

Dwelling as politics: An emancipatory praxis of/through care and space in everyday life

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Isabel Gutiérrez Sánchez**

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Abstract

Drawing on the theory of the Paradigm of Governing and the Paradigm of Dwelling by the philosopher Fernández-Savater, this paper attempts to theorise a spatial politics of care through an ethnographic analysis of three grassroots initiatives – a social kitchen, an accommodation centre with refugees and a community centre – set up in Athens (Greece) as a counter-response to the crisis politics via austerity enforced in the country (2010–2018), as well as to the renewed EU border system (2016). The everyday politics of these self-organised groups is conceptualised as a *Politics of Dwelling*. The concept refers to a form of political praxis and capacity forged within the sphere of social reproduction and everyday life. It is argued that *Dwelling* as politics holds an emancipatory potentiality beyond capitalist relationships, which lies in (1) its situated/embodied nature, which marks collective processes of decision-making and organisation with an ethics of care, (2) the central role that space and material resources play in those processes.

Keywords

Care, chronic-crisis, dwelling, everyday life, space, struggles over social reproduction

Introduction

The crash of the international financial system in 2008 triggered multiple crises across the world. In Europe, it put an end to decades of economic growth and relative social stability. Austerity programmes were delivered across countries. A decade on, the accelerated retrenchment of welfare systems, the rising deterioration of living conditions, the increasing impoverishment, exclusion and violence that followed still pervade the lives of millions of

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people. Crisis – normally understood as a phenomenon of passing nature – has actually turned into an enduring state of affairs (Roitman, 2014 [2013]). Importantly, this new normalcy is being translated in many places into a “politics of chronic crisis” by which governments are enforcing new or reworked mechanisms of suppression, exclusion and dispossession. Athanasiou and Butler (2013) have contended that governing via crisis has become a new form of contemporary (neoliberal) governmentality.

The present state of systemic crisis can be viewed as a manifestation of what within feminist theory has been called “the crisis of care”. Federici (2019) has located its epicentre in the realm of everyday life, noting that however everyday life is still a fundamental site of resistance and struggles against oppressive and extractivist regimes. The emergence throughout the last decade of new movements in defence of life and livelihoods based on practices of solidarity and mutual aid prove her point (Federici, 2019; Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2017; Rübner Hansen and Zechner, 2015; Spade, 2020). This juncture has prompted the reopening of debates around the notion of care, its social and spatial organisation and, most importantly, the possibility of a new social imagination able to radically challenge the fierce attack on life inherent to capitalism. Intellectuals and scholars like Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), Chatzidakis et al. (2020) and Manrique (2020) have theorised around the possibilities of a politics based on care as an alternative out of the contemporary state of crisis and its politics. However, most of these theoretical proposals lack a critical reflection on the role and implications of space in such a politics.

This paper will attempt to engage the endeavour of theorising a spatial politics of care through an ethnographic analysis of three grassroots initiatives – a social kitchen, an accommodation centre with refugees and a community centre – set up in Athens (Greece) as a counter-response to the austerity regime (2010–2018), which I will articulate drawing on a theory by the philosopher Fernández-Savater (2020) – whose approach, in contrast to the ones by the aforementioned authors, does include a spatial gaze. I will conceptualise the politics in these self-organised initiatives as a *Politics of Dwelling*. The concept refers to a form of political praxis and capacity forged within the sphere of social reproduction and everyday life. I will argue that *Dwelling* as politics holds an emancipatory potentiality, which lies in (1) its situated/embodied nature, which marks collective processes of decision-making and organisation with an ethics of care, (2) the central role that space play in those processes. Thus, I characterise it as a politics of/through care and space. I suggest the *Politics of Dwelling* as a theoretical framework for scholarly debates and empirical research on present examples of “struggles over reproduction” (Federici, 2012, 2019; Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2017) as sites generative of transformative political imaginations.

The need to reimagine care

The present multifaceted crisis can be viewed as a manifestation of what within feminist theory has been called “the crisis of care”, which broadly refers to the increasing gaps of care provision in a world which paradoxically requires more care than ever to assure and sustain life (Dowling, 2021). Care has historically been undervalued largely for its connection with women and unproductivity (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Federici, 2012; Pérez-Orózcó, 2014). Yet, over the last 40 years, the lack of care has become particularly acute, ultimately turning into a systemic crisis. Contributing factors include the massive incorporation of women in the West to the labour market, the progressive rise of job insecurity and low wages – which prevent the demand for conciliation measures –, the gradual dismantling of unions, and the cut back on state social services (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Dowling, 2021; Pérez-Orózcó, 2014). Federici (2019) has located the epicentre of this structural crisis in

the realm of everyday life. Decades of economic and social neoliberalisation have translated into the gradual emptying of everyday social space. Everyday life's relationships have become depersonalized, while many communal experiences have been destroyed (Federici, 2019; Gutiérrez-Aguilar, 2017).

This juncture has prompted the reopening of debates around the notion of *care*, its social and spatial organisation and, most importantly, the possibility of a new social imagination able to radically challenge the fierce attack on life inherent to capitalism. Claims to re-value care practices, re-organise structures, re-configure spaces and put care at the centre of politics have recently grown both within academic and activist settings, and are actually being put into practice by many groups in struggle. The topic of care is certainly manifold and spans a wide range of fields (Pérez-Orózcó, 2014; Vega Solís et al., 2018). In fact, the very concept of care remains unsettled, and present debates constitute contested arenas. Generally, care comes associated with a wide range of practices intimately related to life – its sustenance, reproduction and limits. Practices that hold, sustain and bear, that assist, support and encourage, that maintain and nourish, which nonetheless are imbued with ambivalent meanings. The concept has actually been defined in different manners.

One of the most cited definitions has been the one by Tronto and Fisher (1990: 10), who described care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible”. Coming from the feminist Marxist tradition, scholars from Dalla Costa and James (1975) since the 1970s to Vogel (2013 [1983]) in the 1980s, and Fraser (2013) and Bhattacharya (2017) more recently, have addressed care through the framework of labour within capitalism. They have revisited Marx's concept of “social reproduction” from a gender-based perspective. Broadly, this term refers to the daily material and social maintenance of a group of people and their social bonds, and the restoration of that society generationally. The concept encompasses both a material/economic dimension – which refers to bodies and livelihoods –, and a social dimension – which comprises the structuring of the social relationships derived from these specific ways of subsistence. Thus, it is particularly useful to see structures, recognise the (exploitative) conditions in which care work takes place under capitalism, and understand the role that this plays in keeping the system running (Vega Solís et al., 2018).

Relational in nature, care has an inherent spatial dimension. Care practices are often carried out in the context of the home, endowing it with symbolic (gendered) significations (Blunt and Dowling, 2006), but also within communities and institutions. Thus, “embodied caring practices must be analysed as multisited [...] and as multiscalar” (Lawson, 2007: 6). Geographers like Mitchell et al. (2004), and McEwan and Goodman (2010) have highlighted the implications of care in the social (re)production of space, and conversely the role of the latter in the reproduction of inequalities associated with the first. Milligan and Wiles (2010: 739) coined the notion “landscapes of care”, described as the “spatial manifestations of the interplay between the socio-structural processes and structures that shape experiences and practices of care”. This “spatiality” of care is in fact fundamental for the understanding of the aforementioned crisis of care. Conversely, as Lawson (2007: 5) notes, “researching care relations allows us to more deeply understand the operation of power and the production of inequality at a range of sites and scales”.

Care has been also conceptualised as an ethics that informs specific subjective formations. In the 1980s a debate emerged around the existence of different ethical approaches depending on gender. The psychologist Gilligan (1982) elaborated a theory of moral reasoning where she depicted two (opposing) “voices”, namely two different forms of approaching ethical problems; one that builds from an understanding of justice as a universal and abstract set of rules – “ethics of justice” –, and one grounded in empathy and compassion – “ethics of care”.

According to her, women would be more likely to address moral dilemmas as an issue of clashing responsibilities depending on the context, whereas men would see them as a problem of conflicting rights. Gilligan's (1982) controversial theory has been critiqued largely in relation to its gendered (essentialist and homogeneous) approach (Bartos, 2019; Wilkinson, 1997). Nevertheless, it was key for the development of feminist political theory around a "politics of care". Tronto's (1993) seminal work *Moral Boundaries*, where the political theorist puts forward care as a political concept and elaborates on the previously mentioned definition by herself and Fisher (1990), has inspired extensive scholarship across disciplines (Bartos, 2019).

At present, a (non-gendered) ethics of care is being (re)considered as a political tool to imagine and build other possible modes of existence and relationship in/with the world. Recent theorisations of politics through the lens of care (e.g. Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Manrique, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) emphasise relationality, interdependence, situatedness and transversality across levels. In their manifesto for a "caring politics", Chatzidakis et al. (2020) outline a series of "caring alternatives" premised on the recognition of interdependence and vulnerabilities. They articulate them through five scales: kinships, communities, states, economies and the World. Although they stress the need for active care "across every distinct scale of life" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 6), strikingly, a description of the actual role and implications of space in the formation of these caring systems is missing in their account. Similarly, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who extends care webs to more than human worlds, fails to address the spatial dimension in a substantial manner. Noteworthy, despite the extensive scholarship by geographers on the matter, the absence of an analytical gaze from/through the spatial is actually common among recent attempts by political theorists and philosophers to define a politics based on care as an alternative out of the contemporary state of crisis and its politics.

In a more nuanced take on this endeavour, through a claim "to politicize the domestic and *domesticize* the political", the philosopher Manrique (2020: 167) describes everyday life and *the domestic* in particular, as the primary realm of biological and symbolic reproduction, where human and material relationships fundamental for social life are first developed, and therefore a "sphere of life with sufficient entity to vindicate its *politicity*". From this standpoint, she advocates a politics informed by the type of practices, values and relationships that form within the domestic realm – care, nurture, parenting, attention to life's materiality, to the concrete and the sensible –, as opposed to one just based on legislation. Although she points to this sphere as the articulating place of the political vision that she delineates, her proposal is based for the most part on a revision of the historical roots of the term *domestic*, but it does not delve into the characteristics and ambivalences of this realm in the present, its different and diverse forms and spatialities, or its enmeshed technologies.

Broadly aligned with this approach in search of a new political conception, the philosopher Fernández-Savater (2020) proposes a theoretical framework, which in contrast to the previous examples, does touch upon the question of the role of space in a more elaborated and critical manner. Based on his experience in the 15M Movement¹ in Spain, he elaborates a theory of two opposing political paradigms, which he uses to reflect on the potentiality of a new political imagination that he intuited latent in this movement. In his view, the unprecedented experience of square occupations prefigured a new political culture grounded in the autonomous and cooperative organisation of the daily tasks needed to sustain the encampments as sites of protest but also of formation of new collective sensitivities and imaginations. He proposes to reflect on this hypothesis through what he calls the "Paradigm of Dwelling" and the "Paradigm of Governing". This theory provides an insightful framework to dwell on the conditions and characteristics of a spatial politics that can serve as the basis for social change from the realm of social reproduction and everyday life. Not in vain, it

stems from an experience of collective struggle, which brought about significant transformations in the political landscape of the country, both at the parliamentary and the grassroots level. This element, namely collective struggle, is in fact of great relevance here. As feminist intellectuals and activists like Federici (2012, 2019) and Gutiérrez-Aguilar (2017) have noted, it is in what they call “struggles over reproduction” where new political capacities with the potential of yielding a social transformation beyond capitalist relationships are being produced and practised.

The Paradigm of Dwelling: Towards a political imagination of care in everyday life

Through an exercise of deliberate theoretical abstraction, Fernández-Savater (2020) invites us to reflect on the stakes, potentiality and challenges of a political conception grounded in everyday life, commons-based relationships and practices. He conceptualises two opposing political paradigms: the Paradigm of Dwelling – as the possible (ideal) model of an emerging form of transformative politics – and the Paradigm of Governing – which represents the model dominant in Western societies. He outlines this theory as follows.

Politics under the Paradigm of Dwelling would emerge from any situated reality and would develop based on the capacity of sensing, accompanying and enhancing the potentialities embedded in the embodied experiences of daily encounters with others. Thus, the realm of everyday life would be a key ground for the formation of this kind of politics. This paradigm would be representative of a political form that does not follow pre-fixed rules or protocols, but rather unfolds through negotiations emerging in situation. Responsibility towards one another would prevail over pre-set codes of fairness. In this form of practising politics from/around a radical experience of inhabitation, power is expressed and exercised more through embodied practices of production, use and operation of spaces and material resources than through parliamentarian or bureaucratic procedures. In contrast, politics under the Paradigm of Governing follows abstract, universal models of what *ought-to-be*. Pre-established ideals of how the social must be ruled and organised constitute the frameworks from and against which political plans and programmes are conceived of and implemented. Its space is that of representation.

Fernández-Savater’s (2020) paradigms resonate with Gilligan’s (1982) ethics of justice and ethics of care. Like the first, the Paradigm of Governing depicts a form of politics driven by principles of fairness and impartiality grounded in ideal rules for “everybody”. In contrast, the Paradigm of Dwelling reflects the rationale of the second in starting from the particular and emphasising relationships. Connections can be drawn too with Manrique’s (2020) proposal to let life “contaminate” politics and her vindication of care and the domestic in the conception of the political. Concerning the spatial element, Fernández-Savater’s (2020) theory echoes Lefebvre’s (1991 [1974]) notions of “representation of space” – which refers to the production of abstract space – and “representational spaces” – those that people produce, inhabit and imbue with meanings in their everyday lives.

Based on my research on self-organised initiatives in Greece, I argue that Fernández-Savater’s (2020) theory can serve as a productive lens for present ethnographic studies on grassroots political organisation and struggles. It very much speaks to the kind of spatial politics I observed in these collectives of people (self)organised around issues of social reproduction. By spatial politics, I am referring to the mechanisms used to negotiate and rule, the kind of norms that are set, the different stances that people take towards those established rules, the power dynamics that these processes elicit, and the role that space

plays in shaping these interactions. Drawing on the philosopher's theoretical formulation, I will conceptualise the form of daily ruling and organising in three of the initiatives that I examined as a *Politics of Dwelling*, understanding dwelling as a set of practices of creation, transformation, establishment, operation and maintenance of spaces and times in our everyday lives, as well as of construction of new meanings, relationships and affections with those space-times and with those who inhabit them. I will argue that *Dwelling* as politics, despite not conforming fully to the ideal paradigm, holds an emancipatory potentiality in face of the ongoing neoliberal offensive(s) against life through contemporary crisis politics. This transformative capacity lies in (1) its situated/embodied nature, which marks the processes of decision-making and organisation with care ethics, (2) the central role that space and objects play in those processes. I will note, however, that the fight against gender-based oppression, part of which involves the task to de-gender social reproduction, is paramount to the liberating potentiality of this politics.

Political activation off/through care: Solidarity initiatives in Athens

The global financial crisis of 2008 rapidly spread to the European economies. Austerity programmes were implemented across countries including the UK, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Spain and Greece. The latter was the one where austerity policies were rolled out most extensively. Structural adjustment was delivered by enabling and extending processes of exclusion and dispossession, including the further retrenchment of the welfare and social security systems, the privatisation of public infrastructures and assets, and the curtailment of workers' and civil rights. Of these processes, the first to hit was that affecting the labour market. The increase of unemployment rates came coupled with a steep decrease in salaries and pensions. Subsequently, households' income and purchasing capacity experienced a sharp decline, while taxes and the cost of living rose. The increasing economic stress plunged many households into indebtedness. Many family networks and traditional safety nets were broken. At the same time, budgets for healthcare, social care and education were curtailed, and many people were excluded from these services (Encounter Athens, 2013; Kalandides and Vaiou, 2015; Konstantatos, 2012). Amidst this harsh austerity regime, in 2015 Greece faced a large-scale arrival of asylum seekers from war-torn countries like Syria and Afghanistan. The EU renewed its border system² leaving thousands of refugees stranded in the country, most of them in dreadful conditions in newly set up camps.

Austerity policies especially targeted urban populations and areas. In Athens, continued cuts to municipal expenditures affected services like garbage collection, maintenance of streets, parks and city infrastructures, as well as the functioning of the transport system and public cultural and sports facilities. The closedown of many small businesses contributed to the gradual deterioration of urban spaces and neighbourhoods social life. Parallel to public disinvestment, privatisation and deregulation policies were put in place to facilitate the sell-off of urban land, public infrastructures, buildings, parks and commercial spaces (Hadjimichalis, 2015). Increasing racist violence, including forced evictions from many public spaces, became a quotidian experience for many groups who faced the violence either of far-right groups or the police (Kalandides and Vaiou, 2015). All these urban policies and events were part of what scholars like Koutrolikou (2016) and Boano and Gyftopoulou (2016) have called the "governmentality of Athens in crisis", namely a form of crisis politics in/through the urban that has translated into new geographies and a change in the everyday urban experience for many.

However, these processes have not gone without contestation. Since the early months of the economic recession, citizens took massively to the streets to protest. In May 2011,

Syntagma Square was occupied for over a month. The occupation provided the supporting infrastructure for a growing movement demanding a radical political and economic overturn, becoming a powerful collective experience of self-organisation, direct democracy and mutual support (Stavrides, 2016). The experience of Syntagma took roots in many neighbourhoods, fostering the emergence of numerous neighbourhood committees, cooperative economy structures and so-called solidarity initiatives (Arampatzi, 2016). The latter in particular have significantly contributed to placing the pressing issues of social reproduction at the centre of the political struggle. Starting in the aftermath of the occupation, social kitchens, social clinics and pharmacies, networks of care services, training and language lessons, accommodation centres for/with migrants and refugees, legal aid hubs, and mobile laundries, gradually became part of an emerging urban geography of self-organised structures that would combine the provision of everyday survival needs with participation in broader struggles over social reproduction and civil rights (Arampatzi, 2016; Rübner Hansen and Zechner, 2015). Common across these different projects was an explicit critique and rejection of the (discriminatory and/or paternalistic) ways of delivery of aid and social support services by state institutions and (transnational) NGOs alike.

Solidarity initiatives have contributed to politicising care at different levels. On the one hand, by reclaiming welfare as a universal right through public actions, they have placed care – or social reproduction more broadly – within the “matters of public concern”, hence a political question of structural implications. On the other, they have actively performed this right, namely the right to care and be cared for, through their self-organised daily activities marked by political significations emerging from the very experience of working and living in common. Thus, I contend that their integrated praxis has entailed a political activation of care and through care.

In the following section, I will provide an ethnographic account of three of these solidarity initiatives. My fieldwork comprised two phases, each lasting six months during 2016 and 2017. I carried out participant observation sessions, which translated into an engagement in these collectives’ assemblies and meetings, everyday activities – ranging from reproductive work(s) to cultural/educational/sport activities, training workshops, games, and long conversations over coffee or beer –, parties, public events, political actions and protests. Alongside, I did 20 in-depth interviews with people directly involved in them, members of other political and solidarity initiatives, and researchers.

The three initiatives comprise a social kitchen, a refugee accommodation and a community centre. The three of them were set up to provide practical solutions to real needs, but also to open up new political spaces of resistance and counter-power. They have brought together people from different origins, ages, economic and political backgrounds, including retired locals, students and professionals, homeless people, people with prison experience, foreign volunteers, migrants and refugees. In each of them there have been people with life-long experiences of political organising, others who have come as volunteers from abroad in groups or individually, others for whom their engagement has constituted their first experience of self-organisation and struggle, others who have come in search of support given their situation of pressing need, and others who have returned as volunteers after having being supported in the first instance.

O Allos Anthropos social kitchen

O Allos Anthropos (“The Other Person” in Greek) is a social kitchen that was initiated in 2012 with the aim of providing free food for any person in need. The group installs a mobile kitchen in public spaces on a daily basis. They cook there and eat the meal together with the

people they serve. At the time of my fieldwork, the initiative comprised a “core group” of six people and others who would partake temporarily or occasionally. On the busiest day, those people were up to 36. Over the years, the initiative has counted on several headquarters located in central areas of Athens, where they store the food and provide other services including school support activities for children, and night accommodation for homeless people.

City Plaza refugee accommodation centre

City Plaza, today inactive, was an accommodation centre with migrants and refugees. It was located in a formerly abandoned hotel in the area of Victoria in central Athens, which was squatted from April 2016 to July 2019. During this time, the initiative housed over 2500 refugees and asylum seekers, as well as local activists and dozens of so-called international “solidarians”, while serving as an active centre for the coordination of political actions of different sorts and scales. During my fieldwork, around 400 people were living in the building. The “squat” or the “house”, as residents used to refer to it, operated as a self-managed housing community, self-sustained by economic and in-kind donations.

Khora community centre

Khora was a self-organised community centre, which was set up in 2016 by a group of people with volunteering experience in Europe. It was first located in a former industrial building in Exarcheia in central Athens, which was eventually vacated in the summer of 2018. During my fieldwork, Khora provided a space for people from different backgrounds to socialise, work together and learn. The centre offered services including food, clothing and hygienic products provision, dentistry, legal aid, language and music lessons, internet and computer access, childcare, a women’s (safe) space, and a carpentry and metal workshop. There were around 150 volunteers. At present, Khora is split into several service-specific settings across Athens.

Dwelling as politics: An ethnographic account

Structures, dispositives, codes and pacts

The three initiatives shared a form of governance in/of their respective projects intimately attached to the everyday administration of activities and resources. People were all invited to directly take part in the day-to-day management and associated decision-making. Their organising structures were characterised by having a rather stable “core” and a diffuse and changing “periphery”. The core group was always integrated by some of the people who initiated each project. They were the main point of reference for newcomers and constituted a key organ for the maintenance of the project. In the case of O Allos Anthropos, for instance, the core group decided the weekly schedule and settings for the kitchen, organised everyday logistics and administrated donations and resources. In City Plaza, the main reference group for newcomers – whether migrants seeking accommodation or people willing to volunteer – as well as for those supporting the project from afar, was the so-called “reception team”. They were responsible for the financial administration. Similarly, in Khora, some of the founding members played the role of financial administrators and first point of contact. None of the core groups was closed. However, over time, in part for practical reasons, they became more established and thus less keen to accommodate newcomers. Outside each core group, there was usually a changing group – or set of groups

organised by function – comprised of people who partook in each initiative occasionally or temporarily. Overall, the structures of the initiatives were quite unsettled, flexible, lax and ambivalent. They were made and unmade contingently, in response to the ever-renewing necessities and desires of those inhabiting them. This was partly due to their temporary character, but it was also an intentional self-defence strategy. The three were rather accessible, albeit the politics of expulsion varied among them.

The daily operation was mainly based on two mechanisms: the assembly and the working groups. Like in other grassroots projects, the assembly – in different versions – was the most common dispositive for decision-making. Some were open to the public while others were reserved just for the “members”. The matters and scope of each one varied accordingly. In City Plaza and Khora assemblies were held more frequently. O Allos Anthropos held assemblies too. However, given its smaller size, the forms of discussing and taking decisions involved almost no pre-set procedures. In City Plaza, decisions were taken following open discussions by direct individual vote, while in Khora it was by consensus. Appointed facilitators would introduce the topics to be discussed, set the order of interventions and speaking turns. Others would note down the minutes. English was the primary language used. Different people would volunteer as translators to Greek, Arabic, Farsi and French.

In City Plaza and Khora, broader political issues were treated weekly in the so-called “General Assembly” and “Building Meeting” respectively, alongside questions concerning “codes” for the operation of each project. The articulation of forms of engagement with large-scale political struggles with issues concerning the everyday running of the initiatives did not always flow smoothly. During my fieldwork, the dilemma of whether to prioritize pressing needs or, on the contrary, broader political aims, emerged quite often in the three initiatives. In O Allos Anthropos, the issue of taking part in collective political actions in the name of the kitchen was brought up a few times by some of the regular members. It would give rise to the same argument, usually among the same people. On one side, those who believed that the kitchen should get more involved in political affairs, at the risk of becoming a “kitchen of an organisation” like any other. On the other, mostly women, who argued that what they were doing was “more important” than going to demonstrations, and in their view, it was actually a form of protest too. In City Plaza, for its part, the issue was brought about several times by volunteers in the House Assembly. In their view, the time that was being dedicated to the discussion of “mere logistics” undermined the action on more pressing issues for refugees. However, time after time those complaints were answered back. “Logistics must be democratised as well” – responded a resident once. These debates generally remained inconclusive. In some cases, discussions could extend for hours and even days. Some saw this as “highly inefficient”, while for others it was a sign of a “strong democratic effort”. When agreements were made, those would normally translate into norms of mandatory compliance. Often, the new rules were written down in different languages on signs, which were hung on the walls, and circulated via diverse communicating platforms.

Alongside assemblies, working groups would hold smaller meetings to address practical issues. In City Plaza, working groups ranged from reception, introduction, kitchen, cooking, cleaning, security, translators, warehouse, clinic, bar, finance, media/communication – all of these related to the direct sustenance of the project –, to children’s activities, language lessons, yoga, art workshops and other entertainment activities like cinema or dance sessions. Timetables with shifts were pinned up on the walls of the squat for people to sign up freely. Similarly, working groups in Khora comprised reception, induction, kitchen, café, legal aid, translators, dentistry, women’s space, kid’s space, education, workshop, art space, free-shop, cleaning, communication, finance. During my fieldwork, the emergence of new

groups was a constant, for example, the “purple commission” – set up to tackle gender-based issues in the building –, the “health accompanying group” – to accompany people to the hospital –, or the “neighbourhood group” – geared towards starting actions to inform neighbours about Khora and invite them to the space.

The working groups operated on an informal basis, that is, social interactions were based on presumably agreed codes of behaviour and implicit social commitments. The awareness of a web of interconnected relationships fostered a tacit acknowledgement of accountability to others. This consciousness was coupled with a disposition towards sharing and caring, which stemmed largely from the daily practice of dealing with issues of social reproduction as matters of common concern. The operating logic of the working groups differed from the rationale of the assembly, whose ultimate purpose was to set compulsory rules or procedures and was made operative mainly through discourse. Interestingly, decisions via assemblies were questioned and put on hold time after time. Even the safety protocol and the rules regarding admission or ejection were subjected to continuous debates. In City Plaza, for instance, one of those rules established that anyone skipping a mandatory shift more than twice would be expelled from the house. In practice, the implementation of this rule was rather vague since it was unclear whether any specific group had the power to enforce it. Even the expulsion of someone, which did happen at times, could turn revocable depending on the case.

In contrast, the working groups’ functioning revolved around the materiality and contingency of everyday needs and resources, with informal meetings that resulted in “ad hoc” pacts open to permanent reworking. They were in practice the executive bodies of the initiatives. Their organic form of decision-making stemmed from daily face-to-face interactions and the affections derived from those. Contact was the main driving force. In this sense, they constituted governance mechanisms aligned with the Paradigm of Dwelling, as opposed to the assembly, which would belong in the Paradigm of Governing. Their decentralised and flexible organising provided a margin to accommodate newly emerging material needs and affections, as well as individual or spontaneous initiatives. Thus, it fostered resiliency to assume unforeseen events. In City Plaza, a woman started a “library working group” on her own, sometime after her proposal was accepted in the assembly but no one joined her effectively. She managed to gather a collection of donated books in different languages. The initiative became quite popular, especially among the kids. In Khora, another woman used to replenish the stock of beauty products of the “women’s space” on her initiative. Individual actions like these indeed contributed to expanding the projects and sustaining them. However, at times, independent initiatives would bring about tensions, as was the case with a man in Khora who used to take goods from the free-shop and distribute them among some refugees or give people of his choosing an additional meal. When he was told off, he would argue that “the bureaucracy” implemented was extremely inefficient.

Discussions and arguments over the implementation of certain procedures were in fact rather common in the initiatives. Some contended that the lack of settled norms was confusing, while others said that it was unfair and even discriminatory. Asymmetric power relations would tend to break out and prompt conflicts whenever people felt their say was not equally heard or respected. A common cause behind power imbalances was the stagnation of the rota system, meaning specific people remaining in the same working group for long. Over time, these individuals’ opinions would become more prominent to the detriment of others’, giving rise to positions of power and subordination respectively.

The different nature of assemblies and working groups as governance mechanisms translated into different forms of dealing with conflicts, which generated different power dynamics. The assembly produced a form of power that tended to concentrate around those with more salient oral communication skills. In contrast, in the working groups, those who had

been involved for longer would retain some power as long as they were able to maintain a good relationship with the rest. Generally, turning to the established norms was not a common resort in the everyday practice of the initiatives. Usually, affections, embodied commitments and personal relationships prevailed over rules, and conflicts were mostly addressed through face-to-face communications. Namely, an ethics of care prevailed over an ethics of justice. Normally, the awareness of interdependence fed a sense of mutual responsibility and engagement that was what kept the initiatives running. However, at times, informality did not translate into reciprocal relations of support. Composed as they were by very diverse people, the set of values underpinning unspoken modes of behaviour were not always aligned. At times, informality actually became an internal threat for the initiatives, all of which needed transparency, trust and openness to keep going.

These contradictions are reflective of a form of daily ruling and organising that emerges in situ, attending to everyday social reproduction in a direct and embodied manner and as a form of common struggle. Politics is embedded in the web of bonds that are woven in the day-to-day, and thus evolves and transforms according to the contingencies of life and personal relationships – as opposed to the abstract, anonymous and individualised relationships of capital. In this sense, I argue that this political praxis tends towards the Paradigm of Dwelling in that it is grounded in and takes shape through collective practices and relationships that emerge through a commons-based inhabitation of everyday life. Interpersonal power dynamics and conflicts are part of this hands-on politics concerned with the impure and ambivalent realm of care in everyday life, with the ever-reconfiguring processes of construction of “as well as possible” modes of living and sustaining our world – as per Tronto and Fisher’s (1990) definition.

Spatio-temporalities of their own: Space agency and home-making practices

With the emergence of solidarity initiatives across Athens, buildings, premises and open spaces were taken over and transformed to make room for increasing reproductive needs. The boundaries of the domestic were expanded. Like many of the emerging initiatives, the three presented here set their main action settings in buildings that were abandoned or in disuse. They made them theirs by repurposing the use of the spaces and transforming them physically. Khora was a former printing house in a six-storey building. It was entirely refurbished to accommodate a welcome area and a kids’ space, clothing storage and free-shop, a kitchen and food storage, a café with a stage, several classrooms and a library, legal support offices, a dentistry practice, a creative area for crafts workshops and music lessons, a women’s space and a rooftop garden. O Allos Anthropos set up the headquarters of the social kitchen in an industrial building, which was likewise refurbished to accommodate a kitchen and a pantry, clothing storage, a computer area, a space for educational activities, a space for meetings and gatherings, and restroom facilities. City Plaza was originally an eight-storey hotel, which had been abandoned for years. The building was adapted to house around four hundred people. The new residents arranged private and shared bedrooms, a reception, a kitchen and a large dining room, a café, a stock room, a doctor’s practice, and common spaces. A resident referred to the experience as follows: “Although we realised with surprise that most of the equipment still worked perfectly, we had to re-imagine the building so we could fit in.” Metaphorically, this *re-imagining the building so to fit in* encapsulates beautifully the meaning of dwelling as a multidimensional praxis that involves in the same operation the creation of space and time – the act(s) of making room, making time for – and of meanings through which to find and claim belongingness.

These initial conversion operations would become a recurrent practise in the three initiatives. The transformation of space would take place organically alongside many of the daily activities. Each initiative established its own operating rhythms, which was reflected in the type spatiality that came forth. Most of the emerging spaces were never finished, they remained in-the-making. City Plaza, for example, would undergo complete transformations over the day. The reception hall would turn into a hairdressing salon, the staircase into a ground for games, the café into an office or a room for lectures, the dining room into an auditorium and dance hall, and the rooftop into an open cinema. Space in Khora was subject to a rather intensive transformative speed too, involving also architectural (re)construction works. Quite amazingly, over a year, the building underwent two self-managed large refurbishments. In the last one, the entrance was completely re-designed to move the “kids’ space” down to the ground floor and the fourth floor was re-arranged so that the dentistry and the legal aid office had separate waiting rooms. The rooftop was populated with pots to grow vegetables, and the kitchen was divided to accommodate an office room. In a different yet still relatable way, O Allos Athropos’ space production was also marked by a temporary, unfinished and elastic fashion. The installation of the kitchen for some hours on the street often prompted the emergence of other activities like ball games, performances and puppet shows. A temporary domestic space of blurred boundaries was created, transforming the public setting into a space of enhanced social interaction imbued also with political significations of resistance.

Space and material resources were indeed fundamental common assets to care for and defend on a daily basis. The role of space nonetheless transcended this material function. It was an active constituent of the forms of organising daily work and activities, and ultimately of the politics that were enacted. “If you want to take power, take over the kitchen, the women’s space, the classrooms, the warehouse” – said a resident of City Plaza. Such a statement made it explicit that space in the squat was an agent in its own right. In fact, in the three initiatives, negotiations, agreements and conflicts happened to be more rooted in the material resources and the spaces than in the people themselves. In City Plaza’s kitchen, for example, there were three different daily shifts. Every day a different room had to fulfil one. Meals were contingent on the food available. Yet, special meals for residents with specific needs were also provided. There were the chefs, people who chopped vegetables or meat, people who cooked in the stoves, people who served, and people who cleaned and washed. All the roles were interchangeable. Generally, everything would run smoothly, however, there were moments in which arguments over changing tasks, what to cook, the quantity of food to use, the inefficient control of perishables or non-completion of the “full shift” would break out.

Everyone’s direct participation in the operation and maintenance of the spaces and equipment was fundamental for the running of the initiatives. A funny anecdote that happened to O Allos Anthropos collective illustrates this point. Two representatives of a design collective based in Germany came to Athens to “test” a “mobile-solar kitchen”. They offered it to replace the makeshift kitchen the group used to display. The two men started the kitchen certainly attracting a lot of attention from passers-by and children who showed a curiosity for its quirky design. But just before the water began to boil, the kitchen stopped working. For a long while, the two designers unsuccessfully tried to restart it to the bewilderment of all those present. None was capable of helping them, as they were not able to figure out the functioning of the machine. Members of O Allos Anthropos eventually decided to bring back their ordinary kitchen. This anecdote speaks to the “experts-users” divide at play in our societies. Those appointed as experts are given the power to apply their knowledge, while those designated as users are considered passive subjects devoid of any significant knowledge. To a certain extent, the initiatives challenged this, for the simple reason that the ability of different group members to understand the functioning of

things was crucial for the daily running of the projects. This is why they explicitly endeavoured to share tasks, skills and know-how.

If dwelling is about creating, establishing, operating and taking care of spaces and times to accommodate evolving needs and desires, certainly, the multiple spatial practices of the initiatives constituted manifested examples of acts of active dwelling. Nevertheless, dwelling encompasses also a symbolic dimension that comprises the creation of new meanings, relationships and affections with the space and the rest of inhabitants. In this sense, dwelling comes often associated with the notion of home. Participants in the three initiatives would frequently manifest their will of building “homeplaces”, of “home-making”, in multiple ways. Among residents in City Plaza it was common to actively engage in the decoration of the common spaces, whose walls – full of photographs, drawings and signs – served as an open multi-layered archive of the many stories and faces of its dwellers. For many of my interlocutors, this was a way of creating a space where their stories mattered and was fundamental to nourish a collective capacity to cope with and resist the multiple hardships and threats facing them. Decorating and taking care of the squat fostered a loving sentiment and pride for the space they collectively inhabited. Often, residents would invite non-residents to show them their “home”. The intimate spaces of the bedrooms of the squat would transform into makeshift kitchens where meals and tea were shared with neighbours and visitors. At times, balconies would serve the function of kitchen-tables to prepare homemade pasta and bread dough.

In Khora, the days when the laundry-van served the centre, the passage on the ground floor would become “our home’s living room”, as one of my interlocutors said. The temporary living room would be furnished with self-design chairs and tables – built in the workshop. People would linger there waiting for the laundry to finish while engaging in conversations, sharing a coffee or a smoke, or playing backgammon. Sometimes, clothes would be hung on strings, adding new layers to this temporary urban threshold. References to “home” were also common among those participating in O Allos Anthropos. The collective liked to emphasise that their meals were “home-made”, implying that they were cooked by them and with care. They would also stress the importance of creating a welcoming atmosphere, a “home-feeling”, so people could overcome feelings of shame and eventually develop some sense of belonging in the collective.

These accounts show that space and material infrastructures were fundamental for the forms in which each collective organised and governed itself, the type of relationships that were forged, and the creation of collective significations – particularly around the notion of home. The practices of putting into use(s), taking care of and maintaining the different spaces, objects and equipment, reinstated the agreements among the people. This gave rise to conflicts too. Nevertheless, collective participation in the production and operation of the different spaces and infrastructure was an essential requirement for the initiatives – as the incident with the “new” solar-powered kitchen attested to. Thus, it could be argued that governance in the initiatives was embedded in the space, the objects and the material infrastructure. The production, management, use, design and maintenance of them were central to a form of politics articulated around experiences of dwelling, which in its ultimate sense is the very agency to (re)create spaces and times of one’s own – or our own –, and imbue these practices with meanings that help us make sense of our selves.

Social reproduction: A gendered sphere that resists change

Examined from a gender perspective, the first thing noticeable in the initiatives was the presence of a majority of women. When asked about this fact, several of my interlocutors

said that women have been always trained carers. The initiatives' main endeavour being within the realm of social reproduction may suffice to explain this. Nonetheless, beyond this, during my fieldwork, I could observe other less apparent aspects where gender featured as a condition behind discriminatory and/or abusive behaviours. It was in City Plaza and Khora where I could observe this more extensively, thanks largely to several initiatives to counteract discrimination, abuse or violence against women. I will present two examples below. Besides, I was able to talk with several female participants about personal experiences of unwanted attention and sexual misconduct that they had unexpectedly faced in the spaces. Complaints about sexual misbehaviours as well as about unequal participation of some women – often refugees – in assemblies were in fact not unusual and were denounced straightforwardly repeatedly.

In Khora, I took part in the attempts to set up a “purple commission”, whose function was to report – both orally and on a proposed “harassment record book” – any case of sexual misconduct in the building. The idea was put forward after several cases of sexual harassment in the café were reported. The “purple commission” was short-lived and the idea of the book did not make it in the end. However, soon after, an unnamed working group of female volunteers initiated a series of campaigns to secure better conditions for the women coming to the community centre. They brought to general attention questions concerning the spatial arrangement of the building – for example, the inconvenience of having the women's space and the kid's space on separate floors, the lack of a “fitting room” in the free-shop or the intimidating atmosphere at the reception for (some) women due to an “excessive” sitting area, which was normally fully taken over by men only –, and other issues like the insidious non-compliance of the rule of no men access in the women's space. Some of their proposals were eventually realised.

In City Plaza, I was able to participate in a number of collective efforts to counteract sexist behaviours. One of these initiatives comprised the setup of a “women's space” in the building. Interestingly, the idea was presented in the general assembly first by female local activists. It had a sort of initiation with a movie session, which failed to be continued despite the efforts of its promoters. However, a group of international volunteers finally succeeded in setting up the first women-only event in the squat. The event, which was not exempt from controversy and resistance from some residents, consisted of an evening on the rooftop, which started with a shared meal and ended with dances. A permanent women's space with a growing range of activities would be finally installed in a room of the building.

On a general level, these two examples show that social reproduction remains broadly a gendered sphere, which resists change. People involved in the initiatives certainly endeavoured to promote equitable forms of organising (some areas of) their social reproduction. However, forms of discrimination and/or abuse against women were unfortunately present. The efforts by the women presented here yet again prove that women's struggle against oppressive powers remains (at least) twofold. Namely, women who struggle for a more egalitarian society continue to find themselves simultaneously fighting for their own freedom. The implications for a Politics of Dwelling insofar as praxis with emancipatory capacity are substantial. The path towards a more just society in which coverage of reproductive needs becomes a universal reality has to go hand in hand with the struggle against women's oppression, part of which involves the fight to de-gender social reproduction. Thus, this work needs to be undertaken largely in everyday life. Reimagining the ways in which we inhabit everyday life from an egalitarian perspective is a necessary condition to yield that structural change. Any politics that does not assume this endeavour will continue proving inadequate for liberating purposes.

Conclusion

The three presented solidarity initiatives constitute examples of grassroots (counter) responses to a situation of enduring crisis sternly manifested in the everyday lives of a social majority. The devastating consequences of the austerity measures in Greece have proved that this regime has been nothing more than an upgrade of the neoliberal system. Despite difficult material and political conditions, the three initiatives were rather successful in enacting forms of organising social reproduction and modes of care different to those of the state institutions and (large) NGOs, which have largely failed to assure people's life sustenance needs. Their daily practices combined the (self)organisation of (some aspects of) social reproduction with political actions of protest and resistance. I have argued that this integrated praxis entailed a reconfiguration of care practices and imagination. Drawing on Fernández-Savater's (2020) theory of the Paradigm of Dwelling and the Paradigm of Governing, I have conceptualised the politics of the initiatives as a *Politics of Dwelling*. I contend that this politics holds an emancipatory potentiality against the ongoing neoliberal offensive against life, which is based on two main aspects.

First, it is a form of daily ruling and organising that attends to the sustenance of everyday life in a situated and embodied manner, evolving according to the contingencies of life and personal relationships. It is a politics embedded in the web of bonds that are woven in the day-to-day. It is sustained by the capacity of reaching and performing agreements to take care of one another and of what is shared. Thus, it is marked to a great extent by an ethics of care, namely power dynamics are shaped largely by interpersonal relationships, affections, tacit obligations and the acknowledgement of interdependency. Mechanisms that seek the establishment of certain rules are used too. However, in practice, conflicts are largely addressed on a case-by-case basis by those directly affected, rules are revised constantly. In this sense, it is a politics of proximity, embodiment and direct engagement with the ambivalent tasks of (collective) caring – as opposed to a politics of abstraction, representation and delegation.

The second key aspect concerns space and material infrastructure. Through diverse and never-ceasing spatial practices, the initiatives provided themselves with space(s) and time(s) of their own. This agency is what ultimately defines the act of dwelling. Space was actually the main medium of decision-making, prevailing over bureaucratic procedures. As noted, dwelling comprises practices of both space production and meaning-making, which in turn inform feelings and subjectivities. In this light, the space that mediated the form of self-government of the initiatives was a (collectively) inhabited one, namely a space in which objects had a use-value, and which was shaped through practices of house-keeping and home-making, which are ultimately practices of care. As such, this space was characterised by being permanently in-the-making, unlike the space of representation of institutional politics.

In these two aspects, which characterise the *Politics of Dwelling* as a political praxis of/through care and space, lies a transformative capacity. However, limitations are also apparent, as the ethnographic accounts have shown. At times, interpersonal power dynamics and conflicts posed significant threats for the actual sustenance of the initiatives' life-in-common. Most importantly, gender forms of discrimination and/or abuse were present. Common across many grassroots groups, these forms of violence constitute in fact a major challenge that hinders the emancipatory potentiality of their politics. Still, I contend that a shift towards a *Politics of Dwelling* can offer a desirable path to fairer and more meaningful forms of life beyond the present regime of chronic crisis. As Fernández-Savater (2020) highlights, the war on life by the ongoing neoliberal regime(s) is carried out by a power

of abstraction. The continuing processes of dispossession and extraction of bodies and natural resources alike are enabled and fostered by the fact that there is no sensitive connection with what is exploited. We are governed by instances of power far removed from our everyday life, and through increasingly diffuse and intangible apparatuses. However, our material and social reproduction are resolved for the most part in places outside the spaces of power. This is why, despite the limitations, I believe that *Dwelling* as a political praxis offers valuable insights to those seeking to de-habituate themselves from capitalist forms of living and relating. As a political praxis that attends to the necessities and desires of those who practice it, it actually brings about forms of relating capable of yielding significant changes in subjectivities and forms of life.

The *politics of dwelling* presented in this paper is just an example of what a (situated) politics leaning towards the Paradigm of Dwelling can look like. The ethnographic accounts attest to the complexity of scales and scopes at play in present struggles over reproduction. As for research, the concept is suggested as a framework for empirical research on existing examples of groups coming together to sustain – or socially reproduce – themselves, and the type of everyday spatial politics that develop from those experiences. Federici (2012, 2019) and Gutiérrez-Aguilar (2017) have repeatedly asserted that the stakes of re-imagining care and social reproduction are at present higher than ever while pointing out to everyday life as a key site where practices of resistance and struggle are being conceived of and performed, and where new social imaginations are actually flourishing. Thus, there is the necessity to broaden the scope of empirical research on these existing instances as generative of transformative political imaginations.

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Notes

1. The 15M Movement is the popular name used to refer to the mobilisations and squares' occupations that took place across Spain in 2011, starting on 15 May.

2. The Greek state responded to the large-scale arrival of refugees in 2015 by setting up a multi-agent reception system, which included camps – mostly located outside urban areas –, hotels, flats and other facilities. This reception system has proved insufficient and inadequate. Complaints about the material conditions, violent incidents and lack of security have increased over time. In March 2016, the EU and Turkey signed a statement of cooperation aiming at controlling the number of people crossing from the latter to Greece. The agreement prompted the closure of the so-called “Balkan route” – Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia and Macedonia closed their borders to new migrants –, which since 2015 had been used by migrants to get to Western Europe.

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