"Diversity in the context of crisis in Athens' city centre; everyday practices of solidarity and cohesion versus the quotidian realities of micro-segregation and fear"

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Abstract:

Diversity has become a fundamental characteristic of today's European cities; people of different ethnic origins cohabit with people with diverge lifestyles and perceptions of life. However, in times of crisis whoever is perceived as different, i.e. the migrant, gay, or activist 'other', tends to become a scapegoat accused for all urban ills. This research is part of the Divercities European project that puts an emphasis on the research of diversity in today's' hyper-diversified cities. The basic hypothesis of this qualitative research project claims that diversity promotes social cohesion and becomes a driving force of social interaction in residential environments. Driving attention to the current dynamics that emerge in the city centre of Athens, this paper focuses on the way diversity interplays with the social dynamics that emerge in a mixed, though deprived, neighbourhood of Akadimia Platonos. A great part of the interviewees share the same ideas promoted by the mainstream media against the 'other'. Within this discourse the presence of migrants appears catastrophic for the local economy, and diversity is equated to a syndrome of fear, especially against migrants. However, the micro-geographies of the area indicate the contrary. In times of crisis, the notion of solidarity becomes a major task undertaken by local residents who form initiatives closely related to diversity. Daily interactions and deeper bonds develop amongst neighbours who may be characterized as the 'other'. The activist 'other' in the area encourages solidarity practices for/with the migrant 'other'. This local, bottom-up reaction emerges in a place where urban politics shift their attention to economic notions and neglect social needs, as the residual welfare state gets mangled. This way diversity gains importance not only as an aspect of social cohesion, but becomes an active factor of a broader attempt to construct and promote mutual support and establish new solidarity structures.

This paper consists of three parts. The first section analyses the way the Greek society has diversified since the 1990s. The following sections focus on the way diversity is realised by the residents of an inner city neighbourhood of Athens called Akadimia Platonos. Notions of fear are challenged by the micro-geographies of solidarity, mutual support and social cohesion.

Key words: diversity, crisis, Athens, fear, solidarity, social cohesion

Introduction

Diversity has become a considerable force (re)shaping the characteristics and social composition of today's cities (Tasan- Kok et al, 2014). Beyond the great metropolis, cities of the lower hierarchy, have become extensively more diverse. Within the framework of the European Union, people, in seek for better living conditions and employment opportunities, migrate from one place to the other, carrying with them distinct cultures, philosophies and religious beliefs. Simultaneously, diversity is interconnected to the global crisis; wars and violence in Africa and the Middle East force people to migrate and find refuge to more peaceful environments.

At the same time, the notion of diversity is interlinked to the existence of heterogeneity within cities (Maloutas, 2014). Diversity amongst the various social groups signifies different trajectories in the legal status, education, employment, income, religion, i.e. differences in citizenship and the socio-economic potential (Vertovec, 2010). Discrimination in the labour market, difficulties in obtaining the right documentation, lower economic income and wages result in social inequalities which in many cities, especially of the global north, may be spatially expressed through patterns of spatial segregation (Park, 1921, Amin, 2002). However, in cities of Southern Europe low spatial segregation (Mignione 1995) has led to socially mix environments, while diversity is mainly related to unequal social opportunities (Kandylis et al, 2012). The way global trends of migrant transcend to the local level of the neighbourhood signify the way diversity is understood, experienced and lived by people. At the micro-scale of the neighbourhood, diversity is about the interpenetration of different cultures in everyday living, related to the formation of social interaction through the establishment of social bonds or not.

This paper drives attention to way diversity plays out in the everyday life of the residents of an inner city area in Athens called Akadimia Platonos. Under the shadow of the crisis, many inhabitants share and reproduce the mainstream xenophobic discourse. At the same time, residents who are active in local associations and grassroot initiatives establish solidarity structures which form spaces of encounter and

1

interactions amongst the diverse social groups that live in the area; promoting and celebrating diversity. At the same time, the use of public space results in the constructions of social relations and bonding which break the stereotypes against 'otherness'. It is within the quotidian practices at the very local level where diversity is encouraged as a figure advancing social cohesion.

This research is part of the Divercities European project that puts an emphasis on the research of diversity in today's' hyper-diversified cities. The basic hypothesis of this qualitative project claims that diversity promotes social cohesion and becomes a driving force of social interaction in residential environments. In total 26 open ended semi structured were conducted with politicians, both from the local and the central state, NGOs dealing with migrants' issues and local and bottom-up initiatives related to diversity. Moreover, 50 in depth interviews were conducted with residents of the area of Akadimia Platonos seeking to address the ways social relations of diversity develop in the inner city of Athens.

The next section of this paper refers to the processes of diversification of the city of Athens. The following sections focus on the daily practices of the inhabitants of Akadimia Platonos, the relations that emerge, the social distance which exists besides spatial proximity, as well as the potential of social cohesion which emerges within specific initiatives in the micro-spaces of the neighbourhood.

Migration in Greece and Athens' socio-spatial reconfiguration

Since the post WWII period until relatively recently, Greece could be characterized as a country of emigration; deprivation and lack of job vacancies led many Greeks to migration in more developed countries, such as the UK and Germany in Europe, or the USA in the global north and Australia in the south. Nonetheless, since the 1970s, a small number of migrants from Egypt, Pakistan, India and Philippines with legal status permits arrived in the country, as a result of several labour treaties that the Greek governments signed with the above mentioned countries. However, since the 1990s, Greece turned from a sender into a receiver country; when processes of liberalization began in eastern European countries under the communist regime, Greece

experienced an important inflow of migrants (Cavounidis, 2002). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, migrants from Albania, Poland and Bulgaria settled in Greece, either by obtaining the legal documentation, or crossing the boarders bypassing the documentation issue.

State reaction for migration was restrained; as Cavounidis (2002: 47) notes *'Greece was the last of the southern European countries to implement a regularisation programme for unauthorised migrants'*. Kandylis (2006) states that the initial state reaction towards the first wave of migration was related to the preservation of public order: border controls and police operations in cities. Since the 1990s, several legal frameworks and legislations have been put forward by the Greek government (especially by the ministry of Interior which had a main role on migrant issues), dealt migration a temporary issue; the migrant population was considered as transient, policies reproduced oppressiveness whilst the lack of regularization, eased the migrants' exploitation in the housing and labour market (ibid). The first regularization program to deal with migration was introduced in 1997 (under the Presidential Decrees 358/1997 and 359/1997) focusing on issues like 'entry-exit, residence, employment, expulsion of foreigners and procedure for the recognition of the status of refugee for foreigners' which dealt the migrant population as 'temporary labour force' (Maloutas et al, 2014). By 2005, the current legal framework for migration was established (L. 3386), which, under the guidance of the EU directives and policies, signified a shift in migration policies, as it explicitly referred to the issue of 'integration' (Kandylis, 2006).

Nonetheless, with the debt crisis and the austerity policies that have been imposed the last years, which ever policy to promote migrants' integration, thus the rights as citizens, were determined. With the raising powers of the neo-Nazi party of the Golden Dawn, and the expansion of an anti-migrant public discourse, the 2012 government embraced a punitive approach in migrations policies, strengthening the powers of the Ministry of Public Order over migration. More precisely, the Ministry of Public Order

undertook extended operations of arrest and eviction of undocumented immigrants from city centres. A number of detention centres were created around Athens and in other parts of the country in order to detain undocumented migrants until their expulsion. Border controls have intensified and a wall has been erected to impede the entry of illegal immigrants from the Greek-Turkish border (Maloutas et al. 2014).

Simultaneously, since the mid 2000s, a new wave of migrants has appeared originating from countries in the Middle East and Africa which are hit by war and oppression and poverty (Kandylis et al, 2012). Migration policies echo still L. 3386/2005, signifying the important weakness of the Greek state in dealing effectively with immigration flows. Nearly 20 years after the initial waves of migrants, Greek immigration policy remains short-sighted, dealing with immigration as a necessary evil (Triantafyllidou, 2009). This argument exemplifies the reactive and piecemeal character of the migration policy making in Greece (ibid).

As housing was not an issue picked up by migration policies, it was mainly provided by the private sector. Since social housing is almost non-existent in Greece, immigrants sought shelter in the most affordable areas of the private rental sector. That is, in small, devalued apartments on the lower floors of antiparochi buildings, in the less affluent neighbourhoods of the city centre or in the periphery of Athens, in areas close to their jobs (in agriculture, in light industry or in construction (Maloutas et al., 2012). Antiparochi refers to the housing system where low storey houses were demolished and replaced by new high buildings whose apartments were offered in affordable prices by small construction companies (Sarigiannis, 2000). During the 1960s and the 1970s, its implementation led to the demolition of the majority of the low-rise housing stock, especially in the central areas of the city, and its replacement by high-rise and dense blocks of flats. This system led to a form of vertical social differentiation (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001) in the central parts of the city, where the more affluent households settled on the higher floors of the buildings and the lower classes on the lower floors and in the basements (ibid). The deterioration of the housing

condition in the city centre led to the suburbanisation of the Greek population since the 1980s. Hence, since the 1990s, the migrant population that settled in the city, resided in the apartments on the lower floors (mostly ground floor and below ground) of the antiparochi buildings, introducing ethnic diversity to the vertical social differentiation pattern of the city (Maloutas, 2011).

According to Kandylis et al (2012) foreign population in Athens represents 10% of the total population and almost the 13% of the economically active population. According to the census data of 2001[1], "t*he ethnic composition of the immigrant population is quite unbalanced with the single largest group (Albanians) representing almost 51%. The other important groups from the Balkans and Eastern Europe represented more than 15%, including immigrants from Poland (3.4%), Russia (3.3%), Bulgaria (3.1%), Romania (2.9%), Ukraine (2.8%) and Moldavia (1.1%) [...] Groups from the Indian Peninsula represented over 4% and included Pakistanis (2.5%), Bangladeshis (1.1%) and fewer Indians (0.7%). (EKKE-ESYE, 2005)*" (Kandylis et al. 2012: 269). However, Census data under-represent undocumented immigrants, hence the actual number of the migrant population of Athens is bigger.

Migrants are almost exclusively (90%) engaged in non-skilled and manual jobs well below the immigrants' level of education and qualifications (Arapoglou and Sayas, 2009). Since the 1990s, the participation of the migrant population in the labour market has changed the ethnic composition of the working class, and also it managed to reverse its declining numbers, especially in the areas of the city centre of Athens (Maloutas et al 2012, Arapoglou and Sayas 2009).

The spatial concentration of the migrant population in inner city neighbourhoods, as well as in areas of the periphery of the city in close proximity to their work, in contradiction to the social segregation theories of the western cities, has led to a reduction of spatial and social segregation in Athens (Arapoglou, 2012). The availability

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[1] At the time of the writing, the census data of 2011 for the city level are not available.

of cheap housing in central areas, actually reinforced ethnic mixing through the pattern of cohabitation in the 'vertical differentiated' buildings of antiparochi (ibid). Nonetheless, although the outcome for the Athenian socio-spatial tissue has been an increase in ethnic and social diversity, the integration process of some migrant groups goes hand in hand with the emergence of important inequalities. Particularly migrants in the lower end of the social structure, employed in precaurity without documentation, seem to be exposed to fierce exploitation underpinning issues of social and spatial injustice (Kandylis et al, 2012).

For instance, the recent wave of migrants from Asia and Africa that has arrived in Athens on its way to other European countries[2]. Due the European Union Treaty of Dublin II, immigrants are not allowed to leave Greece and they are sent back to the country of entrance in case they are illegally found in other European countries (Tzirtzilaki, 2009). As there is not any housing provision for the immigrants, thus hardly any job opportunity due to the crisis, this population resides in derelict buildings in the city centre or gets exploited by groups of people who provide mattresses in apartments in the city centre; it is said that the cost of a mattress raises up to 5€ per night and that most the apartments do not have toilets nor kitchens. With the country's economy in crisis and the increasing number of unemployment, some city centre areas are facing serious problems considering delinquent behaviours, trafficking, and narcotics. The middle classes in the city centre feel trapped in a common destiny with the immigrant population (Arapoglou and Maloutas, 2011), where deterioration and insecurity thrives, especially as the economic crisis reflects itself in inner city areas through shop foreclosures and skyrocketing unemployment rates.

The next section focuses on the everyday realities of diversity of people in an inner city area called Akadimia Platonos. Although some residents express feelings of fear

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[2] Greece is generally considered a transit country

against diversity, others, especially the ones active in local initiatives, enjoy social interaction with residents of various socio-ethnic backgrounds.

'Otherness' and everyday fears in Akadimia Platonos

The area of Akadimia Platonos is a 3.4 Km^2 neighbourhood in the south-west of the city centre of Athens, in close proximity to Omonia Square (the second largest square of Athens). It consists of 64, 155 inhabitants; most of them are of Greek origin (almost 80%) while the rest of the population consists of migrant groups. The largest migrant group is the Albanian one (9% of the local population), followed by the Pakistani group (0.8%) and other groups from Eastern European countries, mainly Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia and Romania (EKKE-ESYE, 2005). This neighbourhood may be characterised as a mixed neighbourhood, since the social groups that inhabit in it are of mixed ethnic and cultural background. However, the diversification of the area is a relatively recent process; although very few people from India, Pakistan and Egypt had settled in the area since the 1980s, Akadimia Platonos started receiving migrant population since the 1990s. Simultaneously, since the 1980s many people from the Roma community started inhabiting in the neighbourhood, in the low storey neglected houses or in the basements of the antiparochi buildings. After, the 2000s people from Middle East and African countries have settled in the neighbourhood; and, since 2010s, young alternative people, engaged in cultural activities, are active in Akadimia Platonos, reallocating themselves from the gentrifying area of Metaxourgio where they cannot anymore afford the rents.

Most of the interviewees, both of Greek and migrant origin, stated that the basic reason to settle in Akadimia Platonos is the economic one; low house prices and rents in relation to the close proximity to the city centre and the easy access to the national highways have been the most important pull factors for choosing the neighbourhood as a place to inhabit. Moreover, other social reasons were mentioned such as the importance of being close to compatriots and friends for the migrant population, and to family members for the Greek population.

Nonetheless, for many Greeks there was a broader perception that their living conditions have worsened since the arrival of the migrant population in the early 1990s. According to their narratives, before the 1990s the neighbourhood was peaceful, but when the migrant 'other' appeared, problems of delinquency emerged. Especially older people, mostly with low cultural capital working in routine occupations before getting a pension, discussed in detail about their fearful syndrome against the migrants. As expressed by elderly interviewees, they are afraid to leave home after 7 o' clock in the afternoon, as there are lots of drug users and dealers who are *'Pakistanis, blacks and migrants that sleep inside the park',* hence they cannot enjoy the public spaces in the area, due to the presence of the migrant 'other'.

Likewise, middle aged Greeks (of low cultural capital, employed in routine occupations) indicated fearful feelings against the migrant other. For example, a Greek cleaning lady in her 40s indicated that:

> *'We have lots of issues with the migrants. It is a matter of security. We cannot leave our children to play on their own in the playground as someone has to watch over them constantly, as we are afraid that something bad will happen to them, that they will steal from them [...] and there are gangs by the Albanian children'*

The issue of fear is underpinned by the need of constant surveillance that the interviewee highlights; the migrant children (Albanians) are illustrated as dangerous, organized in gangs that threaten and attack the Greek children, who are more portrayed as the victims of the violent practices of the 'others'

Moreover, the arrival of the recent wave of migrants from countries of the Middle East has intensified these feelings of discomfort. As narrated by an unemployed Greek woman in her 40s:

8

"*There are many Albanians, and Pakistanis from all kinds of the races... They are all blacks [...]I don't know exactly where they are from as I get confused from their blackness [...] they fight with each other, they get drunk, they get into many things. The other day my son told me there were gunshots in the square [...] The old days you were not afraid to go out. Now you lock yourself inside the house...*"

According to the interviewee, the presence of different cultures is perceived as negative. The migrants are described as people with black skin colours who are responsible for the delinquency in the public spaces of area (problems with alcohol, gunshots, fighting) which threats the tranquility of the private space of the house (robberies, attacks, restricting at home for self-defense). The *'blackness'* is used in a twofold way by the interviewee: it acts as an equalising factor (all migrants are black) indicating the lack of knowledge of the migrant other, as well as a feeling of superiority of the white colour of skin. Moreover the word *'blackness'* symbolizes the darkness of terror, the fear which arises against the migrant other. Such feelings fuel the political support of the Neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn. In the area of Akadimia Platonos, the Golden Dawn received the highest electoral support (20,8%) in comparison to other districts (13% the lowest one) in the last local elections[3]. However, as diversity is perceived as the main reason for the downgrading of the area, it may be considered as a crucial factor of social distancing amongst the various groups that co-habit in Akadimia Platonos. Actually fear against the migrant 'other' turns spatial proximity into social differentiation and distancing, jeopardizing the potential for social interaction.

Interestingly enough, many migrants expressed feelings of fear against the Roma community and the Greek population. For example, a Syrian waiter in his 30s stated that:

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[3] Other Greek respondents perceived this rise of racism in the area as a rather negative factor that jeopardizes relations amongst the various social groups that live in Akadimia Platonos.

"I would like to meet the people in my area, but I am scared of their reaction when I talk to them [...] once I was going back home at night and some Greeks started shouting at me and calling me names [...] I felt very scared [...] In my country where there is dictatorship we never talked to people like that..."

This respondent wants to be open and meet his neighbours, but he is afraid of the Greek's reaction, as once he was harassed in the public space by a group of neo-Nazi supporters. The issue of harassment was brought up by other migrants. Many migrants stated that they had problems with the police and the civil servants when dealing with their documentation. The rudeness and the impoliteness by Greek policemen and state employed have made the migrants feel offended. Nonetheless, the Romanians and the Bulgarians stated that this attitude changed when their countries joined the European Union and ever since their affairs with the Greek state have normalised.

Harassment by Greek neighbours was stressed by other migrant inhabitants, indicating the social distancing which exists amongst people in the area. One Rumanian narrated that she had to change house, as the Greek lady living below her was complaining and creating problems to them claiming that her child was making lots of noise and she could not sleep. An interviewed Roma narrated a similar story that a Greek woman residing in the upper floors of the next building is trying to convince his owner to evict him and his family. Quite similarly, a Pakistani migrant stated that a Greek neighbour was calling the police when they celebrated the Ramadan and gathered for dinner at his home. From a similar perspective, a Pakistani interviewee expressed that he does not want to visit any of the public places of the area in fear of the police controls and of the Roma people. As he claimed in the interview:

'I don't like this square it is full of Gypsies [...] we don't go there are when they see us they start calling us names and shouting at us [...] The other thing that makes me feel scared is the Golden Dawn. And the

police that controls all the time. I am ok. I have papers, but if they put

you in the bus then they don't let you out for at least 3 or 4 hours, and

you lose your time[...] they will take me there and let me out later and I

will come back home by midnight'

According to the interviewee, Roma bullying, neo-Nazi attacks and police controls become have become main obstacles to use the public spaces in the area. He prefers to visit other friends at home than spend time in the public spaces. The lack of documentation (of the friends), and the fear of police and neo-Nazi brutality restrict the Pakistani population to the private sphere of the house were they feel more secure. Moreover, the anguish from loss of time is underpinned; being arrested by the police means spending lots of time in police stations and bureaucratic mechanisms or in detention camps. Time loss is perceived as humiliation (I am ok I have papers, but they don't let you out...) thus extra tiredness (I will come back home by midnight) which makes daily life more complicated, especially when working informally at routine, manual occupations.

Moreover, the presence of Roma population in the area creates feelings of discomfort to both migrant and the Greek population. The strong outdoor living, the low educational level (Roma's in Greece hardly go to school), the tendency to panhandle and cheat creates feelings of fear or dislike. As stated by a Romanian unemployed woman in her 30s, very close to her home there is:

'a building full of Gypsies and to tell you the truth I am afraid to pass

from there [...] it is not that I am afraid of something important, but it is

that these people have their own culture'.

The above interviewee could not specify why she is afraid of the Roma population, which is the reason which makes her feel afraid, apart from the fact that they have their own culture which is distinct to the rest of the social groups. Similar fearful

feelings which are expressed by the Greek population against otherness, are expressed by the migrant population. As Ahmed (2000:21) has argued, the stranger is somebody we already know as it is some-one we have already recognised as a stranger: "*The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: we recognise someone as a stranger rather than failing to recognise them*". The Roma or the migrant 'other' is someone different from us that we are reluctant to recognise the distinctiveness of hers culture. This leads to social detachment besides the spatial attachment.

The fact that diverse cultures co-exist in the same place is, sometimes, perceived as something bad. As stated by a Ukrainian cleaning lady in her 30s diversity is something negative and unavoidable:

> "*I now think that there is no way round anymore. We have become a very mixed, very diverse society, but we learn to compromise with each other. There are lots of gays, drug addicts, we cannot go anywhere where they don't exist...*".

This interviewee would prefer to live in more homogeneous environments. She recognizes diversity as an aspect of living in the city, without alternative. There is a strong evidence from the research that the limited or the lack of knowledge over cultural differences and distinctiveness leads to misunderstandings, prejudices, intolerance and fear. As Koefoed and Simonsen (2012) 'strange(r)ness' is actually a spatial relation constituted in everyday encounters where the 'stranger' is a figure living within the spatial ambivalence of proximity and distance. The figure of the stranger is represented as the danger of the unknown (ibid). Such perceptions encourage more distancing than interaction and social cohesion.

However, as Massey (2007) has indicated space is a mosaic of disputes, a meeting place of joint though conflicting trajectories of people. As such, spatial disputes which are caused due to fear of the "other", are accompanied by social practices of encounter

and interaction, filling in the puzzle of the socio-spatial mosaic. The following section focuses on the encounters, the social bonding and bridging that develop in the area impeding the generalization of mistrust and fear.

Everyday living with diversity; solidarity and cohesion at the micro-spaces of Akadimia Platonos

Place attachment, social networks and the development of stronger bonding are especially encouraged when different social groups live within the spatial framework of the neighbourhood. It is at this spatial level where closer relations and bonding may emerge amongst diverse social groups. Moreover, at this scale, social inclusion and interaction may be analysed through the lenses of social cohesion. After all, social cohesion is about getting by and getting on at the more mundane level of everyday life (Forest and Kearns, 2001). Nonetheless, social cohesion is a rather ambivalent term, as with a basic scope to advocate better social relations, it ends up in contextual ambiguity, in need for more conceptual analysis (Maloutas and Malouta, 2004). In order to diminish this epistemological fallacy, we focus on the dimensions of social cohesion which are related to participation in local initiatives, the use of public space, social solidarity and the networks which encourage a sense of belonging.

Local associations and the use of public space
Residents' associations and local committees have been established in Athens in order to put forward demands for the amelioration of the built environment and improvement of the local quality of life (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012). However, since 2010, i.e. since the begging of austerity, local associations put forward the need of self-organisation against the crisis and formed solidarity structures dealing with eveyday needs such as food and clothing issues, legal affairs against the vast taxation, auxiliary classes to students, social medical centres and groceries (Arampatzi, 2015).

In Akadimia Platonos, the residential committee has rented a space exactly opposite Plato's Park, the public space- landmark of the neighbourhood, as it is where Plato had

established his school in ancient Athens. It engages with the social problems in the area, especially the ones which affect the most vulnerable population, i.e. the migrant and the Roma people. Soup kitchens, classes to Roma and migrant children, discussion over legal manners for migrant's issues form the core of the local activism. Next to the space of the residential association a collective kafeneio called European Village puts forward the need for solidarity, zero growth environmental development and humane relations. A block away the Platonas' initiative organises language (both Greek and foreign), traditional dancing and singing classes, whilst in the same area, the Sunday's migrants school offers free Greek language classes language to the migrant population. People who are active in these initiatives network with each other in order to promote their ideas and alleviate the burdens of living in austerity. Daily interactions turn into social bonding and friendships amongst migrant and the Greek population. At the same time, the exchange of ideas and experiences inspire constantly new initiatives which are organised in the public spaces of the area. Such initiatives aspire to bring the diverse people together, beyond political, religious and lifestyle differentiations, while bridging the gap that exists in the local social relations. As Putnam (2000) would indicate, such initiatives encourage the development of bridging social capital.

Local associations, especially the resident's committee and the Sunday's migrants school, put forward the idea of solidarity and cater for the needs of the most deprived population. Through food and clothing distribution, and the provision of supportive classes to school children, there is an exchange of goods, ideas, worries and hopes amongst both the Greek and the migrant population. Social solidarity is expressed in cases when someone is in need, activists in the local associations mobilise in order to cover the direct needs (money, clothes, medicine). As indicated by a Pakistani carpenter in his 40s:

> "*In the Sunday school, the Greeks and the migrants are the same, there*
> *is no difference between the Greek and the migrant, as we don't have*
> *anything to split [...] I will talk to people, I will discuss things about what*

I need for my papers, my boss asked me to sing a paper, I will ask
people about it... so that people know how it is to live in Greece"

Within the local associations people feel equal to each other, and there is a broader sense of trust; entrusting each other daily problems and personal frustrations. Migrants better rely on the legal advices of the activists neighbours, than the officers they meet at the migrants' public services. As such, trust becomes a matter of daily interaction and collaboration within the neighbourhood. Issues of diversity are celebrated as bonds are created amongst the diverse social groups and the notion of equality is promoted.

People who participate in the residential committee and the European Village kafenio, interact with each other and develop social and spatial bonds. The interviewees who are active in the associations have indicated that the park and the kafenio have become a daily meeting point where they can meet their friends, discuss the local issues and develop ideas for new initiatives. People have become close friends with neighbours who share similar cultural, social and political thoughts.

Many respondents pinpointed to the significance of the activities undertaken by the residential committee for the preservation of the architectural heritage of the area and of the green space. In order to oppose the construction of Plato's park, the initiative raised awareness in the neighbourhood and mobilised against the destruction of the green space. Moreover, they turned against the demolition of an old factory of architectural importance and stopped the construction of a shopping mall pushed by the international company Blackrock. Such initiatives in combination with the organisation of cultural and solidarity activities (such as soup kitchens) inside the area of the Park, have further stimulated the use of public space.

It should be noted that in Athens the use of public space is mainly restricted to the use of outdoor spaces of cafe' s, i.e. use of public space via private means. However, in Akadimia Platonos, local initiatives liberated public space from delinquency (such drug

trafficking and use) and activists and migrants encouraged the use of the park by other social groups. Migrant and Greek families with young children often visit the park so that their children meet their friends, play in the green spaces. Although they claimed that they hardly visit the park on their own, they take advantage of the occasion of being there with their children, so as to chat and raise informal discussions with other parents of mixed ethnic background. The descriptions of the social environment of the park that they have provided us with, are quite similar. For example, a 50-year-old clerk who is active only at the local school's parents' association illustrated that in the park:

"*You will meet the whole neighbourhood there. Especially if you visit the place during the summer, you will see lots of elderly people as it is an oasis of freshness. You will meet people with their dogs, grandfathers and grandmothers, or aunties who have accompanied their children to play... You will meet Roma who have settled with their tents, musicians rehearsing... You will meet from homeless people to culture lovers who have come and discuss about the ancient... you can meet everything... and you listen to all the kinds of languages... and they combine with each other in a very harmonic way*"

Through this quote the respondent refers to the diversity of the people who visit and use the park. As mentioned, the park is a place receptive of all cultures and lifestyles existing in the area. Elderly people, migrants of various ethnic origins, dog owners, Roma, homeless people, artists or culture lovers use the park. The interviewee characterised as "harmonic" the way people use this public, indicating the relations that develop among the users. In other words, the diversity of the park is harmonic, indicating the way people may interact without prejudices.

As illustrated by another interviewee of Bulgarian origin, in the public spaces of the area it is where the residents meet each other:

"We gather there, Bulgarians, Greeks and we form groups. We speak in Bulgarian, others speak in Russian, others Albanian [...] but our children play together and they know all the languages. I cannot understand how they can communicate with each other".

The children's need to play becomes the major reason for people to meet and spend time in the public spaces of the area. Neighbours with children may develop friendships, regardless of the ethnic background. As Camina and Wood (2009) indicate, parents tend to do more neighbouring due to the locus of their children's life-world (making friends and playing), the convenience of local support and, sometimes, the overlap of school and neighbourhood. As indicated by the respondent, while the children play, the adults talk and have a good time with each other. In such places the barriers that may exist amongst the diverse cultures seem to be negligible, as according to another interviewee, people talk and interact to each other, either on their own languages, either in Greek. At the same time, we should bear in mind that households in the area cannot afford the -current- trend of middle-class households who prefer private playgrounds for their children and their entertainment. The area is consisted of deprived households and paying for the child's entertainment is an extra burden; hence the use of public space is the only occasion for outdoor games and social interaction.

Weaker ties and helping each other

Jane Jacobs (1993) has indicated how people who keep "an eye upon the street" contribute to higher levels of safety and control in an area; elements that according to Forrest and Kearns (2000) are part of the conceptual framework of social cohesion. Although many residents indicated that their ties with the neighbourhood are formal and weak, neighbourhood mobilization in cases of emergency was often mentioned. In one case, the house of an informant was on fire, but the whole neighbourhood mobilized in order to save the house and the children in it. As demonstrated in the interview by the 40-year old Swedish make-up artist:

> *"Some years ago, I was not at home as I was working, and my veranda was set on fire [...] the whole neighbourhood mobilised, the pharmacy owner, the neighbours they were all struggling to put out the fire until the firebrigade arrives... I was at work at Schinias and a neighbour called me and asked "what is going on in your house" and then I started calling too, and the neighbours were calling the police and they were telling them that there are children inside the house. They knew I had children. Everybody had mobilised, everybody helped, and they had become one team. I really liked that".*

Although the respondent did not have any close relations with her neighbours, they were aware of the fact that she has children. So when they realized that her house was set on fire, they mobilized in order to their neighbour who was absent at that time. Such reaction from the local society creates feelings of security and trust, as indicated latter by the interviewee. Mutual support seems to emerge even in cases where the social ties may be characterized as loose.

Moreover, many respondents stated the ways they have helped or they have received help by their neighbours, although their relations are not that close. An unemployed woman in her 30s described how, after having a car accident, her Roma neighbours have assisted her by:

"carrying my daily shopping, carrying things I could not carry on my own, sometimes they brought me coffee, cigarettes or beer when I could not move, even the Greeks [...] they have offered to clean my house, they ask me if everything is ok on a daily basis..."

Later on in the interview, she pointed that she had helped one of her Roma neighbours by hiring a lawyer when he was threatened with eviction. Such acts are indicative of the mutual support that may be expressed in neighbourhood on a daily basis. Feelings of sympathy turn into solidarity acts that encourage support and build stronger social ties, beyond the cultural or ethnic back ground of each neighbour.

Moreover, other interviewees have illustrated the ways they have received help from their neighbours. A 30-year-old cleaning lady from claimed that people in her neighbourhood assist her a lot as they often provide her with food and clothes for her children, while a Bulgarian woman stated that whenever she runs out of money she feels ok to ask for milk and cigarettes at the local shop, or ask neighbours for some money until she gets paid. Simple daily practices encourage interaction amongst neighbours, leading to the construction of stronger networks based on respect, solidarity and support. Other daily practices that indicate social networking in the area deal with entrusting the neighbours with the collection of children from school, or with the house keys for watering the plants. However, it should be indicated that such feelings of trust develop only amongst people who live in the same street or the same building, i.e. in the micro-spaces.

Other interviewees, especially the ones that do not participate in the local associations nor make use of the public spaces in the area, characterise their relations to their neighbours as "typical". Apart from saluting each other, they hardly develop further relations. For many such nodding and the exchange of small discussions in the street makes them feel nice and secure, as familiarity acts against feelings of isolation. Such

account refers to Granovetter's (1973) approach on weak ties; even when strong bonds are not apparent, weak ties that emerge are significant for the establishment of a sense of social cohesion.

As discussed by Kalantides and Vaiou (2012: 263), such relations that range from nodding acquaintance to mutual support, social bonding and solidarity networking have obtained new importance in times of crisis, as "*minimal acts of reciprocity and mutual support may be crucial for the survival and may mobilise processes of inclusion*". Within this framework, neighbouring relations which range from strong interactions to loose networks lead to processes of acquaintance and acceptance of diversity and may transform social distancing to social attachment.

Conclusions

Today most of the European cities are characterised by diversity. The mobility and the distinct lifestyles of people of diverse ethnic, cultural and socio-economic background, come together in big cities, introducing the dynamics of diversity in the socio-spatial dynamics. This paper has focused on the way diversity is experienced by the residents of an inner city area of Athens, called Akadimia Platonos. This area has been constantly receiving in-migrants since the 1960s; initially the urbanising population from the rural areas settled in this southern-west part of the city centre. After the 1990s, migrants from Eastern European countries, and especially from Albania, settled in the area, thus by the beginning of 2000s new waves of migrants from the Middle East, Pakistan and African countries arrived as new residents. Nowadays, Akadimia Platonos may be characterised as an inner city ethnically mixed area.

Due to the crisis and the economic down spiraling, mainstream discourse turned against the migrant other blaming him/her as being responsible for the unemployment faced by the local society and the deterioration of the living conditions city centre of Athens. This signified a backwards shift of policies related to migration issues, and a broader turn to political conservatism and nationalism mirrored in the electoral

support of the neo-Nazi party of the Golden Dawn. In the last local elections, in the area of Akadimia Platonos, Golden Dawn gained the highest percentages in comparison to the other administrative districts of Athens.

Many interviewees portrayed the figure of the stranger/migrant as a danger of deprivation, deterioration of the neighbourhood and of delinquency; his inappropriate behaviours have jeopardized the tranquility of the private space posing a danger on the local society. Their presence in the public spaces, the parks and the streets constitute what Ahmed (2000) names the 'stranger danger'. Simultaneously, many migrants expressed feelings of fear against "other" social groups like the Roma population and the Greek, especially referring to the police and the neo-Nazi violent behaviours. Hence, fear against the 'other' is a common characteristic amongst the diverse social groups related to the lack of acquaintance. Moreover, intolerance against cultural distinctiveness leads to misunderstandings and encourages social distance while putting at stake any potential for social inclusion and cohesion.

However, everyday interactions in local associations and the public spaces, create spaces of micro-encounters where people come closer, interact and develop social bonds. In such micro-spaces it is where social cohesion is encouraged, diversity is encompassed and people with different lifestyles and cultures develop stronger bonds to each other. Especially within the framework of the residential assembly and the collaborative kafenio, where ideas of equality and solidarity are put forward, diversity is considered as a positive social force which may contribute in the structuring of alternative pathways beyond austerity. As social solidarity against the fiscal crisis is put forward, people of different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles interact with each other and built social bonds aiming at the alleviation of the social burdens. Although diversity concerns are not the main concern of the local associations, it arises through the need to boost social cohesion and solidarity in the area. Differences and fears are left aside, and ideas, such as amelioration of the built environment and solidarity for all against the crisis, are expressed.

Local activism and the promotion of ideas related to the right for better living conditions has lead to the appropriation and use of the public spaces in the area. Public spaces become as spaces of encounter and interaction, especially for people who are active in the associations, as well as the ones who are not afraid of the "other". Diversity emerges as the outcome of the act of using public space, as the interaction and bonding of people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, of different lifestyles and cultures. Through the use of public space, frequent encounters and daily interactions may turn into strong social bonds which encourage the bridging and the bonding social capital of the area.

Moreover, social bonds may emerge in the micro-spaces of the neighbourhood, i.e. in the level of the building and/or the street. Life in the same street or in the same building, breaks down mainstream stereotypes against the migrants. In these micro-spaces people create stronger bonds and good neighbouring behaviours end up in the construction of strong social interaction and networking, in the construction of social capital. Moreover, typical relations which are interpreted as "weak ties" construct feelings of security and frequent daily encounters may turn into bonding and exchange of support and solidarity in times of need. Within this framework, diversity is an aspect of good neighbouring relations which contributes to the amelioration of social cohesion in the area. In this sense, spatial proximity encourages social proximity and attachment which runs counter to the popular culture and discourse of the 'stranger danger'. Diversity, social inclusion and cohesion are developed within the everyday practices of people who claim their equal rights to better living conditions in a city hit by the crisis and pose solidarity against oppression and fear.

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