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So long, Exarcheia: in conversation with Athenian essayist George Souvlis

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[Raluca Bejan \(/category/bios/raluca-bejan\)](#) September 3, 2019

POLITICAL ACTION (/ISSUES/POLITICAL-ACTION)

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Political graffiti plastered on almost every wall. Three naked mannequins carelessly placed in a large garbage bin on Kallidromiou Street. Trees full of oranges on Ioustinianou. Strefi Hill. The view of Acropolis a few steps down from Exostrefis. The run down Villa Aiolos. The 2019 Antifa Football League playoffs. Messages against "drug mafias, social cannibalism and state repression" and for "resistance, self-organization and solidarity." A riot police helmet dropped on Benaki Street. These are some of the inner-city elements that one will encounter when stepping into the Athenian district of Exarcheia.

Mixtures of anarchist and left-wing political linkages have made Exarcheia a one-of-a-kind neighbourhood: boosting political creativity, enabling strong solidarity initiatives as well as heterodox forms of community mobilizing while simultaneously responding to local needs, creating alternative economies and providing substitute housing for many refugees.

Exarcheia was **raided** ([https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/26/athens-police-poised-to-
evict-refugees-from-squatted-housing-projects?](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/26/athens-police-poised-to-evict-refugees-from-squatted-housing-projects?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_tgu&utm_medium=&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1566800745)

[utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_tgu&utm_medium=&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1566800745](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/aug/26/athens-police-poised-to-evict-refugees-from-squatted-housing-projects?utm_term=Autofeed&CMP=tw_tgu&utm_medium=&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1566800745))

about a week ago, on August 26, in one of the most forceful police interventions to date. Several refugees and asylum seekers have been evicted from the squats where they were living.

I spoke with George Souvlis, Athenian resident and essayist covering political developments in Greece since the 2008 crisis. Here is an excerpt from our conversation regarding the current politicized state of the neighbourhood.



George Souvlis (GS): On August 26 police forces invaded Exarcheia, raiding several squats and removing over 143 people: refugees, migrants and other residents who had lived there since 2015. The squats attacked by the police included Gare, Spirou Trikoupi 17, Rosa de Fok and Clandestina. These squats were run by different solidarity collectivities and were generally very active in the historical centre of Athens. Since the start of the refugee crisis they have hosted over 9,000 people. Their main focus was to improve the living conditions of those in need of international protection but also to simultaneously offer a counter-alternative to the authoritative national strategy in Greece, that of housing most refugee claimants within "hot spot" centres.

As you mentioned, the attack should be explained as part of the so-called process of restoring "law and order" on behalf of the new neoliberal government of the New Democracy. This tactic incorporates an organic, identitarian aspect of the party, in a country where the political system almost collapsed after the crisis. The parties who survived it were forced to change their physiognomy as a response to the new conjunctures. The New Democracy underwent this authoritarian shift in 2012, when Samaras held a leadership position as the prime minister of Greece and when the means of consent (i.e., the social policies deemed to provide relief to the affected people) vanished due to the implementation of austerity policies.

Thus, it was a card that the party played in order to repress the resistance from below that emerged during the same period. In the new momentum, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the prime minister of Greece and a New Democracy member, despite his proclaimed liberal sensitivities, did not change the political direction of the party in regards to this aspect. He continued the same ideological tactic of reshuffling parts of society in order to create a new, "included" social bloc on a discriminatory basis -- in the Gramscian sense, one that includes some yet it excludes others; the middle, upper-class "in" and the refugees "out." His obeisance to the EU-dictated austerity failed to provide concrete social policies that would relieve the majority of the population from the implications of neoliberalism. Thus, the subsequent policy attempts became about forging a hegemonic, neoliberal rule grounded on a generalized fear of otherness. The most vulnerable, easy target is represented by the refugee population residing in Exarcheia. The police raids need to be contextualized as a move to erase from the map of Athens the counterhegemonic loci where a dissenting social example is being exercised.

Raiding the squats, however, is not a new phenomenon. It happened many times under Syriza governance. The qualitative difference with the previous government is that the police repression was the sign of an institutional unwillingness to reform and democratize the authoritarian apparatus of the Greek state and subsequently, of the Greek police. In other words, Syriza failed to democratize the police force;



this kind of condition is a fragile one; sooner or later, it will collapse.

RB: *What about the position held by Athens' new mayor, Kostas Bakoyiannis? How are the evictions related to his proposed plan, that of investing 10 million euros to gentrify Exarcheia?*

GS: Bakoyiannis is an organic part of New Democracy. He is the nephew of the current prime minister of Greece, which explains why the New Democracy promoted him. His ideology and political practices are in full agreement with those of his uncle and he is seen as a member with "big political potential" for the party. One of the key slogans of his electoral campaign was that of a "safe Athens," which subsequently implies the expansion of the police state throughout the municipality.

In conjunction with the symbolic aspect of entering Exarcheia, there is also a material one. Exarcheia underwent a fast process of gentrification from the beginning of the crisis. This manifested through a significant spatial dispossession of property, through fast-track privatizations of public assets, and through the implementation of new urban agendas that were aligned with the memoranda agreements. Under these new conditions, the existence of the refugee squats did not fit well with how Exarcheia was being re-envisioned -- as an "orderly," ready-made area for tourists and investors. Bakoyiannis is simply standing on the side of capital with a capital C. For instance, during his electoral campaign, he explicitly declared that he is against the implementation of a general legal framework that will regulate the short-term renting of city apartments through Airbnb. An example that demonstrates the fast expansion of the gentrification process in Exarcheia is that of a Chinese investor buying 100 apartments in the area. These were initially intended to be used through short-term rental platforms and to be sold later at a higher price. Bakoyiannis's policies will most likely continue to endorse this type of greedy, capitalist investments, while they will completely ignore the housing needs of local people, who oftentimes find themselves in desperate situations due to increased housing prices, unaffordable housing stock, and overall low salaries.

RB: *Why is Exarcheia, all of the sudden, a point of ideological contention?*

It is not sudden at all. After the fall of the military junta in the '70s, Exarcheia became the key area for the development of an alternative political and cultural milieu, from within anarchist and the left-wing traditions. It embodied and continues to embody a space where different counter-cultures are produced and reproduced. The squats constitute an organic part of this nurtured social paradigm. More so, the squats have existed since the beginning of 1980s. During the post-junta era and due to all the aforementioned characteristics, Exarcheia was always a place of political confrontations between official state authorities and subversive political groups. It also needs to be clarified that the so-called "armed"



have materialized into us-versus-them combats. The real problem of the area is not the anarchists, let alone the refugees. Yet the police seem uninterested in the drug dealers. When the area will radically change due to gentrification, the dealers will simply move to other parts of the city and they will continue their activities as before. Thus, what is really at stake, materially, is to structurally steer Exarcheia on a trajectory that attracts further economic investments.

RB: *Despite the anarchist outlook of the neighborhood, mass mobilizations against Monday's evictions seem to have been few in number. Could you comment on this? What about conducting the raids at the end of August? When most Athenians are away from the city and Exarchia is, for the most part, a ghost community? Was the timing of these evictions merely coincidental?*

GS: First, it should be clarified, for those unfamiliar with the place, that Exarcheia is a neighborhood where average people (i.e., students, families etc.) also reside. It is not solely a place for anarchists. Additionally, it is a very lively neighborhood, with ongoing cultural events and quite an intense nightlife. In this sense, it is an area as many others in the Athenian historical centre. Thus, it is reasonable that during the month of August, Exarcheia will be almost empty, as it is the case with other parts of Athens during this period. I do not think that the timing of the raids was coincidental. They were conducted the day after Bakoyiannis won the elections, hence attempting to provide a first glimpse of the political character of his forthcoming governance and before the majority of Athenians would return from their vacations. More so, the raids were conducted through heavily armed police forces in order to combat any possible resistance efforts. The day after the raids, a massive protest was staged from the people standing in solidarity with the refugees. I am really afraid that if there will be a repetition of similar attempts on behalf of the Greek police during the autumn, there will be blood. The Greek police should think twice about invading Exarcheia again.

RB: *The raids were clearly the manifestation of right-wing politics in Greece. Yet what about the left? At some point in our former conversations, you were arguing that the left no longer exists in Greece. Can you expand a little bit on this statement?*

GS: The Greek left does exist but in small, fragmented pieces, in the form of politically insignificant organizations and without offering an attractive socio-political alternative. What I meant is that the left does not exist as a combative force at the political level. After the defeat of Syriza in July 2015, the Greek left has proven itself incapable to offer, at least at a minimum, a solid ideological frame for the creation of a coalition that would function as a pole for community organizing and mobilizing. The left seems to be continually shocked by Syriza's inability and unwillingness to implement a different set of policies from those of austerity. To a certain extent, this can be explained by the fact that Syriza was the first left-wing

an actual policy-based strategy for improving the everyday life of the Greek people. The left was, and continues to be at the current moment, completely unable to catch the momentum of the post-Syriza defeat and to capitalize on the post-2015 social unrest widespread amongst the Greek people against Alexis Tsipras. A first step towards the reconstruction of the left in the country would be to undertake an honest self-criticism on the causes of its defeat and to attempt to correct its mistakes, such as the increased organizational bureaucratization, the lack of structural capacity, its widespread elitism and the lack of connection with those struggling in their everyday life. There is a need for openness towards other collectivist forms that might create a multi-faceted political identity. The single positive development of Greek left-wing politics was the recent national election of nine MPs from Yianis Varoufakis's party, MeRA 25, which is the only non-Stalinist, anti-austerity party within the Greek parliament. The challenges faced by MeRA 25 are, more or less, the same as those mentioned above. MeRA 25 needs to prove that it is not only Yanis Varoufakis's party but also a party with a democratic structure that is capable to capitalize on the prevailing social unrest, to mobilize the people in the streets and to attempt to meet their social needs.

George Souvlis holds a PhD in history from the European University Institute in Florence. He is a freelance writer for various progressive magazines including The Salvage, Jacobin, ROAR and LeftEast. Souvlis lives in Athens, Greece.

Raluca Bejan is an assistant professor at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, Canada, where she teaches social policy and community organizing. She has a PhD from the University of Toronto. Raluca regularly writes for rabble.ca, and she previously contributed opinion pieces to TelesurTV, Verfassungsblog, and LeftEast/CriticAtac.

Image: Raluca Bejan

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