



Commodity fights in Post-2008 Athens: Zapatistas coffee, Kropotkinian drinks and Fascist rice

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Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one... (Debord, 1967: 66)

In this short commentary, I address Shukaitis' questions by drawing inspiration from the 'commodity fights' witnessed during an ongoing ethnography of a city in ultimate socio-cultural and economic transition: Athens. I will try to illustrate that behind the unprecedented reconfiguration of the Athenian public space and way of living past 2008, from newly established 'migrant-free' and 'fascist-free' zones (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2010) to solidarity trading initiatives and soup kitchens, lies both an emerging shift in the socio-economic structures of production and consumption and a more implicit shift in the understanding of its material culture. In contemporary Athenian agoras, people not only listen to commodities talk but also watch them *do* it: it is as if commodities are now part of a battlefield in which nonhuman objects fight along with humans for their own right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991). As this commentary will demonstrate, these nonhuman comrades have political attributes (e.g. 'Kropotkinian drinks'), contribute to economies of solidarity and de-commodification (e.g. Zapatistas coffee) and assist in riots (e.g. 'climax full face masks').

The Athenian spectacle

In December 2008, Athens entered a new chapter in its long and tormented history. The capitalist spectacle of the early-mid 2000s – comprising of

development frenzy, supersized shopping malls and patriotic achievements of Olympic proportions (from being the dark horse winner in international sports competitions to hosting Athens 2004) – gave way to the December 2008 riots and the most severe, ongoing economic crisis since Greece's restoration of democracy in 1974. For some, however, a deeper socio-cultural crisis pre-existed. The 2008 Athens uprising helped uncover struggles and contradictions that injected the Greek antagonist movement with newly-found confidence (e.g. Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011). Within Exarcheia, the city's traditional core of intellectual and political activity, various grassroots movements and collectives started experimenting with here-and-now politics such as solidarity trading with Zapatistas and like-minded local producers, various squats of private and public spaces (including guerrilla parks), new producer and consumer co-operatives, anti-consumerist bazaars, collective kitchens, no-ticket cinema screenings, among others. Spaces of rupture and cracks in the capitalist system (Holloway, 2010) began to appear everywhere.

Fast forward three and a half years, the notions of solidarity trading, linking consumers with producers without intermediaries and resident assemblies on the basis of anti-hierarchical structuring and self-management are now part of the collective vocabulary and have spread far outside Exarcheia (nearly) as fast as the December riots. In this emerging discourse, commodities are an indispensable part of social and political struggles and as I illustrate below, they have assumed various comradely and not-so comradely dimensions.

Zapatistas coffee and Kropotkinian drinks

It seemed the perfect neighbourhood to me...here you can do many of the things you generally do but from within 'the movement': you can have your coffee in a collective, you can buy some food stuff from Sporos, you can hang around and have a good debate in the park, you can get your clothes from Skoros. Not as if that includes literally everything you do – I wish – but slowly there is a tendency towards this direction and I do not think you can find this anywhere else...much of your daily life is politicised. (Male, 33)

Exarcheia is a central neighbourhood of Athens that is renowned for its radical intellectual and political history. Described, among others, as the world's only 'anarchist neighbourhood' (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011), Exarcheia has been the birthplace of the Athens Polytechnic uprising (November 1973), the December 2008 riots and is the heart of various other protests and forms of anti-capitalist action since the arrival in the country of the so-called troika (EU/IMF/ECB). Nonetheless, it was not until the 2008 uprising that various Exarcheia-based



Figure 1: Exarcheia's park.

grassroots collectives and movements began to experiment in a larger scale and more consistently with various forms of here-and-now politics and creative forms of resistance. For instance, one of the most striking manifestations is a guerrilla park (formerly a parking lot) known as 'Park Navarinou' or 'the park', that was created in the aftermath of the 2008 riots in an attempt to give something positive to the community and provide a public space that operates on the basis of self-management, anti-hierarchical structures and anti-commercialisation. Today, having established its spatial legacy, along with some impressive



Figure 2: Exarcheia's park.

vegetation, the park continues to function as a space that defies commodification, whilst hosting a variety of different events (from no-ticket cinema screenings to anti-consumerist bazaars), and opportunities for political and comradesly cultivation.

Other movements aim at addressing the salience of commodity objects more directly. For instance ‘Sporos’ (Greek for ‘seed’), one of the few such collectives that pre-existed the riots, aims at providing an economy of solidarity with Zapatistas and related producer co-operatives. Concurrently, members of Sporos’s collective aim at cultivating an active consumer ethos that confronts more mainstream conceptions of ‘ethical consumers’ who simply satisfy their ‘guilt fetishes’ (Cremin, 2012) through purchases of fair trade products (mostly at supermarket shelves):

we do not see it as a method to ‘help the poor’ in the developing countries, but rather as a possible social movement, comprised of horizontal networks of organized producers, distribution groups and active consumers. We see this possible movement as part of the broader global struggle for social change, not as a thematic action unconnected to the general social and political issues. (<http://sporos.org/en>)

Since Sporos’s successful establishment in the area, various other collectives attempted their own versions of solidarity trading initiatives, gifting bazaars, time banks, barter economies, collective cooking events, free cinema screenings, theatrical plays, artistic exhibitions and educational courses, among others, providing the area with an unprecedented number of opportunities for everyday radical action. And yet, for most of them, the possibility of creating yet another layer of commodified politics remains a constant problematisation:

there is a saying that capitalism can sell you the rope that is about to hang you, capitalism has the ability to commercialise and commodify everything, even resistance....so we remain conscious that even the smallest, most benign activities, say collective cooking, need first, to have a political rationale and second, to be seen in the context of broader social and class struggles... (male, 40)



Figure 3: Zapatistas Coffee (<http://www.sporos.org/products>).

Indeed such problematisations are commonplace within Exarcheia and they often translate into extensive debates, for instance, how, by ensuring social welfare provision in a period of extreme neoliberalisation, solidarity trading initiatives risk serving a complementary-reformist rather than antagonistic role, or the possibility of the area itself to become exoticised and commodified into a Disneyland for ‘anarcho-tourists’.

Exarcheia, nonetheless, is not an autonomous zone. It remains a neighbourhood in an (otherwise) capitalist city and the dynamic between Exarcheia and the rest of Athens (and Greece) continues to shift dramatically. Previously an area of ‘explosion’, during the 2008 riots and more discretely through the exportation of self-management principles and here-and-now politics in other areas, Exarcheia is now experiencing an ‘implosion’, in the sense that a deepening systemic crisis is now abruptly and violently applied upon its residents as much as anywhere else in the country (Chatzidakis and Vradis, 2011). Stories of increased violence, drug-trafficking, and people nearing and falling below the poverty line are part of the new (dystopian) reality. As a consequence, many of the established collectives have had to reconsider their scope and mission. For instance Skoros, a very successful anti-consumerist collective that provides a permanent space for the exchange of goods and services without attached norms of reciprocity has had to reconsider its ‘anti-consumerist’ agenda:

When we started Skoros, three years ago...everything was easier. It was much easier to propose anti-consumerism, re-use, recycling and sharing practices. Later however the economic crisis arrived – of course the social and cultural crises pre-existed – and made us feel awkward. How can one speak of anti-consumerism when people’s spending power has shrunk considerably? How can one propose a critique of consumerist needs when people struggle to meet their basic needs? How can we insist that ‘we are not a charity’ when poverty is next to us, around and above us and it is growing massively? How to counterpropose solidarity and community when the crisis isolates individuals and makes them turn against each other? ...Nonetheless, we are definitely not mourning the loss of our spending power. Our wardrobes may not be as full so as to be able to get rid of last season’s clothes and rush for their renewal but how many things do we really need? We are part of a broader network of resistance and struggle but we do not aim for the previous situation: the exploitation, uneven growth, environmental degradation and constant nightmare of unfulfilled consumer needs... (Published leaflet, December 2011).

Concurrently, new cracks emerge in what could be the most unexpected moments and places. ‘Vox Squatted Social Centre’, previously a cafe/bookstore attached to a cinema, is now a squat run by more traditional anarchist groups that had so far kept a less public profile in the area and were against engaging in any form of monetised transactions. Perhaps the systemic crisis has imposed a reconsideration of their approach to here-and-now politics but the somewhat ‘Kropotkinian’ drinks sold in Vox do retain a solid comradely mission: all money (so far a few thousands euros) goes in support of anarchist comrades that face juridical charges and/or are already in jail.



Figure 4: Vox squatted social centre.¹

Greek-only soup kitchens, solidarity trading from-Greeks-for-Greeks and Fascist rice

In post 2008 Athens, however, like many other terms and ideas that have been historically associated with the left (such as solidarity and self-management), the word comrade has been reinvented by a variety of groups at the other end of the political spectrum. In particular, the rise of Golden Dawn, a political party with explicit links to neo-Nazi ideology and which it won 7% of votes in the last national elections (July 2012), has responded not only through practising its own spatial politics via the creation of migrant-free zones (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2010) but also through counter-proposing its own version of ‘comradely’ activities and objects; such as solidarity trading that is ‘from-Greeks-for-Greeks’, soup kitchens upon proof of (Greek) national identity card and ‘security services’ such as walks to ATMs for citizens that are concerned by the rise of migrant-led crime. And yet, commodities do travel and they often break their silence about the conditions of their production.

‘Fascist rice’ is a term used across various solidarity trading networks when it was revealed that the producers’ co-operative of the particular rice were affiliated with extreme-right groups and organisations. Subsequently, the rice was

¹ Source: http://www.anarkismo.net/attachments/apr2012/473188_423853804308583_143534732340493_1534631_437263738_0.jpg

withdrawn from networks with a more explicitly radical agenda. This is a battle fought not only at the level of colonising particular words and ideas but also at the actual material and social conditions in which commodities are produced and acquire their meaning.

Human and nonhuman comrades

The case of post 2008 Athens opens up the question of nonhuman objects as comrades at three distinct levels.

First, commodities can certainly be attributed comradely and not-so comradely qualities. In a period of severe economic crisis and increased polarisation of political views and actions, humans' tendency to apply ingroup-outgroup distinctions and to project negative and positive attributes to others is perhaps less escapable – in line with various psychoanalytical traditions (e.g. Rustin, 2010) – and may apply equally to human and nonhuman objects. Commodities such as rice, for instance, are anthropomorphised ('fascist') and avoided at any cost regardless of what the particular rice does (or not) in people's stomachs. Concurrently, suspicions about the conditions of its production aside, fascist rice emerges as a commodity invested with a new layer of fetish, as in the case of fair trade (Cremin, 2012, Lyon 2006) and Soviet products (Kravets, this issue). Yet, the 'phantasmic' outcome mirrors a battlefield played out in the streets rather than an imagined dialogue between consumers and advertising agencies or artists and state planners.

In post 2008 Athens, objects are caught in an urban struggle where 'who gets there first' – despite questions of historical and political legitimacy – *whose* phantasy is the object (solidarity rice, collective kitchens etc.) associated with is the ultimate trophy. This is a fight which is not very different from the fights taken in the streets for territorial-spatial legacy, indeed it is about urban space (Lefebvre, 1991) as well as the objects *in* space (e.g. from fascist-free zones to fascist-free products). In the end, by demarcating fascist rice from economies and products of (universal) solidarity, the Greek antagonist movement claims its traditional territorial rights both in a tangible and a more intangible, phantasmic realm.

Second, for various solidarity trading initiatives and collaborations between producer and consumer groups, the aim has been to de-fetishise objects and turn them into comrades at a more actual-material base:

the real question is not simply to provide solidarity and link producers with consumers but also to question which producers, what products, why, produced under what conditions. (female informant, 32)

Of course, the extent to which such movements can take place within a capitalist system remains a problematisation:

they should not have illusions that they can progress outside the system, that they can grow and overturn it without confrontation...if tomorrow the project of bypassing intermediaries carries on and extends massively, the system will respond, because it loses taxes through this [solidarity trading]. And not only taxes. More importantly, an autonomous society emerges, standing across the capitalist system and the market. And this won't be left without a response... (male, 40)

Third, some commodities may be comradely not for their intrinsic value or what they say when/if they talk (Shukaitis, this issue) but for their instrumental value, or what they otherwise *do*. Kropotkinian drinks may be as fetishised as the drinks sold in a fancy cocktail bar but they do serve a distinct, comradely mission: to assist in radical action. Another such commodity that is popular among some Exarcheia-based groups is the 'climax full face mask' or the protester's mask of choice: some wearers of the mask have in the past displayed the price tag and retailer's address to pre-empt questions from other comrades and assist them in gaining access.



Figure 5: Climax full face mask. (<http://www.sis-lebanon.com/catalog/mask/full-face-mask>).

At the time of writing various collectives, such as Sporos, have broken up (July 2012; although Zapatistas coffee is still supplied via a sister co-operative) whereas others begin to emerge such as the creation of a bigger 'time bank' (network for

sharing goods and services) that aims to co-ordinate various smaller-scale groups and initiatives within Exarcheia. Concurrently, an increasingly dominant narrative across conventional media and pro-establishment actors depicts the variety of urban struggles and grassroots interventions as part of an ongoing affair between the ‘extremes’, left and right. This ideological reshuffle serves to distantiate all radical action from the interests of the ‘extreme centre’², whilst totalising and dismissing the differences between Golden Dawn and the Greek antagonist movement – despite for instance, Golden Dawn’s neo-Nazi ideology, accusations of murdering, and use of explicitly racist and sexist practices³. The battlefield is still played out and many nonhuman comrades may soon realise they will have to become ‘full-time’ comrades and ‘parts of’ rather than ‘members in’ the antagonist movement, as many of their human counterparts have already done.

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2 See e.g. <http://nomadicuniversality.wordpress.com/2012/07/14/%CE%BF-%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%BF%CE%BA%CE%BB%CE%B7%CF%81%CF%89%CF%84%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%BC%CF%8C%CF%82-%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82-%CE%BC%CE%B7-%CE%B2%CE%AF%CE%B1%CF%82-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CF%84%CE%B1-%CE%B1/>.

3 See e.g. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-its-not-rhetoric-to-draw-parallels-with-nazism-8092591.html>;
http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_14/08/2012_456870.

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