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## RADICAL ADULT EDUCATION PRACTICES IN THE SQUATTED CITY PLAZA HOTEL

### ABSTRACT

*The article is set in the political, social, and economic context of Greece, where newly arrived refugees and migrants have ended up following the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement. The forcefully marginalised new arrivals found themselves trapped in a traditionally hostile migration environment. Greece was already struggling with severe neoliberal policies imposed by foreign lenders and accepted by domestic political elites, which have drastically affected the welfare state. In the politically and economically hectic times institutional racism and social exclusion became integrated into national migration policies. By conducting qualitative interviews, participation observation, and by exploring secondary sources, this article centres around a housing project which developed as a response to neoliberal hegemonic policies. The findings show that educational initiatives lead to the building of counter-hegemonic community, provided the practices of solidarity and collective learning, and helped educate the general public.*

**Keywords:** Greece, radical adult education, hegemony, solidarity, refugees

### RADIKALNE PRAKSE IZOBRAŽEVANJA ODRASLIH V ZASEDENEM HOTELU CITY PLAZA – POVZETEK

*Članek izhaja iz političnega, družbenega in gospodarskega konteksta Grčije, v kateri so se od leta 2016 po sporazumu med EU in Turčijo znašli novoprispeli begunci in migranti. Prisilno marginalizirani novoprišleki so se znašli ujeti v tradicionalno sovražnem migracijskem okolju. Grčija se je že spopadala s hudimi neoliberalnimi politikami, ki so jih vsilili tuji posojilodajalci in so jih sprejele domače politične elite ter so drastično prizadele državo blaginje. V politično in gospodarsko razburkanih časih sta institucionalni rasizem in socialna izključenost postala del nacionalnih migracijskih politik. Z izvedbo kvalitativnih intervjujev, opazovanjem z udeležbo in preučevanjem sekundarnih virov članek raziskuje stanovanjski urbani projekt, ki se je razvil kot odgovor na neoliberalne hegemonске politike. Ugotovitve kažejo, da so izobraževalne pobude vodile k izgradnji protihegemonске skupnosti, ponudile prakse solidarnosti in kolektivnega učenja ter pomagale pri izobraževanju splošne javnosti.*

**Ključne besede:** Grčija, radikalno izobraževanje odraslih, hegemonija, solidarnost, begunci

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on a grassroots housing project that emerged within the squatted City Plaza Hotel in Athens, Greece, between 2016 and 2019 during a time of political, economic and social turmoil when the country was hit by “a refugee and migrant crisis” according to European authorities and “a summer of migration” (Kasperek & Speer, 2015) as referred to by the refugees and migrants but also by pro-migrant political movements all across Europe.

The paper explores the innovative radical adult education activities of the residents of the City Plaza Hotel housing project in Athens. While many contributions have been written on the modern Greek grassroots initiatives (e.g., Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Raimondi, 2019; Squire, 2016) none of them explores the radical educational potential within these projects.

Radical adult education comes into existence when a group begins to challenge the hegemonic ideology in relation to politics, economics, religion, race, gender or education. Radical individuals are driven by a vision of what a better society could look like and the need to act in order to bring it about (Hicks, 2004). In this paper, radical adult education refers to the forms of educational initiatives that lead to the social inclusion of new arrivals, acts of solidarity, development of collective learning, education of the general public and other forms of cultural actions which aim to empower new arrivals.

In this paper the term “new arrivals” is used for the asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants who entered Greece after January 2015. The borders into Greece have always been crossed by both refugees and economic migrants. Since March 2016 and the EU-Turkey agreement regarding the exchange of refugees, both groups of migrants have been trapped by European migration mechanism policies. This study is therefore about both these groups and additionally about local Greeks and foreigner volunteers involved in the housing project under study. In the text I will refer to all of them as “residents” of City Plaza. With the use of a participatory approach and interviews, the methodology focused on the housing project’s residents in the squatted community regardless of ethnic background.

I had been present in the field since 2013 and was familiar with the Greek grassroots phenomena before undertaking the research for this paper. The specific contribution of this research is therefore personal insight and participatory research founded on a high level of trust that has been built between the author and the residents. City Plaza was formed as a progressive revolutionary housing experiment that encompassed a series of radical educational activities in order to intervene during significant economic and political situations, but also as an alternative to non-governmental and governmental initiatives that failed to protect vulnerable refugees and excluded them from society. The attempt of the housing project was therefore to empower people and help them in their self-organisation to fight racism and the aggressiveness of neoliberal hegemonic policies.

The article is structured as follows: first, it presents radical educational concepts, the local context that led to social exclusion and racism, and it tackles the neoliberal hegemony and the counter-hegemonic response. The second part describes the case study selection and

methods used, followed by the presentation of findings and in the conclusion summarises the findings and presents the paper's main contributions.

## **RADICAL ADULT EDUCATION FOR FUTURE CHANGE**

The two most important authors in the context of radical adult education, Gramsci and Freire (Coben, 2013; Gramsci, 1971/1992), argued that education is not neutral, but closely linked to hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interests within a given society. Both saw education as the most important tool for combating various forms of oppression and exploitation; they believed that the radical nature of education is manifested in people's efforts to change existing living conditions. They advocated for the struggle and the emancipation of subordinate classes or oppressed groups from the hegemonic domination of the ruling class or oppressors through education.

In his prison writings Gramsci (1971/1992) argues that the supremacy of a social group may manifest itself in two forms: "domination", which is realised through the coercive organs of the state, and "intellectual and moral leadership", which is objectified in and exercised through the institutions of civil society, the coalition of educational, religious and associational institutions.

A social group dominates antagonistic groups by using armed forces or by consent achieved during a peaceful period. According to Gramsci (1971/1992), consent is obtained through cultural and intellectual leadership by a particular class, class fraction, stratum or social group, as part of a larger project of class rule or domination. This is generated through the promotion of legitimate ideologies and social relations, in particular through cultural and educational activities (Davidson, 2020).

Hegemony means the progressive formation of alliances centred around a given social group. A group is hegemonic to the extent that it exercises intellectual and moral leadership over other groups, so that the latter become "allies" and "associates" of the former (Fontana, 2000). According to Joseph (2002), hegemony is integrally linked to capital accumulation, whose conditions always have to be socially secured.

The maintenance of power and social consent are established through (adult) education and the teaching of "common sense", which is done through established institutions, through the media, and popular culture. Boukala (2019) argues that mainstream media function as a powerful elite, or in the Gramscian sense, "traditional intellectuals", who distribute hegemonic discourse and control the public's knowledge about the "Other".

Radical adult education plays an important role in problematising social consent or ideas "taken for granted" or what is defined as "reality", by unmasking hidden ideologies and expanding democratic, dialogical social relations, as opposed to conventional and asymmetrical relations (Kump, 2012).

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) presented a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between adult education and social movements. Their approach focuses on the process

of articulation of movement identity (cognitive practice), on the actors involved in this process (movement intellectuals), and on the contexts of articulation (political and cultural institutions). The authors argue that an important feature of social movements is the “cognitive practice” within which new and critical knowledge is produced. Social movements provide a space in which participants can express, exchange, disseminate and act on their tacit knowledge. Referring to adult education, they state that the production of knowledge and collective identity is a “process of social learning”. In doing so, they take into account both formal and informal modes of knowledge production within social movements.

In contemporary social movements, the knowledge and experiences of participants from diverse movements are shared and combined, alliances (“unity in diversity”) are forged through peer learning processes, and capacities for collective action are strengthened (Hall, 2009). The newest social movements consist of the precarious population, which take part in developing new demands and more inclusive radical education through horizontal, participatory, equal, and direct forms of democratic action and mobilisation, which also stimulate new spatial and organisational forms (Holst, 2018; Kump, 2012). The integral part of radical education is to examine the problems of unequal power relations in society, learning about mobilisation and organisation, about democratic ways of working together, developing the capacity for critical analysis, for alternative discourses and visions, understanding differences, respecting diversity, learning how to build consensus.

While the informal and non-formal forms of radical adult education such as collective learning, education of the general public, experiential learning, for example, meetings, protests, cultural events, discussion and the everyday activities of social movements, have largely been denied its educational character (Kump, 2012), this article aims to do exactly that: to describe, research, and analyse the radical adult education practices of the Athens’ counter-hegemonic housing project.

## **NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC MOVEMENTS IN GREECE**

Since the beginning of 2015, an exceptionally high number of people from Middle Eastern and African countries, many of them fleeing war, persecution and persistent poverty, have entered and crossed Greece, turning it into one of the main entry points to Europe (Mayanthi & Giordano, 2016). New arrivals came into a hostile migration environment characterised by racist incidents, an Islamophobic and anti-migration narrative, and social exclusion.

Greece has a long history of isolating ethnic, religious, and vulnerable groups. In the process of nation-building and constructing a homogeneous national identity, minorities – such as the Turkish, Roma, Macedonian, and Jewish minorities – were assimilated or excluded (Just, 1989; Troumbetta, 2000). Membership in the EU and the incorporation of human rights regimes led to a greater recognition of cultural differences and minority rights (Tsitselikis, 2013). Legacies of intolerance and exclusion policies or attitudes

towards migrants (Papataxiarchis, 2006; Ventoura, 2004) were tailored into public opinion and folklore, but in the last instance, according to my experiences, responded to popular demand. On the other hand, numerous incidences of violence against migrants, racist violence and arson attacks were received with general ignorance and insensitivity.

The anti-migration attitude has intensified during the social, economic and political crisis and significantly after the 2012 national elections when the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party received 7% of the popular vote and entered Parliament for the first time in history. Violence against migrants was an integral part of this extreme ultranationalist political party that was for many years ignored by the authorities, supported by the police and endorsed by mass media (Lihtenvalner, 2021).

Violence against migrants is an extreme manifestation of racism (Solomos & Schuster, 2002), perceived here both as an ideology and set of social practices that produce exclusion and inequality on the basis of the social significance attributed to biological, cultural or social characteristics (Miles & Brown, 2003).

Anti-migrant violence is racialised because it is integrated in regimes of migration controls, which exemplify practices of categorisation, exclusion, and sovereignty in modern states (Garner, 2007). Violence against migrants is also racialised because it is embedded in state practices, which reproduce the idea of migrants as threatening and different. This conceptualisation of violence challenges official narratives of anti-migrant violence as the product of individual motivations and pathologies (Blee, 2005), since it sees violence as embedded in social practices and discourses.

From 2015 onwards, new arrivals and minorities were now united with the new poor (local Greeks) who were also living under tremendous pressure and whose lives changed for good. Locals had been suffering from attacks on the welfare state and political instability since May 2010, when the government of Giorgos Papandreou and international lenders of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), i.e. the so-called “troika”, signed the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and loan agreement.

After Greece’s submission to international lenders the neoliberal agenda became a universally imposed economic and political practice, while neoliberalism evolved into a hegemonic project. The protests and police violence were a constant feature on the streets of Greece in that period, but there was no war in the classical sense, thus political elites managed to establish prevailing social consent during the periods of stable rule (Robinson, 2005).

For the next decade Greece became the country with the highest public debt in the EU and became an epicentre of global attention. The MoU was accompanied by a set of neoliberal austerity measures in return for the loans, including wage cuts and cuts in social spending (Sotiropoulos & Bourikos, 2014). The social consequences of the austerity measures were tremendous and devastating. Poverty and, to a lesser extent, inequality were almost

constantly at the forefront of public discourse in the years of the crisis. Both had risen and in 2014 noticeably low incomes were significant for many Greek households; initially “floating” poverty surged in the same period (Andriopoulou et al., 2018) while Greece experienced one of the highest unemployment rates in the EU. In 2016 35.6% of Greeks were at the risk of poverty and social exclusion (Thema Newsroom, 2017).

In the anti-migrant local environment based on the social exclusion of others and in the economically and socially disintegrated country, new arrivals were mostly looking for ways to escape Greece and not for possibilities to integrate or stay in the country.

While the progressive Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) led government generally did not prevent migrants and refugees from entering the country in the first half of 2015, it also failed to offer them decent living conditions or appropriate reception facilities, thus creating conditions for marginalisation, ghettoization and social exclusion (Tsitselikis, 2019).

Social exclusion, as proposed by Estivill, (2003) is

understood as an accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of the economy, politics and society, which gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centres of power, resources and prevailing values. (p. 19)

On the other hand, according to Popay (2010), we need to consider the alternative approach to defining social exclusion, which is relational. This focuses attention on exclusionary processes that are driven by unequal power relationships operating across four dimensions: economic, political, social and cultural, and at different levels, individual, households and global regions. These restricted processes create a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterised by an unjust distributions of resources, capabilities, and rights, i.e. socio-economic inequalities that in turn generate health inequalities.

Popa and Cozma (2009) argue that exclusion captures economic, political and social dimensions, while the poor and the new poor are equally marginalised and ultimately excluded from current societies. In other words, social exclusion does not only mean insufficient income and economic precarity but goes beyond participation in working life; it is manifest in fields such as housing, education, health and access to services. It affects not only individuals who suffered serious set-backs, but entire social groups that are subject to segregation, xenophobia and discrimination.

Social exclusion is opposite to social inclusion, which a report issued by the European Commission in 2010 defined as:

a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living and well-being that is considered normal in the society in which they live. (p. 1)

The common core of social inclusion involves including everyone in social institutions and relations in ways that matter for people's well-being.

Social inclusion can be understood as a structured plan regarding degrees of inclusion (Gidley et al., 2010). The narrowest interpretation applies to the neoliberal notion of social inclusion as access; a broader interpretation regards the social justice idea of social inclusion as participation, while the widest interpretation involves the human potential lens of social inclusion as empowerment.

After the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016, asylum seekers, refugees, migrants – among them victims of militant regimes, victims of sexual abuse and human trafficking – had unwillingly joined the local ethnic groups, economic migrants, seasonal workers, undocumented migrants or second generation people of migrant origins. These groups have for decades been exposed to systematic racism and institutionalised social exclusion, living in remote rural areas of the Greek countryside or ghettoized neighbourhoods in cities and suffering from marginalisation.

The counter-hegemonic movement in the form of the numerous demonstrations has responded to the new social circumstances and integrated human rights, the right to a decent life in refugee camps and demands for an improved asylum policy into its concepts and narrative.

Counter-hegemony as interpreted by Hall (1988) may bring deep transformation, while it starts from “the immediate field of conjectural” in resistance to the agenda of the dominant hegemony.

Carroll (2006) argues that counter-hegemonic struggle occurs in direct opposition to the aspects of capitalist hegemony – in the rejection of social and semiotic fragmentation, of neoliberal insulation and dispossession, of globalisation from above.

Greeks have resisted the dominant hegemony during numerous protests against anti-austerity measures (“counter-hegemonic response”) since 2010; these were repressed by the use of force, extremely large amounts of repressive means, police units (“armed force”) and condemned by the state-controlled mass media to perpetrate a certain image in public (anti-protest narrative) and consequently garner public consent (“control of public knowledge”). Similar models have been seen in Europe and worldwide: any attempts of confronting neoliberal hegemony in the form of riots, demonstrations and rallies were viciously crushed with extreme use of violence.

Counter-hegemonic practices have a long tradition in Greek political activism. Greeks evidently express what kind of world they would like to live in while shouting slogans in demonstrations, holding banners and handing out political leaflets. In open discussion they articulate the ideas, while on the streets they claim them. As such they do not only focus on protest (struggle against) or criticism of existing power relations in society, but also offer proposals (struggle for) or alternatives for transforming everyday lives (Hall, 2009).



In Greece the bottom-up resistance to the austerity was generally wide spread and it mobilised a counter-hegemonic bloc from which SYRIZA rose, establishing itself as the main party of the movement (Aslanidis & Marantzidis, 2016) and in 2015 winning the historical parliamentary elections with promises to “tackle the neoliberal agenda”. SYRIZA failed to keep its promises and in August 2015 signed the third loan agreement with the same institutions it criticised during its political breakthrough, which left Greeks politically frustrated and in despair.

Since the beginnings of the Greek economic collapse in 2009, locals have been fighting for the protection of and access to public services, which were under regular attack from austerity measures. On the other side, economic migrants have been fighting for work-related rights, while new arrivals after 2015 have been fighting for basic human rights, the right to asylum and decent living conditions. All of these groups have lived socially excluded lives, suffered from precarity and were exposed to state or racist violence.

The social concepts that developed within the movement addressed all those issues through a series of radical educational practices and education became a vehicle of making change through empowerment, respecting the diversity of personal experiences, building community and privileging individual voices (Popa & Cozma, 2009).

Educational analyses point out that education and learning are inseparably linked to the establishment and maintenance of civil society and social movements (Foley, 1999; Holst, 2002). As social movements seek to develop alternatives to the status quo in society, the role of education is to prepare people for change (Martin, 1999).

Since social movements have the ability to change society, Holst (2002) asks whether social change without education is even possible. According to him, education is an essential part of social change because new knowledge and understanding are created and disseminated within social movements. Below, the article will present the radical educational initiatives of the Athens housing project that functioned between 2016 and 2019.

## **CASE STUDY SELECTION AND METHODS USED**

In Greece we can find many examples of refugee and migrant (squatted) settlements. What divides our case study from the others is the development of the structural and spontaneous radical educational initiatives that developed inside the facility.

The City Plaza (referred to also as “The Best Hotel in Europe”), an abandoned seven-storey hotel building, was occupied by the “Economic and Political Refugee Solidarity Initiative” on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2016. The collective was a coordination of four different groups belonging to the Greek far-left. Two of these groups were mostly made up of young people and students active at universities. The other group was an anarchist-unionist group, while the fourth one was an anti-racist and anti-fascist network (Scampoli & Cardinali, 2017). The initiative functioned from the occupation until its closure on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019.



Before the occupation, the City Plaza Hotel had been closed for business for around seven years, but the building remained fully equipped and was used after being squatted in to house nearly 400 people of mixed nationalities (Squire, 2016).

I visited the facility during its opening on many occasions and found it to be an outstanding housing projects with impressive organisational structure, an exceptional comfort of accommodations, and one of the unique examples of multi-ethnic social solidarity practices.

The squatters explained (Scampoli & Cardinali, 2017) that they occupied the hotel intentionally because they wanted to offer people better housing conditions in order to give them dignity and ensure they had a certain level of privacy.

The facility was based in an area where vibrant migrant communities are present. According to the members of the collective, City Plaza was created as a response to the EU-Turkey agreement when some 55,000 people were left stranded in Greece. The squat was administered by the refugees themselves, as well as between 30 and 40 solidarity activists who volunteered informally on a daily basis. The activists were locals, but some also came from abroad. City Plaza was functioning without institutional funding, without any kind of resources from the state or from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and was strictly supported by the individuals or groups.

The article is based upon the analysis of both primary and secondary sources of data, including 15 interviews with the residents, among them with new arrivals, migrants, and local activists, and the participant observation method. I have reported about the City Plaza house project also for reporting purposes and have conducted interviews with the residents on different occasions. While choosing the sample for this paper, I divided them accordingly but used also interviews of secondary sources.

While interviews are a widely used qualitative research method in social science and other related fields, participation observation requires special skills, knowledge and understanding (Vinten, 1994). I worked as a journalist, researcher and analyst in Greece from March 2011 to December 2021. I have worked on reporting the consequences of the economic and social upheaval in Greece and have good knowledge of the local context, traditions, culture and history of the country, including knowledge of the language. As a journalist I often covered protests, attended public discussions and different other initiatives organised by the social movements in Athens, Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Patras and Crete. I have published numerous articles covering also the concepts of this paper: radical adult education (Lihtenvalner, 2015c), social exclusion (Lihtenvalner, 2017b), racist violence against migrants (Lihtenvalner, 2014a, 2015a), neoliberal hegemony (Lihtenvalner, 2015b, 2017a) and the counter-hegemonic movement (Lihtenvalner, 2014b). I was mainly based in Athens in the area of Exarcheia, which is known as the historical core of radical political activism, solidarity initiatives, and squatting culture. I have myself been involved in several initiatives, assemblies and have also taken part in squatting projects.

While actively participating in the social movement, I gained access to data on some occasions as an activist or journalist, but many times also as an observer, a supporter, a friend. On various occasions before 2016 I met with members that later occupied the City Plaza Hotel. Among others I reported in the past also on radical educational practices (Lihtenvalner, 2015c) that were developed by some members of the City Plaza Hotel as part of other projects. The roles in the research field did not change much because trust had been established before I entered the research field.

Greek grassroots groups that like to refer to themselves as “a movement” (το κίνημα) tend to develop distrust specially towards members of the media and members of NGOs. The dislike against both groups increased during the refugee crisis as many saw them as an extended mechanism of state propaganda or the actors that maintain institutional mistreatment.

The fieldwork was conducted in Athens from April 2016 to July 2019. The interviews were done in English and Greek with help from translators for Arabic and Farsi.

Additionally, this article explores secondary sources, such as journalist and academic articles, video reportage, photos, documentaries, interviews, texts published by the group under study, social media posts, leaflets and posters.

Interviews and observation notes were later transcribed and analysed through the process of qualitative data coding organised according to the themes (Bazeley, 2009). The analysis is mixed with primary sources of data and a thematic analysis of secondary sources of data. In order to anonymise the data, only first names are used. The findings can be found below.

## **RADICAL EDUCATIONAL HOUSING PROJECT**

The presentation of the data is divided into three chapters: the first one will introduce the creation of the counter-hegemonic project, followed by a description of the action of solidarity, and conclude with traced analyses on the education of the general public.

### **Building a Counter-Hegemonic Community Project**

After the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016, people, especially those who believed they could just cross into Greece and pass through, suddenly became trapped in the country. “It was this moment when hundreds of people were homeless in the centre of Athens or living in remote refugee camps in harsh conditions, while borders were reinforced once more” (Olga, local activist). New arrivals were either living without accommodation in the centre of Athens or had been settled in inhuman conditions in isolated refugee camps. In response to these conditions, the collective of City Plaza decided to start squatting in a building in the city centre of Athens:

It is not normal to squat, but it becomes normal under these circumstances because there is no real human initiative to deal with the refugee issues and population. The NGOs were involved but with different motives, while [the]

state was just in the third plan observing the situation or applying the security measures, detention, military strategies without [a] real plan for social policies. (Louka, local activist)

Special circumstances called for a special response. Even if occupying empty buildings was not a method that activists immediately wanted to use, they believed that it was the best solution to solve the plight. According to the City Plaza collective and other activists, the role of the NGOs supported by the EU, local government or private funders was not clear (Malichudis, 2021). There have been frequent accusations that the NGO networks that populated the Greek islands and refugee camps on the mainland at the time were maintaining the status quo. While the state stayed a passive observer and acted only with repressive intervention, City Plaza helped to challenge the status quo.

The housing project was based in an extremely hostile environment in the centre of Athens:

A lot of racist violence was committed in the Agios Panteleimon, where City Plaza is also based. This area was since I moved to Athens 2013 one of the most notorious places in Athens with presence of extreme Nazis patrolling the streets day and night. Among others this is also the area where arson attacks against migrant communities were perpetrated, migrants were stabbed, beaten or attacked on the streets. (author's notes)

One of the motives for locating the squat in such an area was to take over the place and try to eradicate the hostile activities in this area: "This area was always run by Golden Dawn members. People were living in fear. So we said we gonna take over this place and kind of eliminate their activities in this area" (Christian, chef). The attempt to squat in a building in the dangerous area of Saint Panteleimon was generally risky, therefore the community of the City Plaza organised night watches, and in more risky situations other anti-racist groups were called in to help. The presence of the City Plaza project helped to obstruct the Nazi patrols from the streets.

The collective City Plaza wanted to offer an alternative to the migrant crisis and Greek refugee policies:

It was not a question of not being possible to do it, or having no alternatives. They, politicians, EU and the Greek government choose how they want to do it. We wanna show that it was not the problem the lack of funds, or knowledge, or possibilities, but it is a choice. It was a part of the plan. The mistreatment was part of the plan, the horrible conditions in the camps were part of the plan, the locations they choose to make camps were part of the plan. (Nasim, local activist)

The City Plaza initiative attempted to show that an alternative is possible, while at the same time revealing the hidden agenda of the authorities.

### **Acting in Solidarity and Encouraging Collective Learning**

As stated on the City Plaza website, the project was built on a foundation of solidarity, participatory involvement and collective learning:

Daily life at CP was based on the principle of participatory organisation and collective decision making and operations, processes particularly complex in a community of 350 people speaking different languages, and with different ethnic, class, and social backgrounds, and different plans for the future. Regular coordination meetings became the space in which equal discussion took place on issues of operation and organisation, while House meetings were – especially in the beginning – a real lesson in how we can and should discuss, operate, and co-implement, as refugees and as locals. The organisation of residents and solidarians into working groups was a component of organising the project but also an essential basis for developing personal and political relationships amongst ourselves. The working groups were: Reception, Education, Children’s Activities, Health Centre, Kitchen, Security, Economics, Cleaning, Communications, as well as a self-organized Women’s Space. (City Plaza, 2019)

In City Plaza 350 residents with different cultural and language backgrounds created a learning community and established a democratic participatory system of living in the housing project. In order to function properly, residents had to learn from each other while cooperating on different tasks and also at the regular meetings, where they debated about the structure and operation of the working groups. Within these meetings participatory, collective, and experiential learning took place based on solidarity between residents of different cultural, ethnic, class and social backgrounds, thus building transnational networks:

City Plaza managed to exist due to transnational solidarity. From all over the world, from Germany to China, from the States to Switzerland, from Mexico to Turkey, different autonomous groups and collectives were supporting the maintenance of Plaza: either by donations, by political support or by physical presence. City Plaza would have never managed to exist without this crucial global support. (Olga, local activist)

City Plaza was part of a transnational solidarity network getting support from different parts of the world and hosting volunteers from many countries. The volunteers lived together with the other residents in City Plaza, which contributed to the creation of a vibrant multicultural experiment. By being part of the global network of social movements, City Plaza contributed to the awareness of the importance of solidarity and made a significant contribution to international communication and awareness-raising among a wide range of people. The Internet and social media presence played an important role in terms of exchanging practices, building global connections but also raising support and sharing

experiences. The openness and integration of the international community was something that was significantly different than what we had seen in Greece in the social movement until that moment. “What you created here is an experiment in democracy, self-governance. You welcome others and you insist of living with them. To make a work together which is based on anti-racist and democratic principles” (Judith Butler while visiting City Plaza).

In its new community, City Plaza established more democratic and inclusive modes of governance absent within hegemonic neoliberal policies: “We think that migrants must live inside the city, stay with the locals and be included in the social structure of the society. This is one of City Plaza’s main goals, and we want to demonstrate that it works” (Olga, local activist).

The organising team established at the outset that social inclusion would be one of the important factors in this project. While life in refugee camps dehumanises, excludes them and puts them in the position of being an observer, in City Plaza residents take an active role in creating future plans and becoming a part of the local community.

The residents’ existential problems, anxieties, and hardships were alleviated during their stay at City Plaza, which also shows the importance of living in the accommodation with dignity, comfort and privacy. The residents of City Plaza started to hope again and believe that the future can be different, as one of the residents describes:

I see these people [residents of City Plaza], they have a hope of going to another country, for creating a life, new life. While they [the authorities] wanna take your hope, everything. When everything comes from your heart, they cannot take it. We show the power to the system. (Siavash, resident)

The vision of the future, demands towards the authorities and criticism towards the system were shaped through many educational activities (discussions, debates, lectures, exhibitions, protests, creating the banners, writing political texts, etc.). Members of the collective took on different roles in helping to create a common goal:

Here in City Plaza there are people, like us coordinators, who participate in the project because I think it is a wider part of the struggle against neoliberalism, capitalism and borders implementation, and of course there are refugees coming here because they need a safe space where to live, but they have never thought about fighting sexism and racism for example. (Olga, local activist)

Locals like Olga wanted to join City Plaza because, for them too, it was a struggle against existing political and economic practices and border controls. The data also suggest that the residents became aware of the struggle against, in the specific case, racism and sexism.

## Educating the General Public

City Plaza organised many educational activities to present, debate, analyse, inform, share and educate the public. Dozens of public discussions were organised concerning the border regime, racism, the struggle for rights, often featuring contributions by prominent intellectuals from around the world, for example, Judith Butler, Angela Davis, David Harvey, Alain Badiou, Sandro Mezzandra, among others. The insight and self-reflection that these extremely influential visitors and activists could bring to members of City Plaza and the public was precious. Additionally, City Plaza was very innovative in its use of mass media to spread its message:

While similar projects in Athens resisted to talk to the general public, City Plaza has done the opposite. In all my period of staying in Athens and working as a journalist I never experienced that [a] political group let alone the squatters would organise a press conference, welcome media and open the doors for the public. They even had a team dedicated to media relations. (author's notes)

While they opened the doors to the media, City Plaza importantly held on to its own narrative. The role and influence of the media was also clearly visible through the collective agreement on creating a media group: "This project is not just about us; we want the average citizen to learn about the case" (Nasim, local activist).

The City Plaza collective made an attempt to spread the word among the public about the study case they developed and use media to channel the message. The City Plaza community took over the narrative and shaped public opinion, thus not allowing the media to talk about them without them; one of the researchers noticed this in her report (Iliadi, 2016):

While most squats have [a] small presence in the media and are characterized by a lack of communication strategies, City Plaza is *the most publicized* refugee squat in Athens. Despite the ongoing vilification of the solidarity movement in Greek mainstream press, City Plaza is distinctively and consciously open to the media. [...] Media publicity, according to the squatters, is desired for a double purpose; firstly, for the viability of the project itself and secondly for the strengthening of the whole solidarity movement.

In Greece all the major mainstream media organisations are owned by the businessmen close to the political elites of New Democracy and Pasok. They continue to have a general monopoly over all major media organisations and run the agenda according to their own interests to shape public opinion. The City Plaza collective took a great risk by taking over the communication strategy, but the experimental and different approach to the media, film-makers and also the academic scene, which was regularly present in the City Plaza, has also protected them in many situations, and offered an exceptional opportunity to document and analyse this collective learning experience.

Media reporting brought visibility to this counter-hegemonic project, empowered the movement and raised awareness amongst the general public about alternatives:

We want to show to the public what is going on here, since one goal is to help 400 people to live here decently. But another goal is *to set an example* of how the state itself and other people can do things for the refugees and to show that there is a way to house refugees which is human and decent and works better both for locals and refugees [...] so, this is why we are more open to the media and we are not afraid to be so. (Elias, local activist)

The attempt of the City Plaza collective was to share the positive experiences they had, presenting an alternative, and to establish a benchmark for others, even for the authorities. The stories from City Plaza and about City Plaza were widely reported by local and international media, among others Al Jazeera, Time, BBC, etc.

Lina adds that through their tolerant stance to media a positive image can be projected for the whole movement of solidarity with refugees and that through the depiction of local solidarity's power, the whole society might be urged to a more progressive direction. It follows that the project's communication works, to draw on her words, "propagandistically", "as an example that can help the whole movement" beyond City Plaza. (Iliadi, 2016)

Learning about the positive example of City Plaza could, according to the collective members, have the potential to steer societies into a more solidaristic and progressive direction, while media played the role of spreading the concept of City Plaza across the whole social movement: "The desired publicity was also produced on the streets of Athens through placards, banners and loud slogans which spread the activists' message in the most direct way" (Iliadi, 2016).

Participation in the protests and demos also became an opportunity to share the message of solidarity, but also to use it for promotion:

At the protests for the refugees' rights that took place almost weekly on the streets of Athens between 2015 and 2019, there was rarely a demo that passed without the presence of a well-represented group from the City Plaza. I saw refugees carrying banners with signs: "We live together we fight together". Sometimes they chanted slogans in their own languages, such as "Freedom" in Arabic. They also hand out leaflets explaining personal life experiences, thoughts and demands, which they have translated into various languages, including Arabic, Farsi and English. (author's notes)

The residents of City Plaza participated at many public events such as demonstrations and joined other refugee groups, anti-racist collectives and political groups on the streets



to manifest their demands publicly. They created banners, leaflets and texts in different languages in order to be understood by the wide range of the public.

The City Plaza housing project was from its very beginning in a legal dispute with the owner, once an actress, who pressed charges against the collective. On 10<sup>th</sup> July 2019, two days after the electoral win of the right-wing New Democracy party, the residents of City Plaza voluntarily left the building. One of the priorities of the newly elected minister, Michalis Chrisochoidis, was to evict the squat.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored the City Plaza housing project, which developed radical educational initiatives for residents and the public in Athens between 2016 and 2019. The findings show that radical educational initiatives for adults challenged the hegemonic discourse, practices and policies, while the housing project offered the opportunity for social inclusion, built a solidarity network, and raised awareness among the general public.

While new arrivals ended up homeless or excluded in the state-controlled refugee camps, the collective squatted in the building and presented an alternative by creating a counter-hegemonic community project.

City Plaza provided and developed a counter-hegemonic narrative to the mainstream agenda of migrant exclusion by proving an alternative is possible. They challenged social consent, the idea of being “taken for granted” or what is defined as “reality” by unmasking hidden ideologies and expanding democratic, dialogical social relations (Kump, 2012). Through different radical educational methods like public discussion, lectures and interviews with different actors (also from abroad), they developed a possible vision of the future.

The education of the public was done in three different ways: firstly, with a series of open educational events; secondly, by participating in demonstrations, protests and public gatherings; and finally, with an openness to the media, which they used as a channel to spread their message. Educational initiatives such as open public debates, lectures and presentations were an integral part of the City Plaza collective and, as Holst (2002) argues, an essential part of social changes because new knowledge and understanding were created and disseminated. The approach towards the media was unique and part of the organisational activities of City Plaza. Even if City Plaza did not own the media, they at least attempted to keep hold of the narrative in the local and international space, thus challenging hegemonic knowledge. The media were also used as a tool to spread word about the concept of such a housing project and reach wide solidarity networks.

Social inclusion was achieved first when new arrivals joined the alliances in a new community where local and international activists, forged through peer learning processes and capacities for collective action, were strengthened (Hall, 2009). While newcomers moved to the centre of the city they joined the public schools and became part of public institutions. The City Plaza collective was active in the network of social movements in

Athens as such newcomers were given an opportunity to become a part of the multi-cultural inclusive environment. According to Gidley et al. (2010), City Plaza offered a certain degree of inclusion: access to different services and possibilities were provided to residents (schools, market, ethnic gatherings, etc.); participation was achieved through the radical educational activities inside the housing project; while residents empowered themselves through different educational initiatives.

We have to be critical about social inclusion: because of its self-sufficiency, City Plaza created and built a kind of bubble within the local community, which did not require individuals to be overly involved and engaged in seeking opportunities to participate in working life if they did not want to be. They participated in the local community but basic housing, education and health services were provided by the City Plaza collective. Only some school-age children went to school, adult classes were organised by the City Plaza, as well as nearby projects that were also part of the network. Again, the study does not deal with extensive research on social inclusion, which would require more data and a different approach.

Data show that the City Plaza collective contested the “intellectual and moral leadership” of the institutions (NGOs and media) that helped maintain social consent and neoliberal hegemony (Gramsci, 1971/1992). It transformed into a successful counter-hegemonic experiment that with the help of radical educational activities supported the struggle for social inclusion and solidarity. The research presented here offers a foundation for further research, especially within the concepts of social inclusion, radical educational initiatives and counter-hegemonic housing projects.

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