

Growing Racism and the Social Crisis in Greece

Listen to the Voices of Algerian Refugees in Central Athens

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Listen to the voices of refugees in the centre of Athens. If we hear them clearly, we will have no doubt as to what needs to be done. We need to reject totally all those who seek to present refugees as criminals, as sub humans, as garbage or terrorists as a means of protecting their privileges.

Refugees can only survive by the kindness and friendship of strangers who very often become life long friends. Support from family networks wherever they exist are also important. Just as we discovered during our visits to the West Bank of Palestine, we came across extraordinary solidarity and friendships amongst the mainly Algerian refugees with whom we recently spent 3 days in central Athens.

Accommodation, food, clothing, work, health needs and more are mainly met through these solidarities. There is nothing from the Greek state, there is nothing from their embassy, and what few resources are available from citizen support groups hardly touch the problems they face or can deal with the immediacy of the problem. So much happens at night. Who helps them then? Each other.

Take Mohammed. He told how he arrived in Athens after spending 3 months in the detention centre on Samos, alone and knowing nobody. But he knew the areas where the Algerians gathered. Having coffee in the area, Amin joined him realising that Mohammed with his packed back pack was new to the city. Mohammed lived with Amin and his wife for the next 3 months. People together who had never previously met.

Samir was released the night before we arrived. He had been 9 months in a police cell. His crime? No papers. He arrived in the neighbourhood late at night and was immediately found a room. The next day he was vomiting blood. He had been beaten repeatedly by the police during his jail time. All his care came from other refugees.

There is a lot of moving around rooms. Some had their own places and if they had spare rooms these would be available to any who needed them. Those without a fixed base would move around, not because of any sense of overstaying their welcome, but rather they wanted to see other friends. They might not always have water or electricity in their houses but if they had space it was offered.

If you have, you give, is taken for granted amongst those we met. It is not something to be talked about but to be done. There are no conditions. It is beautiful to see people with so

little being so generous. Just as on the West Bank, all the refugees we met had experienced bad things either to themselves or to close friends. One told of how his wife miscarried after a police beating, another of a friend who had died of cancer but got so little help. The Algerian embassy refused to repatriate the body so it was left to the refugees to collect the money to fly the body home. Most had experience of being swept up, humiliated on the streets and held for varying lengths of time in police cells. That there is still humour and laughter, that so many remain steadfast, is due entirely to their solidarities.

Such attitudes and behaviour are crucial to 'staying strong'.

Food, a room, clothes are just one aspect to staying strong. More importantly, we were told again and again, it was what was in your head that mattered. Staying strong meant being a human being with dignity and being a part of humanity. The terror of never knowing when you might be picked up and beaten by the police, for no reason; the terror of having been beaten up in your own home by police young enough to be your children; the sick feeling that comes from hearing the Greek prime minister state that one of the first objectives of his government was to take the cities back from the migrants; of daily confronting a police system that allows you to be robbed, beaten and messed around for no reason and with total impunity for the aggressor: all of these and more demand strength. Without strength these feelings can defeat you.

If we really want to understand what is going on we must listen to the refugees. They know that they are the victims of a system that quickly resorts to racism to deflect the anger and distress of the majority population that is suffering under this crisis. The Algerians we met loved the Greek people in their neighbourhood. They talked of them as being of a similar character to themselves in their attitudes to work and living – 'a relaxed people' like themselves. They shared their pain at the devastation of the small shops and bars in their area and the loss of work and income. And who could ever remain unaffected by seeing so much suffering and hardship in the streets around you no matter what their origins?

An Algerian in his late 50s who had been in this neighbourhood for 10 years, laughed as he told a crowd of us in the coffee bar how police hassled him recently saying all Algerians are thieves and were disturbing Greek lives. He told them to go and arrest some bankers. But another younger guy was clearly cowed by his experience of being repeatedly slapped around the face in his room. Every time the policeman slapped his face he would shout "all Algerians are thieves" – slap – "You are barbarians; primitive" –slap- You have no right to be here" – slap – and " You are garbage!" –slap. This guy was frightened. He stayed in his room for most of the day. He was scared to be outside.

That the Algerian embassy does nothing for their migrants in Athens might normally deepen these vulnerabilities. We heard many stories about appeals to the embassy. When a small group went to the embassy to demand that they protest to the Greek government about the violence and attacks from Golden Dawn, they were told by Embassy staff that there was nothing they could do. They also told the refugees that they had not been invited to Greece and if they didn't like what they found, should move on. For some, this just showed once more how the system works. They expect nothing from their embassy. Nothing. But even so when it came to ensuring that Algerians could get their papers and ID's confirmed, or for registering the birth of a child or helping fly someone sick or dying home, the Embassy's refusal provoked disgust.

Growing Racism

Those Algerians who had been in Athens for some years all spoke about the ways in which racism was deepening and growing, mirroring the on going economic decline and the rise in violent austerity measures. Neither, they said, was this just happening in Greece. In many places, those on the outlying margins of society are being demonised and presented as the cause and not the victim of the crisis; 'of capitalism' as one young Algerian told us. The forms of victimisation are various, but in Athens it has taken the form of presenting all Algerian refugees as criminal. But any criminalisation of the refugees is entirely due to the actions of the Greek state which refuses them so many of the fundamental rights to life, work and travel.

Understanding the way in which racism works for the system by dividing people and making them weak, helps keep you strong. It helps you be clear about what the enemy is and not slip into the trap of the elites who would love you to hate with equal measure the people around you infected by the racist virus. But it is hard. Racist violence of all kinds hurts.

The growth of racism is disturbing to many of those we met. It is the hatred which is so frightening. Where is it going to end? Where are the racist police of today going to be in 10 years time? What damage would people do to themselves if they turn ever more to racism? These anxieties are deepened by the knowledge that the Greek state itself is deeply implicated in the process and legitimates, protects and encourages its growth. For the Algerians we met for example, there was no distinction to be made between the police and Golden Dawn. They were simply interchangeable. Everybody knew that the police could beat you and imprison you with utter impunity. They all knew of some such as lawyers who had tried to help them but were then moved against and silenced. They all knew that Greece has no anti-racist legislation which could protect them. They all knew that no police had been punished even though half of the reported cases of racist violence in the past year are attributed to the police. In any event to report the violence of police was a no brainer as it simply brought you more pain. They all knew that many police were active supporters of Golden Dawn and worked directly with them.

But there is another side to this story too. Conversations in the cafeterias also tell of victories, big and small against the police. Of winning places where they can meet and relax knowing the police are scared to come close because they will be hassled and threatened. Gaining such free spaces is uplifting both in keeping the racists out and providing places where people can breathe air free from fear.

The scale of the intelligence to be found in such cafeterias and bars is extensive and vital to the survival of the refugees. This is where you can find a room when you have just arrived. This is where you find out what is going on in the neighbourhood and the city. This is where you find out who is hurting and needs help. This is where you can get news of your friends, and networks. This is where you can talk things through. Where you can relax.

However, you don't need to walk the streets for long to realise that many around you have not stayed strong and who have not been able to withstand the incredible pressure. Heroin addiction is a big problem. It is available and relatively cheap. Addiction in this context is a nightmare. What temporary relief it might bring is overwhelmed by its consequences including loss of appetite and paranoia. It calls on no genius to explain the causes of heroin addiction amongst some of the refugees nor to recognise that calls for more drug counsellors are no answer. Just as it is no solution to press for better conditions in detention centres and police cells when the people should never have lost their freedom in the first

place.

Listen to the refugees. They can tell us much. Solidarities keep them alive and human in the most terrible of circumstances. But what they have to endure is almost beyond belief. And for what reason – because they have not got the right paper or right skin colour and class background ? Ask the refugees what they stand for, and the most common response is “for humanity”. That says it all.

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