Care commons: Infrastructural (re)compositions for life sustenance through yet against regimes of chronic crisis

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Abstract

Infrastructures constitute key sites in the contemporary crisis regime. Emerging infrastructural configurations, particularly in the urban setting, are raising questions about the possibilities and challenges that these transformations may bring regarding more just and sustainable modes of social provision. Attention is being drawn to the grassroots, where experiments with novel forms of organisation are bringing about new collective contexts and political conceptions. In this context, infrastructure has been proposed as a concept to both examine contemporary crises and devise ways to cope with breakdown that can gesture towards living alternatives at the service of life. In this article, I engage this debate through an ethnographic study of two grassroots initiatives in Athens (Greece) intervening in the realm of life sustenance. I will show that these people-driven initiatives (re)compose networked infrastructures in ways that advance organisational modes of social provision different to institutions, and forms of political engagement and possibility. They do so by *infrastructuring* care through *commoning*. I will argue that infrastructural systems of care commons contribute to an infrastructural imagination that moves away from modern ideals towards values of relationality, conductivity, care and repair, which may nurture a transformative politics for a world in crisis, yet against crisis regimes.

Keywords

care, commons, informality, infrastructure, networks, social justice

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摘要

基础设施是当代危机机制中的关键场所。新兴的基础设施配置，特别是在城市环境中的基础设施配置，令人对这些转型可能带来的机会和挑战产生了疑问，其涉及更公正和可持续的社会供应模式。人们的注意力正在被吸引到草根阶层。草根阶层对新的组织形式的实验正在带来新的集体处境和政治观念。在这种情况下，有人提议将基础设施作为一个概念来审视当代危机并设计出应对崩溃的方法，这些方法可以提供其它生活备选方案，为生活服务。这篇文章通过采用人类学研究方法，对希腊雅典两项生计方面的基层干预举措进行了研究，从而参与这场辩论。文章将说明这些以人为本的举措（重新）组合基础设施网络，并推进不同于制度的社会供给组织模式以政治参与和可能性的形式。他们通过共享 (commoning) 使关怀成为一种基础设施，从而实现这点。本文将论证，关怀公地基础设施系统有助于实现一个关于基础设施的构想，从现代理想转向关系性、传导性、关怀和修复的价值观，这可能会为处于危机中的世界培育与危机制度相悖的变革性的政治。

关键词

关怀、共享 (commons)、非正规性、基础设施、网络、社会正义

Introduction: Infrastructural reconfigurations through regimes of crisis

Increasingly recurrent capital-driven crises are accelerating the breakdown of the systems of eco-social reproduction on a planetary scale. Crisis has become a chronic condition of our contemporary world. Governance via crisis has expanded across countries. Importantly, the consolidation of crisis politics is ultimately paving the way for renewed regimes of extraction and capital accumulation (Athanasiou, 2018; Bhattacharya and Dale, 2020; Roitman, 2014 [2013]). Infrastructures constitute key components of this scenario and regime. In the global North, states have been long unable to fully finance the infrastructural development needed to sustain economic growth. Following the 2008 international financial crisis, the private sector has gradually withdrawn investments too. Dalakoglou (2016) and Dalakoglou and Kallianos (2018) have referred to the present deficit in infrastructure development and maintenance as an 'infrastructural gap' (IG).

They contend that the IG has prompted the emergence of new infrastructural configurations, particularly in the urban setting, where new actors, technologies, modes of operation and ownerships are yielding a shift in the modern paradigm of infrastructural function, governance and imagination. Given the intrinsic connection between infrastructures and modernity, they argue that these infrastructural reconfigurations are challenging the established social contract, pushing a change in the wider socio-political paradigm altogether.

This juncture has prompted a renewed focus on infrastructures in academic scholarship and debates. Attention is being drawn to the grassroots, where experiments with novel forms of organisation are bringing about new collective contexts and political conceptions associated with ongoing infrastructural reconfigurations, and the possibilities (and limitations) that those may open concerning more equitable and sustainable modes of social provision (e.g. Angelo and Hentschel, 2015; Arampatzi, 2016, 2017; Berlant, 2016; Corsín Jiménez, 2014;

Dalakoglou, 2016; Dalakoglou and Kallianos, 2018; Graham and McFarlane, 2015; Venkatesan et al., 2018). New conceptualisations have been posed from different fields, moving away from modern understandings – where infrastructures are largely seen as homogeneous, uniform, expert-based and politically neutral systems – towards new analytical frameworks to examine infrastructural transformations and, through them, contemporary crises. Scholars like Angelo and Hentschel (2015), Tonkiss (2015) and Lawhon et al. (2018) propose to use infrastructure as an analytical lens, highlighting its relational nature. Others, including Corsín Jiménez (2014), Dalakoglou (2016), Berlant (2016) and Simone (2019), have gone further to propose infrastructure not only as a category productive of new modes of inquiry, but also as a concept generative of imaginations that can gesture towards living alternatives at the service of life through global breakdown.

This article will engage these debates on infrastructure through an ethnographic study of two grassroots initiatives – a social clinic and pharmacy and a community centre – in Athens (Greece). The aim will be to show that these people-driven initiatives (re)compose networked infrastructures in ways that advance organisational modes of social provision different to institutions, and forms of political engagement and possibility. They do so by infrastructuring care through commoning across different sites and scales. I will argue that infrastructural systems of care commons contribute to an infrastructural imagination that moves away from modern ideals towards values of relationality, conductivity, care and repair, which may nurture a transformative politics for a world in crisis, yet against crisis regimes. To provide a framework to ground the analysis and these arguments, in what follows, I will further elaborate on present theoretical deliberations on infrastructure

and put those in dialogue with debates on care and the commons.

Infrastructures, care and commons

Current theoretical debates on infrastructure draw largely from studies of everyday engagements with infrastructures in urban contexts, particularly in the Global South, where infrastructure is commonly experienced as discontinuous, heterogeneous, decentralised and peopled (Lawhon et al., 2018). This rich scholarship is inspiring recent studies focusing on the role of the grassroots in the infrastructural reconfigurations taking place in cities of the Global North in response to conditions of crisis expanding since 2008 (e.g. Arampatzi, 2016, 2017; Corsín Jiménez, 2014; Dalakoglou, 2016; Dalakoglou and Kallianos, 2018). A broad definition that could be drawn from this literature is that of infrastructures as relational and moving socio-material configurations that enable everyday sustenance, through which people partake and transform their social, political and built environments, and produce or reproduce collective imaginations.

The ethnographic work by Simone (2004, 2019) has been paramount in these recent conceptual engagements with infrastructure. He has defined infrastructures as relational fields that shape and sustain everyday urban life, showing that relation-making through experimental practices of collaboration, reciprocity and entrepreneurship is key to endurance in contexts marked by scarcity and uncertainty. The notion of 'people as infrastructure' (Simone, 2004), based on ethnographic research about everyday economic activities in Johannesburg, provides a framework to understand the myriad ways in which people engage the unsettled imbrications of materialities and socialities that infrastructures are, and the role that those play in

enabling – or disabling – the conditions for inhabitation. Building on this idea of infrastructure as relation-making for everyday urban sustenance, McFarlane and Silver (2017: 463) have proposed thinking of it as a verb –*infrastructuring* – namely 'a practice of connecting people and things in socio-material relations that sustain urban life'.

Simone's (2004) notion also encompasses a political dimension. 'People as infrastructure' does not refer to a mere coping strategy. Rather, active engagement and composition of infrastructures constitute modes of intervening in the existing reality, ways of expanding opportunities, and as such – although precariously – ways of performing agency and yielding change. The infrastructure in this sense provides both a supporting structure for livelihoods and a site for the exertion of (some) agency. More recently, Simone (2019: 49) has emphasised that 'the focus on infrastructure allows us to see the kinds of relational knowledges that are at work, that are under threat, that are vulnerable today'. Graham and McFarlane (2015: 13) and Corsín Jiménez (2014) have elaborated on this political dimension from a similar perspective, referring to infrastructures as sites of continuous political negotiations among different actors. They argue that the capacity of citizens to engage with infrastructures determines citizenship conditions. In this vein, Dalakoglou (2016) and Dalakoglou and Kallianos (2018) note that since the emergence of the first infrastructural systems, social imaginations of infrastructure have been linked to notions of political participation and citizenship.

In this conceptual debate on infrastructure and its dimensions, the comparison with institutions has provided further nuance. Berlant (2016) noted that the key difference between the two lies in movement. This aspect translates into politics and ethics of a different kind. Whereas institutions operate through established norms, roles and normative reciprocity, infrastructures work through movement, dynamic relationality and connectivity. Institutions seek to organise transformation based on predictability. They want to 'protect' us from change, alterity, plurality and conflict. Thus, they fix, settle, classify, separate and control – ultimately closing off. They tend to prioritise their own interests over society's needs and demands. Thus, they concentrate power and interest. Infrastructures, by contrast, circulate, distribute, bridge, and connect. Their functioning and durability are mostly based on use. Thus, they are more porous to power re-adjustments and re-arrangements. Based on this conceptual distinction, Berlant (2016) invites us to think and imagine modes of social organising as infrastructure for a world facing breakdown through regimes of crisis.

Infrastructuring from the grassroots

Dalakoglou (2016) and Dalakoglou and Kallianos (2018) argue that the current shift in the (European) infrastructural – and political – paradigm is being pushed substantially by people-driven initiatives and movements, which are experimenting with novel forms of organisation and provision. Similarly, ethnographic studies by Corsín Jiménez (2014) and Arampatzi (2016, 2017) have shown that recent grassroots urban projects are bringing about new ecologies of urban relations that foster socio-technological innovation and open up new pathways for political action and governance. Among them, there is a specific type that is playing a key role in the sustenance of people in urban areas hit by recent crises. These are infrastructures intervening in the realm of *life sustenance*[1]– or social *reproduction* – that is, the sphere where social and material needs are provided for. Their function, size, scope and legal status are varied. Among them, we find social food banks and kitchens, self-organised

community gardens, mutual-aid schools, self-managed clinics and pharmacies, self-run accommodation centres, solidarity laundries and community centres.

The notion 'life sustenance', which comes from the long Latin American tradition of communal experiences and struggles against colonialism and extractivism, bridges different theoretical traditions on care[2] encompassing various dimensions – economic, ethical, political, subjective and symbolic. Importantly, it brings those in dialogue with theory and debates on the commons. Scholars like Gutiérrez-Aguilar (2017), Federici (2019) and Zechner (2021) have shown that in experimenting with forms of organising life sustenance with a commons-based approach, many contemporary grassroots initiatives and struggles are forging new political capacities. Berlant (2016: 395) for her part suggests the commons as a 'vehicle for troubling troubled times', arguing that they acknowledge our broken world yet, at the same time, hold a generative capacity beyond brokenness.

As noted before, I will engage these debates on infrastructure, care and commons through an ethnographic study of two grassroots initiatives, which were established in Athens (Greece) in response to austerity and the renewed EU border regime. My account and arguments draw on ethnographic fieldwork from 2016 to 2018, 20 semi-structured interviews with participants, people involved in other solidarity initiatives and researchers, and follow-up secondary research during the pandemic. Among my interviewees, there were people of different origins – Greeks, migrants and international volunteers – and varied social and political backgrounds, who were chosen based on their experience of involvement in the examined initiatives and other solidarity groups, aiming to include as many voices and perspectives as possible. The interviews included sets of open-ended questions, which sought to get the interlocutor engaged in in-depth reflections largely about forms of organising and management in the initiatives, forms of resistance and building power, opinions about the Greek crisis, austerity and institutions, personal experiences and visions for the future. They took place in settings chosen by the interviewees, who gave permission to record and transcribe the interviews via signed consent forms. The interviews were analysed through narrative and thematic analysis methods by coding them according to recurrent themes, classifying responses key to my research questions, and interpreting how my interlocutors gave meaning to their lived experiences based on their positions in the research field and in society more generally.

Greece through chronic crisis: Recomposition of the welfare regime and urban transformation

Greece has become a paradigmatic case of the state of chronic crisis facing our contemporary world. The country has been struck by a series of overlapping crises for over a decade. In 2008, the crash of the international financial sector plunged the Greek economy into a profound sovereign debt crisis. In 2010, the government signed the first Memorandum of Understanding by which Greece was required to implement structural economic adjustments. Austerity triggered multiple processes of dispossession and exclusion, which became most manifest in urban areas. Athens particularly was turned into a territory of governance experimentation. Municipal budgets for urban services, transit systems and cultural and sports facilities were curtailed. Many public spaces and urban infrastructures deteriorated. In parallel, public urban lands, infrastructures, buildings, parks and commercial spaces were sold off. Ethnicity-based violence from both the police and far-right groups became more

present in public spaces, while political activism was repressed and the right to protest curtailed (Boano and Gyftopoulou, 2016; Hadjimichalis, 2015; Kalandides and Vaiou, 2015; Koutrolikou, 2016).

Midway through the austerity regime, in 2015, Greece witnessed a massive influx of asylum seekers. The EU responded with a new migration agreement with Turkey,[3] which left many migrants stuck in an administrative limbo. The government set up a reception system based mainly on camps, which were mostly built outside urban areas. Since the onset of this system, refugees' mobility, right to privacy, safety, proper housing and healthcare have been subjected to striking state control and restriction (Lafazani, 2018). The deprivation of rights that ensued from these crises – infamously targeting vulnerable populations the most – has continued into the present, intensifying with the pandemic. Governmental measures to counteract the spread of the virus have impacted populations unevenly along lines of class, ethnicity and gender. The COVID-19 pandemic has in fact deepened the existing trend of increasing inequalities, which are most apparent in urban areas (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2021).

These continuing crises have extensively transformed the economic, political and social landscapes in the country. One of the realms that have been profoundly affected is that of social welfare. Like Southern European countries, Greece's political economy has historically been marked by a pattern of low-wage labour devoid of sufficient public welfare support. A great part of the costs and responsibility for societal reproduction were therefore assigned to the family. Papadopoulos and Roumpakis (2013) called this model 'Familistic Welfare Capitalism'. Over the last decades, it has undergone extensive transformations towards more heterogeneous modalities of welfare provision (Bonanno, 2022; Streinzer,

2021). Already before the debt crisis, governments had performed gradual outsourcing of some forms of social and care provision from the public system to both the private sector and households. The austerity regime came to increase the public infrastructural gaps in social welfare, ultimately accelerating the ongoing reconfiguration of the Greek welfare regime. Budgets for healthcare, social care and education were severely curtailed. Many people were excluded from healthcare and social care services and deprived of educational and cultural resources (Dalakoglou and Kallianos, 2018; Kalandides and Vaiou, 2015; Streinzer, 2021). The contraction of the public healthcare system during the austerity regime became all the more manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the deadly consequences, the current government has refused to take action to reverse the trend of continuous commercialisation and privatisation of social welfare (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2021).

These transformations in the welfare regime can be understood as part of broader infrastructural reconfigurations taking place in the country, especially concerning soft infrastructures. The widening of social welfare infrastructural gaps has prompted the emergence of alternative actors, who have gained socio-economic relevance. On the one hand, the refugee crisis would bring hundreds of NGOs and charity organisations to Greece. Their presence and influence have consolidated over the last years. On the other, anti-austerity mobilisations yielded the proliferation of grassroots structures and networks of social reproduction, which have concentrated in urban areas (Bonanno, 2022; Dalakoglou and Kallianos, 2018; Streinzer, 2021). The case of Athens has been particularly paradigmatic in this regard. After a period of infrastructural contestation that followed the Olympic Games in 2004 – for which major infrastructural

developments were undertaken – during the austerity regime, urban-based protests turned their main focus to life sustenance issues, paving the way for the emergence of myriad solidarity initiatives (Arampatzi, 2016, 2017; Dalakoglou and Kallianos, 2018). Contrary to the expansion of the third sector, many solidarity initiatives have been subjected to state repression or erasure (Apostolopoulou and Liodaki, 2021). Nevertheless, many remain active in the present. Some have been repurposed to tackle new challenges in the wake of the pandemic, during which they have taken on an important role in the social reproduction of vulnerable urban populations.

The emergence of solidarity initiatives

In May 2011, the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens created a temporary autonomous site where people experimented with novel forms of protest and self-organisation. The occupation fuelled the emergence of neighbourhood assemblies, cooperative structures and self-organised solidarity initiatives including social clinics and pharmacies, social kitchens, accommodation centres for refugees, community centres, solidarity schools, legal aid hubs and mobile laundries. Ever since, solidarity initiatives have configured dynamic and heterogeneous networks of mutual aid and struggle across the metropolitan territories. They have gathered people from diverse socio-economic and political backgrounds, ages and countries, bringing together long-standing activists and first-time volunteers, young people and retirees, locals and migrants. Broadly, their operation is based on a combination of participatory practices that attend to the provision of everyday needs with political actions articulated with broader struggles. In many cases, their endeavour has included the recuperation of neglected buildings and the reintegration of those into the public

urban circuit. In others, the temporary reactivation of squares and other open spaces. Overall, they have rendered life sustenance public – and visible – spreading counter-austerity and anti-racist narratives contributing to the politicisation of life sustenance in the everyday (Arampatzi, 2016, 2017; Cabot, 2016; Kalandides and Vaiou, 2015; Rübner Hansen and Zechner, 2015). Dalakoglou (2016) and Dalakoglou and Kallianos (2018) have interpreted them as an innovative and insurgent response to the breakdown of the top-down-instituted infrastructural paradigm that is advancing novel forms of democratic infrastructural practice with broader implications for the socio-political order and its institutions.

During my fieldwork in a range of these solidarity initiatives, I engaged in several of the daily operations carried out in each one. They were based on the distribution of different knowledge(s), information, resources, bodies and objects. A logic of active engagement was manifest, resonating with Simone's (2004) notion of 'people as infrastructure'. Simone (2004), however, coined this concept referring to economic/productive activities, whereas here people constitute themselves as infrastructure through reproductive activities. What solidarity initiatives produce, distribute and deliver is fundamentally care in a broader sense. This adds some specificities to Simone's (2004) notion. In the following subsections, I will introduce two of these grassroots initiatives through examples of some of their daily operations as networked infrastructure, namely as supporting platforms of everyday life that operate as part of a wider system of collaborative actors.

Athens Community Polyclinic and Pharmacy (ACP&P)

The Athens Community Polyclinic and Pharmacy is one of the multiple self-organised medical centres that emerged in

response to the breakdown of the Greek National Health System and the privatisation of the healthcare sector. The ACP&P was set up in 2012 in a housing block in Omonia in central Athens. A reception and a waiting area were accommodated at the entrance, some rooms were furnished with medical equipment and one more was arranged with a fridge, shelves and tables to stock donated pharmaceuticals. The flat was rented by *Solidarity for All* – an organisation funded by the party SYRIZA that provides funding and resources for various solidarity initiatives.

The ACP&P functions on donations and voluntary work. It has agreements with public and private hospitals where patients who cannot be treated at the clinic are referred. The clinic started its activity by providing free-of-charge health services, prescriptions and pharmaceuticals to Greek citizens and migrants excluded from the NHS. Soon after, it added the provision of social and psychological assistance to cancer patients and drug users. In 2016, new activities were undertaken in support of refugees, as well as 'personal meetings' among volunteers. At present, it counts on gynaecologists, endocrinologists, dermatologists, cardiologists, ophthalmologists, dentists, psychologists, social workers and admin personnel. The ACP&P remained without legal status until 2020, when it was registered as a non-profit organisation called *Open Solidarity City*. Services ceased during the lockdowns, but resumed once restrictions were lifted. An email account for emergencies was provided and the clinic's social media remained active.

The resources and logistics that make it possible for patients and other people in need to get their medical services and medicines include the following. Alongside the funds from Solidarity for All, the ACP&P has a bank account for monetary donations. Occasionally, the 'admin team' launches calls asking for specific needs – some of them via social media and some through the network *Social Solidarity Clinics and Pharmacies of Attica*, which includes 16 clinics and pharmacies. The ACP&P participates in regular meetings with this network and with other solidarity initiatives, with which they share information and resources. Aside from them and neighbours – who have been donating unused drugs since the clinic opened – the ACP&P has received financial support and in-kind donations from organisations in Germany, France, the UK, Belgium and Switzerland, and some international NGOs like *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, *Red Cross* and *World Doctors*. The collection of donated drugs is performed by the admin team and the 'pharmacist team' alternatively. Volunteers would make use of their personal vehicles. Once at the clinic, the latter would check pharmaceuticals, classify and re-label valid ones, place those in their corresponding place and dispose of those not suitable for consumption. The admin team would do the same for the rest of the items. The ACP&P also delivers pharmaceuticals, sanitation items and food to other solidarity clinics, refugee camps and prisons.[4]

Khora community centre

Khora is a community centre, which was initially set up after the EU–Turkey agreement by a group of volunteers on a self-managed basis. Initially located in Exarcheia in central Athens, Khora provided a space for people from different backgrounds to socialise, work and learn. Until 2018, services included the provision of meals, clothing and other essential products, dentistry, legal aid for asylum seekers, language and music lessons, Internet and computer access, library and childcare. The six-storey building, which was fully refurbished, also counted on a women's (safe) space, a workshop and a rooftop. At the time of my fieldwork, there were around 150

volunteers. Currently, Khora is registered as an association and runs throughout three buildings in Kypseli and Exarcheia. During the lockdowns, Khora's kitchen provided food and cooked meals. The asylum support team continued providing services remotely.

Khora has collaborated with legal aid organisations providing asylum support (like *Solidarity Now* and *Diotima*), translators, independent education groups and artist collectives (like *Giving for a Better Future, Victoria Square Project*, *The Flying Seagull, DoYourPart* and *No Border School*), 'without-middleman' food networks and food supply organisations (like *Hope Café* and *Steps*), local free-shops (like *Skoros*), the *Ithaca* mobile laundry, independent charities working with refugees (including *Jafra Fourndation*, *Melissa*, *Amurtel*, *Orange House, Love and Serve without Borders*), and other migrant/refugee initiatives in Greek islands and abroad. *Thighs of Steel, Solidarity with Refugees, HelpRefugees* and *Lush* are some international charities that have supported Khora financially. Besides, at the time of my fieldwork, the community centre was connected with some refugee squats and activist groups in the neighbourhood.

The daily running of the building and the services provided required extensively coordinated operations and resources. For instance, it used to take four weekly working groups – the 'admin/media team', the 'van team', the 'sorting team' and the 'shop assistants team' – coordinating in shifts for donated clothing to be handed at the free-shop. The admin/media team would launch calls for clothing donations and arrange collection. When transportation was required, the van team would use a rented van for the purpose. The team would make frequent trips to a warehouse at Elliniko – the former airport – where the self-run initiative *Pampiraki* used to store and distribute free-of-charge goods among solidarity initiatives across the city. At the building's basement, the sorting team would classify, fix and organise the clothes. The shop assistants would allocate different turns for people to come and get some clothes.

Infrastructuring care through commoning

> Hierarchy led to this crisis. People making decisions for other people without taking their opinions into consideration, whether it is armies, governments, large NGOs, companies… We felt that this inherently ignores minorities and […] we just all agreed that every voice is equal and every voice should have a say... So it is kind of a direct disagreement with the systems that have been inherently violent towards the people that we are now trying to support. […] There were so many gaps left by the large NGOs and the government, that it just felt that we needed to do something to cover those gaps. (Ruth, interview 8 August 2017)

This statement by Ruth – a volunteer at Khora – reflects a critical stance towards institutional responses to the crisis, which is largely shared among solidarity initiatives. People involved commonly see state institutions and some non-governmental organisations as responsible for having created the very conditions for impoverishment and inequality to thrive, leaving them with 'no choice' but to engage collectively and committedly. Both the ACP&P and Khora make explicit this rejection in their respective statements of intent, which are accessible on their websites.[5] This is why they strive – not exempted from tensions and contradictions – to produce and deliver care differently. I argue that solidarity initiatives in Greece infrastructure care, that is, create social, material and affective networks through which care is provided in dynamic, flexible, distributed, plural and rather open manners, which contrast with institutional

modalities of care provision. Importantly, they do so not only to make the most of what is available but also to deliberately put into practice democratic and collaborative forms of work. Athina, a scholar and activist, reflected this point as follows:

> Different to what the state and NGOs do, solidarity, as I've witnessed being practised on the ground is much more about engaging people, about activating them, especially people who have been marginalised by the crisis, the unemployed, the homeless. So it's about creating a relation to transform this helplessness into some sort of empowering relation. Their [solidarity initiatives'] political meaning is to enhance social cohesion and democracy. The radical perspective they introduce it's not just about providing free food, it's about opening up new political spaces and introducing new ways of relating to each other on an everyday life basis. (Athina, interview 19 July 2017)

In the following lines, I will show some elements of this mode of organisation and provision of care, which do differ from institutions, while acknowledging contradictions and limitations. Concerning work organisation, people set their own working conditions through a range of participatory procedures. Overall, they reject strong hierarchies and long bureaucratic procedures. Assemblies and working groups are the most common mechanisms of decision-making and organising. At the ACP&P, volunteers' schedules and shifts are flexible and adaptable to each one's personal circumstances. Aside from doctors, the rest of the volunteers take on roles and tasks not bound to formally-established professional demarcations. Most of them assume manifold duties depending on the day. Volunteers assist refugees in camps and inmates in prisons near Athens. Additionally, they provide guidance to patients who need assistance with registration procedures to claim state allowances and access to public hospitals. Generally, services do not follow a prescriptive rule. Rather, they are established, stopped and/or resumed as new needs or demands come up, accommodating contingencies, which sometimes transcend the boundaries of official healthcare.

The admin team holds in practice the principal organising role, as most doctors do not take part in the assemblies, they just 'fit in' – as Ifigenia, one of the administrators, noted. When asked about this aspect, another interlocutor stated that social clinics were more about creating the conditions for professional doctors – whom he referred to as an 'elite' – to be accommodated into a rearticulated system from the bottom-up. He noted that social clinics' approach to healthcare – which is extended to (some) social care – aimed beyond the official framework based on medical specialities and an individualist approach. In his view, healthcare had been individualised, privatised and detached from structural social, economic and political factors, and thus it needed to be reconfigured to include a social and community-building perspective. He acknowledged, however, that for the time being these efforts by the social clinics were limited, for there was a lack of mechanisms in place to actively integrate patients into this 'community'. Nevertheless, support for the ACP&P has grown over the years. Ifigenia pointed out how the clinic became progressively known and accepted in the area, despite initial reservations from some locals. At present, the clinic is supported socially and also economically by numerous neighbours – many of them migrants who run small businesses and have benefitted from the services and social aid the clinic provides.

At Khora, during my fieldwork, weekly 'building meetings' were held to organise work based on decisions taken through consensus-reaching mechanisms. However,

following the meetings, each working group would attend their respective duties on a rather informal basis. Meaning they operated based more on improvisation, face-to-face interactions, invisible affects and flexible socialising times than on specific rules or pre-established agreements. Actually, much of the efforts devoted to the establishment of written codes via assembly would be eventually deactivated in practice. In the end, this mode of working – decentralised, flexible and informal – allowed them to accommodate contingent material needs and affects as well as individual or spontaneous initiatives, fostering resiliency to assume unforeseen events.

Common among my interlocutors was an interpretation of the capacity of Khora as emerging from a pool of skills and experiences – which were exchanged and circulated – and resources procured collectively. The spaces and the material infrastructure at the community centre were active constituents of social relationships and politics. Day by day, the common and democratic practice of putting into use(s), taking care of and maintaining the different spaces, objects and equipment, renewed agreements, enabling – and at times interrupting – the functioning of the centre. Authors like de Angelis (2017), Linebaugh (2009) and Stavrides (2016) have theorised about these practices using the framework of the commons. Broadly, they define 'commoning' as a range of practices of cooperation and sharing against capitalist extractivism and state co-optation. Thus, they defend it as a force towards social transformation, stressing that commoning brings about new relations between people and fosters democracy, agency and creativity. Dalakoglou (2016) argues that commons expose the 'experts–users' divide that underpins the modernist infrastructural imaginary in the West. To a certain extent, solidarity initiatives prove this point, for the simple reason that without collective access and understanding of the functioning of things the spaces would not be able to sustain their daily running, which is premised on distributed agencies and changing responsibilities.

Another element underlying commoning practices, which has been elaborated by feminist scholars like Federici (2019) and Berlant (2016), is care – or the disposition to care. My interlocutors would often signal this fact, highlighting the importance of the relationships they had established, the efforts and affective labour they had put into them, and the need for spaces and times outside work to expand those bonds.

> I have forged true friendships here. Work was hectic at the beginning, we were all devoted to get things done effectively. But one day one colleague broke, he said he couldn't keep up with it anymore. It caught us by surprise. Yet it helped us to realise how exhausted we were, and that it wasn't just about getting things done. We started to have "personal meetings" where we would share feelings and personal things. We've taken care of each other at difficult times. But this hasn't always being easy. […] At times I've also felt down. (Ifigenia, interview 27 April 2018)

> I find it great to gather on Wednesdays for a basketball match, some snacks and a beer, because work and the fact of being in Khora [meaning inside the building] creates a bond, but this bond is not strengthened until you share free time with that other person, until you get to know her out of work. All those spaces that are created around the daily work are super necessary in my view. Actually, I think, they should be expanded. In the end, people look for it. It is the role of the kitchen, for example. The balcony in the kitchen is just about relating to each other, or the front yard, just to sit down and talk. (Lola, interview 24 August 2017)

> I think that the objective of Khora is to create a sort of community. To create strength through unity. Thus, many times I compare it with a big family. Especially for the people who have been here for long, a family emerges. Even in families there are tensions and conflicts, but in the end

people tend to take care of each other, people know a lot about each other. You can see this type of questions at the demos. People are very engaged, they are very keen to make their voices heard, and a lot of care is generated. (Miguel, interview, 15 August 2017)

The role of affects in social movements is informing an expanding body of scholarship (e.g. Knox, 2017; Näre and Jokela, 2022; Street, 2012) contributing to a debate about the political dimension of emotions. These studies have shown that affects are key components in infrastructuring processes. Diverse forms of affective labour like the personal meetings among volunteers at the ACP&P, efforts to listen to patients and take into account issues beyond what is strictly related to health, being present all day long at Khora's women's space just to offer company, a chat or a shared tea, showing up to mediate when conflicts broke out, have indeed been fundamental to keep the initiatives running.

Affects and personal relationships also played an important role in decision-making processes, challenging established rules or previous agreements. An ethics of care shaped working and management procedures, most of the time reinforcing trust and cohesion. However, at times, it was also a cause of tensions and disputes over the fairness of some decisions. At Khora, complaints stating that the lack of established rules created confusion among newcomers and promoted the emergence of injustices or discrimination were frequent. Conflicts due to power imbalances derived from personal miscommunications or tacit distinctions in the says about participation in the centre did emerge at times, for example, when the weekly rota system – meant to provide everyone with the chance to participate interchangeably in any of the working groups – stagnated. In closing off, groups' dynamics were affected. Certain individuals would concentrate the power to decide and execute to the detriment of others. Eventually, this would lead to strong arguments, at times involving personal threats. In fact, around eight months into the running of the centre, volunteers decided to create a 'code of conduct' to address these conflicts. It took several building meetings to be finally agreed upon, in part due to the reservations of some who refused to 'become an institution'. Throughout the process, attempts to address gender-based issues were criticised for being 'too technical'. Its actual implementation would trigger re-negotiations and, oftentimes, new disputes, attesting to the difficulties and challenges that emerging modes of organising life sustenance through commoning entail – as the aforementioned authors have acknowledged.

Weaving geographies of political possibility

Solidarity initiatives have created a decentralised infrastructural system of networks spanning different scales. Over the years, the work of weaving alliances with other groups – including other grassroots initiatives, political associations, neighbourhood committees, local struggle groups and broader struggle platforms, long-established social and migrant centres, solidarity-economy structures and non-governmental independent organisations – has resulted in a dynamic geography of multiple intersecting networks across Athens and beyond. The city's central areas concentrate the majority of nodes. Some are just provisional, or short-lived, or they appear and disappear intermittently – whether for economic strains, repression or internal issues. Scholars have referred to this complex of self-managed networks of provision of everyday needs and articulation of resistance in ways such as 'hidden welfare system' (Rakopoulos, 2016) or 'urban solidarity

space' (Arampatzi, 2016, 2017). As noted by Streinzer (2021) and Bonanno (2022), this solidarity networked space is in turn embedded in wider ongoing infrastructural (re)compositions made up of ever-shifting interactions, overlaps and also clashes with other welfare actors including public institutions, third sector organisations and families.

For the most part, the nodes of these networks are autonomous in terms of governance, yet they hold a relation of interdependence and exchange among them that – as Arampatzi (2016, 2017) explains – mobilises human and material resources, information, services and social relationships. As shown in their introductions, both the ACP&P and Khora work in this way, namely as networked infrastructure. The effort to generate connections locally and internationally is a constant in their daily management. Apart from their spatial infrastructures, they count on group chats and email groups that allow them to organise and address internal issues, as well as social media accounts, newsletters, websites and blogs, which they use as platforms to post news, announcements, statements and calls for solidarity actions. For instance, Khora regularly issues reports on the administrative, material and political situation of refugees through a self-run media outlet. The ACP&F also makes active use of social media to provide information about accessible healthcare and social care services in Athens, as well as ongoing campaigns in defence of the NHS.

Besides the use of social media, and perhaps of greater significance, is the engagement of the initiatives in common events and actions with other groups in Athens, other Greek cities and across Europe. Volunteers at the ACP&P regularly take part in meetings with other social clinics and solidarity initiatives. Together they have engaged in numerous protests against public healthcare underfunding and exclusion. Likewise, Khora connects with other groups to participate in demonstrations, protest actions, open assemblies, festivals and solidarity caravans and campaigns. The community centre has also organised open talks with guests, picnics and parties to expand connections with neighbours, other solidarity initiatives and activists. My interlocutors highlighted the relevance of these varied activities for different reasons.

On the one hand, the composition of temporary (trans)urban safety nets by weaving alliances with other groups, apart from affording modes and sites of self-protection and care, serves the initiatives as a foundation to amplify the pressure on authorities and gain strength to claim rights. Kostas, a volunteer at a social kitchen, articulated this point as follows:

> We believe in solidarity. […] It also helps us to become stronger. We need to connect with each other [solidarity initiatives] to be able to resist, and to protect ourselves better. Taking to the streets is very important. There we meet with others who are in struggle like us. It's reassuring. It helps us keep active and keep the on for our rights, for the rights of everyone. […] And also doing other things together like parties and festivals is important. Because we feel active and less powerless. Despite that most of the time we don't achieve our goals at the institutional level, I believe this is also about politics. (Kostas, interview 8 September 2017)

Another aspect that came up was the impact that solidarity initiatives had at the neighbourhood or city level through practices involving the re-appropriation and temporary transformation of urban spaces in collaboration with different groups and publics. Several of my interlocutors noted that the initiatives had contributed to bringing back collective life to streets and neighbourhoods, many of which had lost their social and

commercial activity during the economic crisis and had rapidly deteriorated due to the administrations' neglect. Others like Danai, from Khora, highlighted how certain activities jointly organised with other initiatives had served to challenge processes of urban enclosure and geographies of fear, which had largely resulted from crisis politics and discourses that were instrumentalised by diverse ruling powers to impose (their) order, eliminate conflict, and repress those deemed a threat or a hindrance to capital interests.

> Dinners like the one last night on Strefi[6] make some days special, so days are not just grey as in the camps. We do this so there are days with different colours. Besides, it's a good way to show that spaces like Strefi belong to us, to the neighbours. That there is not just drugs, as they say. […] It was a big effort but in the end it was worth it. Together with some people of a neighbourhood association we did some posters announcing the event and placed them on the streets around the area. We also posted it on Facebook and Indymedia. We worried no neighbour would come, but in the end a group showed up. We talked about doing more things like that. (Danai, interview 16 August 2017)

These accounts show that solidarity initiatives' politics operate at different levels and spheres of social life. Arampatzi (2017) uses the term 'expansive politics' to refer to the capacity of these grassroots networks to raise and spread awareness about growing structural inequalities affecting people's everyday lives, but also to (re)activate an always in-the-making political life in the here and now. Politics in this light exceeds not only discourse and representation but also public protest and power struggle to encompass a wide array of practices of different nature, all of which nonetheless contribute to expanding collective agencies and possibilities concerning the organisation and sustenance of common life.

In this sense, solidarity initiatives' capacity to generate forms of collective agency resonates with Simone's (2004) claim when he says that by acting as infrastructure people expand their power to transform their (urban) context. Importantly, solidarity initiatives do so through care, which adds perhaps a novel element to Simone's (2004) conceptualisation. 'People as (reproductive) infrastructure' certainly exist and the role that they play in the maintenance of life and livelihoods is paramount. The so-called global care chains are examples of this on a planetary scale. However, as 'non-producers', caregivers and care-receivers have historically faced invisibility and deprivation of rights, and all the more when positioned at the bottom of society. This double 'vulnerability' undermines the political capacity of acting as infrastructure as a means to transform the public and urban realms. The initiatives examined here, however, in combining the (re)organisation of (some areas of) life sustenance on their own terms with participation in broader social struggles, do constitute themselves as urban political actors. Namely, as agents with the capacity to elicit (some) change in their conditions of inhabitation.

Continuous relation-making affords solidarity initiatives endurance and agency. However, connections are most of the time temporary, precarious and vulnerable to economic constraints, ideological differences, external threats and/or particular individual circumstances. Clashes among actors of these networks are not exceptional. A common cause of disputes comes from different ideological positions concerning the engagement with state institutions or third sector organisations. In the ACP&F this relationship has always been rather open, as the clinic has agreements with certain hospitals as well as with non-profit organisations. Nevertheless, its connection with Solidarity for All has been critiqued by certain political groups, which have accused

this organisation of co-opting solidarity initiatives in the interest of SYRIZA. The truth is that while distrust towards the state and NGOs prevails across solidarity initiatives, this varies among them, and it has actually evolved over time partly for practical reasons concerning the very reproduction of the initiatives. When Khora started to provide 'qualified services' like workshops for volunteers or psychological support delivered by NGO 'professionals' who did not take part in the assemblies, a big debate broke out in the community centre. Some expressed worries about potential divides that this could create. Others saw it as a positive move, noting that despite stances against state institutions and NGOs, solidarity initiatives did not mean to replace them.

Conflicts reflective of more broad structural issues, particularly gender-based discrimination and/or sexual abuse, would also affect the cohesion of the networks. During my engagement at Khora, I witnessed several instances in which cases of sexual harassment were collectively reported, followed by a number of attempts to address them and prevent these behaviours. Once, the issue transcended the community centre, eventually prompting confrontations with a feminist collective that accused Khora of turning a blind eye to gender-based violence. Conflict, therefore, is pretty much embedded in this geography of solidarity networks, at times cancelling political possibilities that had been growing slowly, yet also providing the opportunity to learn new ways of communicating and negotiating different stakes.

Infrastructural imaginations of/for life sustenance

Novel modes of social organising for social provision from the grassroots, like the two instances presented here, are creating new care spaces and forms of political engagement and possibility. In this article, building on an expanding scholarship and theoretical debate, I have characterised these bottom-up organisational experiments in response to entrenched crisis and state mismanagement as modes of infrastructuring care through commoning. This conceptualisation affords an analytical lens that facilitates connections across scales while drawing attention to questions of sustenance, relationality, affects, ethics and agency. The comparison with institutions further helps dig into questions concerning alternative modes, structures, actors, governing mechanisms and spaces for (re)organising social reproduction and providing care that can open up avenues towards eco-social transformation in the face of systemic breakdown. Yet, beyond this analytical affordance, I would like to conclude by taking on the invitation to think of infrastructure as a concept generative also of imaginations of living alternatives amidst crisis yet against crisis regimes.

Through my ethnographic accounts, I have shown ways in which solidarity initiatives in Athens' infrastructure care through commoning across sites and scales. Infrastructural care through commoning creates systems where resources, capacities, agencies and affects are in constant circulation and reconfiguration, accommodating to emerging needs and desires. Underlying this mode of socio-material organisation and provision features an ethics of care whereby personal relationships and affects prevail over pre-established rules. Infrastructural care through commoning affords solidarity initiatives political agency, especially at the local level, where as part of different intersecting networks they (re)compose common struggles. Importantly, solidarity initiatives never meant to replace other forms of state support. Yet, by networking with others, they build political power in their absence creating a foundation from which to articulate collective demands regarding a wide range of issues concerning the very sustenance of dignified

lives. This way they contribute to the (re)activation of the social and political life, composing relevant forces of delegitimisation and contestation of crisis politics and opening up the realm of the political possible as active (reproductive) actors in the city.

In Greece, the state and (large) NGOs have failed to assure people's life sustenance needs during the ongoing crisis. The state has not only withdrawn responsibilities for social provision but has also increased its violence. For their part, third-sector organisations, which ultimately depend on private interests, largely dismiss individuals' political condition preventing the possibility of non-normative reciprocity and the formation of durable bonds among people. Namely, they impede care becoming a practice with political capacity to challenge existing regimes of inequalities. In contrast to prevailing institutional modes of social provision, which seek to prevent or control change, reciprocity, engagement, alterity and conflict, solidarity initiatives contribute to an infrastructural imagination that moves away from ideals of progress, centralised control and homogeneity, towards values of relationality, conductivity, care, maintenance and repair. That is, systems in motion, continuously in-the-making, based on the persistent (re)creation of connections dot-to-dot through the distribution of a plurality of knowledge(s), resources and responsibilities. Systems that allow people to take collective responsibility for sustaining life in a world in crisis. In so doing, in turn they gesture towards an alternative conception of care as a political praxis directly linked to people's democratic participation in society and assertion of rights. Such conception could serve as a foundation to re-think the very political paradigm that structures Western societies and their institutions.

However, nothing guarantees that infrastructural systems of care commons will necessarily bring about more democratic or sustainable modes of social provision and life

sustenance in the long run, let alone the sweeping transformations needed to catch up with the speed of capitalist destruction. As the ethnographic accounts have shown, the challenges facing solidarity initiatives are in no way small. Not only hardships and external threats, but important internal conflicts – whether more structural, ideological, organisational or personal – undermine their transformative potentiality. In fact, solidarity initiatives in Athens have gradually become less distributive and less open. At both the ACP&P and Khora, the reduction of moments for collective decision-making, the establishment of certain fixed roles and the setup of more (rigid) rules concerning the incorporation of newcomers are elements reflective of a closing tendency over time. These changes attest to the challenges facing bottom-up groups striving to put in practice forms of organising life sustenance with a commons-based framework under the hegemony of capitalism. Turning care into a truly collective practice at the centre of social life, and keeping commoning on an expensive basis, namely as an open practice of insistent relation-making, are both endeavours far from being devoid of constraint and ambivalence. Nevertheless, instances like the ACP&P and Khora create the conditions for people to learn to engage in common life and its sustenance in ways that expand solidarities and build collective power – even if it is just temporary. Thus, modes of organising life sustenance as commons-based infrastructure intensify the possibilities of a transformative politics for a world in crisis, yet against crisis regimes of further extraction and dispossession. To contribute to this potential and prolong these openings, critical researchers engaging these modes of infrastructural care might explore research methods that, without compromising an ounce of criticality, self-reflexivity and ethical positionality, can nonetheless facilitate a commitment with the possible becomings of the engaged fields,

perhaps through affective, speculative exercises that suggest (non-normative) openings towards more caring worlds.

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Notes

1. *Life sustenance* theorists build on the feminist Marxist tradition on *social reproduction* – a notion that addresses care as labour within capitalism – to bring to the fore capital's dependence on biological processes. Importantly, life sustenance theory links care with theory on the commons.
2. Feminist theories on care span multiple fields including economics, ethics and politics, geography, science studies and environmental humanities to note but a few, as well as diverse epistemological traditions. In this article, I largely draw on *life sustenance* theory and address care as the set of practices that sustain and reproduce life and societies, and also as an ethics.
3. In March 2016, the EU and Turkey signed a statement of cooperation aiming at controlling the number of people crossing from the latter to Greece. The agreement has had devastating consequences for thousands of asylum seekers and refugees who have been in an administrative limbo for years already.
4. As reported on their website, the ACP&F has supplied hygiene products, first aid items, baby milk, and/or food at state-led detention centres in *Rhodes*, *Petrou Ralli* and *Amygdaleza*, at

UNHCR-led refugee camps in *Diavata*, *Galatsi*, *Elaion*, *Hellenikon*, *Schistos*, *Skaramagas* and *Eleusis*, and at self-run refugee camps like *Lavrion*. Food was supplied also to homeless refugees at *Pedio Tou Areos Park*.
5. See initiatives' statements at: https://www.kifa-athina.gr/en_fre_deu/ (last accessed: 22 March 2022) https://www.khora-athens.org/about (last accessed: 22 March 2022).
6. Strefi Hill is an urban park located in Exarcheia.

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