeepers, or institutionalised elements such as blocks, hand signals, or points of process. This is especially true for the ad hoc assemblies, whereas regular assemblies of groups who run specific spaces will generally at least have someone taking minutes. It is also generally understood that the assembly will begin at least one hour after the time listed in the call, which can be confusing for internationals (contributing to the tongue-in-cheek designation "Greek time").

Generally speaking, in ad hoc assemblies, the person or group who called the assembly will begin speaking, laying out the reasons for the assembly and any ideas they already have regarding actions they want to take (they could perhaps be considered de facto facilitators). From there, anyone is open to speak. A multi-person dialogue then ensues. Assemblies can last for hours, people come and go, and there are sometimes long peri-

[2] The Covid-19 pandemic provided a supreme opportunity for the state to seal up the Gini building. Despite a temporary anarchist-led reopening during the November 17 anniversary in 2021, it is once again sealed, dealing a major blow to the exilic space and the movement in general.

ods of silence, as well as long soliloquies by loquacious individuals. Reaching consensus is not typically verbalised in the same overt fashion as with DAN. Some sort of consensus is reached, and concrete decisions are certainly made, but given the open and ubiquitous nature of assemblies, if someone disagrees with the direction one has gone in, they will probably just stop coming back. Despite the lack of an overt organisational framework, I have witnessed remarkably little chaos or heated moments that many of the DAN participants had routinely encountered in less process-oriented meetings (Graeber, 2009), though I have certainly witnessed some.

One group I was heavily involved with did routinely appoint a facilitator (two, actually, so they could take breaks), but this was largely due to the size of the assembly, which regularly exceeded 100 people. This assembly was also particularly unique for its international composition, containing members from perhaps 20 different countries, perhaps more. This necessitated multiple translations, which were done sequentially, rather than simultaneously. The ability for everyone to fully understand and participate in a dialogical fashion was of paramount importance for this assembly. In fact, for several weeks, written on the room's blackboard in large letters, was the sentence, "Not translating stuff creates hierarchies".

The failure of translation is a perennial problem in some Exarcheia assemblies, acting as an impediment to comprehensive dialogue with internationals. Very rarely do sequential full-assembly translations, as with the above-mentioned assembly, occur. At best, someone will volunteer as an English translator and then have everyone who needs it crowd around them. The translator has to listen to what is being said in Greek and then decide what is important enough to be translated quickly, so that they can catch what is being said next, inevitably leading to a fragmentary experience for the non-Greek speaker. While this scenario is less than ideal, most often, internationals have to fend for themselves by going around and finding someone willing to translate specifically for them. I have personally walked out of several assemblies due to feeling excluded as a non-fluent Greek speaker.

Nonetheless, a major reason for my utilisation of movement-produced texts is the fact that I have repeatedly witnessed first-hand how communiques are debated and agreed upon collectively via assembly and represent a group's authoritative statement on the relevant matter. The process, as I have witnessed it, is usually as follows. After discussion, a working group is tasked with writing a draft. This draft is then read out amongst the entire assembly whereupon anyone can make comments, issue critiques, challenge phraseology, and so forth, which then leads to further discussion and decisions on spe-

cific wording and language. When everyone is more or less satisfied, the working group rewrites the text incorporating all the changes, and the whole process is repeated—rereading amongst the entire assembly, discussion, changes, rewriting—until a final version is reached. In smaller assemblies, this can be a relatively swift process, whereas in larger assemblies this can (and has!) involved several hours of discussion and multiple rewrites over numerous assemblies. The point is that the texts contain vital information regarding any group's positions, actions, and justifications and represent their definitive word on any matter as decided by group consensus.

The ubiquity of consensus-based assemblies highlights the importance of dialogue within the exilic space. Indeed, constant dialogue is a necessity given the persistent incorporative threats Exarcheia faces. While the creation of any exilic space is no easy endeavour, the socio-spatial characteristics of Exarcheia perhaps make it even more difficult. The fact that the exilic space of Exarcheia exists as a porous urban environment within a large metropolis deeply enmeshed within conditions of advanced capitalist development, and wherein an exilic community coexists with an existing non-exilic community places it in an incredibly precarious position.

Nonetheless, Exarcheia as an exilic space has persevered for over forty years, birthed in the wake of the most repressive regime Greece had ever seen. It has persisted through times of intense repression and crisis, always maintaining its exilic character, rejecting the dominance of state and capital, and working to build social relations based on self-organisation, solidarity, and mutual aid. We must always remember that these exilic characteristics were not freely given to the space. Rather, they have been achieved through decades of continuous dialogue and struggle.

Exilic space, provisional autonomous zones, and the avato of Exarcheia

In his piece, *Provisional autonomous zone: Or, the ghost state in Madagascar*, Graeber (2007) writes of the spectral presence of the state in the rural areas around Arivonimamo in the Eastern Imamo region of Madagascar. He explains that while a certain amount of institutional infrastructure existed, the state had largely receded from exerting significant influence in the area. There was even a nominal police force, though they were almost entirely absent from daily affairs, and disputes—whether concerning property rights or violent offenders—were typically settled by the local inhabitants. Thus, the local communities were essentially left to govern themselves. It helped that the area already had a long tradition of self-governance, including assemblies known as *fokon'olona*. However,

people certainly understood what the coercive authority of the state looked like and often acted as if it could be implemented at any moment.

Certain parallel aspects are operating in Exarcheia, but also significant— almost inverted—differences that help highlight the contradictory locations in which Exarcheia as exilic space resides, particularly the complicated relationship Exarcheia holds vis-à-vis the Greek state. The incorporative pressures discussed in the previous section make clear that Exarcheia is not fully insulated from state authority or processes of capitalist accumulation. As in Arivonimamo, there is institutional infrastructure, including schools, banks, and hospitals, as well as state-run or regulated utilities like electricity, water, and internet. In many ways, in fact, Exarcheia is a fully functioning neighbourhood in the conventional sense, with a plethora of cafes, restaurants, bookstores, various shops, and a diverse population of roughly 20,000 residents, many of whom in no way identify with the anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieu.

Nonetheless, the exilic qualities I described above based on anarchistic principles display the ability for the community to self-organise without the need for state intervention. However, the existence of the coercive apparatus of the state is absolutely clear and visible, given the armed squadrons of MATs guarding the perimeters of the neighbourhood and the presence of a police station. These have both been frequent targets for attack with Molotov cocktails and other projectiles, and the retaliation invariably involves tear gas and beatings. In fact, the frequent and excessive use of tear gas spurred a collective open letter from residents addressed to the minister of citizen protection, the head of the police, and any other responsible authority arguing that its use constitutes a direct attack on the resident population (inExarcheia, 2017), another acknowledgement that the state certainly does exist.

However, another parallel with the provisional autonomous zone in Madagascar is the fact that, despite the permanent police presence, the police largely chose not to enforce certain laws or pursue certain criminals during the period under study. Specifically, the state and police appeared to be complicit—if not actively involved—in the existence of mafia drug trafficking networks operating in the area. This led to the growth in what the exilic community refers to as *social cannibalism* (*κοινωνικός κανιβαλισμός*), which without a doubt became the primary focus for analyses and actions of the vast majority of groups active within the exilic space during the period from early 2016 to mid-2019.

While the term social cannibalism is utilised by the exilic community to refer to a wide range of perceived anti-social phenomena considered to be opposed to the exilic principles of self-organisation, solidarity, and mutual aid, it is the behavioural practices asso-

ciated with mafia drug trafficking networks that represent the primary embodiment and focus of social cannibalism. These networks deal in a variety of drugs, including cannabis, cocaine, heroin, and MDMA. It was widely claimed that members of the mafia drug trafficking networks were involved in cannibalistic activities within the exilic space, including attacks on exilic comrades, protection rackets, domination of common space, sexual harassment and sexist behaviour, robberies of small shops, muggings, stabbings, attacks on self-organised spaces and concerts, car break-ins, and random beatings (Armed Militia Groups, 2016; Exarcheia Reappropriation Assembly, 2016f, 2017; Participants in 2012 Assembly Against Social Cannibalism, 2012a).

By 2016, a solid and refined narrative had developed concerning social cannibalism anchored in the assertion that there was a police-state-mafia nexus that was to various degrees actively working to sow disorder and purposefully degrade the area in order to promote its disintegration. The majority of the exilic community characterised this nexus as a conscious strategy for the elimination of the exilic space and its eventual incorporation into the dominant strategies of capital and state and the standard functioning of the urban centre. Many texts were released by various exilic groups between 2016 and mid-2019, in which these fundamental assertions were frequently repeated. The Exarcheia-based anarcho-communist group Class Counterattack (2016) proclaimed their opposition to:

> the consolidation of narco-mafias fully controlled by the police-judicial complex, the spread of lumpenproletarianization and the phenomenon of social cannibalism, a police blockade of the area, the closure of self-organised structures, and the transformation of Exarcheia into an aesthetically bland entertainment hotspot of cheap and disciplined labour. (para. 1)

Echoing these sentiments, K-Vox, a squatted social centre on Exarcheia Square spearheaded by the well-known anarchist group Rouvikonas, asserted, 'Drug trafficking in Exarcheia enjoys the full protection of the police, who … promote the degradation and ghettoization of the region over time, in order to at some point justify … a triumphant invasion' (2016, para. 1) that will specifically target the exilic community.

The self-organized medical facility operating within K-Vox also released a text asserting that

> the systematic effort to destroy the political fabric of Exarcheia via its transformation into a commercialized neighborhood has continued in recent years with the

> establishment of mafia groups and the marketing of all sorts of drugs. (Self-Organized Health Clinic of Exarcheia, 2016, para. 2)

A necessarily anonymous group who carried out an attack on the Exarcheia police station released a text claiming responsibility on the basis that:

> In Exarcheia Square, as everywhere, the state pushes drugs, on the one hand, as a part of its strategy of controlling, alienating, subjugating, impoverishing and eventually wiping out the youthful proletariat, and, on the other hand, as a commodity for reaping huge economic profit, both for the state itself and for the employees of the cops and judges, as well as the trafficking network which is controlled by central authorities. (Anonymous, 2016, para. 1)

Given that the state and police are viewed as at least complicit if not integrally involved in the phenomenon of social cannibalism, it is up to the exilic community itself to combat it and decide the methods of doing so. As Graeber (2007, p. 164) writes regarding the inhabitants of the rural areas around Arivonimamo, 'assemblies had to develop all sorts of creative strategies to overcome the reluctance of the forces of order to enforce the laws.' At one end of the spectrum lies the (self-)organisation of numerous events in Exarcheia Square aimed toward the production of collective joy, attempting to provide inclusivity for families and children, but also activities that bring bodies into the square for concerts, movie screenings, book bazaars, farmer's markets, and so forth (Exarcheia Reappropriation Assembly, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016e; Pettas, 2018). These events occupy the square with preferred activities and temporarily push out perceived social cannibals, specifically drug dealers and those who simply utilise it as a space to hang out. However, the fact that these events are temporary means that as soon as they are finished, and the crowds have dispersed, the perceived cannibalistic activity resumes.

While the above set of tactics can perhaps be considered as creative methods of socio-spatial production or forms of *alternative nonviolent securities* (Koopman, 2011), on the other end of the spectrum lies tactics that were more assertive, typically organised around the idea of direct physical conflict with those viewed as social cannibals. The most oft-implemented examples of these tactics have been periodic interventions into Exarcheia Square in order to physically confront suspected social cannibals, referred to as "sweeps". These actions sometimes involve upward of 60 masked and wooden stick-wielding individuals (seemingly all male) who rapidly descend onto the square, physically confront dealers, rifle through their bags in order to confiscate—and sometimes triumphantly burn—whatever drugs they possess, and forcibly remove the cannibals from the square.

One particularly dramatic example employing tactics of the more assertive variety remarkably mirrors another that occurred in Graeber's provisional autonomous zone. Graeber (2007) relayed the events of a dangerous man in Arivonimamo named Henri, who regularly terrorised the townsfolk, stealing from local stores and sexually assaulting women. After some time, the young men of the area decided that they would band together and kill him. Ultimately, Henri escaped the attack badly wounded and fled the area.

In Exarcheia, there was a similarly dangerous man nicknamed Habibi, an Egyptian mafioso with an unstable demeanour, who was involved in drug trafficking, thefts, muggings, and assaults—including stabbings—and who had established a sort of cult of personality in the area that left him nearly untouchable. As with Henri, the police repeatedly turned a blind eye to his misdeeds. The final straw came after he became involved in a brutal attack on comrades of K-Vox, sending one to the hospital with severe craniocerebral injuries (Anarchists-Communists, 2016; Kalaitzidis, 2016). A few months later, as retribution, Habibi was assassinated by gunfire in broad daylight by two masked men on a motorcycle (Armed Militia Groups, 2016). In the cases of both Henri and Habibi, the fact that the heavily armed police refused to intervene in the situation meant the community had to decide on the methods of dealing with the problem.

There is also a strange inversion—or perversion—of the idea of a provisional autonomous zone that is employed by those opposed to the exilic characteristics of Exarcheia, manifesting in a sort of right-wing mythology around Exarcheia's relation to the Greek state. In the extreme, Exarcheia has been referred to as an 'independent state of anarchists in the center of Athens' by former head of the political party New Democracy Konstantinos Mitsotakis (as reported by *Eleftherotypia* on May 14, 1985, quoted in Ioannou, 2016), as well as by former minister of public order Antonis Drosogiannis who was quoted in the May 14, 1986 issue of *Eleftherotypia* as saying that he would 'not tolerate the existence of an anarchist state' (quoted in Ioannou, 2016, p. 434).

However, the term that has been most readily used to characterise the exilic space negatively is *avato* (*άβατο*). This term has religious origins, being used to refer to a sacred place where entry by any other than specifically designated individuals was forbidden. The most well-known contemporary usage refers to the autonomous monastic area of Mount Athos in northern Greece where women are forbidden from entering, thus representing an avato for women specifically.

In order to gain an understanding of the way in which this term is employed and to chart the evolution of its usage in reference to Exarcheia, I performed a content analysis

of the major establishment Greek newspaper, *Kathimerini*, as far back as their digital databases permitted—which was 2001—until mid-2019. I went through each article that mentioned the term avato to gauge the scope of its general usage while concentrating specifically on its use in conjunction with Exarcheia.

While the word always refers to a certain level of inaccessibility, there is a wide array of contexts in which it is used. Many articles use it in its traditional religious sense, though there are also wildly peculiar and idiosyncratic uses. The interpretation that is most relevant here as it best captures the sense in which the term is most often applied to Exarcheia refers to a purportedly dangerous area full of violence and crime. Articles that invoke the term avato in this fashion refer to neighbourhoods with profuse drug trade and violent mafia activity, and frequently contain racist overtones, such as highlighting the settling of "gypsies", Albanians, and other immigrants in recent years as being a primary cause of the activity (Antoniou, 2001), while using choice phrases like 'third-world ghetto,' the transformation of the streets into 'public urinals,' and the increased risk of 'infectious diseases' (Lygeros, 2009, para. 1-3). Also relevant for Exarcheia is the idea that police are prohibited from entering the area, as with a mountainous area of Crete known as a hub of arms and drug trafficking and wherein the police cannot enter without being fired upon (Antoniou, 2005).

The vast majority of articles referring to Exarcheia as an avato focus on incidents carried out by purported anarchists and anti-authoritarians—who usually only need to be seen wearing a hoodie to qualify as one—that typically consist of Molotov attacks on the MAT squadrons or the larger riot activity that occurs on the anniversary dates of 17 November and 6 December (Kathimerini, 2017f; Souliotis, 2014). Much ink is spilt decrying university asylum since the Polytechnic is frequently used as a base of operations for these activities (Katsounaki, 2016). Another frequent focus is the amount of graffiti, street art, and posters that cover the buildings in the area (Athinakis, 2018; Vatopulos, 2015a, 2015b, 2018). There were also a few incidents where members of parliament were accosted in Exarcheia restaurants, which raised the ire of some journalists (Lakasas, 2015; Mandravelis, 2015a, 2015b). However, there were also numerous mentions of general crime such as property destruction and drug trafficking though there was little effort in differentiating the phenomena from genuine movement activity (Athinakis, 2017; Eptakoili, 2017). Finally, there is a perpetual theme that the area is inaccessible to police forces (Kathimerini, 2017e; Lakasas, 2015; Rigopoulos, 2015), which is a strange claim for an area where two fifteen-year-old boys have been murdered by police.

What is most telling is the frequency of articles during specific periods. From 2001 through 2005, there were no articles that mentioned Exarcheia as an avato. The years 2006 through 2014 saw a total of 14 articles. From 2015 through 2018, there was a massive increase in the number of articles, totalling 74, for an average of 18.5 per year, more than the previous 14 years combined. While we see a wide range of phenomena mentioned within the articles that supposedly justifies the application of the term avato to Exarcheia, there is no clearly discernible developmental trajectory in the sense that both the earliest and latest articles mention hooded anarchists, attacks on police, and various criminal activities. What does increase in tandem with the frequency of articles is rhetoric about the need for "law and order", including comparisons of anarchists with terrorists, conflations of mafia activity with anarchist activity, increased use of the term ghetto, and a heightened focus on the fact that the state (under a nominally left-wing Syriza government) was absent from the region (e.g., Kathimerini, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

The reason for the upticks in frequency and rhetoric becomes more apparent when we realise that Exarcheia has, in fact, long served as a convenient political tool and scapegoat for New Democracy—when they are not in power—to indict the presiding government for its inability to tackle "criminality". This is true for whatever party is in power, Pasok in the 1980s or Syriza in the 2010s. Syriza came to power in January 2015, and shortly after, there was a dramatic emphasis on Exarcheia as an avato. Most telling is the dramatic spike in coverage that occurred in the month leading up to the 2019 municipal elections, wherein another 20 articles invoking the avato of Exarcheia appeared in Kathimerini.

In these articles, the rhetoric around existing criminality and the need for law and order was ratcheted up to the extreme (Kathimerini, 2019a; Kathimerini, 2019b; Kathimerini, 2019c; Kathimerini, 2019d). The leader of New Democracy, Kyriakos Mitsotakis (son of former party head Konstantinos), was already particularly fond of declaring that he would "end the avato of Exarcheia" if New Democracy was put back in power with him as prime minister (Kathimerini, 2016a; Kathimerini, 2016b; Kathimerini, 2016c; Kathimerini, 2016d; Kathimerini, 2016e; Kathimerini, 2017d). In the lead up to the election, he was quoted as saying, 'On the day following the elections, the law will be implemented in every corner of the country so that citizens can feel safe again, the police will be allowed to operate freely, without tolerance to organisations that are similar in form to parastatal entities' (Kathimerini, 2019b, para. 3). It would appear then that the *Kathimerini* campaign is a politically motivated attempt to discredit Syriza and indict them for allowing the neighbourhood, city, and country to slip into lawlessness and

degradation while consistently giving voice to the opposition party New Democracy's platform and rhetoric about the need for law and order.

Hence, avato represents, as I referred to at the beginning of this section, a strange inversion or perversion of the idea of a provisional autonomous zone. Rather than an area from where the state has withdrawn, leaving the community to self-organise, or a place where the authorities refuse by choice to enforce the law, it is deemed a place where the state as keeper of law and order has supposedly been expelled, leaving behind a dystopian landscape inaccessible to police and representatives of the state and full of danger for ordinary citizens wherein anarchists and anti-authoritarians carry out all sorts of criminal activities. This is an obvious fiction but a useful propaganda tool for New Democracy to regain power, which they did in July of 2019. Once in power, they revealed their true concerns by immediately evacuating and sealing nearly every refugee squat in the neighbourhood, destroying communities that had been built on exilic principles of self-organisation, solidarity, and mutual aid.

Exilic tensions as dialogical breakdown

> A lot of anarchist practice—at least the kind I think of as quintessentially anarchist—revolves around a certain principle of dialogue; there's a lot of attention paid to learning how to make pragmatic, cooperative decisions with people who have fundamentally different understandings of the world, without actually trying to convert them to your particular point of view. (Graeber, 2020, p, 7)

As dialogical encounter is one of the fundamental aspects of anarchist practice—or indeed of being a human—it is interesting, I believe, to view certain tensions that have cropped up in the exilic space of Exarcheia in recent years as failures of proper dialogue to manifest. There are, of course, some instances in which dialogue appears impossible. For example, when it comes to the exilic community and the mafia drug trafficking organisations mentioned previously, it is difficult to imagine even the initiation of dialogue or negotiation, let alone one that could produce an outcome agreeable to all. However, in this case, the impossibility of dialogue spurred a dialogical encounter amongst certain exilic groups regarding how to deal with the problem of the mafia, leading to a consensus around the phenomena of social cannibalism.

This consensus initially began to coalesce in 2012. At that time, an increase in cannibalistic phenomena coupled with the relative absence of state authorities prompted the creation of a specific assembly opposed to social cannibalism that held weekly meetings to

discuss strategies of intervention (Participants in 2012 Assembly Against Social Cannibalism, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). In 2014, the continued existence of perceived cannibalistic behaviour led to the creation of another, more stable assembly, the People's Assembly of Exarcheia. In 2016, yet another amalgamated assembly, the Exarcheia Reappropriation Assembly, was formed, initially consisting of roughly a dozen groups from within Exarcheia and beyond, including the People's Assembly, Parko Navarino, and K-Vox. In their founding text, they write:

> The collectives and comrades participating in the Reappropriation Assembly define our assembly on the basis of our common belief that the struggle against the state, the mafias and social cannibalism is an integral part of the wider movement. At the forefront is the confrontation with narco-mafias who for years have attempted to impose their power in Exarcheia … through repeated acts of violence. (Exarcheia Reappropriation Assembly, 2016d, para. 1–2)

Thus we have a dialogical encounter amongst several exilic groups in order to reach consensus about what was viewed as the major issue threatening the existence of the exilic space.

However, certain methods of dealing with the phenomenon of social cannibalism itself led to tensions, which can also be attributed to a lack of dialogue amongst the larger exilic community. That is to say, the circle of dialogical encounter only extended so far, and some of those who fell outside of it had serious criticisms of the logic and praxis of the hegemonic consensus. This was most acute in instances where certain groups operating within this consensus began carrying out actions without holding open assemblies in order to decide on whether these methods would be considered appropriate or acceptable. One particularly contested incident took place in 2018 when a group referred to as the Security Team unilaterally decided to evacuate a squat that they deemed were full of problematic individuals engaging in cannibalistic behaviour. This move spurred an instant reaction wherein several other individuals and groups active within the exilic space formed an emergency ad hoc assembly that reclaimed the squat for its inhabitants and denounced the vanguardist actions of the Security Team, calling for them to be dissolved (Assembly of Collectives and Individuals Participating in the Reoccupation of Arachovis 44, 2018).

The Security Team also had, for a time, become the leading group carrying out the aforementioned sweep operations in and around Exarcheia Square. However, in 2019, the frequency of these operations increased and expanded to the neighbourhood at large in response to a surge in cannibalistic behaviour, including sexual assaults. It would ap-

pear that the tactics were adopted or condoned by several exilic groups as every one of the several demonstrations that were organised between March 2019 and July 2019 had a corollary aspect of physical confrontation with or removal of suspected perpetrators of social cannibalism (actions that I repeatedly witnessed). While demonstrations took place in the centre of the square, many masked and wood-armed individuals would stand sentry around the perimeter of the square. Occasionally, a supposed social cannibal would be identified and dealt with. On several occasions, after the demonstration had ended, many masked and armed individuals would go on what can only be described as a hunt through the neighbourhood, attempting to locate and attack supposed perpetrators.

Although there were genuine and well-founded concerns regarding the violent activity taking place in the neighbourhood, there emerged objections from marginalised voices who dissented from the consensus concerning social cannibalism and, in particular, harshly criticised the sweep and hunt operations carried out in and around Exarcheia Square. Once again, these methods elicited tensions because of a lack of dialogue amongst the exilic community at large. What became particularly evident was the lack of female voices, which was particularly disconcerting considering that the increasing incidents of sexual assaults in the neighbourhood were being used as justifications for expanding sweeps and hunts. Thus, a considerable amount of criticism began emanating from a much-needed feminist perspective.

It is of great note that two texts containing reasoned criticism were signed by feminist comrades anonymously. The first candidly states that their anonymity stems from the fact that they felt unsafe amongst members of the anarchist and anti-authoritarian movement (Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019). From my position in the exilic space, I can attest that these conversations were indeed being held in assemblies, in *stekia*, and in the streets, and thus do not represent isolated perspectives. Furthermore, I believe these perspectives embody a forceful and significant critique of the hegemonic consensus. My role here in elevating these marginalised voices and giving articulation to their critique (Gordon, 2007) can thus be considered as a sort of partisan positioning (Apoifis, 2016; Russell, 2015) characteristic of the role of militant ethnographer dedicated to reflexive transformation.

Many texts explicitly rejected the presumptions of those involved in the sweeps—who were invariably male—of both acting in the name of feminist projects and of automatically placing women in a subordinate position, assuming that they were unable to speak for themselves, act for themselves, or defend themselves:

> We are decisively opposed to the use of rape to serve a more general propaganda that satisfies the project of 'security' and the use of this propaganda to justify 'sweep' operations on immigrants or other categories of people who do not conform to the standards of the great Exarcheia. (Other Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019, para. 4)

They go on to say:

> We know full well that, in addition to all the other problems, these purges will be undertaken by macho native males' who believe 'the sweep operations are a legitimate instrument aimed at protecting the social whole and particularly the women (as part of the population in need of "protection"). (Other Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019, para. 6)

Hence, the main argument that emerges is that these acts were founded upon a gendered logic of masculinist protectionism based on 'the identification of femininity with weakness and the need for protection from "strong males"' (Assembly for the Dissemination of Migrant Struggles, 2019, para, 2). Thus, those engaging in the sweep and hunt operations were placing those they sought to protect in a subservient position 'analogous to that of the masculine protector toward his wife and the other members of his patriarchal household' (Young, 2003a, p. 9), while the very 'willingness to risk and sacrifice for the sake of others' (Young, 2003a, p. 9) was the chivalrous justification used to perpetuate their actions.

Several texts noted that the hegemonic faction engaged in a conflation of various "cannibalistic" phenomena in order to create a convenient and singular deviant subject in order to justify the operations. This had the ultimate effect of targeting the most marginalised, particularly immigrants, as a number of them residing in Exarcheia—being stranded in Greece with no money or economic opportunities—were recruited into the drug trade. As noted by an anarchist collective operating as part of and aligned with Gare, an anarchist group operating a squatted building in Exarcheia, 'The general accusation of "social cannibalism" is now directed squarely against all immigrants in the same public space as drug dealers' (Anarchist Collective for Militant Proletarian Reorganization, 2019, para. 10). Another text entitled Gentrification and pogroms (Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019, para. 2) also highlights this conflation:

> Inhabitants of Exarcheia as well as a part of the anti-authoritarian movement have declared a "war on drugs", organising pogroms and "clearing-out opera-

> tions" at the square of Exarcheia. Thus, by playing the role of the cops and the state, their aim is to "clean up" the area by getting rid of what the everyday white greek man finds defiled: immigrants.

Certainly, the most damning indictment was the comparison of the sweeps in Exarcheia to tactics used by certain fascist groups in other neighbourhoods. One text highlights this by referencing infamous attacks against refugees that had taken place in recent years in the nearby neighbourhood of Agios Panteleimonas by a neo-fascist neighbourhood assembly of self-described "indignant citizens", stating that:

> in a miraculous way, when the inhabitants of Agios Panteleimonas carry out 'sweep' operations in their area they are called fascists, but when the same and worse acts take place in the sacred area of Exarcheia they are baptised "acts against social cannibalism". (Other Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019, para. 7)

Indeed, I and other comrades witnessed several seemingly random beatings of immigrants around the square accompanied by admonitions of rape toward females who tried to intervene. Hence, it is no surprise that those engaging in the sweep operations were denounced as consisting of 'sexist and racist individuals, who take part in the anti-authoritarian movement, imposing their order by attacking immigrants' and using references to 'widespread rape culture' to accomplish their goals (Anonymous Feminist Comrades, 2019, para. 3).

Much of the blowback from these incidents can be attributed to the fact that certain groups were perceived as assuming a sort of vanguardist role and taking major actions in a unilateral fashion without engaging in dialogue with the wider exilic community. As a testament to the closed nature of their decision-making, open assemblies to decide on these methods of intervention were not held. While the protectors endeavoured to present their actions as a form of "liberatory community armed self-defense" (Crow, 2018), the blowback indicates that these actions were not based on 'power-sharing and egalitarian principles' (Crow, 2018, p. 9) and lacked 'critical accountability' (Young, 2003b, p. 225).

In contrast to these methods, several individuals from counter-hegemonist assemblies formed a new group that '[i]n response to the misogynistic culture of Exarcheia and the recent incidents of rape, sexual harassment, and gendered violence in the streets of the area' carried out 'anti-sexist scouting without the presence of cis men chanting slogans and demonstrating our ability to fight back' (Femininities in the Streets, 2019a, para. 1,

2019b). Identifying themselves as "Femininities in the Streets", they also voiced their opposition to the 'pogrom-like tactics that are aimed at extended groups of people based on their status or identity, which is for sure racist' (Femininities in the Streets 2019c, para. 4).

The dialogical breakdowns surrounding the phenomenon of social cannibalism were certainly the most serious that have occurred within the exilic space, though they are not the only instances. There is, for example, a divide between those on the one hand who see the riot activity that has traditionally occurred on 17 November and 6 December as a legitimate struggle against state authorities and as an appropriate commemoration of the events (Gare, 2017; Zaimi, 2017), and those on the other who view it as 'systematic degradation and destruction of our neighborhood' carried out by those who have 'insurrectional fantasies and delusions' (People's Assembly of Exarcheia, 2016, para. 2). The riot events of 6 December 2016 elicited these particular characterisations from the People's Assembly of Exarcheia. To be fair, Gare and Zaimi did call an open assembly to discuss tactics before this particular anniversary date (Gare & Zaimi, 2016), which the People's Assembly did not attend. However, what sort of dialogue would have been possible is uncertain.

Another example occurred on the following 17 November when some groups decided to occupy the Polytechnic in an effort to prohibit entry to members of the government or political parties, whom they saw as capitalising on the memory of a militant uprising (Polytechnic Occupation, 2017a). While the occupiers did call an open assembly, several groups alleged that the manner in which the occupation was pursued and carried out was not done in an open and inclusive fashion. Some participants reported that, 'We were there in order to validate the occupation's agenda, not to collaborate on it as is appropriate in an open process' (Anarchist/Anti-Authoritarian Initiative, 2017, para. 6). Conversely, the occupiers claimed that 'the only counterproposals offered were to limit ourselves to the Gini building and stop the occupation' (Polytechnic Occupation, 2017b, para. 8). Thus, both sides seemed to claim a lack of compromise from the other. The occupation spawned ad hoc counter-assemblies who eventually marched to the Polytechnic and opened the gates, allowing the traditional ceremonies to commence. While some aspects of these incidents can be explained by differing ideas of theory and praxis, they can also be considered as moments when proper dialogue failed to manifest, leading to the disintegration of exilic principles.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have put my research on the exilic space of Exarcheia into dialogue with several themes explored across multiple works by David Graeber, accomplished through the use of a militant research methodology that Graeber himself both promoted and utilised. Foremost, I have highlighted an affinity between the successful principles on which exilic activity should be based and the anarchistic principles consistently championed by Graeber—including self-organisation, mutual aid, horizontality, and direct action—and displayed how these principles have acted and continue to act as foundational elements of Exarcheia.

I have also explored Graeber's concept of provisional autonomous zones by highlighting considerable correspondences between his Madagascar example and Exarcheia, particularly in reference to Exarcheia's relationship with the Greek state. Exarcheia possesses qualities of a provisional autonomous zone in that it exists in a sort of liminal realm where the state is quite evident in certain respects and seemingly absent in others. In reference to the former, the state serves as the provider of utilities and deployer of a hostile police force, while in relation to the latter, it has at various times allowed drug trafficking and other criminal activities to occur unimpeded.

However, the propensity towards self-organisation in Exarcheia enables the exilic community to deal with many problems in the neighbourhood without the need for state intervention, thus achieving a certain degree of autonomy and self-reliance. At the same time, the concentration of anarchist and anti-authoritarian activity forms the basis for a state-promoted myth that portrays Exarcheia as a dangerous territory under the full control of anarchists and off-limits to the state, which serves as a pretence to engage in repressive operations.

Crucially, I have highlighted how dialogical encounter within the exilic space acts as a key component of self-organisation and direct democracy. As a corollary, I have also suggested that exilic tensions can be viewed as moments when dialogue breaks down or fails to manifest altogether. While I have focused mainly on the problematics surrounding the drug trade in Exarcheia, I have also suggested that any time a group adopts a vanguardist position that neglects to engage in appropriate dialogue with others in the exilic community, their actions will almost certainly elicit a backlash. The veracity of this dynamic in Exarcheia demonstrates the validity of Graeber's conviction regarding the importance of dialogical encounter as the basis for cooperative decision-making.

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Povzetek

Soseska Exarcheia v Atenah v Grčiji je že dolgo znana kot družbeno-prostorski epicenter atenskega anarhističnega in antiavtoritarnega okolja, v katerem je uspevalo več samoorganiziranih prostorov, skupin in pobud. Exarcheio označujem kot izgnanski prostor znotraj kapitalističnega svetovnega sistema. Izgnanski prostori so paradoksalni prostori relativne in negotove avtonomije, ki temeljijo na načelih samoorganizacije, solidarnosti in medsebojne pomoči. V tem prispevku sem svoje raziskave postavil v pogovor z več temami, ki jih je raziskal David Graeber, vključno z metodologijo militantnega raziskovanja, začasnimi avtonomnimi conami in dialoškimi srečanji. Medtem ko poudarjam Exarchein status izgnanstva, raziskujem tudi pomembne notranje napetosti, za katere trdim, da jih je mogoče obravnavati kot trenutke, ko se dialog prekine ali se ne manifestira.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: prostor izgnanstva, Exarcheia, dialoško srečanje, militantne raziskave, anarhizem

CORRESPONDENCE: JOHN RYAN KARLIN, Department of Anthropology and Social Change, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, 1453 Mission St, San Francisco, CA 94103, USA, jkarlin@mymail.ciis.edu

