

Bringing clues from the future into the present (in the shape of a book, a lunch or a theatre play)

Conversation with Stavros Stavrides (25/09/17)

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Since March this year, I live in Greece as part of an artistic residency organized by Capacete (Rio de Janeiro), which brought together ten Latin American artists to live and work with two Greek artists in Athens for nine months. In this context, Stavros Stavrides appeared in our conversations as an important reference to try to understand this city as well as to build bridges between the different realities from Latin America and the European south.

Eliana: You have been working with the idea of the thresholds as a situation that allows people to share time and space, freeing themselves from fixed identities. I would like to ask you what are your thoughts about this situation right now, in Greece; where do you find those thresholds?

Stavros: So you want some connection with the general idea of the thresholds as potential spaces of emancipation, or at least as spaces that offer opportunities for different social relations, with the current experiences of the Greek crisis. I think that it is interesting to see how different initiatives have developed in response to it, and how they were not really what we had before the crisis, as initiatives coming from either the anarchist movement or the leftist movements. In many cases, the previous initiatives were focused on issues of organization of resistance. They had very specific, most of the times, explicit orientations towards choices of ideology, and choices of value systems. And they were based on practices which connected them to specific political forms of organization; you had mostly a very clear identity that you could recognize. And it was more or less part of an explicit political struggle, using the word political not merely in terms of election processes, but also other kinds of political projects. The difference is that the initiatives that started from below, during the period of crisis, were not necessarily connected to specific political groups, although many activists were part of them, and also they were not connected to recognizable political identities. This gave the participants the opportunity to explore uncharted areas like what does it mean to collaborate? If you think that you have a different view about the future, or equality, or forms of working together... You had, in many cases, genuine innovative experiences. Could we say that those experiences have something to do with this idea of threshold? Perhaps, because I think that these were not experiences that you could describe through a specific identity, or by locating a specific group within its limits, within its perimeter.

In many cases, those initiatives were from the beginning open, a forum, always in negotiation with its surrounding or with its members. These create threshold conditions. What I am trying to describe is exactly this: a passage, an in-between area, which is not defined as a place. Usually a place belongs to somebody, has the power to represent the identity of a group or a person. So this place is like the locus of an identity, whereas a threshold is, more or less, an area which is always under negotiation. These were threshold initiatives, and they had rules which were not imposed and decided once and for all; they were actually shaped in the process. For example, I'm talking about a cultural center that was created by the neighborhood, based on voluntary work and contributions from the people, not as part of an institution, like the church or any kind of municipal service. There's people really experiencing these kind of threshold situations, finding their own rules, finding new ways to approach, transform and to translate, his or her role, in a socially meaningful participation in a period of crisis, in a period of needs.

Eliana: I wanted to call the attention to how you mentioned different possibilities of thinking about the future. Especially in this context of uncertainty, what kind of future can be thought? Can we think of a process of collective transformation, that implies each other's subjectivities?

Stavros: I will not try to be over optimistic and romanticize those experiences. In many cases the need is so urgent, that it prevails. Some people need those services and they support them, mostly because it is that everydayness which is at stake. But, what is interesting, even inspiring, is that sometimes out of urgent needs, new forms of social relations are being developed, and these social relations contain seeds of a different, social organization; they contain the future within the present. For example, experiencing solidarity, not because you believe in it or because your ideology conveys it, but because you do these things out of need. Sometimes that transforms solidarity, gives value to an idea. You see that solidarity works, you see that it can help you to survive, but at the same time you feel nice in this conditions, and they also show you that you are not simply a victim, but that that you are part of an active and alive situation. Those are collective experiences that show you that life can be otherwise, that we can live differently. This is a way of thinking about the future, although I do not underestimate very important attempts to think about the future, connected to specific anticapitalistic or counter-capitalist ideologies and political projects. I don't underestimate their role in shaping struggle, in shaping everydayness; I'm part of it. But the interesting thing is to see people discover the power of those ideas, or the power of those forms of thinking about the different society, in their lives. And I think this is a challenge for all those who consider themselves militants in this project of social emancipation: to see how the values and the potentialities of social emancipation can be proven today, not in the future as a plan of who knows who. The future is part of what we live, otherwise it might be some kind of religious afterlife.

Eliana: Living in Athens these months, it called my attention that there doesn't seem to be a big production of art works about the economic and political situation. I was wondering if maybe people from the art world or the field of culture, who might be interested in that, is now focusing their energies in direct action, in solving more urgent problems collectively, as part of those kind of initiatives. If that is the case, I wonder how the importance of symbolic work is being perceived here. How does symbolic work defend its sense and, let's say, right to exist, in this context? And how do you relate this to your idea of turning the city into a work of art?

Stavros: This is a very important problem and perhaps it can be connected to the way art in general, public art specifically, has developed in Greece. We are talking about a field in which there were constant demands for public support. Greece does not have the historical legacy of public funding of art. In many cases artists depends on networks of support, in a good case, or rely totally on private institutions, galleries or the new supermarkets of culture as I call them, like the Onassis foundation. So this is already a serious handicap, because we need public money for art, which is all right to a certain extent, but it has created a kind of dependence of engaged art on the 'good part' of the state. This tradition of dependence, in the recent story of Greece after World War II, has, in a way, blocked for many periods, a kind of growing of the self-management in the production. So the production, even the most engaged, was not just through autonomous networks. And those that are against state institutions, have surfaced quite recently. I'm not sure if it exists in a scale that we could study, to see attempts to produce art from below, independently, based on crowdfunding for example. This makes it even more difficult for this kind of art to be present in experiences of neighborhood initiatives. There is a lot of work to be done to connect existing artists or existing artistic groups with those peculiar forms of resistance from below. There might be artists willing to do that, but in many cases their focus is going on mostly on their individual projects, and less on being part of these networks. That is why you cannot locate lots of works that explicitly express these needs. And the history of Documenta 14 is instructive in these terms. There are many reasons to be critical of it, but it provided a kind of institutional and funding opportunity for dissident art, which is interesting. This kind of art did not develop much inside those networks, but had an opportunity to express itself in this kind of institutional framework, which is, of course, highly debatable.

On the other hand, I would add this: shouldn't we call art or consider as art various kinds of practices or projects that are happening on a different level, through the city, based on amateur participation? You have dancing lessons in the neighborhood, philosophy lessons, or other forms of participation in collective production. I saw a remarkable theatrical production by a group in Exarcheia, a citizens' initiative. Among other things, they have produced a very interesting theatre piece called *Penelope*, a very strong remark on the refugee crisis. So you have the let's say unofficial art, the unrecognized, the anonymous art, which was also present in Syntagma Square occupation. One can have objections about the quality of the production, but what I'm talking about when I want to rethink the city as a work of art is to perceive various ways through which people can actually express their feelings, their lives, in a creative form in public space, in common and shared spaces.

I think we should include this if we talk about art. We should include the music played in the streets, that is not necessarily the music of recognizable singers or artists. But it's sometimes music that unites people, like the way they were reunited after the police raids in Syntagma Square, by being able to sing and dance together to wear off the fear. Let us extend the field of art, and see how it can actually express this kind of creativity. I think Henri Lefebvre's idea about the city as a work of art, was mostly based on the creativity of its inhabitants, in the way they produce spaces by themselves, and areas of negotiation, of reappropriation of the city.

Eliana: In Athens, with such strong differences between the neighborhoods, which challenges do you think that the refugees and migrant's situation pose in the way we can experience together the city? Here we have the constant presence of bodies in the squares, the public space. And there is the question of translation, which also interests you. How can we think those needs, like collective tasks and the need to share the public space, as an exercise of translation?

Stavros: Migrants were coming mostly from the formerly called socialist countries. For many years, who came to Greece looking for work, trying to build their own communities. In many cases they were unable to find houses with enough space for their families, so lots of their shared life was outdoors. So, suddenly you had, before the crisis, people introducing new life into public spaces, parks and playgrounds. And this was very, very instructive for us. Suddenly, by example at the Pedion to Aenos park, one of the largest that we have, you could even see Pakistani or Bangladesh people playing cricket, which was almost science fiction for us. But they have found a way to make this area, temporarily, an area of their own leisure, and also in the playgrounds, you could see lots of different people coming from those European countries, but also from Africa or from faraway countries of Asia. So you had those people in the playgrounds, and their children were playing with the children of the locals. This did not create hostilities, although you have Nazi propaganda, especially by the Golden Dawn. I believe that in Greece this has, in most of the cases, produced rich experiences for people. And now that with the refugee's crisis this was at its climax, many of us were afraid that this would be a fertile ground for xenophobic propaganda and the rhetoric of racism, but we were amazed to see how open people became and how we got there, to share a space like Victoria Square, with such an interesting interaction of people with those others coming from other places.

An interesting example that I could mention is when two of my students wanted to do their small theses last year. They chose to do this through a kind of an anthropology exploration of the Victoria Square, one of the first places where actually people stayed the first year of the refugee crisis without being expelled or evacuated. This was an *ad hoc* occupation of the square, a lot of people were staying outdoors, so they said they wanted to do field research in Victoria Square. I said, come on! They were two young girls. I thought they would have problems while approaching the people; I was not sure they could do it and I found it almost hopeless. And they said that they wanted to explore the way those people understood public space. There were people from Persia, from Afghanistan, from Africa. They managed to find someone who could help them with translation, they managed to talk to the people, to open them to talk, because they were not exactly aware of what kind of society they were thrown into. And they even convinced some of them, not only children, but also old ladies, to draw their cities of origin or their places of origin. So people are willing to learn, to take this crisis as an opportunity for cross fertilizing cultures. You can actually do it; it's not only an aspiration.

Eliana: It's important that these students were women, because for me, when I got here, it was almost shocking to notice how the public space is so masculine. In which sense does the idea of threshold address not only socio economic injustice, but also propose a more egalitarian situation for women?

Stavros: I can refer to some examples that I have experienced, which might show that this idea of threshold has to do also with empowerment of women, or the creation of areas of equality, in terms of gender or sexuality. One comes from Mexico. I've been to some neighborhoods which called themselves autonomous neighborhoods, one with 500 people and the other one was less than 1,000. They were developing through participatory processes, in assemblies, models for their houses, like creating a settlement from below, through recognized focus on equality and sharing. The role of women was crucial in redefining the house as an arrangement of spaces, putting at the center the kitchen, as the place where the family meets. It was not reiterating the idea of the house as an agglomeration of individual and private spaces: children's, the couple's. What was also interesting is that the kitchen became a threshold for sociality inside the house, and connected with various thresholds of the rest of the settlement, because it was based on sharing space, not on creating individual spaces. The women were who defined the characteristics of the family courtyard, because for them it was important to be part of the public realm, to be present, while at the same time, to be able to control the realm of the family, to watch the children play. Out of these discussions in the assemblies, there came a model of courtyard that had a porous boundary. It was private in a way, privately managed by the family, but at the same time, it was part of the shared space. So, creating thresholds in space, but also thresholds in terms of relations, is a crucial element of gender equality. It's a crucial element of empowering women, especially in societies or in communities in which women are not part, to try to go beyond an existing society, so that they might become part of it and thus, produce new forms of understanding what it means to share or be together. You can see that in Athens: in certain cases the general rule is perhaps, as you said, a predominant male presence in space. But various kinds of initiatives that had to do with the support of the refugees, or with the creation of social centers and neighborhoods, are developing a counter-process to that. Empowering women or children for that matter can be part of the public culture, part of the public life. It's not easy, obviously; it's maybe part of the challenge, part of a struggle, but I think we have some indications of that starting to happen.

Eliana: You are constantly thinking and working about Latin America's theory and social movements. To what extent do you think that our so deep-rooted crisis may dialogue with the Greek one, or with the situation in other parts of Europe?

Stavros: We had experienced the hope of progressive governments to start with, and then the disappointment in most of Latin America, but at the same time, you got a lot more emphasis on your recent history on self-management and organization from below. We can learn a lot from that. A minor example is the way that the experience of the Argentinian recuperated factories actually had exerted large influence on a factory occupation, now active in Greece. You also have interesting experiences that have to do with organization. We don't have lots of these kind of experiences, in which everyday people can indeed organize themselves to collectively claim land, housing and various other services. Part of our history is a kind of predominance of lower middle-class mentality, and we are not as divided; we used to be less divisive and less segregated, than the societies I have seen in Latin America. Large parts of the population were actually excluded from the city, having to live in peripheries, *favelas*, *villas miserias*. This was not part of my experience, but unfortunately the crisis is tending to produce this kind of situations. It's heading towards the exclusion, the throwing out of parts of the population from the safety net of the society. Whatever safety net we had, we had some kind of welfare state.

We have the experiences of Latin American countries, and we have a lot to learn from the disappointments of the progressive governments. What exactly is this project of changing society from above? What were the handicaps? Its misfortunes or its inevitable results? And we need to study a lot the Latin American experiences, in terms also cultural, and their everyday forms of resistance. That is why I try to connect, to read the way Latin America theorists and activists talk about those experiences, because there's a lot of reflection there. And unfortunately there is a kind of division of labor, in academic and generally in intellectual circles, in which the center, the Western Center, would provide the grand theories, and all of us in the global south would provide the case studies. Enough of that; there is strong and important theory produced in the peripheries of the so-called first world, in India, in Latin America and in the European south. We need to use those theories as active tools in our fight against neoliberalism. We are indeed experiencing a period of colonialism inside Europe; we are a debt colony, as simple as that. So we need this interaction, both in terms of culture as in terms of political projects.

Eliana: The word depression is used often to describe the current situation here, as a condition of the people and society. Would you also use it in this sense?

Stavros: Yes, I would use this term to describe this kind of disappointment, because the rise of Syriza to the government was not the result of a sudden left turn in the society. It was as if it was the only option to go beyond measures and policies which were destroying our life. Lots of people decided to vote for Syriza because they thought that this was the necessary change to create measures of protection for the most vulnerable, to protect the society which was being destroyed by those hard austerity policies. So the disappointment was huge because, you in your continent, had very important experiments and experiences of progressive policies. They had certain results, and you can draw some conclusions from that period. For us this period was condensed to a few months; the disappointment was almost instantaneous. Before the rise of Syriza to the government, there were lots of different kinds of resistance, like Syntagma square occupation, and other forms of organization from below, which in many cases were attacked very harshly by the previous governments. Syriza seemed to be the last option to be able to recover. So there is a lot of depression in people, but there's also a kind of disillusion. And some are now more inclined to believe that if we don't do something ourselves, and organize ourselves in resistance, no change in government would help us. Of course there's the other side. Some people tend to think, trapped in this dilemma of the parliamentary system, that now the new right would be better than the Syriza's administration, which is of course a lie. But depression, if it continues, it will not produce good results.

Eliana: There are theories about how depression is a word that we use for a lot of different symptoms, and that actually most of the cases have to do with unresolved process of mourning. It could be interesting to take that figure from the individual to the collective and to ask, if this would be the case here, what would be the probable object of mourning? And if there could be a way to make a collective process of mourning, how could this be?

Stavros: There are various levels of depression, and of possible mourning. One of them is the disappointed left, the people who believed that the left would make a difference. And they see that the left is not what they thought it is. Some of them described this as a defeat for the lefties mentality. And for those people there is a certain kind of mourning that connects to the fall of the so-called socialist countries and their change, the predominance of the idea that neoliberalism is the only possible future for societies.

I don't know if the mourning can take the form of accepting the problems, or if it has to do with understanding in differently sociological changes. In many cases, those people, -and I'm part of this tradition, I am coming out of this- had focused on the idea of social change as something almost religious, beyond existence, mixing this with a change in government, which is absolutely absurd.

To believe, on the one side, on a total and immense change that happens in a condensed period of time and, at the same time, to believe that this may happen through elections is absolutely absurd. So, this kind of disappointment has to do with historical and logical mistakes. The other kind of disappointment has not to do with people really believing in the left or in the anti-capitalist prospect, but actually trying to protect themselves in a period of crisis. It's a kind of disappointment that cannot be resolved through mourning, but it has to be connected to everyday proofs that life can be otherwise. What has created most of the weight of this depression? For most of those people, it's this idea that even those who are saying something else, are doing the same.

How to be able to, in a way, to believe again that our lives can be otherwise, not heavenly, but really otherwise? This depression is mostly based on this idea of inevitability of what is happening, and you cannot shake this inevitability through mourning. You can shake it only through being able to see that things can be otherwise, and I think all those initiatives, whatever size they have, whatever conditions they create, are small indications of that.

The only antidote to depression is finding ways to experience different forms of life, no matter how temporary, and we can learn from what is happening in different parts of the world. We can learn from what actual people are doing in our country, learn from the refugees, their dramas, their hopes and the way they resist. We can learn from many things and from past experiences, of similar periods in which disappointment has created monsters. It humiliated country, or humiliated people can produce really terrifying results. Don't humiliate anyone: humiliated Germany supported Nazism. And it is not the bad guys: a humiliated country which is terrifying.

Eliana: Nowadays, there is a lot of thinking and writing about assemblies. How do you think that this operation can benefit both activities? In which sense does theory need assembly and in which sense do assembly need theory?

Stavros: Of course, there has always been this dichotomy between practice and theory, which I don't find productive. I think we need both experiences and actions. We need reflection and thinking about what's happening, but also trying to think ahead of what is happening. We need both: we need initiatives, attempts to test ideas and programs, but we also need to rethink those programs, to rethink projects of human emancipation, to learn from what is going on, and to see that people are inventive. We are inventive, in our everydayness, and crisis produces an urgent need for inventing.

So let us try to think through these experiences, to try to understand them, but also to theorize, to generalize some characteristics, with modesty. Being not very certain unlike, perhaps, some other periods we used to be, but uncertainty is productive in many cases. Let us try to learn from what is happening, but also what is happening; various initiatives and actions need urgent reflection. They are not enough to explain the possibilities of a different society. We need to think about, compare, to devise criteria, to check rules, to observe the conditions under which the rules become tools of action, and I believe that all of us can contribute to this. We should not accept the kind of division of labor between those who think and those who act. Sometimes that blinds us.