

The New War on Immigrants and Anarchists in Greece

An Interview with an Anarchist in Exarchia

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Filled with squatted social centers and characterized by a combative anti-authoritarian spirit, the neighborhood of Exarchia in Athens, Greece has long been an important reference point for autonomous movements around the world. The new right-wing government that has come to power in Greece has pledged to crush this experiment in inclusivity and self-determination. On August 26, massive police raids evicted four occupations, including some hosting refugee families, many of whom have been sent to concentration camps; at this moment, riot police surround Exarchia, preparing their next attacks. In response, demonstrations have been called for August 31 and September 14. We interviewed a resident of Exarchia about the context of this new chapter of struggle and the prospects ahead for those who seek a world without capitalism or state oppression.

In January 2015, as the global wave of right-wing electoral victories was picking up momentum, the new left party Syriza won the Greek elections. At the time, this inspired a lot of enthusiasm from leftists and socialists in Greece and elsewhere around the world; yet we argued that Syriza would draw movements out of the streets, re-legitimize the institutions of the state without changing their essentially repressive character, and ultimately fail to address the consequences of capitalism, polarizing Greek voters to the right. As we anticipated, Syriza did not follow through on their promises to defend Greece from the austerity measures demanded by the European Union. Instead, they imposed austerity measures themselves, further polarizing Greece and confirming that there is no viable electoral solution to the crises imposed by capitalism.

Consequently, in July 2019, the longstanding right-wing party New Democracy won the national elections by a clear majority. Some corporate media journalists celebrated the victory of New Democracy as a return to business as usual, a rejection of the supposed “extremism” of both Syriza and the fascist Golden Dawn party. But the victory of New Democracy is also a victory for the far right, who have seen their racist, nationalist agenda become mainstream. They took office with the intention of scapegoating immigrants and anarchists for the failures of neoliberal capitalism and the betrayals of left politicians. Taking advantage of the summer holidays to strike,

they have already begun violently evicting anarchist social centers and self-organized refugee housing in Athens, openly declaring war on all who stand in the way of their oppressive vision of order.

We conducted the following interview with an anonymous black flag anarchist resident of Exarchia three blocks from Exarchia Square following a small riot in the early hours of August 28.

New Democracy began by declaring war on anarchists, specifically on the neighborhood of Exarchia in Athens. We have seen a series of poorly-written articles from the yellow press spreading fear about “anarchist violence” and promising major government crackdowns. Why have they prioritized focusing on anarchists and specifically Exarchia as the chief enemy of the state? How much of the population do you think agrees with this characterization of anarchists?

New Democracy has shown a sort of delusional obsession with Exarchia. They refer to it as if it were the basis of the crisis here, as if it were the foundation of all of Greece’s problems. As a resident of Exarchia and an active anarchist, I can confirm that the language they use to describe my neighborhood is ridiculously overstated.

Sure, there are some issues with drug dealing and predatory mafia practices in Exarchia. The mafia recruits refugees, taking advantage of their desperate need for employment, hoping that anarchists who oppose opportunistic attempts to establish a drug market in the police-free zone of Exarchia will hesitate before hitting a refugee. This situation is the result of the poverty refugees face as they wait to receive asylum or struggle to make their home in Athens, trying to avoid harassment from police or fascists.

This is tragic, but it is nothing compared to a typical ghetto in the United States; it’s the inevitable result of the combination of the economic crisis and the so-called refugee crisis. The image of a refugee dealing drugs in Exarchia is an easy scapegoat for the right, and New Democracy has used this over and over in a cowardly manner to rally reactionary support.

Most people outside of Greece don’t understand that Exarchia is a very large neighborhood. It is only a five-minute walk from the most expensive part of the city center, Colonaki, a middle-to-upper-class neighborhood comparable to Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The anarchist movement emerged in the early 1970s out of student resistance to the Junta, which was concentrated at the nearby Polytechnio, the architectural university of Athens. Until then, Exarchia was a sort of extension of Colonaki. Since the 1970s, the neighborhood has become a gathering place for anarchists and squatters, but also for the theater community, leftists, intellectuals, artists, and the clients of an array of alternative bars. It is known locally as a nightlife destination on the weekends for students and partygoers as much as it is known for riots and squats.

While all of these elements coexist in a sort of chaotic equilibrium, the old inhabitants of Exarchia still complain. Unless you are one of the lucky few who have found an apartment here owned by an old person unaware of its Airbnb potential and the erupting real estate market in central Athens, or you are living in a squat or in a home owned by family, it is unlikely that a typical working-class Greek person could afford to live here. The wealthy residents of Exarchia complain to the municipal authorities. They have been doing so for years. New Democracy is responding in a way that may go beyond their whining.

For example, there is famous hill called Streffi where youth and anarchist-friendly folks go to chill with their friends and comrades. It is also a beautiful park that used to house parties and gatherings to celebrate and benefit the punk and hip-hop counter-cultures and anarchist and anti-fascist movements. Because it has a view of the Acropolis and some of the most expensive houses in Exarchia, a brutal initiative began in the summer 2018 to crush the cop-free-zone culture of Streffi. Riot police surrounded the hill before any announced event, and completely demolished the only squat in the area shortly after it declared solidarity with those trying to reclaim Streffi.

In short, Exarchia is not a beautiful utopia in which anarchists live in harmony together and with other locals. There are snitches and “good citizens” here who applaud the police.

New Democracy has been in power before; they are not something new. But after five years in exile under Syriza, they are declaring revenge on the left. Unlike Syriza, which has a realistic understanding of Exarchia, New Democracy members have a childish image of it. They mystify it as the enemy of all Greek civility and as the epicenter of all things left or anarchist.

While Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the new prime minister, is a rich kid who has probably never set foot in the neighborhood, the police are even more obsessed with Exarchia. On the morning of August 26, when four squats were evacuated, a police spokesperson went on national television to say “One finger launched a silent new vacuum cleaner which is the police, which will slowly suck all the garbage from Exarchia progressively, democratically, with a plan by police officers.” He went on to describe the 143 refugees who were detained as “dust with an annoying character.”

The police felt betrayed by Syriza. They think that for the past five years, the government condoned the weekly actions against the riot police that surround Exarchia. Now the police are ready for war. As soon as New Democracy was elected, riot police guarding the old PASOK political headquarters in Exarchia beat a homeless man nearly to death. When a local journalist tried to intervene, the police made threats; one cop was quoted as saying “this is how things will be for now on.” They are emboldened now in the same way that American police and fascists were when Trump was elected. I couldn’t make a more precise comparison.

Thus emboldened, they await the next battle with great anticipation. The riot police they station in Exarchia are typically not from Athens; they choose officers with extreme right-wing attitudes specifically for that role. This is a longstanding precedent for riot police. In some ways, they enjoy the riots as much as anarchists do; they too believe that they are fighting a war. New Democracy has handed them a clear mandate to restore order in Exarchia.

We can also see that Exarchia has become the highest priority target as a consequence of the decline of more radical action from the anarchist movement. After a period of many surprise attacks and bombings following the upheaval of December 2008, many members of the anarchist groups Conspiracy Cells of Fire and Revolutionary Struggle have been captured and imprisoned, and there has been a significant decrease in so-called political terrorism. Such actions still happen, but not at the same frequency and intensity as before.

This is similar to what happened to US anarchists following Operation Backfire as a result of the FBI declaring the Animal and Earth Liberation Fronts to be the number one domestic “terror” threat in the United States. After a wave of infiltration, repression, and inflated sentences targeting clandestine direct action, the US anarchist movement shifted towards mass street action. The state shifted its strategy, as well, using grand juries to harass people, demonizing classic forms of protest, and militarizing police departments.

In a similar way, owing to the drop in clandestine attacks, the Greek right was forced to construct a new enemy. This is likely why they chose the neighborhood of Exarchia and focused

on the local anarchist group *Rouvikonas* (Rubicon). Rouvikonas has quite a reputation in Athens and the media love them. Essentially, they are an anarcho-communist group that engages in civil disobedience with an aggressive edge. They intimidate bosses, throw paint on buildings, smash turnstiles at subway entrances, and organize various other actions that are inspiring and courageous but deliberately restrained in order to avoid the risk of long prison terms.

Regardless of their restraint and the fact that they are just one of many groups in the Greek anarchist movement, Rouvikonas has become the new government's public enemy number one alongside the anarchists in Exarchia as a whole and the specter of drug dealing in the square. Unless some more pressing concern arises, New Democracy will focus on this constructed threat, striving to present themselves as the saviors of the Hellenic people, while doing nothing to truly improve people's lives—a classic fascist strategy.

It is hard to know how many people buy into the narrative of the new Greek right. About 39 percent of Greek voters cast ballots for New Democracy, with another 31 percent voting for Syriza, 5 percent for the Communist Party, and 3 percent for Golden Dawn. It is hard to tell how much of the population believes this administration's nonsense about Exarchia. Greece is a very polarized society, notorious for a popular skepticism of politicians of all stripes. But the residents of the countryside and the suburbs of Athens, the super-rich, and the isolated poor people who voted for New Democracy certainly subscribe to their agenda.

Of the first wave of police raids, in which four squats were evicted and 143 people arrested, the vast majority of the arrestees were immigrants, who are being moved to concentration camps. How do the crackdowns promised by New Democracy relate to continued scapegoating and repression of immigrants? How do anarchist strategies for defense against the government crackdown address the targeting of immigrants?

Of the four squats evicted, only two were housing refugees. The other two were anarchist spaces that did not serve this function. It is not easy to put all the squats that were targeted in any one category, as they are associated with different groups and different objectives. One of these squats, named Gare, has been evicted—and reoccupied—several times already under Syriza.

It's also important to emphasize that the squats Spirou Trikopi 17 and Transito were providing housing and support to refugees in a completely self-determined manner independent of the state. Syriza never targeted this occupation, from what I understand—and this is where a new policy shift is obvious. These squats, along with several others nearby, have been providing free spaces for refugee families in conditions that are far superior to those in the state-funded detention facilities. Even if we consider the subject from a statist point of view, it actually saves the state money for refugees to be self-organizing their housing in this way with support from anarchists.

So this is an explicitly racist and fascistic act of symbolic revenge from the new government: a statement to refugees and other immigrants that they are no longer safe in Exarchia's asylum. Many of the refugees who were arrested will probably be moved to Petrou Ralli detention center, a volatile place located in the middle of an industrial zone in Athens. Others have reportedly been dispersed to various refugee concentration camps around Athens and Greece. We hope that many of those detained will be released following investigation, but some may be deported or else remain in overcrowded detention centers in Greece.

Let me repeat this: even from a state perspective, the spaces that the police evicted were saving Greek taxpayers money and alleviating some of the impact of the so-called refugee crisis. However, just as the US government spends more money capturing and imprisoning immigrants and homeless people than it would spend simply helping or housing them, the point is to set a polit-

ical precedent for society at any cost. Immigrants and refugees are not welcome here, law and order above all else, and, like all the other right-wing governments reigning over various parts of the earth today, the Greek government aims to encourage their base to blame the desperate and excluded for their suffering, rather than the prevailing order or the elites that benefit from it.

Syriza evicted plenty of squats during their time in power. But they targeted the immigrant squats that they alleged were housing people involved in drug dealing and the anarchist squats that they claimed were being used to manufacture Molotov cocktails. In both cases, they attempted to frame an ethical narrative, trying to draw a line between “good” and “bad” squats.

By contrast, New Democracy has made it clear that they have a long-term plan to eradicate not only the existing squats in Exarchia but squatting itself, along with all the refugees, immigrants, anarchists, youth, and other people who give the neighborhood its world-famous character. They aim to destroy the culture that has come to define Exarchia. This will not be a quick procedure; they have a long-term plan, likely concluding with the creation of a subway stop in Exarchia Square and a return to the good old days when Exarchia had more in common with Colonaki.

Besides the government imprisoning families who had been living self-determined, peaceful lives in Exarchia, the most striking element of the eviction of August 26 was its timing. In late July 2019, around the same time they officially lifted the university asylum, New Democracy released the police officer who murdered the teenage anarchist Alexis Grigoropoulos; these were two dramatic provocations aimed at the anarchist and autonomous movements. Typically, the state has evicted squats between the beginning of July and the middle of August. While squats both inside and outside Exarchia—for example, in the neighborhoods of Kipseli and Koukaki—have been repeatedly harassed throughout the summer and continue to experience harassment at this moment, the operation of August 26 was timed to occur immediately before many people are returning from summer vacations. Carrying out these attacks at this time is meant to send the message that war has been declared on Exarchia and those who support the cop-free and anti-fascist social experiment that it represents.

To bring this back to the situation for immigrants, they are having their lives ruined once again. People are concerned about refugees committing suicide. We may see an escalation of violence on the part of desperate refugees. Many people who have faced and escaped the direst circumstances of our century have found Exarchia to be a safe place they could call home. The trauma that New Democracy aims to inflict with its reign of terror may produce unexpected results. This is a sad reality that we have to discuss. We should take seriously the severity of the emotional damage that the raids of August 26 inflicted, as well as the raids likely to come.

We hear that the Greek government has repealed the “sanctuary law” maintaining university asylum, prohibiting police from entering the universities except in emergencies. How will this effect the anarchist movement in Greece and the social context as a whole?

So far, the end of university asylum has taken place in words alone. Cops already often raided universities during riots or in pursuit of so-called criminals. Now they have changed the law so police will not need the formal permission of a university dean to enter. But it remains to be seen what this will mean in practice. University asylum is a hard-won victory cherished by a substantial part of the movement in Greece. Many people are deeply invested in it. It is not simply a matter of people sometimes running to the Polytechnic in Exarchia to avoid arrest during riots. This is a very small aspect of how the end of university autonomy will effect the movement.

Universities are important rallying points for assemblies and organizing in Greece. There are occupied spaces inside many universities that house social centers (*steki*) and anarchist groups. Above all, universities have served as a recruiting space for anarchists and as a venue for events. Parties and events at universities throughout Greece, from the hip-hop shows at the economics school in Kipseli to the punk shows at the law school in Neapoli, have provided important infrastructure to challenge repression and raise funds, as well as a safe and affordable space for people to gather and connect politically.

New Democracy has been obsessed with drug users and drug dealing, but no informed person would deny that the police have been intentionally pushing addicts and dealers into the universities. In most cases, drug use and dealing has not interrupted the ordinary function of the universities. But drug addiction is a major problem in Greece, where there is intense poverty by European standards and the port of Piraeus serves as a hub for heroin entering Europe. I do not blame people for their addictions; I blame capitalism. At the same time, the police have used the epidemic to target universities and Exarchia. For a long time, now, they have pushed addicts to the peripheries of the universities in hopes of delegitimizing the asylum law and undermining student autonomy. And while the drug dealing situation in Exarchia has become sad and confusing, it originated with a huge police effort in 2010 to push addicts into Exarchia.

Incidentally, in addition to pushing the drug trade into universities, police have also sought to push it into neighborhoods inhabited by (largely legal) immigrants. This is a way to consolidate drugs and crime in non-white or immigrant communities. In Athens, the neighborhood of Omonia experiences some of the most devastating heroin and meth use I have seen in this city. It also happens to be one of the largest concentrations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi business owners.

Time will tell whether the police can take control of the universities in practice. If they begin patrolling campuses, evicting occupied centers in the universities, and shutting down parties, this would put a damper on the movement. At the same time, it would probably ignite a forceful reaction from the movement that would backfire against New Democracy.

New Democracy may be poking the wrong beast. If they push harder, rather than sticking to the slow, patient strategy of repression Syriza employed, there will be a broader backlash extending far beyond Exarchia. The asylum law is not only cherished by anarchists, but also autonomists, communists, leftists of all kinds, and, to put it simply, kids who like to party. The reaction to this clampdown has yet to be seen.

How does the state attack on Exarchia relate to the capitalist assault on the neighborhood that has been taking place through gentrification and urban displacement? What is the relationship between Airbnb and urban development initiatives and riot police?

Exarchia has always been a sort of obsession for people from the conservative suburbs and for fascists in the countryside. Since the 1970s, there have been efforts to mess with Exarchia time and time again. After the 2008 insurrection, the Delta police would raid the neighborhood at random, attacking and beating people. Syriza formally eliminated the force; now New Democracy plans to reestablish it.

But Airbnb is the invisible enemy everyone is at a loss to deal with. Exarchia is becoming one of the most expensive places to live in the center of Athens, and Airbnb is almost 100 percent responsible for this sudden spike in real estate value and short-term rent hikes. Prior to Airbnb, a three-bedroom apartment could cost you 250 euros a month; now, that same apartment could generate well over 1800 euros a month if used for Airbnb.

This has drawn the attention of property owners and investors. New Democracy has been promising a new prosperity for Greece following years of recession. Yet in the melodramatic television coverage of Exarchia here, it is rarely mentioned that all these demonized alternative and deviant criminal elements are actually entertaining a huge market of alternative tourism.

In Exarchia, German, American, and Chinese tourists walk side by side the same immigrants and anarchists that the police refer to as trash. There is even a tour available as an “Airbnb Experience” called “Sweet Anarchy” describing Exarchia and its street inhabitants as if we are animals in a zoo.

What has changed in the war on Exarchia since the days before Syriza? Chiefly, this: if New Democracy is able to succeed in its long-term effort to eradicate those who defend the neighborhood’s character, Airbnb and foreign investors have created a new market that will be ready to redefine Exarchia swiftly.

How will anarchists respond to the attacks promised by the state? Are there divisions over issues of strategy?

I don’t think there are very many divisions over issues of strategy. Compared to the US, there are fewer bourgeois voices demanding pacifism in the movements here. Any strategy for the self-defense of Exarchia and the movements that define it will be welcome, whatever form it takes. Some groups are more open to using force than others are, but it’s rare to hear the sort of debate about violence and nonviolence that often takes place in the US.

But the challenge isn’t division over strategy so much as it is division itself. I think most people in the movement would say that morale is at a low point in recent memory. There are more anarchists, autonomists, and anti-fascists than ever before, but division is rampant. Many groups have a competitive attitude towards each other, nurse personal disputes, experience infighting, or refuse to work together at all. Still, I believe this will change quickly.

Many would say that 2008 to 2012 saw the peak of anarchist activity in Greece thus far for the 21st century. There were many challenges following mass police operations against the groups Conspiracy Cells of Fire and Revolutionary Struggle, not to mention the tragic deaths of three bank employees during a general strike in 2010.¹ Many people experienced an insurrection, a generalized revolt that people can only dream of in the current anarchist movement in the United States. Rioting and organizing both took place on a massive scale. However, following those years of struggle, very little actually changed. Austerity and poverty remained the norm, as Greece became the scapegoat for failed European policies and the new generation was forced to bear the consequences of the economic crisis.

When Syriza came to power, many anarchists fought with each other about whether to vote for them. Some argued that a Syriza government would make it easier to defend Exarchia and alleviate the suffering of those in prison, as well as mitigating the stress caused by state forces such as the Delta police. This created a great deal of division between anarchists, showing how confusing things became as what had seemed to be a social revolution quickly turned to the left, taking the stage in the theater of Greek politics.

Syriza was strategic like a snake. The party leaders knew Exarchia; many of them were leftist intellectuals and academics who used to come to Exarchia to debate over coffee or beer. They knew how to quell the movement, how to turn people against each other. They knew how to

¹ Many attribute these three deaths to the boss refusing to let the employees leave during the general strike and the riot that predictably accompanied it.

give people just enough room to breathe so they wouldn't feel strangled. But they had their hands around our necks the whole time.

Many people from the prior generation became depressed or moved on. It was sad to see what many had thought of as a leftist government with all the right answers imposing austerity measures. It was a sad conclusion to the peak years of resistance.

However, the number of participants in anarchist, autonomist, and anti-authoritarian movements has not decreased. On the contrary, it has dramatically increased. Anarchism exists on a massive scale in Greece. It is hard to describe the extent of the movement and its diversity to an American audience.

During the Syriza years, there was a considerable amount of repression. The police attacked squats, but did so in a very calculated manner, so that people would target their anger internally, emphasizing small conflicts and political distinctions. The Syriza government helped to fan the flames of sectarianism in the movement by containing the movement rather than trying to suppress it.

Now, there are signs that people are coming together. A new poster is circulating calling for a mobilization on September 14 under the banner "No Pasaran." Many groups in Exarchia that were at odds during the Syriza years are calling for this mobilization together. The assemblies that have taken place in the last 48 hours were not characterized by the infighting many of us are used to, and the number of participants has been high. People feel the pressure. They know they have to choose their battles. They have learned from the deceptions of Syriza that there is no such thing as a victory for our movements in the theater of state politics.

I think many people expected this. Some are depressed and divided, but prepared to transcend these issues collectively. Since its inception in the 1970s, the Greek anarchist movement as we know it has always been characterized by waves. As summer is ending, we see people coming together, opening their minds, and realizing the seriousness of the battle ahead.

I should note that the four squats evicted on August 26 were associated with groups that are at odds. But the dialogue that has followed has expressed unity and solidarity. Things are bad and they will definitely get worse. But I believe that people will come together. This is already happening.

What can we do outside Greece to support the anarchist movement and the freedom of immigrants there? What are the most effective ways we can act in solidarity?

For better or worse, Exarchia has been portrayed as the mecca of global anarchism. Sometimes I laugh about this, but then I remind myself to not take for granted the beautiful elements of this neighborhood.

Many would say that the answer to your question is to go to Greek embassies and let the Greek state know that Exarchia will not be isolated, that it is loved from across the world. But I would say, in the spirit of revolutionary solidarity, that the most important thing that those who read this text can do is to continue building spaces and community wherever you are.

Exarchia has its fair share of issues, but it is generally a safe place. Considering its size, the fact that it functions so well without policing—despite so much diversity and internal differences and external pressure—attests to the viability of anarchism. Exarchia confirms that even without a police force, a major metropolitan area can function peacefully. So one way you could demonstrate your solidarity is to work towards creating more communities that celebrate self-determination, that do not welcome the police.

This year will see the first observances of important annual events under New Democracy, including November 17, the anniversary of the day 23 students were killed by the Junta at the Polytechnio in Exarchia, and December 6, the anniversary of the murder of Alexis Grigoropolous that sparked the 2008 insurrection. New Democracy has used both days to rally their supporters and argue that they must lift the asylum laws. While the movement has generally been critical of what is called anarcho-tourism, I think the attitude around this is changing. If people come to Greece for these days, they could help to protect Exarchia.

Outside supporters can also come to Greece to help immigrants independent of the state and NGOs, inside and outside of Athens. This has been going on for a long time.

It is not easy to say exactly what you should do. As I write this, I still don't know what New Democracy has planned, nor how anarchists here will respond. But there are cops in riot gear surrounding the neighborhood, undercover cops roaming the streets, and tension everywhere. I am equally afraid and excited to see what is to come.

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