Fascinating Racism in the age of the Greek crisis: Stories of resistance

by Georgia Korre

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Abstract

This paper describes a project undertaken by a part of the Antiracist Group of the University of Crete in the city of Rethymno between September 2012 and April 2013. Given that the onset of the Greek Financial Crisis has been accompanied by an increasing prevalence of racist and nationalistic discourses, this project intended to address the problem of racism and its multiple effects in our local community. We made use of specific narrative tools such as narrative documents, externalising conversations, and conversations that highlight unique outcomes. This paper is a presentation of our work in three parts. The title was inspired by Susan Sontag's essay, Fascinating Fascism (1975).

Key words: crisis, racism, externalising, collective documents, social division, sustaining efforts

A short tale of the Greek Crisis

In the spring of 2010 the Greek government resorted to the International Monetary Fund in an attempt to solve the government debt crisis. The harsh austerity measures and lending agreement conditions that followed led to income and pension reductions, a tremendous rise in unemployment, aggressive plans of privatisation, authoritarian fiscal regulations, and eventually to the increase of sovereign debt. These past years of recession have resulted in diminished health and education services, over-indebted households, one in three Greeks living on or below the poverty line, an increase in suicide rates, over 20,000 homeless people in Athens, unemployment of one in two young people, increased emigration rates, and thousands of people living on 500 Euros per month. The government responded to public reactions with repressive measures against protest demonstrations, violations of workers' rights, and unconstitutional limitations of democratic freedoms. During these extreme and disastrous political and social transformations, the government also adopted a harsher immigration policy, and formal political and media discourses became infused with racist attitudes. We witnessed the current prime minister refer to a 'takeover of our cities by illegal immigrants' in his campaign election speech, public humiliation of female, HIV-positive, sex workers who were treated as a threat against public health and who had their photographs and personal data published by the media under the public prosecutor's order, inhumane living conditions in refugee reception centers and far-right Golden Dawn party members, many of whom have been linked to violent attacks against immigrants, entering the parliament for the first time.

In this context and the aftermath of elections, some of the members of our antiracist group started discussing our next moves. We were genuinely confused and deeply disappointed. We wondered together, in what ways could we react to this wave of racism? How could we respond to the increasing anti-immigrant sentiment we were facing daily? Had all our actions before the crisis, and the actions of the left-wing world in general, been in vain? Many argued that the crisis acted merely as a pretense that allowed the Greek society to show its real face, a deeply racist face. Various historical, political and cultural explanations were offered in order to justify this assumption. This way of reasoning inevitably led to the conclusion that racism was deeply rooted and interwoven in our culture and thus unchangeable, implying that there was nothing we could do except choose sides. After all, a local extreme nationalistic group had been active in the city of Rethymno long before the crisis. But we also realised that we were speaking of a society we knew little about. Even though we wandered the same streets for years, we had been living within a different social reality than the majority of the local population. Most of us were university students whose activities were confined to specific environments such as academia, left-wing parties and activist groups. So our first decision was to try to communicate with a world very different from ours, the world that existed beyond our known contexts. We wanted to meet with and understand a local community which we had preconceived as potentially racist. We decided that our weekly meetings should function as a time to prepare and reflect on our attempts to communicate with people from other contexts.

PART ONE
Preparing through conversation

We began by engaging in externalising and co-researching conversations about our understandings of the rise of racism in Greece, its histories, effects, tactics and appeal, as well as ways of resistance to racism that we had encountered in our lives. We thought that this way of talking could function as a 'counter- practice to those that objectify the identities of people' (White, 2007, p. 26) and that this might prove helpful in our everyday discussions with local communities. Since racism is a sensitive matter, likely to raise high tensions among disagreeing individuals and groups, we found the use of empathic listening helpful in practicing and achieving constructive communication. We use the term 'empathy' as defined within the discursive tradition of thought and 'postmodern therapies' and consider a 'reconceptualization of empathy that fully appreciates the extent to which our

clients' experiences are necessarily a sociocultural production' (Sinclair & Monk, 2005, p. 333). During our group meetings and discussions, whenever a frustrating feeling such as disappointment, anger or passivity would emerge, we tried to deconstruct the underlying and contributing social factors that were shaping this feeling and avoid the use of individualistic interpretation. These conversations helped us make sense of our own experiences, especially those that were intense and frustrating. During these conversations, we kept a small record in order to gather some thoughts that were helpful to us. The following is a small part of the document that was created through these conversations and that illustrates our emerging understandings of practices which are creating and maintaining racist attitudes, some of racism's effects and some of the responses to racism we have witnessed that we treasure.

Racism:
What are we talking about?

Racism as Socially Constructed

Some of us believe that the formation of racist opinions and attitudes is being used as a means to construct a 'national identity' at risk during the crisis period. Its history is connected to social construction by the mass media and the formal conservative political system. Today's racism can be seen as the step that followed 'moderate' anti-immigrant discourses, practices and beliefs that existed before the crisis. Its history is also connected to the institutionalised racism that has long dictated insufficient immigration policies that had dividing results. The history of racisms social construction is also connected to the inadequate prosecution and penalisation of racial attacks. Furthermore, an Orthodox Christian dogma dominates against other religions and histories in our education system and it is taught in an ethnocentric way which we believe is deeply related to racist intolerance.

Racism as a product of indifference and individualism

Racism's history can be connected to the individualistic, consumerist culture imposed by the neoliberal model of life. We believe it also has a relationship to the tradition of political clientelism which has replaced democratic principles and confined political imperatives to the pursuit of individual privileges as a reward for our vote. Some of us believe that when you feel threatened and are unable to fulfill your basic needs, you might come to not care about other people's lives, especially the lives of immigrants, and this can foster Indifference and Individualism.

Racism and its relationship to nationalist & anti-immigrant discourses

We believe that the far-right fascist party produces intentionally confusing statements that resemble left-wing political ideology, such as caring about exploitation of the people by politicians, bankers, and the like. However their discourse is positioned in a nationalistic context and members of Golden Dawn have been undertaking the role of 'setting things straight' through actions like slapping a female parliamentarian publicly and destroying foreigners' market stands. Nationalistic discourse and extreme right ideas have managed to permeate the public opinion by espousing an alternative to a widespread European assumption, that the Greek people are inherently corrupted. Their celebration of Greek pride has presented us as a blessed and charismatic nation and is being offered to us as an antidote to our national humiliation, however it relies upon the distortion of our history. Also, by relating the 'power of protest' to nationalistic ideology, the Golden Dawn political party is establishing itself as the only authentic voice of effective protest against austerity, thus also popularising nationalism and promoting stricter anti-immigrant policies.

Some of the effects of racism

Increasing sense of fear and insecurity

Increasing racist attacks, beatings and murders

Entrance of the Golden Dawn into the parliament and legitimisation of a party ideologically related to neo-Nazism and nationalistic beliefs

Legitimisation of racist attitudes and practices in our everyday reality. Opinions that were previously unacceptable before the crisis are now acceptable.

Social construction of a Dangerous Other in order to define our national identity in terms of differentiation. The Dangerous Other is attributed characteristics such as: foreigner, illegal, thief, dirty, uncivilised and carrier of various infectious diseases.

Social division and various types of discrimination. When racist views are openly expressed, it creates opportunities for other forms of discrimination to emerge. This includes through constructing an Other who allegedly offends traditional Greek ways of life. This includes 'Others' who are left-wing, anti-authoritarian, those who defend immigrants and minority groups, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex communities, women, people who are unemployed, people with disabilities, and younger people.

Revival of a particular culture of masculinity which promotes a 'saviour' who will relieve us of our affliction. This saviour is imagined as a white Greek man who will use all the necessary means, even brutality, to meet his goals.

Existing ways of resistance in our everyday lives and in the lives of others

In various everyday and organised contexts, we witness a fight against the rise of racism. Some of these include left-wing political parties, anarchist/ antiauthoritarian collectives and antifascist networks. We have also seen interventions within towns and small communities and even within places where antifascist movements did not exist before the crisis.

We have witnessed citizen journalism, open web communities, web radios, bloggers and independent columnists share their work freely and inform the public rapidly via the social media, creating a wave of alternative information against the discourse of the mass media and the politicians. The dissemination of this kind of information recently led to the boycott of the 'bloody strawberries, a reaction to shootings against 29 foreign workers by three strawberry plantation foremen in the area of Manolada.

In the artistic world we have witnessed artists, art and cultural collectives and associations respond against racist stands through theatrical plays, exhibitions, festivals, and film screenings in collaboration with anti-fascist networks. Established artists have taken a stand against racist incidents and cartoonists have published corresponding drawings. There is an emerging movement of young artists who address our social and political concerns through their creations.

We have witnessed various reactions of state institutions and labor unions against Golden Dawn's parliamentary demands. For example, many municipalities denied providing school data concerning the attendance of immigrants' children in kindergartens and health professionals and hospital administrations rejected Golden Dawn's demand to establish a blood bank exclusive to Greek citizens.

We have witnessed university and high school students associations' responses, like the occupation of schools after the beating of students. Associations of university and high school professors conduct open lectures on the prevalence of racist violence in schools. Academic conferences explore the history of fascism. Educational networks organize interventions within schools in order to minimise racist attitudes.

We have witnessed athletic unions' responding against neo-Nazi acts of athletes and football players such as the Hellenic Football Federation deciding a player's lifelong exclusion from all national football teams.

We have witnessed demonstrations and gatherings in public spaces in order to protest against violent attacks, concerts, antiracist graffiti and the erasure of racist graffiti.

Small acts of resistance

We believe that anti-racism is not a 'privilege' of left-wing and antiauthoritarian people. 'Small' acts of resistance against the dominant discourse also matter. Many people adopt an antiracist position based on their humanistic principles and values, on their religious beliefs, or on values of solidarity stemming from historical and collective hardships. As such we notice and witness informal personal and collective antiracist choices made within an increasingly difficult and hostile social environment and everyday small acts of solidarity from 'ordinary' people.

We witness 'small' acts of resistance …

'When we encounter people who insist on believing that racism is not the answer to their problems, even though they live in a ghetto where danger of being attacked or robbed is an everyday reality.'

'When a small restaurant owner distributes food to 'foreign' children because he cannot bear to watch children starve in our country.'

'When people offer help to immigrants who are in a depleted state after having passed the borders; when older people cry upon seeing impoverished immigrants because they perceive them as fellow human beings and not as a possible threat; when individuals who live on the Greek borders do not follow the dominant discourse of border control.'

'When young and older individuals protest against racist opinions being spoken out loud in public spaces. When people explicitly declare their antiracist stands. This is a way to resist being silenced.'

'When we read statements like, "We are the great-grandmothers who lived through the WWII German Occupation and said 'never again Fascism'. We are the grandmothers who witnessed the Greek Civil War and said 'never again War'. We are the mothers who lost our children to immigration and said 'never again Racism'. We are the daughters who lived under the Junta (military dictatorship of 1967-1974) and said 'never again an Authoritarian Regime'. We are the granddaughters who never witnessed the Occupation, the Civil War, the Immigration Era and the Junta, but now experience all of them at once. We are the great-granddaughters who dream of, hope for and demand a better future". (Γυναίκες της Χαλκιδικής, 2013)(Excerpt from an open letter written by the women of Halkidiki who fight against the expansion of gold mining activities which threaten to destroy the whole area)

Emerging possibilities

These conversations have had multiple effects on the way we understand our realities and engage in our local communities. They helped us to get distance from preconceived ideas we had about Greek society as a historically racist society, which transformed our relationship to the problem. These conversations saw us redefining racism as a product of culture, history and politics, instead of the fault of individuals (Carey & Russell, 2002). These conversations and practices enabled us to follow a narrative path of 'the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem' (White, 2007) which allowed us to stop locating blame amongst people and start focusing on Racism's impact on our lives and possible paths of resistance. This created a sense of unity between us and the local community, with no disregard to our differences, but that replaced the oversimplified categories of racist versus antiracist, categories that had been used to divide the Greek

population into opposing polarities. Drawing on the work of Yvonne Sliep and the Care Counselors (Sliep, 1998) we found that these externalising conversations created space 'for the community to join together' (p. 146) against the problem, and that issues that may have been dividing people 'begin to be seen as a consequence of (the problem), rather than the fault of individuals, and this increases the possibility of collective action' (p. 146).

The second part of our conversations, considering ways of resistance, enabled a more detailed description of voices that were normally absent within formal political and the mass media discourses and within our own conversations. Previously, we had felt frozen, dazed, shocked and inert toward a social situation against which we believed there was nothing we could do. However, focusing on existing ways of response and action, without devaluing the political and social consequences or underestimating the severity of the problem, illuminated a more complex reality. We believe that acknowledging this complex reality enabled us to surpass our disappointment and motivated us to become more active political and social agents.

Through these conversations, we had detected multiple and diverse 'cracks' (Holloway, 2010) a term that suggests ordinary moments and spaces of resistance and rebellion are instances in which we assert a different form of doing and living. 'Cracks' that had previously gone unnoticed, or seemed trivial when our narrative was too superficial or confined within a strictly political frame of understanding, now led to fruitful conversations and a re-authoring that broadened our meanings of political action. This offered opportunities to re-author our ways of resistance. In turn, our expanded understanding of political action allowed us to refocus our group actions. In doing so, we decided that one of our goals would be the enrichment and empowerment of small, daily, informal responses. This decision was based on the belief that social change can come about through the expansion and proliferation of the 'cracks' that exist in the dominant racist discourse. This path of action is canvassed below.

PART TWO
Dismantling social division through the 'cracks'

These reflections and our group process had us discussing and suggesting some informal ways of participating in the local community. Although events, speeches and seminars had been very constructive until now, they had only attracted people from specific social networks. We wanted to establish communication with people from different contexts who, like us, faced the crisis and its consequences on a daily basis. As

such, during a six month period, we met with and exchanged opinions with people who were close to us but did not share our ideology, those that we met at work, in our practicum and our neighbourhood. Additionally, we visited the local *kafenio*, a traditional Greek coffee place that often functions as a social centre, especially within small communities. In the past, the *kafenio* was thought of as the main gathering place of a community where people conducted political discussions. Traditionally, it was a gathering place mostly for men and this tradition still survives to an extent as it is rare to meet young people or women in a *kafenio*. People of older generations

usually gather there to play cards and talk casually about political and social issues that concern them. By visiting the *kafenio* we participated in the political and social discussions that took place there and were thus exposed to a series of diverse attitudes towards racism.

Conducting informal everyday conversations in various social contexts

This journey was an interesting but difficult task. It is made up of stories. Stories of us stereotyping people and people stereotyping us, stories of despair and anger when the reality of the crisis reached our group members and we felt that we did not have the time and the energy to struggle in order to find a common ground with people who don't share our beliefs, stories of fear and insecurity when we were faced with frustrating and dangerous events in our everyday life such as beatings of friends, conflicts between members of Golden Dawn and left-wing people. It is also made up of stories of hope when, against all odds, we stuck to the values that engaged us in this path of communicating and we finally created a context of understanding each other. Stories like our meeting with Vasilis, a man who has engaged in many conversations about racism in the *kafenio* and who we invited to function informally as an outsider witness. His constructive feedback helped us keep on going even during times when we feared that our efforts to communicate with a different world were futile, and encouraged us to continue exploring different social contexts even when we met with criticism.

Responding to power & privilege

During our group meetings we also posed questions about how our social position in the local community was influencing our attempts to communicate with other people. This line of questioning was based on Raheim's invitation to narrative practitioners to address privilege and dominance (n. d.). Additionally, throughout our group conversations we constantly had in mind that, 'when it comes to privilege, it doesn't matter who we really are. What matters is who other people think we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in' (Johnson, 2001, p. 35). We wondered, to which extent does our social position lead to positive or negative effects, and under what conditions? This question offered us an opportunity to explore and reflect upon our ways of communicating in socially diverse contexts. We started pinpointing some of our most self-evident attributes depending on the context. For example, when trying to engage in discussions with people at the local *kafenia*, being Greek, Cretan, white, heterosexual and male was a favourable condition and was met with greater receptiveness. However being a young, highly educated, non-Cretan, female, university student posed significant challenges. As

we noticed the emergence of hierarchical positions amongst participants on account of the possession or lacking of certain privileges, we attempted to respond to these inequalities by using conversational and listening skills that we found helpful. A second document was written in regard to our learnings and ways of conducting and navigating these everyday conversations about the crisis and the rise of racism.

Defining our ways of listening and discussing with others

Some of us now try to avoid patronising and using too much jargon. We realised that we tended to act condescendingly toward people who we thought were uneducated and politically inactive. When talking to them, we would 'politely' discard their views, saying they 'lack the knowledge' and then proceed to explain the problem in question in our own terms. After reflecting on the issue of privilege, one of us realised that they had acted as an 'expert' who provided interpretations and solutions in an incomprehensible and strictly political language; a language that was for the most part inconsistent with the other person's life experience. This created a distance between us during our conversations. It was not until we started discussing our common experiences and practical dilemmas, that we managed to construct a communication context characterised by a shared language. We were able then to reach common conclusions, which, although not formulated in political terms, were deeply political in their essence.

Another one of us tries, when they truly disagree with someone's opinion, to express their disagreement openly. I explain why I disagree, providing examples from my life, my choices and the values that lie behind those choices. I associate this kind of honesty with a desire to show my real face and at the same time I try to listen carefully to what the other person has to say. Honesty and attentive listening opens a shared space of communication on equal terms.

Some of us try to limit our own dogmatism. Unless you give space to the person you are discussing with, they won't care about your arguments. That takes time. When I first started discussing about racism with people who didn't share my beliefs, I would lose my temper. In time, I realised that many things we take for granted are only valid within a particular local and political context. The group conversations about our position in the local community helped me realise that there is a whole different world outside my world of which I know

little about. So, my first step was to approach that world and to listen to what it had to say, in an open manner. The effects of this way of communicating are multiple. It creates a habit of seeing reality through various lenses and of being open to different opinions, for both sides. It allows us to at least understand each other, even if we disagree in the end. In this way, you spend less time trying to refute an opinion, and more time trying to understand it.

We also try to use double listening when we hear a contradicting opinion. In the past, when someone told us 'I am not a racist, but …' we would interpret it as an excuse and would argue that the use of the word 'but' in the same sentence was contradicting. After our group started discussing about the unique outcomes that had emerged against the dominant anti-immigrant discourse, our focus started to shift. Instead of fixating on the contradicting content of statements such as the above, we started paying more attention to the first part of the sentence (I am not a racist) and asking questions about the person's antiracist thoughts. Many times, we would end up being pleasantly surprised in agreeing with what they had to say. I found that this shift in focus allowed people to avoid adopting a potentially defensive stance and encouraged them to get more in touch with their values and commitments, which can be overlooked when one lives under harsh conditions.

Establishing a context of shared concerns and dilemmas has also offered us the opportunity to invite people to take responsibility for their views and actions. When we heard arguments that were in favour of Golden Dawn's tactics because of their alleged effectiveness, we posed questions such as:

Where does this road of social division, imposed by Golden Dawn, lead us?

Are we all willing to live under civil war conditions?

In instances where we failed to surpass certain generational gaps with older people, we tried to limit the distance between us by stressing the importance of making decisions in the present so that we and their children won't have to witness a future of conflict and social division.

Issues for further exploration

This path has been difficult to follow but we try to treat each challenge as a new opportunity. We are determined to carry on with our fundamental objectives to enrich our current understandings, to seek for unique outcomes in our social

environment, to expand and multiply the existing 'cracks' in the dominant discourse, and to continue reflecting upon our ways of communicating. We believe that this effort constitutes an additional way of resistance and hope to expand it further by bringing forth new ideas, actions and considerations. Our initial observations have led us to respective issues that require further exploration. During our conversational encounters with the local community, we often came across racist opinions that seemed to be rather malleable and negotiable, instead of solid and explicit, when examined under certain conditions. On addressing the issue of racism, we were met with more confusion than certainty. We would like to believe that at the end of our conversations, some of the participants, including ourselves, gained a wider understanding of the rise of racism, even if we did not change our stands entirely. Each time we met again, we would notice an increasing enrichment of thoughts and concerns among us. This observation taught us that constructive communication requires patience and continual effort. Since these discussions exert only a minor effect on the lives and the social networks of people involved, our goal now is to search for ways to expand the effects and reach as many people as possible. We believe that the use of definitional ceremonies may prove helpful in this endeavour and intend to host one in the future.

Across the course of these conversations we discovered possible solutions to the economic crisis and the rise of racism that we hadn't thought about previously. When we stopped raising political arguments about the problem of immigration and racism, and paid more attention to local practices, a new space was opened that allowed the emergence of local solutions. As participants talked more and more about these ideas and practices, we noticed a gradual enrichment of 'grammars of experience' (Denborough, 2008, p. 180) with the addition of the word 'we' and an emergence of collective speech and action which functioned as a counterweight to the language promoted by individualism. We became informed about practices that had established a local barter economy in the villages of Rethymno as a response to the economic crisis. When asked about the role of immigrants in this context, some of the respondents replied that the immigrants who prefer to stay here, rather than return to their homelands, should be accepted regardless of their nationality. We were particularly struck by a young man who, when asked about the role of immigrants in the local community, replied, *I do not know and I think you don't know either; I would ask them firstly what they want to do; I would ask them if they want to stay here'.* This experience has taught us a lot and we are keeping a collective record that will document the richness and wisdom of local practices and knowledges in order to detect and highlight those 'psychosocial strategies built into our traditions' (Arulampalam et al., 2006, p. 88).

Part Three

Stories of immigration, collective hardships, and sustaining ourselves

Among the narratives that emerged during our conversations were the stories of immigration, collective hardships and solidarity that have taken place during the last century of our histories. This observation made us wonder whether those parts of our collective memory could stand against the emerging racist discourse. During the 20th century, Greece witnessed at least two massive immigration waves. Within those stories, Greeks and immigrants who live in Greece, can identify common concerns and experiences that we share. We believe that these stories of immigration invite people to see behind the veil of nationality and constructed boundaries. Our group started researching the immigration waves from and to Greece during the 20th century and designed a map and a timeline (Denborough, 2008) of the history of immigration in order to use in our future discussion groups. This is intended to be a 'project in process' that will be open to whoever wants to add their personal testimony. It will also function as a starting point for conversations about immigration experiences.
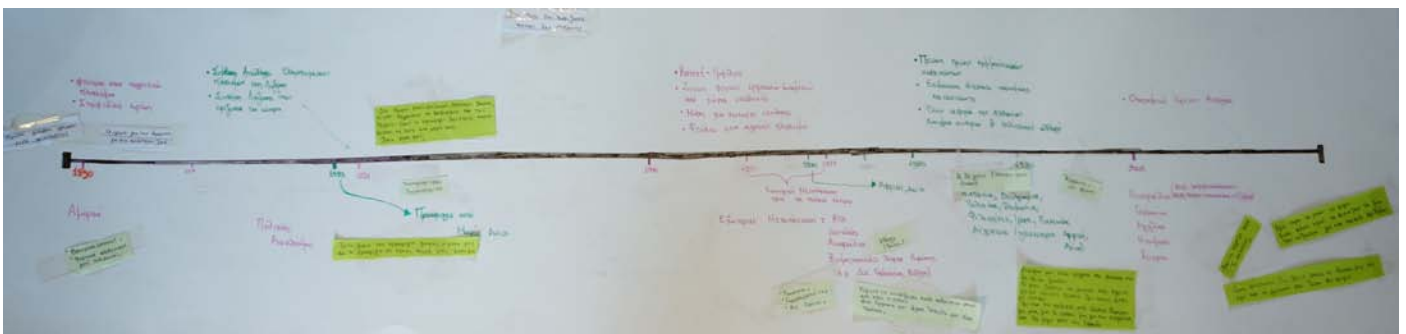
Timeline of the history of immigration: personal and collective stories

Map of the history of immigration (project in process)

Stories of despair and double listening: 'When the crisis knocks on your door'

In the course of this project, we encountered various and increasing difficulties that discouraged us from continuing our antiracist actions and tried to lead us to passivity. When the crisis reaches your personal life, its effects can render you unable to take action and willing to surrender your power of decision-making to others. As a result of facing cruel working conditions, precarious, unpaid, poorly paid or insecure work and unemployment, we have tended to prioritise our own survival and search for more individually-oriented solutions. In the past months, we have observed an increase in the attacks made against antifascist individuals in our community, attacks which make us feel insecure in places where we previously felt safe. We have also experienced various kinds of social discrimination given a dominant discourse that treats people who fight for social change as dangerous.

Through the gradual limitation of democratic freedoms, we, the 'Dangerous Others', experienced a loss of our voices and our tools of response. Being called to respond on various fronts of social injustice and the need to be active within different contexts simultaneously has led some of us to exhaustion. Furthermore, our experience of political fragmentation in left-wing and anti-authoritarian groups has disappointed us and forced us to confront criticism. Finally, we continue to deal with our frustration and shock when anti-immigrant stands manifest within our own families and social networks. In order to deal with these difficult and frustrating parts of our work, we have engaged in double listening, identifying and thickening unique outcomes and the idea of absent but implicit.

We also engaged in conversations in order to gather stories of strength that sustain us through difficult times. In the course of our group discussions, we tried to follow the principles of direct democracy. One of the main characteristics of direct democracy that we engaged with was using group consensus to guide group discussions rather than through voting. Thus, decision-making was much more collaborative, co-operative, egalitarian, horizontal, participatory, and inclusive. The meetings were not characterised by hierarchical structure and they served a decentralisation of power into the hands of the people participating. During our discussions around 'Stories of Strength', I tried to reformulate my questions according to the vocabulary that was used by the group members. When a term or an expression felt inconsistent with their experiences, they were free to reformulate the questions in their own words, using a more politically oriented language. As a result, the terms *hopes* and *dreams* were replaced by *political* and *social imperatives* or *goals,* while *beliefs* and *values* were often *ideological* or were replaced by *ideology*

or *political principles*. In accordance with the theory of social constructionism which permeates narrative practice, I tried to respect the language spoken by the group members, keeping in mind that the language in which we express ourselves plays an active role in the construction of our reality and in the way we perceive ourselves and others. The effects of this process were very empowering and liberating for us and we have included here a part of a collective narrative document that details these conducted 'Stories of Strength' as an epilogue to this journey.

Behind the frustration, the fear and the anger, lies the path of solidarity:

Stories of strength

Providing an answer to injustice

Providing an answer to injustice is a commitment to myself, my generation and the future generations. A commitment to all the repressed people of this country. At some point in our lives, we realised that this world has been divided into the privileged and the oppressed; a division that is not natural or biological, but constructed. From then on, we understood that we have a duty to restore this injustice against us and especially against those who have suffered greater oppression. Racism is one of the most powerful weapons that the ruling class uses to control us. When immigrants who have been forced to leave their homelands because of wars enter our countries, they are represented by the media not as workers or as people like us, but as heathens, thieves, dirty and uncivilised sub-humans. That is why I continue to be antiracist. I am antiracist because this seems utterly unfair.

Justice as an antidote to the prevalence of constructed social divisions

One of our fundamental principles is justice. We share this principle with many people and it has a long history in our lives. Many have inspired us to this direction. Our families who encouraged us to engage in humanistic practices, certain teachers and professors who provided a political frame to our humanistic ideas, the groups we have joined where we learned how to fight collectively for social justice.

If I had to capture all that I've learned in just a few words, I would describe it like this: There is a sketch drawing that depicts three people – one short, one of average height, and one tall – standing behind a wall. Each of them is standing on top of three boxes. The tall one can see over the wall, the average one can only glimpse over, while the short one cannot see at all. On the bottom is written 'Equality'. Then, there is a subsequent drawing that depicts the same three people differently: the short one stands on five of the boxes, the average one stands on two, and the tall one stands on no box. In this way they can all see over the wall. On the bottom is written 'Justice'. This, in my opinion, is true justice.

The solidarity of the repressed

Most of us no longer belong to the privileged upper-class, while many of us did not belong to it even before the crisis. We have been living under difficult circumstances and we experience a sense of solidarity which stems from an emotional connection that cannot be explained merely in political terms. During my discussions with economic immigrants, I was amazed by their ability to endure life's hardships. I have had similar experiences in my family in the past and it has taught me a lot. Even though my life difficulties cannot be compared to theirs, I found a common ground with them that motivates me to carry on fighting for their and my own rights.

*'Taking charge of our lives' or '
Another world is possible'*

Our primary goal is to stop the expansion of fascism in our country and elsewhere. Furthermore, we hope and wish to be part of a strong local network, developed by the people and for the people, consisting of individuals who are willing to participate in a shared vision of political imperatives and goals. A network that will offer an alternative to neoliberalism and will adhere to principles such as social justice and respect for nature. A network based on the concept of social self-organisation, which allows people to take charge of their lives by making direct decisions within the frame of a bottom-up governance. A network that will engage us in active partaking and will reshape the mentality of political passivity and of letting others represent our interests. In other words, we aspire to participate in a self-organising system that will provide alternative tools to influence our political and social reality beyond voting.

Being left-wing means taking action

Being left-wing is not something that can be merely declared and taken at face value, it is something that is demonstrated by our actions. Unless my actions follow my beliefs, I will be distanced from my own values, my political decisions, and my social environment. Either way, I can't avoid being stigmatised for my beliefs. The possibility of being harassed or abused scares me, but what scares me the most is remaining passive. What scares me the most is the possibility that my town will be filled with fascists and that I won't be able to leave my own house. That scares me the most.

I can't just sidestep the path whenever it becomes too rocky

Adopting an antiracist position is a matter of personal and collective values and it requires a serious commitment on all levels. In this light, it is a blessing and a curse. It requires taking into account the risk of being targeted by certain political groups and the danger of being harassed. It can take the form of a personal struggle when you are confronted with the reality of increasing social impoverishment. Witnessing homeless people sleeping on the street and searching the garbage for food is no longer part of a movie scene but an everyday reality. We are constantly confronted with the responsibility to take a stand on these matters. An antiracist position is essentially a political position that has to be a product of constant reflection and continuous re-evaluation. I can't just sidestep the path I chose to follow every time it becomes too rocky. This is an important part of what defines me, an important part of who I am.

Acknowledgements

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