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The struggle to become visible. Commoning practices in a migrants' informal settlement on the South- eastern Aegean Sea

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INTRODUCTION

From the summer of 2015, Greece has experienced a huge influx of refugees, which by far exceeded existing capabilities in reception and hospitality (given also the stark socio-economic condition of a country already in its sixth year of recession) (Psimitis, Georgoulas & Nagopoulos, 2017). In 2014 the number of arrivals in Greece by sea was estimated at 41,000 persons, in 2015 it climbed to more than 856,000, it dropped to 173,450 in 2016, then down to 29,718 in 2017, and for the first 6 months of 2018 (last update July 8, 2018) it was 14,387 (<http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>).

Under the EU-Turkey deal in March 2016, migrants arriving in Greece are now expected to be sent back to Turkey if they do not apply for asylum or their claim is rejected. That, in combination with the increasing anti-immigration rhetoric in some EU countries of the Central and Eastern Europe, and the ensuing tightening of the EU border controls, started to create a sense of “entrapment” of the newcomers (migrants/refugees) inside the Greek territory. In total, Greece is currently (end of April 2018) hosting approx. 55,000 persons: more than 41,000 in the mainland and almost 14,000 on the islands (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63723>).

Some of the Aegean Islands close to the Turkish coastline (mainly Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros, Samos) shared the largest burden of the refugee population (Alexiou, Tsavdaroglou & Petropoulou, 2016; Papataxiarchis, 2016, 2018; Psimitis, Georgoulas & Nagopoulos, 2017). The Dodecanese islands, and especially Rhodes, have not been affected by major refugee flows. However, the drastic cuts in funding of food and health programs by international organizations (e.g. the United Nations High Commission for Refugees / UNHCR) and the absence of a viable national or regional plan for hosting the incomers, tightened security around refugee camps, discouraged solidarity groups and NGOs from working with migrants/refugees and decreased the originally very generous influx of supplies (Papataxiarchis, 2018; Psimitis, Georgoulas & Nagopoulos, 2017). On top of that there have also been “fears” of the local –and booming– tourist industry for the prospect of “spoiling” the idyllic picture of the Aegean islands (e.g. Rhodes).

In this paper, we will present such an example from an *informal refugee camp in the city of Rhodes* (the capital of the island of Rhodes, on the South-eastern Aegean Sea), where migrants/refugees decided to prepare their own meals around the clock. We will examine how this initiative had been originally perceived, how it was implemented, and to what extent does this may constitute the emergence of a new kind of “commoning” framework.

THE SITUATION IN RHODES

As we said earlier, Rhodes has not been affected by major refugee flows. According to official figures, a total of 3,098 persons applied for asylum in Rhodes from June

2013 till May 2018, as compared to 25,500 in Lesvos (see <http://www.unhcr.gr/sites,https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64636>). The corresponding numbers for the applications filed from January to the end of April 2018 are 211 for Rhodes and 5,823 for Lesvos (http://asylo.gov.gr/?page_id=143).

Those who do not seem eligible for “refugee” status are forwarded to the nearest Reception and Identification Centres (RICs), located in Kos & Leros (on the northern part of the Dodecanese islands). During the first two years after the major refugee influx (2015-2016), the vast majority of them resided in an unofficial site, which is a *former slaughter-house*, near the passenger harbor of Rhodes. The buildings are municipal property and they were provided by the mayor of Rhodes on the promise that the camp would remain unofficial and there would not be any official hot-spot on the island (<http://www.dimokratiki.gr/19-08-2015/se-kentro-prosorinis-filoxenias-metanaston-metatrapike-ta-palia-sfagia-tis-rodou/>, http://www.ert.gr/perifereiakoi-stathmoi/notio_aigaio/sto-kentro-filoxenias-sti-rodou-xenagithikan-ekprosopi-tou-oie/).

The situation in the camp is below acceptable standards. The buildings are shabby, and there is a complete lack of basic amenities (e.g. regular and sufficient water & electricity supply, laundry services, WC facilities), something that has been gradually dealt with, but with only minimal consequences on the living standards of the refugees and asylum seekers, while at the same time there has not been any noticeable change in the local perceptions about the necessity of the camp (<https://www.rodiki.gr/article/378228/prepei-na-fygoyn-oi-prosfyges-apo-ta-palia-sfageia>). In the meantime, the UNHCR intervened, using EU funding for the housing of the remaining refugee population and those who apply for asylum. As a result of this intervention, the camp is currently hosting a small number of immigrants and asylum seekers, and there is an increasing debate about its permanent closure (<https://www.rodiki.gr/article/383541/kleinoyn-gia-thn-filoxenia-twn-prosfygwn-ta-palia-sfageia>).

The number have fluctuated considerably (UNHCR, 2018a,b). At the time of the study (May-June 2017), 50-60 persons was the norm, but there were times with more than 150 persons residing in the camp. All those people were living in “a regime of institutionalised waiting” (Tsilimpounidi & Carastathis, 2017, p. 414), with

the most vulnerable ones enjoying some “privileges” in relation to others. The rest were forwarded to other RICs (Crete, Leros, Kos, or the Greek mainland).

Most of the refugees and asylum seekers were from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan but increasingly from a vast array of foreign countries and/or regions within countries (e.g. Kurdistan) (for recent data see UNHCR, 2018b).

In November 2016, some of those staying in the (informal) camp started to complain about the quality of the food provided to them by various humanitarian groups and individual volunteers, coordinated by the Municipality of Rhodes and the Region of the South Aegean Sea. They decided to take turns in preparing their own meals around the clock, given that they would have uninterrupted supplies. This situation continued until the summer of 2017, due to the departure of those who had taken the initiative (transfer by the UNHCR to other islands, in rented accommodation).

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THEORY

Historical Materialism and political economic analysis are my main starting points, in the sense that I am deeply influenced by theories that privilege the economic in explanation of non-economic phenomena. I concur with the famous motto that Marx used in his Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* (1856): “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1956 [1856]).

However, the way the migrants/refugees *live through* those events, and their *attitudes* and *motives for further action* cannot be explained by a simplistic invocation of “structural barriers” or “collective strategies”, nor can they simply mirror power relations of either the country of origin or the country of migration. As Erel put it (2010), “[m]igrants create mechanisms of validation for their cultural capital, negotiating both ethnic majority and migrant institutions and networks” (pp. 642 & 656; for the use of “social capital”, see also Çelik, 2017).

In this study, we focus on the interplay between the “material basis” of the refugee’s lives (in their place of origin and in the host country) on one hand, and their *religious, ethnic, linguistic, gender or other identities* and *idiosyncrasies*, on the other, and how this interplay affects their course of action.

To this end, we will also use the Knott & Vasquez's (2014) concept of the "place-making" spatial strategies of migrant religious groups in cities (especially "global" or "cosmopolitan" ones), as something that encompasses both "dwelling" ("mapping", "building" and "inhabiting") and "crossing" boundaries, in a state of mobility (forced or other).

Finally, their attempts for self-organization raises important questions about the possibilities for "bottom-up" approaches to the creation of "commons spaces" (Lefebvre, 1977), that is possibilities for challenging the triumphant neoliberalism of the late 20th century and the "intensification of new and old processes of enclosure" (Kioupiolis & Karyotis, 2016, p. 143), and promotion of collective ownership that communities—even "precarious" and "vulnerable" ones such as the ones constituted by refugees— can cater for the well-being of each and every one of their members (Harvey, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic approach was adopted in order to highlight the refugee's own experience, through the organization of focus-groups and in-depth interviews, in May and June 2017.

Migrants/refugees have been called to reflect on a number of issues regarding their living standards in the camp their relation to the state agencies (Coast Guard, Police, Asylum Offices) and local authorities (Municipal & Regional), as well as to various representatives of the "civil society" (social philanthropists, volunteers, NGOs, professional and scientific bodies etc.), their future plans, etc.

Finally, they were asked to reflect on their effort to self-organize regarding the food preparation, to give the reasons that pushed them to do so and what this "self-organization" meant for them, and assess the whole process (possibly providing proposals for improvement of their efforts).

There have been some major obstacles in this study, especially in a place like Rhodes, where, due to the undeniably lower rates of refugee flows in relation to other Aegean islands, these matters are invariably under-explored:

- *Language*. The vast majority of the refugees did not speak any other from their

native language, and it was difficult to find interpreters to assist with the data collection.

- *Time management.* This is one of the most important problems in ethnographic research, especially when we deal with population living in very precarious conditions in the world's "borderlands" (Agier, 2016). When is the appropriate time to conduct an interview or set up a focus group with refugees who struggle to gain a life in dignity and safety, day by day? How much time should the researcher spend on preparing a "relaxing atmosphere" for a face-to-face interview (Kvale, 1996) when an unpredicted event occurs (e.g. a quarrel between two refugees over the distribution of food, or a hyper-active toddler who needs her parents' attention)?
- *Space limits.* Given the fact that refugees and asylum seekers used to live mainly in the informal camp—at least before the UNHCR intervened—there are certain space limits on where an interview (individual or group, formal or informal, structured or not) could take place and how long will it last (Briggs, 2007; Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). The focus group took place in a lecture room used by the refugees for (informal) Greek-language courses¹, while the (two) in-depth interviews were carried out in one of the city's cafés and in a private apartment.
- *Legal & administrative problems.* Although all the examined persons held a temporary residence permit and lived freely within the Greek national territory at the time of the field work, some "gate-keepers" from formal authorities (e.g. the UNHCR staff) were very hesitant to provide assistance with the interviews. Thus, the implementation of the research took place only with people understanding or speaking English or Greek.
- *Suspicion.* How can a researcher conduct an "in-depth" investigation of a person's past—especially when that involves recording the interview data—when that person is deeply distrustful of anyone speaking Greek, since s/he has been subject to degrading and often aggressive & humiliating behaviour from the time s/he stepped his/her foot on Greek soil? It is characteristic, however, that none of the respondents ever mentioned information about their country of origin and the events that pushed them to migrate.

We ended up with:

- *Three In-depth interviews*, with:
 1. **Fatima**: She is from Afghanistan and was 38 years old at the time of the interview, single. She is an accountant by formation and a former secondary-school teacher, with a medium level of understanding English and Arabic, and a very good command of Farsi, Urdu and Pashtun. At the time of the interview she was staying in a shelter for abused women. She is recognized as a “refugee”. She strongly wants to stay in Greece.
 2. **Hasan**: He is from Syria. He was 41 years old at the time of the interview and married, with two kids (5 & 7-year-old), who attend Greek school. He is recognized as a “refugee” and got his two-year residence permit. He holds a vocational-school certificate in fashion designing. He has been working as a cook in various Greek restaurants. He used to live in the camp, but now lives with his family in a private accommodation. He strongly wants to stay in Greece.
 3. **Saleh**: He is from Syria. He was 20 years old at the time of the interview and single. He is recognized as a “refugee” and got his two-year residence permit. He graduated from a lower-secondary school. He initially registered in an evening vocational school in Rhodes (September 2017) and worked in a Greek fishing boat and a fish house in the summer of 2017. He took part in Greek-language lessons offered at the University of the Aegean, although not very frequently after the 2017 Easter break.

- *One Focus group*, with a group of refugees from Iraqi Kurdistan who arrived in Rhodes in spring 2015.
 1. **Abu**: He is from Iraqi Kurdistan. He was 25 years old at the time of the interview, and single. He did not provide information about his past life, or about any attempt to work in Greece. He has not completed secondary school, but he attended regular Greek-language lessons offered at the University of the Aegean, although not very frequently after the 2017 Easter break. He stated that he wanted to stay in Greece, but he left Rhodes to an unknown destination in summer 2017. He provided some help in the food preparation efforts during the “self-organization” period.

2. **Ahmad:** He is from Iraqi Kurdistan. He was 35 years old at the time of the interview, and married, with two kids. While in Greece, he worked in agricultural and other unskilled occupations. He did not provide information about his past life. He took part in Greek-language lessons offered at the University of the Aegean, although not very frequently after the 2017 Easter break. He has been transferred by the UNHCR to Crete. He stated that he wanted to stay in Greece. He assisted a lot the food preparation efforts during the “self-organization” period.
3. **Mahmud:** He is from Iraqi Kurdistan. He was 47 years old at the time of the interview, married, with three kids. While in Greece, he worked in agricultural and other unskilled occupations. He did not provide information about his past life. He was a regular attendant of the Greek-language lessons offered at the University of the Aegean. He has been transferred by the UNHCR to Crete. He expressed his strong wish to stay in Greece. He was one of the initiators of the “self-organization” effort for the preparation of the refugees’ food².

RESULTS

Distinction between “eligible refugees” and “deportable economic migrants”

None of them had a clear picture of this distinction, and they all depended on various experts, state officials and volunteers to elucidate this distinction. Nevertheless, those who were not generally considered as “refugees” (i.e. not Syrians) and had not come from war zones, realized that this distinction can harm them. That made them feel very bad and instilled a sense of “injustice”.

It takes time to realize and understand the whole “asylum” process. [...] The authorities have not given us a clear picture of our rights. [...] I cannot understand why they recognize people from Syria as refugees, and not me, ... not us! [Abu] Me too.... They have not explained me yet why they [the state authorities] treat Kurdish people so badly! Too many papers!... Too many questions, and too few answers!... [Ahmad]

Personal experience from entering to Greece, and from living in, or close to the camp

All of them expressed mixed feelings, with invariably negative experiences in the early days in Greece, and more positive feelings as times went by. What mostly strikes me is that they expressed feelings of resentment towards not the Greeks, but towards other refugees, from different geographical origins and with different ethnic, language and political identities.

It's the first time that I come to Greece. [...] I have been here for almost two years!... The authorities treated me relatively well, but I have not managed yet the temporary residence permit! In the [informal] RIC, they treated us with suspicion. I mean, not only the Greek citizens there [...] but some other refugees like me! [...] I mean people with different ethnic origin.... They don't like us! I don't know why, but... this is a reality. [Ahmad]

I have the same feeling myself... Although we all are Muslims, some people do not trust us [i.e. the Kurds], and they keep us at a distance... They don't want to talk to us... and stuff like that... You know... [Abu]

In the [informal] camp they treated us with suspicion and, sometimes, hostility [...]. I mean, not only the Greeks, but the other refugees, even those from different parts of Syria!.... [Hasan]

There are times when the “refugee” status is not the only distinctive feature of the respondents’ situation, and that the details of individuals’ social trajectories diverge from one another, with many factors, such as *age, gender, race, educational experience, family wealth, place of origin, personal skills and talents* etc., intervening in the outcome of an individual’s response to the various circumstances. In the case of the female member of our informant group, the *gender* can be a crucial factor in the way a person might experience exclusion, prejudices, stereotypes and even hostile behavior.

The authorities treated me well when I entered Greece [...]. The attitudes were positive. [...] I gradually became familiar with the people in the camp in Rhodes, although I was not very comfortable there, with so many male refugees staring at me all the time... You know... I was a woman... alone... [Fatima]

In the case of Saleh (the youngest of our respondents), it seems that age, combined

with *socio-economic background* and *family wealth*, proves to be a determining factor in the creation of feelings of uneasiness and distress.

In the [informal] RIC, the situation was ok, but ... a bit disorganized. They treated me with suspicion [now he lives in a private accommodation]. It is not only the Greeks, but some of the other refugees... You know, there are people there who.... used to live in slums!... So it's natural for them to live like this. Whereas for me... it's bad! What can I say!..... [Saleh]

Social networks they have managed to establish during their stay in this country

According to Schiller's definition of "transnational migration" (1997, in Pusch, 2016, p. 208), immigrants very often "forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement". However, in our case, refugees did not show any sign of maintaining strong ties that "bridge" their places of origin and their destination(s) –the latter being a very fluid goal, both in geographical and emotional terms. Most of them seem to keep only a minimum contact with their relatives and friends in their home country.

I do communicate sometimes with my relatives back in Iraq... just to see if they're ok... to check for their health and stuff... The smartphones help us to do that!... [Abu]

There is a general sense of mistrust, not always manifest in an overt way. Refugees, as expected, socialize more frequently and strongly with compatriots and with people with the same ethnic origins and the same language, although other factors, such as geographic origin, socio-economic & educational background and the social & cultural capital etc. might affect their "place-making", "dwelling" and "bonding" strategies (Bourdieu, 1984; Çelik, 2017; Erel, 2010; Knott & Vasquez, 2014).

Some people group together. They set up their networks, and keep other people away... They share everything among them. I've got my own circle of friends – mainly from my place of origin [...] My family.... We get along very well! Why searching for other friends? We are ok like that. [Ahmad]

There are very few people I can talk to and trust, especially Greek volunteers who have helped us during our stay [...] In the refugee camp, I tried to contact people,

but I met a lot of distrust, and even hostility from certain persons. [...] Some people are not educated at all! They are “peasants”!... You know what I mean...
[Hasan]

Women show a more “defensive” attitude towards socialization with other refugees, especially when they are single among many men or multi-person families.

As I told you, I was not very comfortable when I was living in the camp. When I stayed in the shelter [for abused women] I felt very nice. [...] I met some women, and now I am close to one woman (abused) and four persons [who teach Greek at the University]. [Fatima]

Through this excerpt, we see that women from places where their status –by law and my tradition—is invariably considered “lower” than men (and Fatima clearly testified for this anytime we had talked to each other, not only during the interview), in their attempt to “dwell” and simultaneously to “cross the boundaries” (Knott & Vasquez, 2014), may not limit themselves to increase their “capital” but “to transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2007, p. 99) by depending on their bonds with new acquaintances.

Level of trust for the various people they come across, or have to deal with

The refugees, due to their “precarious” status, are forced to trust other people for reasons of enjoying even basic human needs, such as shelter, food, health, and often talk to somebody as a means to feel “special”, to feel “esteemed” by someone else.

There are very few people I can talk to and trust.... Maybe the Greek volunteers who are helping us. The teachers.... Very few people.... But, I’m happy being among them. [Abu]

I can trust some agencies like the UNHCR, ... Not “trust”... I should say I am forced to trust them. I don’t have any alternative!... Ok, they help some people But they do not seem to care about all our needs. [Ahmad]

Some of them link the sense of “trust” for others with political agendas, which are part of wider, regional, national and transnational, policy-making institutions.

I only trust friends (Greek mostly) who help me, not other Syrians. Very few people ever cared about us. [...] Some agencies (e.g. the UNHCR) have their own agenda.

They help some people and let other people helpless! I don't know why!... [Hasan]

The level of trust is always linked with the level of “cultural capital” one might possess, leading to a distinction between “us” and “them” (Bourdieu, 1984); a distinction that is not based necessarily on a “rucksack approach” to cultural capital, according to which there is a homogenous amount of ethnic or religious cultural resources (Erel, 2010), but rather on a refined version of identity building, which is based on and interacts with other elements of the person’s life trajectories and individual psychological traits.

I socialize with people irrespectively from religion, nationality, language. But I feel more comfortable with polite and educated persons. I prefer people with “open mind” (e.g. when they respect). I am a bit introvert (because of my previous experience, in my country of origin). I avoided speaking to other men during my stay in the camp [RIC]. [Fatima]

Their opinion about the socio-economic situation in Greece, and their goals for the future

As we said earlier, the refugees expressed more positive feelings as times went by. Although Greece had been considered as a “transitory” border land for most of them, after the tightening of the EU borders and the restrictions imposed on their movement by the Greek authorities after the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016, they started to realize that settling down in this country and trying to integrate might become the only viable solution.

It is bad, but it's better than where I come from. [...] At the beginning I wanted to go abroad ... I wanted to go to Germany. Now I wish to stay here. The main problem is unemployment. I need to work. [Ahmad]

My opinion of Greece was very negative at the beginning.... but more positive now. [Fatima]

Some of them, especially the younger ones, voiced their concerns about the lack of “equal status” and even demanded—even on purely humanitarian grounds, and not on grounds of norm-setting—equal rights with the “natives”.

We do not provoke anything and anyone. We just want to be treated equally [...]

The State should intervene and help us to feel decent and free. Especially the basic technical infrastructure (showers, beds, central heating, lighting, water supply, electricity) should be improved! Now, it is better, but there have been many times when we felt abandoned!... [Abu]

The reasons that pushed them to self-organize

Those who got involved in the preparation of the food—for the limited period we mentioned earlier—stated that they were forced to self-organize, because there was no “alternative”. However, that attempt did also help them raise their self-respect and to “build bridges” with the “other”. In their endeavor they had to cooperate with other refugees with whom they had not used to socialize hitherto. In other words, the material bases of their life pushed to cooperate and find solutions to an unbearable situation.

I decided to do something for all my friends here. For all the refugees. The food was ok, but not so satisfactory as I expected it to be [...] The locals don't know our customs and eating habits.... Don't get me wrong. They have tried hard! [...] Mrs. Sofia [a local lady who was cooking for the refugees for some time during winter 2015] did her best [...] but she could not accommodate all the needs and tastes. Additionally, at a certain point she left, so... we were left without a cook, and I volunteered. [...] Along the way, many people got involved [...] [Mahmud, the main cook]

To the question if all the refugees agreed on that, the replies revealed that not everybody embraced that initiative and there were many divisions, dissatisfaction and alienation in the process. Nevertheless, the whole process went along nicely, given the previous situation and the conflictual relations between the various groups in the camp. In the very end, the experience was positive for everyone.

*It went ok, better than I expected. Everybody was satisfied with the food... [Mahmud]
At least we were!.... I liked the food... It was a lot better than before! [Abu]
Not everybody was eating the food I was preparing.... But those who tasted it did not complain. Even those people with whom our relationships were not the best possible... [Mahmud]*

In this process, it seems odd that female refugees did not participate in the cooking process, given their heavy involvement in household keeping in the refugees' countries of origin. One explanation could be that in this case their involvement would be made in the public sphere, not the private one, with which the female presence is associated (Erel, 2009; Peterson, 2010).

As for the ladies who helped in cooking (rarely), I saw that their husbands/ relatives would not let them approach the kitchen. It was not their home, so ... they did not care about the preparation of food. [Ahmed]

I did not participate in such an effort. I only cared about myself. It's difficult for a woman to express her opinion. [...] However, I saw that people who did eat, were satisfied with the food. [Fatima]

Possible proposals for improvement of their life

Apart from struggling to survive and satisfy basic human needs (food, clothing, safety, bodily hygiene etc.), before proceeding to "higher order" ones (see the A.H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs [1943]), our respondents started to raise issues of citizenship rights, something purportedly "odd" given their precarious situation and fragile status.

The authorities should pay more attention to our needs and be more responsive to our demands. [Hasan]

They [i.e. the authorities] should pay more attention to our needs and be more responsive to our demands. They should not care only about Syrian immigrants. We are refugees too! [Ahmad]

The state should provide affordable housing to all refugees who need it. [...] I believe that the distinction between "refugees from Syria" and "refugees from Irak" is wrong. [Abu]

One of them even raised wider macro-political issues concerning the involvement of the EU (as a transnational entity) into the armed conflicts in the Middle East and the havoc that the latter caused on people's life there.

The European Union has responsibility for what is happening in my country, ... so they must help us!.... [Saleh]

Most of them identified the whole process with an attempt to give meaning to their life and overcome the state of “dependence” they had been in from the moment they arrived in Greece. Additionally, they had the chance to leave behind stressful and conflictual situations, and feel “secure”, in the sense that –coming from war zones themselves— they did not have to “fight” for their preservation of their life again.

Yes... we felt free at last! [...] Everybody who tasted the food was satisfied. It was a sense of solidarity to see people who did not like us beforehand to come and talk to us (mainly Homar), and congratulate him for his knowledge & skills on cooking. It was quite calming you know... realising that you do not have to fight for your food... for your life!....[Ahmad]

Thus, they experienced a kind of “crossing” boundaries when they disregarded old and dominant distinctions in their place of origin (e.g. religious & ethnic divisions) and formed a more “inclusive” way of “dwelling” (Knott & Vasquez, 2014). That was evident not only as regards the intra-refugee relations, but also their contribution to a rejuvenation of certain parts of whole neighborhoods in the receiving communities. This, according to the author’s personal experience, is partially true for Rhodes, especially when some refugee families were moved by the UNHCR to rented apartments across the city, and it holds true also for the city of Mytilene (capital of the island of Lesbos, the main refugee entrance point to Greece) (Papataxiarchis, 2017).

DISCUSSION - CONCLUSIONS

Refugees & migrants in this case study, not matter what their place of origin was, showed that despite their undeniable “fragility” and vulnerability, they struggle to survive and cover basic human needs, but also to satisfy other important needs of “higher order” (Maslow, 1943), like “self-esteem” or “self-actualization”.

They showed that, despite their differences (and there are a lot of them), what unites them is the common experiences of displacement, alienation, ethnic (even racist) discrimination, repression, harassment, insecurity, precariousness, unemployment, etc. However, not all differences are overcome, or even forgotten and left behind. They may come to the surface depending on the circumstances.

They do not claim a “right to the city” and certainly do not articulate an eman-

cipatory rhetoric about an imagined and lived “Common Space” (Lefebvre, 1977; Harvey, 2011), through which new emerging social movements that defy neo-liberal enclosures may flourish. However, their engagement with the new spatial settings that their gate-keepers of the hosting country (border police, asylum officials, local authorities and other state and non-state agents) enforce on them is not a passive one. The “space”, in its physical, mental and social dimensions, that is as a “sensed”, “perceived” and “lived” multi-dimensional totality (Lefebvre, 1977; Tsavdaroglou, 2016), becomes a “limit”, as well as a “tool” for the refugees to negotiate their existence and their identity. Stripped from any kind of (formally recognised) national identity—especially those who, for various reasons, do not possess official travel documents—and living at the *metaichmia* (crossing points) between different nation states (the border-lands described so vividly by M. Agier [2011, 2016]), in an endless “institutionalised waiting” (Tslimpounidi & Karastathis, 2017, p. 414), refugees—at least some of them—seem to attempt a “border-crossing” and to give their own meaning—not fixed and clear, but radically new and unpredictable—to the new “enclosure spaces” within which they are confined and surveilled.

Finally, we should keep in mind the perceptions that the refugees have about the various actors of the “hosting” societies who are involved in their “handling” (whether *institutions* or *individuals*). In their narratives, they portrayed a very negative picture about the European Union (EU), which is targeted for its role in the Middle East, and for some EU countries for their unwillingness to assist the refugees and satisfy their demands for relocation.

Regarding Greece, the authorities project a generally negative image in the refugees’ minds. It becomes obvious that the EU, in the face of the huge humanitarian crisis of hundreds of thousands of refugees, chooses to stick to the hard logic of previous years; the logic of a “sealed” fortress, allowing only targeted crossing into European land of a very small number of persecuted persons from war-ridden countries in Africa and Asia.

On the other hand, the volunteers—especially solidarity groups, not NGOs—enjoy a more positive image. Refugees seem to realize that those (of us) who belong to the solidarity side—that is just opposite to the prevalent “Fortress Europe” approach—fight not only to help them to cover basic everyday needs, but also to prevent the mili-

tarization of maritime borders and the setting-up of “hotspots” that decide, usually with unsubstantiated and arbitrary demarcation criteria, who will stay and who will return back to a situation of continuous risking of one’s life.

The situation of the refugees here in Rhodes, although widely underreported and unacknowledged in the local, regional and national media (see <http://oasisrhodes.blogspot.com/2017/09/170.html>, <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/ypanaptyktes-synthikes-kratisis-sti-rodo-kataggellei-i-omada-oasis>, <https://www.kar.org.gr/2018/03/12/i-omada-allilengyis-prosfygon-rodou-oasis-gia-tis-epanaproo-thisis-prosfygon-ke-metanaston/>), is better and constantly improving, at least compared to other islands of the North Aegean Sea (i.e. Lesbos, Samos, Chios). Thus, the few refugees who are still living in the informal camp –and of course who have been transferred to rented accommodation—are trying to pull themselves together and start planning for a new life in Greece, despite their initial hopes to get into the European “promised land”. In this re-arrangement of their strategies, in this new quest for “dwelling” and “crossing” boundaries, in a state of mobility (forced or other), their experience of self-organizing food preparation might be proved enlightening.

NOTES

1. Greek language lessons for adults have been held from December 2016 for refugees at the Linguistics Laboratory of the Department of Primary Education of the University of the Aegean (Rhodes campus) (for more details see Oikonomakou, Kourtis-Kazoullis, Skourtou & Gouvias, 2017).
2. All the names are false for reasons of anonymity.

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