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Kropotkin-19: A Mutual Aid Response to COVID-19 in Athens

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ABSTRACT The current health crisis, triggered by the spread of COVID-19, has mobilized activist groups and individuals within social movements worldwide to respond with actions of solidarity and mutual aid. In Greece, during the lockdown between March and May 2020, several mutual aid initiatives emerged in Athens to offer support to those who needed it. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper traces the emergence of *Kropotkin-19*, a mutual aid initiative in the central neighborhood of Exarcheia, that has provided food, essential goods, and legal and psychological support to families and individuals. The paper offers insight into how a pre-established solidarity network has “mutated” in response to the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing several long-term and emerging crises. The paper concludes that affective infrastructures are integral to the vision of radical social change in a post-COVID world.

KEYWORDS: multiple crises, COVID-19, mutual aid, solidarity network, social movements, care, affective infrastructures, Athens

Introduction

This dispatch focuses on *Kropotkin-19*, a mutual aid initiative in Athens that has provided food, medicines, and legal and psychological support to those who needed them during the COVID-19 lockdown (mid-March to late May 2020). It draws from ethnographic field notes collated as I participated in *Kropotkin-19*. Lingered between two subjectivities, of activist and researcher, I have adopted a militant ethnographic approach based on participatory action research and collaborative ethnography. Following the late David Graeber's *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, this work is intended as a "gift" to those "who are creating viable alternatives, try[ing] to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing" (Graeber 2004, 12).

This contribution is part of an ongoing project that over the last decade has looked at collaborative practices within emerging creative networks of artists, activists, and refugees in an Athenian and transglobal context (Travlou 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020). My central question is how communities and groups within these networks form and change through the collaborative practices of their members. Although "collaboration" has many meanings among scholars, I approach it as the key precondition for an economy of care that places solidarity and mutual aid at the heart of its exchange value system.

Current mainstream representations of the "crisis" ("financial/debt crisis," "refugee crisis," "COVID-19 crisis") often portray it as (only) a catastrophe. Instead, I am interested in exploring the opportunities for socio-political change and novel forms of participatory citizenship to emerge from the collaboration, friendship, care, trust, solidarity – in one word, comradeship – between people that these "crises" have brought together (see Tsilimpounidi 2016; Petsini 2019).

The current health crisis, triggered by the spread of COVID-19, has mobilized social movements worldwide to respond with actions of solidarity and mutual aid. Graeber and Andrej Grubačić (Graeber and Grubačić 2020), in their introduction to Pyotr Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (Kropotkin 1902), noted that

in the Global North, everywhere from various occupy movements to solidarity projects confronting the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid has emerged as a key phrase used by activists and mainstream journalists alike. At present, mutual aid is invoked in migrant solidarity mobilizations in Greece and in the organization of Zapatista society in Chiapas. Even scholars are rumored to occasionally use it (5).

Likewise, Martinez observes that mutual aid defines the "mutating mobilizations" of social movements in Spain during the COVID-19

pandemic (Martinez 2020, 1). Whether this mobilization of social movements is enough to effect social change remains a question. As Christos Zografos (2020), points out, “the experience of inequality during the pandemic seems to suggest that not enough has yet changed.” For him, “[a] post-COVID world must genuinely value care, embrace instead of devalue vulnerability, and attack the existing structures of privilege.”

In the *Kropotkin-19* mutual aid initiative I see a manifestation of how a preestablished network of antiauthoritarian activists has “mutated” to respond to the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key points that emerge from this paper are relevant to Zografos’ emphasis on care infrastructures as integral to the vision of radical social change in a post-COVID world.

Before COVID-19: A Summary of Multiple Crises

In early 2015, I moved from Edinburgh to Athens (the city I grew up in) on a four-month sabbatical leave. My move coincided with major political events in Greece: the election in office of the left-wing SYRIZA party in January 2015 and the arrival of large numbers of refugees in the following summer. Both events were “crises”: a debt/austerity crisis and the refugee crisis that since 2015 have reshaped the geopolitics of the European Union. Enacted in the same territory, these crises were met by a solidarity network of local and international activists who came together to build infrastructures of care. Coming from different fractions of the left and the antiauthoritarian movement, these activists organized to provide medical, housing, and other support to refugees and to fellow citizens who had lost their income and homes. Where the state declared its inability or unwillingness to provide aid, these informal infrastructures emerged to fill the void.

In the summer of 2015, the hope of country-wide radical shift evaporated. The SYRIZA-led government conceded to creditors’ demands for further austerity. Meanwhile, the number of refugees arriving in the Greek islands from Syria and other war zones increased by the day. Networks of local activists assembled to provide food and medical aid to newly arrived refugees who were sleeping rough on the streets and in parks. In September 2015, the first refugee housing squats emerged in an abandoned hotel in central Athens (City Plaza) and in an abandoned public office building. A constellation of refugee housing squats and other solidarity initiatives – social clinics, collective kitchens, intercultural schools, training workshops, free shops, legal advice and translation facilities, to name a few (Travlou 2020) – was built through the redirected energy and infrastructures of the social movement that had assembled during the preceding years of the austerity crisis. Since 2015, many foreign volunteers and activists have arrived in Athens and got involved in these networks, especially in and around the



Figure 1

Free Social Space *Nosotros*. © *Nosotros*, 2020.

All photographs in this article were taken by the author and the Kropotkin-19 team with a mobile phone for the group's Facebook page to communicate daily activities to its members.

neighborhood of Exarcheia, in the very center of Athens, where squats accommodate around 2500 to 3000 people.

These mutations of the refugee solidarity network in Athens became the focus of my ethnographic fieldwork. When I moved back to Athens on a second sabbatical leave in 2019, the group of antiauthoritarian activists I had collaborated with earlier had shifted their interest to new conditions in their neighborhood: touristification and gentrification. Between 2015 and 2019, Athens became one of the top tourist destinations in Europe – a development to which the recurrent presence of Athens in the global media narrative about the austerity and refugee crises and their discontents, alongside the holding of *Documenta 14* (a major contemporary art festival) in Athens, probably had a role. In 2018, the city received over 5 million tourists as it transformed into a year-round tourist destination. Rising tourism drove property value and rents steadily upwards. This increase in property value has been linked with the proliferation of short-let accommodation, especially Airbnb. Exarcheia was particularly affected by this touristification and incipient gentrification. Its “bohemian” reputation, nightlife, and the presence of many social spaces and self-organized initiatives, together with its central location, made it appealing to many, mainly young, foreign visitors.

In late January 2019, we started the *Action Against Regeneration and Gentrification!* (AARGI), based in *Nosotros* free social space, a self-organized, antiauthoritarian social center (Figure 1). We held weekly open assemblies to decide on actions and events: discussions with activist and academic guests from Athens and abroad, film screenings, neighborhood mapping, demonstrations. We witnessed first-hand the rapid transformation of the neighborhood: the

foreign investors, rise in rents, threat of evictions, increasing pressure on the refugee squats, oppressive policing (which intensified since the conservative New Democracy party came to office in July). Between August 2019 and early 2020, most refugee squats were raided by the riot police. State television channels and private media outlets systematically presented Exarcheia as an enclave of lawlessness which the government had to turn back to “normality” through relentless enforcement of the law (Karyiotis 2020). Those caught living there were split into three groups: undocumented immigrants, who were taken to deportation centers; asylum applicants, who were moved to refugee camps in or outside Athens; and recognized refugees, who were left on the streets homeless.

The Lockdown: “Enough with Normality!”

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing and refugee crises in Athens have intensified further, especially during the March-May 2020 lockdown (Sideris 2020). Many people lost their jobs; others shut down their businesses; many were unable to pay their rent. The tourism economy shrank; a great number of Airbnb flats remained empty during the lockdown. Evidently, many people in Athens, well beyond Exarcheia and the refugee squats, would be unable to access or afford food, medicine, and items of personal protection such as face masks, disinfectants, and soap. At the same time, refugee housing squats and shelters continued to be targeted by the police. A post on *Squat!.net* summarized the crisis:

[T]he police have also used the pandemic as a justification to swarm in Exarcheia and terrorize its residents, especially immigrants and those entering or exiting squats. The lockdown measures are more visible in Exarcheia than elsewhere. Police have been randomly stopping and searching people, and ticketing them for fabricated violations, in order to terrorize the neighbourhood. The police units typically deployed against the anarchist movement, known as MAT and Delta, have set up checkpoints across Exarcheia, claiming that the neighbourhood is no more as it used to be. (Radio Fragma 2020)

COVID-19 thus has become a “revelatory crisis,” an event that “reveals the topography of the inequalities and crises that were already there but have really deepened” (Ribot 2020).

When Greece went into strict lockdown, the government stressed that the people of Greece had to make the short-term sacrifice of staying at home to ensure that “we can soon return to normality.” In May 2020, Silvia Federici was invited by the Greek feminist group ‘8th of March Assembly’ to participate in a Facebook Watch Party on gendered violence and social reproduction during the pandemic. In her talk, Federici (2020) argued that “we don’t want to return to normality because normality was the problem. Enough with normality!” As outlined above, even before COVID-19 it was already evident

that this “normality” was predicated on anti-immigration policies, oppressive policing, crackdown on social movements, housing evictions, privatization of public property, poorly paid and precarious labor.

Against the odds, the lockdown became a paradigmatic moment of political praxis: the anti-authoritarian movement that had gone through various ups and downs in the past five years reassembled its solidarity networks almost immediately. As Tine de Moor observed in a recent webinar on the commons and crisis, the pandemic has become an opportunity for the rediscovery of “solidarity in more or less different forms” (de Moor 2020).

In our first open assembly, in mid-March 2020 and on the eve of the lockdown, we decided that *AARG!* and *Nosotros* would respond to the pandemic by launching an initiative of mutual aid: we would collect and deliver food, medication, and other essentials to those who needed them. The scope of this initiative is outlined in our declaration:

In these challenging times, we are called to bear the burden of responsibility towards ourselves and those around us by creating our own structures and networks of solidarity and mutual aid. These networks and structures must be transformed into living agents of resistance, first, by taking our health into our own hands as a conscious choice of mutual protection and, second, by supporting health, mental health and welfare infrastructures. (<https://kropotkin19.com/>)

We named our group *Kropotkin-19*, after Russian anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin, author of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Kropotkin 1902). Kropotkin argued that practicing mutual aid is

[t]he surest means for giving each other and all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence and progress, bodily, intellectual and moral. [...] Moreover, it is evident that life in societies would be utterly impossible without a corresponding development of social feelings, and, especially, of a certain collective sense of justice growing to become a habit. (42)

In his book, Kropotkin challenged the Darwinist view that humans are believed to be competitive by their nature. Instead, Kropotkin suggested that “in the long run the practice of solidarity proves much more advantageous to the species than the development of individuals endowed with predatory inclinations” (17).

Organizing Mutual Aid Actions: From Online to Offline Communication

Between March and May 2020, *Kropotkin-19* organized weekly deliveries of food and other essentials to families and individuals across Athens, and to detainees in the Aliens and Immigration Department.

Due to the lockdown and social distancing measures, our weekly assemblies and most of the communication and organization of the group's actions were conducted online. This proved to be challenging, as group members were unequally skilled in the use of communication technology. We used various communication platforms, mostly open-source and encrypted: Telegram, Signal, and WhatsApp for internal communication, Jitsi and Discord to run the assembly, and mobile phones for those who could not access online platforms. We also set up a closed group on Facebook Messenger for discussing urgent matters. For external communications and collection and delivery of donations, we combined WhatsApp, Viber, and mobile phone calls. There were times when this juggling with multiple platforms and applications did not go smoothly. On a few occasions, the assemblies run for over three hours due to technical issues: someone's microphone would not work on Discord, or we would have to use two different platforms at the same time, with one person moderating the assembly between, for instance, Jitsi and Discord.

To organize weekly actions, we split into smaller teams with specific tasks: communication; technical support; collection, transport and delivery; media documentation and translation. The communication team was responsible for making the poster for each weekly action, managing the Facebook page, and designing and managing the website. The poster announced the collection days and listed the food and other provisions required. Usually, this information was accompanied by a short text that acted as the political banner of the group (Figure 2(a)). The content of the poster was decided by the group over the weekend in an online assembly. The poster was made by the graphic designer in collaboration with the communication team on Sunday. The communication team then uploaded the digital poster on the group's Facebook page and made multiple printouts for flyposting in Exarcheia.

The Facebook page was also used to publicize the group's positions with regards to the multiple (health, housing, refugee) crises. The most vulnerable were the worst affected by the government's "Stay at Home" campaign. How can you stay at home when you don't have a home to stay at, or a job to pay your rent?

During the lockdown, members of AARG! and *Nosotros* participated in assemblies of the international *Rent Strike 2020* campaign, organized by the international *Tenant Solidarity Network* and the local *Initiative for Housing Action and Solidarity*. Through these assemblies, we became aware of how national lockdowns and neoliberal policies were conflated into a catastrophic housing crisis worldwide. *Rent Strike 2020* issued a list of demands to tackle this global housing crisis. The *Initiative for Housing Action and Solidarity*, AARG!, *Nosotros*, and *Kropotkin-19* promoted these demands through our local networks and social media.



Figure 2a, b

a. Kropotkin-19 Mutual Aid: “Only society can save the people.”
Direct solidarity to vulnerable groups. Collection of essentials, food and medicine.
Every Wednesday and Friday 18:00 – 20:30 at the entrance of Nosotros,
Themistokleous 66, Exarcheia.

b. The 5 Demands of Kropotkin-19 Mutual Aid
(© Kropotkin-19, 2020)

The *Kropotkin-19* website was co-authored by the communication, technical support, and media documentation, and translation teams. On the website, we posted information on legal advice and psychological support offered by *Kropotkin-19* members with relevant professional expertise and presented our positions and demands on the pandemic and the multiple crises. We collated five demands (Figure 2b):

1. Lifting of the lockdown restrictions
2. Immediate cessation of non-essential work
3. Requisition and redistribution of housing, and free distribution of essential goods to all
4. Release of all prisoners
5. Legalization of all immigrants

Subsequent posts contextualized our demands and publicized our political perspective. All posts were written collectively – drafted by two or three members of the documentation team and edited and approved by all before publication. The first post (11 April 2020), entitled “Mutual aid against the pandemic of neoliberalism,” was a call for action:

Nosotros Free Social Space invites comrades, friends, supporters, and our neighbours to organise Mutual Aid Initiatives. [...]

Nosotros Free Social Space proposes the initiation of horizontal, open, self-organised Mutual Aid groups; most importantly, we propose immediate mobilisation based on collective action. (<https://kropotkin19.com/posts/a-post-3/>)

Building a Mutual Aid Network across the City

Setting up *Kropotkin-19* during the lockdown was clearly a challenge. One key difficulty was access to physical spaces, including the *Nosotros* building. Although all our communication and decision-making took place online, operating in physical spaces on the ground was essential. During lockdown, leaving the house was only allowed for urgent health matters, food provision, exercise, or for assisting people in need. A permit request had to specify the reason in a text message to the police; we used the option of “assisting those in need.”

We created a network of spaces – an informal supply chain – with the *Nosotros* building as the distribution center. These spaces became the backbone of *Kropotkin-19*. Those of us who did not have an underlying medical condition, and therefore were less vulnerable, could help collect and distribute food and other provisions, while taking all necessary measures to prevent contagion (masks and gloves, social distancing). These measures were described in detail on our Facebook page.

Our ground operations involved our extended networks of supporters, friends, and other activist groups. Each of us contacted our individual networks to find out who needed food and other essentials. The *United African Women Organization*, with whom I had collaborated before, provided us with contact details of newly arrived women refugees from Africa. We also got another list of elderly migrants from Eastern Europe. We phoned everyone in the list to ask for their specific needs. We specified their requests (diapers, powder milk formulas, rice) on our posters. Then, we announced our collection days (Wednesdays and Fridays) on our Facebook page and on fly-posters and contacted potential donors (individuals and other activist groups).

A group of us entered *Nosotros* before each collection day to clean and disinfect the place. On collection days, we asked people to leave their donations at the entrance of the building. Two of us would then take the donations into a designated area to disinfect each package. Another group would prepare each package for delivery (Figure 3). On the day before the distribution, we would contact the delivery team and recipients to arrange delivery times. The delivery drivers were *Kropotkin-19* members or people from our wider network. As the lockdown rules permitted only one passenger in each vehicle, on days with a busy delivery schedule we had to arrange for more than one car to be available. On delivery days, two persons were responsible for loading the packages to the car(s).



Figure 3
Kropotkin-19 Mutual Aid, “Collection Day.” © Penny Travlou 2020.

Then, the driver had to send a text message to the police to obtain permission for the ride (“urgent health issue; assistance to persons in need”). Upon arrival, the driver would contact the recipients and ask them to collect the delivery from the entrance of their household (Figure 4).

This multistage operation linked spaces, objects, and people in a distributed network of mutual aid actions across Athens. Alongside this network of comrades, members, and recipients, *Kropotkin-19* intermeshed with other networks, such as the *international Rent Strike 2020* and the local *Initiative for Housing Action and Solidarity*, and also with similar mutual aid initiatives in Exarcheia, elsewhere in Athens, and in other cities in Greece. In doing so, *Kropotkin-19* became part of an evolving and far-reaching communication meshwork.

Building Affective Infrastructures: Acting Collectively with Care

In the months of the lockdown, mutual aid groups focusing on housing and refugee support proliferated. Many of these initiatives emerged from the “mutation” and merging of pre-existing social solidarity initiatives. The speed of this mutation was remarkable. One explanation for this rapid mobilization is the previous experience of group participants with multiple crises. Tried and proven practices of mobilizing, assembling, and networking were already in place. These interlinked mutual aid groups could be described as “affective infrastructures” (Berlant 2016): the relations, associations, and practices of resistance that enable people to be with each other and to enact



Figure 4

Kropotkin-19 Mutual Aid, “Delivery Day.” © Penny Travlou 2020.

politics of care and solidarity. Affective infrastructures are the alternative to relations of sovereignty and power. They stem from the need to act collectively against a “broken world” (Berlant 2016, 399). In her interview for the journal *Atlantis*, Berlant argued that

if we embrace relationality over sovereign individuality as the ground for social theory and good life; [...] if we begin to think differently about infrastructures and temporalities of dependence, care, and intimacy; if our project is collective and not sovereign – heroic – things could happen (Zarran, Libe, and Berlant 2017, 14).

As a (local) network of care and solidarity, *Kropotkin-19* has provided food, legal advice, psychological support to many people in need. As a mutual aid initiative, *Kropotkin-19* is also positioned within an expansive (transglobal) network of affective infrastructures that has emerged during the current health crisis.

By the end of the first national lockdown in May 2020, the multiple crises have intensified. More refugee housing squats were raided by the riot police, housing evictions rose, police brutally attacked demonstrators on many occasions, and new anti-demonstration legislation gained parliamentary approval (Reuters Staff 2020). Since the summer of 2020 *Nosotros* has been threatened with eviction by the building’s owner due to rent arrears accumulated during the lockdown, which we partly covered through a crowdfunding campaign among local and international donors (activists, local businesses, neighbors). Although *Kropotkin-19* paused its activities for a number of months, the group has started its operation again during the second national lockdown in November 2020. This time, we have created a mutual aid network with other self-organised initiatives in Athens to collect and deliver food and essential goods to the refugee camp in Ritsona.

We cannot though entertain the illusion that radical social change in a post-COVID world can come from solidarity actions alone. Besides recognizing care and vulnerability as central to life, we also need to “attack the structures of privilege and inequality” (Zografos 2020). It should be noted that privilege and inequality also divide this ethnographic project itself. The “structural insecurities” (Panourgia 2019, 232) between the activist/researcher, other activists, and those receiving the food deliveries should be recognized and confronted.

“We [...] live in a time where we have been provided with a peek into an alternative future” (Pirate Care Syllabus 2020). All possibilities for not returning to normality are open. The time calls urgently for our collective action and for “modalities and capacities of care” (Pirate Care Syllabus 2020) that will enable us to imagine, and make, a common world.

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