Being 'there'

At the front line of the 'European refugee crisis' - part 2

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In his ethnographic dispatch from the front line, Evthymios Papataxiarchis describes the unfolding of the refugee crisis in his fieldwork site of Skala Sykamnias, Greece. In Part 1, published in the previous issue, he described the various theatres of engagement and the diverse motivations of the actors involved. In Part 2, published here, he looks in more detail at the refugee camps and the political debates surrounding the crisis. Ed.

IV. 'There' equals multiplicity

The world of camps

The multiple strategies that inform the humanitarian intervention on the ground in Skala Sykamnias, despite their mutual and often contradictory correlation, do not fall apart in a highly antagonistic, atomistic scape. Instead, in various combinations that change through time and in the form of collective projects, they get inscribed in space; they give rise to socio-spatial formations called 'camps' that differentiate space and provide loci for the multiplicity of worlds that currently inhabit Skala. A 'camp' comprises a set of structures – medical 'room', tents, ISO containers, utensils – cramped into a few hundred square metres, that provide the necessary facilities for cooking, sleeping, storing, providing (medical) care etc.

The camp is bounded, clearly demarcated in space, with its own entrance, assembly point, signboards etc. and markers of its separate identity. The two 'first reception' camps, 'Platanos' (plane tree) and 'Lighthouse', were gradually born out of initiatives by 'mother' collectivities in Athens and Stockholm respectively, mostly via Facebook where they sustain a very important parallel virtual life. 'Stage 2' meanwhile, is the outcome of initiatives by professionals supervised by the UNHCR. All of them have a basic organizational structure and a division of labour 'directed' by a 'coordinator'. The virtual community of the two first reception camps, the e-camp, comprises a network of followers and friends who provide human and material resources that make the whole project possible. In the e-world of volunteering, one thing prevails: the gift. Even in the highly politicized Facebook page of Platanos, donations are a central concern.

Each camp may involve roughly between 20 and 40 people on a daily basis, most of whom reside in Skala. The collectivities may provide accommodation, food and, if possible, transport for those who come to help. There is also a periphery of secondary actors who make daily visits, participate in specific actions and contribute to the running of the camp. Their interactions with the local community are selective and rather limited to sympathizers who often act as mediators. Camps are prone to self-sufficiency; they are inward-looking worlds. At the side of the camps operate separate groups of professional lifeboat crews (from a number of NGOs, including Proactiva, Greenpeace, Sea Watch and Refugee Rescue) whose boats are stationed in the small fishing port; doctors (from the Women and Health Alliance and Médecins Sans Frontières), some of whom are based in the community clinic of Skala; and small groups offering specialized services, such as the washing and recycling of abandoned clothes by the 'Dirty Girls'.

Platanos

Platanos has turned into a national emblem of 'solidarity with refugees', attracting 'solidarians' from all around

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Fig. 1. *Cultural innovations, political contestations: A flag with the* motto *'Antifaschistischen Action' at the entrance of Platanos and the chapel of Mermaid Madonna at the background.*

Greece and abroad. It is a rainbow coalition of anarchists, anti-globalization and radical left activists, 'volunteers' without an explicit ideological agenda, local people who want to help and distrust the NGOs, and various performers of a cosmopolitan version of volunteering. It cooperates with similar collectivities aiming at self-organization all around Greece and is keen on preserving the disinterested character of solidarity (*allileggyi*), thus keeping its doors closed to the professionals.

The ironic appropriation of the name 'the camp of misfits' by some of its protagonists captures the anti-structural, dissident aesthetics of this project: openness, immediacy, distrust of bureaucratic organizations and the hierarchical division of labour and resistance to official rule (and institutionalization) are its hallmarks. Here, unity prevails, facilitating a coming together, even temporarily, in the quest for an egalitarian basic fraternity transcending class and ethnic boundaries. The utopia of transcultural 'horizontality' is regularly performed in the sitting area around the 'fire' that dominates the entrance of the camp. Its self-organized character is manifested in the regular assembly of the 'solidarians' where decisions are taken in principle on the basis of consensus.

Lighthouse

Platanos hugely contrasts to Lighthouse, a Facebook group that turned into a Swedish 'social enterprise' cooperating with UNHCR. The functionally differentiated space of this camp is distinguished by an impressive combination of aesthetic concern with technocratic efficiency. The world of Lighthouse is colourful and warm. The well-structured Facebook page of the collectivity, with its regular reports, sentimental appeals for donations and many comments, parallels the order of the camp. Here the ethos of householding together with the sense of civic duty prevails. The determination and seriousness of these (primarily North European) volunteers is manifest in their observance of modern humanitarian standards, social mingling with professionals and willingness to undertake special, particularly demanding, responsibilities, such as keeping an outpost at the nearby peninsula of Korakas in order to help disoriented boats.

Stage 2

The camp of Stage 2 bears the distinctive marks of the primarily religious NGOs that are responsible for its running (mainly Euro Relief and Samaritan's Purse), and the

professionals that direct it under the supervision of the UNHCR. The well-ordered, clean – I would say 'dry'– camp, built in order to facilitate the transport of refugees to another larger camp in a nearby head village, is dominated by narrow corridors forcing the refugees into atomistic queues. The space imposes fragmentation, reducing the multitude of refugees into separate individuals, available for processing in a bureaucratic process. Stage 2, in the hilly outskirts of Skala, signifies a break from the various versions of unity which characterize interactions at the more amateurish camps of first reception – a transition from the liminal world of first reception to the zone of proper humanitarian governance.

Cooperation and sociality

All these actions and reactions which take place there and 'sit over' the place, these bits and pieces, form a rather random yet increasingly recognizable patchwork which is imperfectly assembled as it is undermined by miscommunication and transversed by conflicting forces. It is true that in the lively tavernas and the cafeterias of the main square you get a sense of unity. Here, members of the collectivities from the various linguistic groups – primarily Greeks, anglophone North Europeans, and Spaniards – come together and may socialize with one another, with visitors and with locals, producing a convivial atmosphere. Goji, by far the most popular and lively local cafeteria, is buzzing with life until very late at night. Besides being an important site of sociality for most volunteers and locals, the free internet offered there has turned it into an operational centre for the various groups and a public arena in which the refugee crisis is performed. The collectivities are careful to attend most of the drinking establishments with the exception of those that are accused of racist behaviour.

There is some interaction, even cooperation, among the collectivities and between the collectivities and the local society. Despite its distrust of the NGOs, Platanos will not deny specific services to the other camps when asked. Its organizers are proud to record the huge amount of food it has prepared for Stage 2 or the clothes which it systematically circulates in the direction of Lighthouse. Most camps have adopted a policy of offering services to the local community such as cleaning the beaches or distributing food to the needy.

Yet these interactions fail to transcend two main barriers: a local distrust of incomers and the tendency of the collectivities to form distinct worlds which are built around separate ideological premises and which project their distinctiveness, even in the sphere of sociality. Their members usually sit together at the same table, or even prefer to attend a separate cafeteria when they want to discuss important matters. It is rather rare for members of one collectivity to visit a neighbouring camp. Linguistic barriers also play a significant role.

People come and go all the time. Everything changes fast. Therefore, there is little opportunity for stable social groupings to form. This fluid situation develops in a direction which is hard to predict since it depends on so many external variables – at a national and European level.

What is most evident, however, is that the lack of integration within this fluid social landscape combined with the historic decline of the community's demographic agility and the weakening of its political reflexes, breeds conflict. To a certain degree conflict is imported, channelled along preexisting lines of division, thus reproducing old cleavages and producing new ones.

With the same intensity with which the place attracts thousands of visitors and media attention from all around the world, it also draws upon itself the dynamics of regional, national and European politics. It is like a miniature theatre of conflicts which echo wider debates: on the role of the state in the management of the crisis, 'refugee and migration issues', European Union (EU) and Greek relations with Turkey, the European border regime and the political future of Europe.

V. 'There' equals politics, and conflict

'There' equals politics of different kinds – local, national, European, micro and macro – all ridden with conflict, reproducing old lines of division and producing new ones, all intersecting with one another to produce complex political puzzles that cannot be easily solved. The sites of conflict are many, often easily recognizable, yet contestations over the meaning and uses of 'solidarity', the role of the NGOs and political sovereignty, prevail. The forms of conflict vary. It seems that the violence which displaced the newcomers from the East is recycled here – it is, however, usually subdued. While conflict rarely erupts into violent confrontations or bursts into the public arena to make the headlines in the local newspapers, it can work as an acid that corrodes the fragile cohesion of the local community.

Photos and the politics of appropriation

Photos are a major vehicle of politics. They communicate a visual sense of 'being there' towards an interested public. Particularly in the autumn, when the crisis reached a climax and both the European Commission and the Greek government were adopting 'solidarity' as their official position, public discussion of the refugee issue largely relied on the formal politics of visual representation. In that conjuncture, Skala emerged in public discourse as the place where one could trace an authentic essence of solidarity in the actions of particular inhabitants. 'Feeding' and 'saving' became the paradigmatic manifestations of 'love', 'humanness' (*anthropia*) and 'solidarity' that seemed particularly worthy of celebration.

The biography of a particular photo is remarkable. In mid-October, Levteris Partsalis' photo of three elderly ladies from Skala – M.K., M.M. and E.M. – feeding a refugee baby went viral. Subsequently this photo had a spectacular career bringing international fame to them. Besides occupying the front page of big, national newspapers, it drew the attention of top politicians. It became the background poster at the meeting between the Greek prime minister and the president of the European parliament, inspired the visit to Skala by the president of the Greek Republic where he was photographed with one of the 'grannies', as well as visits from many political personalities, including the president of the Italian parliament, and eventually resulted in the official nomination of M.K. for the Nobel Peace Prize in two separate initiatives – one by Avaaz and 236 academics from around the world and another by the Academy of Athens.[1]

In official discourse, the 'three grannies' became 'the image of the Europe that we want', the 'good face of Europe' (Alexis Tsipras);[2] they 'personified the enormous soul of the Greek mother' (Terence Quick);[3] their behaviour epitomized the primary concern for the 'human being' and the 'respect to his value' (Prokopis Pavlopoulos).[4] A new patriotism of 'solidarity' is on the way! In public discourse, the disinterested generosity of 'ordinary individuals', as it is captured in these photos, is transformed from an inalienable quality of action into an alienable substance that can be further circulated, shared in various directions with various people and used for various political, social and economic purposes.

In this capacity, as absolutely central elements in the politics of representing the refugee crisis, photos became a major object of conflict right from the very beginning. The press frequently reported incidents with 'disaster paparazzi', whose thirst for a good photo violated the rules of proper conduct with the refugees.[5] The issue, however, was not only who and in what way but also

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(From above to below, left to right)

Fig. 2. *Taking care of a refugee baby in the child-centred world of matrifocal kinship: The famous photo of 'the three grannies feeding the refugee baby' in the dining room of M.K.'s house together with photos of grandchildren and great grandchildren.*

Fig. 3. *The camp of Platanos: A view.*

Fig. 4. *The combination of aesthetic concern with technocratic efficiency dominates the camp of Lighthouse.*

Fig. 5. *The camp of Stage 2: A view of the entrance.*

Fig. 6. *'The three territories in Lesbos' by Makis Axiotis. An ironic comment on the loss of sovereignty. At the centre under the German flag is the 'Community of Greek autochtones'.*

Fig. 7. *'A flying tea pot': A drawing by a refugee boy who has settled with his family in the occupied City Plaza hotel at the centre of Athens.*

where one has the right to take a photo. The controversies over taking photos anticipated some of the major topics of conflict: the very inalienability of solidarity, the resistance to the appropriation and 'use' of solidarity practices by third parties, and issues relating to privacy, anonymity and territoriality.

NGOs: Interested 'solidarity' contested

The capturing of disinterested 'solidarity' in photos, the assignment of use value to these elementary acts of 'saving' and 'feeding' and their subsequent introduction into the wider sphere of economic and political exchange, is a major subject of intense discussion and criticism. In the background to these debates, not directly linked but providing an important basis from which public awareness of the refugee crisis has developed, are outspoken examples of the 'exploitation' of vulnerable refugees by various local 'professionals'.

'Solidarity' should be treated as a 'pure/ free gift', and therefore clearly separated from the sphere of interested exchange and money. One should not profit from the offer of 'solidarity'. 'Interest' (*synferon*) and 'solidarity' are mutually exclusive. one should not seek indirect returns for altruistic behaviour – the 'smile' of the refugees is the only legitimate 'reward', the ideal counter-gift.

Such fundamentalist views on 'solidarity' inform the debate on the role of the NGOs. From the viewpoint of the 'solidarians', the (authentic) motives of the 'paid ones' (*plirotoi*) or 'employees' (*ypalliloi*) (and less of state agents) are seriously questioned. 'Doing it for money' is after all a suspect motive. In the abundant stories about the NGOs and the huge amounts of money they collect from donors, the alleged inefficiency of humanitarian workers and their failures (which are linked to their bureaucratic attitude) are contrasted to the operational readiness and altruism which are thought to be intrinsic characteristics of disinterested 'solidarity'. 'Solidarians' are sorting out the mess often produced by the *mikiades* (MKO, i.e. NGO personnel).

Yet the NGOs are challenged from another perspective that raises the key and much broader issue of sovereignty and their principal role in the governance of the refugee crisis. Who runs this place that has become an 'unfenced vineyard' (*xefrago ampeli*)? Since the beginning of the crisis in the summer of 2015, the Greek government delivered important aspects of the management of the refugees to the more than 100 NGOs which operate on the island, while the coordination of these collective agencies was put in the hands of the UNHCR. Despite the fact that this otherwise necessary and challenging cooperation has worked rather well, bearing fruits in the effective handling of the crisis, there is a lot of public resentment against the powerful role of the NGOs. The camps – often administered by NGO personnel – and the presence of Frontex (the European border agency) are strong indices of the limited powers of the state and municipal authorities, who maintain for themselves a rather symbolic role in this context. They work as powerful reminders of the current Greek predicament and the 'crisis within the crisis' which the islanders experience.

The contribution of the international organizations and the NGOs in the effective handling of the refugee crisis is often questioned by the press, particularly in connection with the coordination of the NGOs and the disciplining of those organizations which refuse to cooperate, thus producing certain responses by local officials.[6] For example, foreign NGOs are periodically called to formally certify themselves to the Ministry of Migration and foreign medical personnel are similarly asked to present themselves to the local medical association. Also, all volunteers are asked to register with the municipality in order to get permission to operate on the island. Certification emerges as a major subject of controversy.[7]

The issue of Platanos: Anxieties over sovereignty

Underlying most of the major controversies and disputes is the control of space. Anxieties concerning the loss of sovereignty are very strong, and they are exacerbated by the regime of supervision by 'institutions' which has been imposed on Greece because of the crisis, an issue that remains at the centre of political controversy. Such anxieties surface at the sites of refugee presence; they are fed by the relentless force of the human flows that transverse the local communities and are manifested in disputes over the right to enter public spaces or take photos. Yet they are particularly salient at the front line.

Anxieties focus on the use of public space by the refugees themselves: the routes they take on the island, the places where they camp, the length of their stay there, and the spaces they mark with the remains of their journey. Paradoxically, from the moment that refugee transport was arranged to take refugees to the registration camp in Moria by buses managed by the International Rescue Committee and boats to Athens specially hired by the Ministry of Migration, public anxiety diminished. Yet, in the tourist areas of the 'North' and in Skala, attempts to insulate the refugees by keeping them out of public sight and away from the tourist settlements are still evident.

Anxieties of course arise in relation to the volunteers and the NGOs. In contrast to other parts of Lesbos (or Greece), the presence of the UNHCR-related camps in Skala is not a big issue. Villagers recognize that given the extent of the problem and the degree of the community's exposure to it, the camps are necessary, even welcomed, once they show an attitude of cooperation with the authorities. Of greater concern are the ways in which those who visit the village in order to help establish their presence in the locality and, particularly, the spatialization of 'solidarity'.

If the careful diplomacy of the big organizations is somehow effective in satisfying sceptics, in Skala the arrogant attitude of the idealist 'solidarians' – who in the name of universal ideas failed to follow the elementary rules of hospitality, acknowledge the particularistic sensitivities of their few local allies and ask the permission of the local council when they 'occupied' communal grounds, insisting instead on pursuing the original experiment of 'self-organization' in the rural margins of Europe – has turned Platanos into a political 'hotspot'. The presence of the 'solidarians' on a piece of land that functions as a sort of park for the summer *volta* (promenade) is constantly challenged by the local council, leading to periodic crises and anxieties about a possible eviction by the police.[8] Their forceful entrance into the public life of the village has triggered reactions and factional realignments that resonate with wider political developments and the prospects of Syriza in this historically left village community. First the 'solidarian' activists were denied a small communal building that was initially used as a warehouse to store the hundreds of boxes sent to them from around the world. Later, they were asked to leave the particular spot and move elsewhere, possibly to rent private property on the beach.

Delayed attempts to connect with the wider local community through the politics of the gift – through distributing foodstuffs to the lonely elderly at Christmas – did not manage to significantly change the hostile attitude of the local authorities. A succession of crises in their relations with the leftist local council suggests that a middle ground of harmonious symbiosis will be hard to find. Since February they are facing the challenge of 'certification' – as their statement in the local press said, 'solidarity is not a certifiable product'.[9]

1. 'Over 500,000 signatures back Greek islanders for Nobel peace prize'. http://news.yahoo.com/over-500-000-signatures-back-greek-islanders-nobel-213813999.html (accessed 05.03.2016). Joel Gunter, 'Migrant crisis: Greek volunteers welcome Nobel nomination'. BBC News, 01.02.2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35460012 (accessed 5.3.2016).

2. This statement was made by the Greek prime minister during the press conference he gave together with the president of the European Parliament in Venizelos airport. 'Alexis kai oi "manades" tis Lesvou'O. [Alexis and the 'mothers' of Lesbos]. *Ethnos*, 5 November 2015.

3. 'Terence Quick ek merous tis kyvernisis' [Terence Quick on behalf of the government]. *Empros*, 10 November 2015.

4. A statement made by the president of the Greek Republic during his visit to Skala Sykamnias. 'Otan o Pavolopoulos synantise mia apo tis giagiades tis Sykamnias' [When Pavlopolos met one of the grannies of Sykamnia]. http://www.lesvosnews.net/articles/news-categories/koinonia/otan-paylopoylos-synantise-mia-apo-tis-giagiades-tis-sykamnias (accessed 5.3.2016).

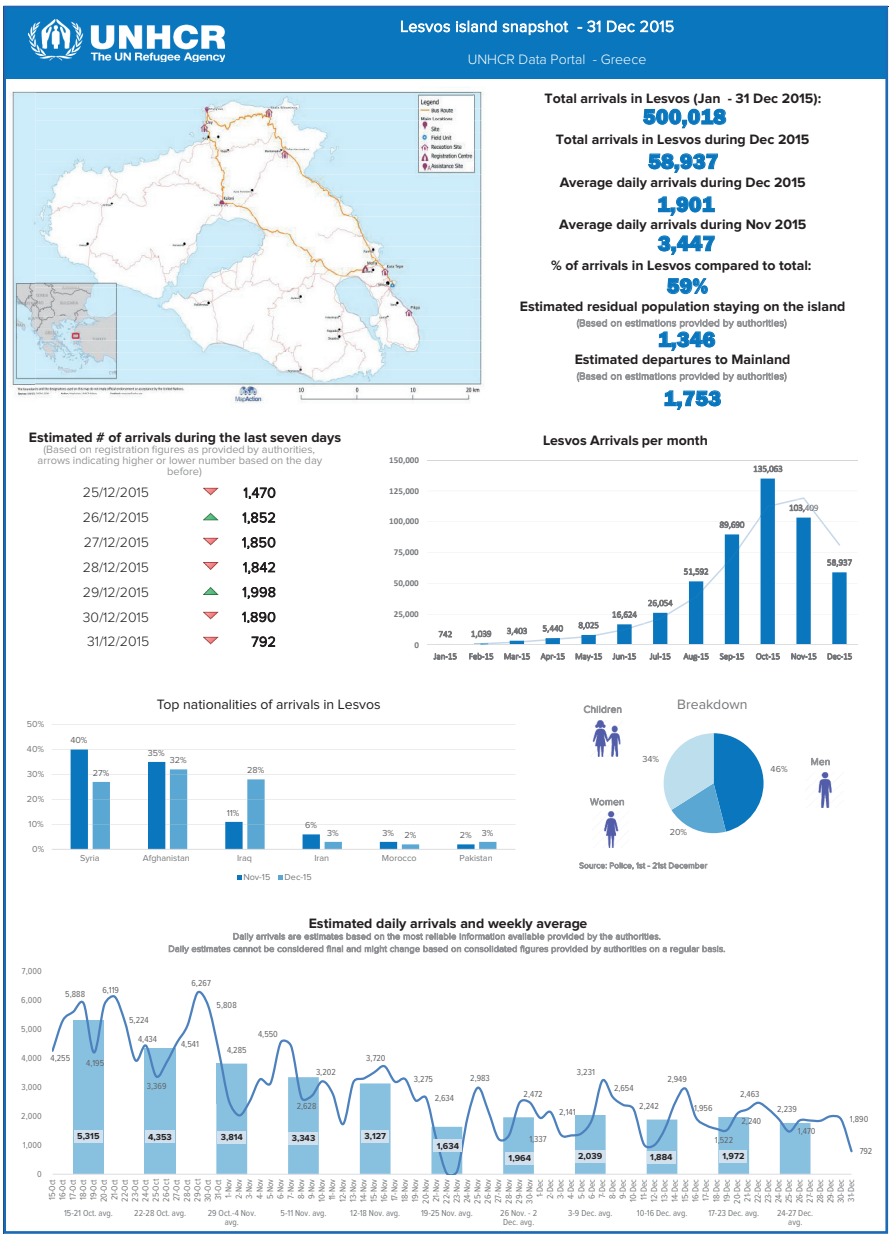
5. Anthi Pazianou, 'Apantiseis gia tin epithesi se fotoreporter' [Answers concerning the attack on photo-reporter in Lesbos]. *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 5 December 2015.

6. Helen Nianias, 'Refugees in Lesbos: Are there too many NGOs on the island?'. *The Guardian*, 5 January 2016.

7. 'Katangelies gia mi pistopoiimenes MKO sti Lesvo' [Complaints against uncertified NGOs in Lesbos]. *To Vima*, 20 November 2015. http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=755606 (accessed 5.3.2016).

8. 'Pros ektonosi i krisi sti Skala Sykamias' [The crisis in Skala Sykamias is resolved]. *Empros*, 24 December 2015. http://www.emprosnet.gr/article/79600-pros-ektonosi-i-krisi-sti-skala-sykamias (accessed 5.3.2106).

9. 'Poreia "multi-culti" gia tis diapistevseis' [A 'multi-culti' march for the certifications] *Empros*, 9 February 2016. http://www.emprosnet.gr/article/80860-poreia-multi-culti-gia-tis-diapisteyseis (Accessed 5.3.2016).



UNHCR

Fig. 8. *UNHCR Lesvos island snapshot - 31 Dec 2015.*

VII. Being where?

At the broken place

As I conclude this ethnographic dispatch from the front line, an account, I have to admit, which has a certain resemblance to the standardized journalistic narratives of the refugee crisis, I am still puzzled by the kind of place I have been visiting over the last few months. It certainly resembles a zone of political liminality due to the withdrawal of the state from crucial functions – or even a 'humanitarian frontier', a kind of threshold, in between a war zone and the 'orderly world' of the Schengen Area. But these macro-political features only superficially capture the socio-geographical disturbance that has occurred.

On the one hand, there is a strong sense of openness: the broken boundary has destabilized the place; the broken people (together with the rest of the visitors) who traverse it in great numbers, have invested it with a sort of indeterminacy – they have made it a broken place, but also a place of freedom. It often appears to be a free space, available to be marked – if not possessed – by anybody operating in it: the refugees themselves, who abandon what is not necessary on the spot (painting red the shores of the 'red island'); the trespassers from neighbouring or even distant communities, who come for *pliatsiko* (looting); the NGOs that mark the place by placing labels wherever possible (e.g. rubbish bins); the activists who raise their own flags on the 'occupied' ground; or the individual performers who leave imaginative traces on their way.

On the other hand, at the level of identity, the place as an eponymous locality is emptied by its political egoism, the fantasy of the distinct character or even the illusion of sovereignty. It is left there naked. The refugees seem to invest their sense of displacement into this locality, emptying it of the strong sense of belonging that made it an eponymous *chorio* ('village'), turning it into a sort of non-place, not quite a port or an airport – at best a corridor of hope. Identitarian emptiness works as a centrifugal force – it attracts you there. You cannot resist the non-place!

In these circumstances, the village community is withdrawn, subdued under the pressure, lost in the crowd of well-wishers and the periodic noise of the refugee drama. Underneath the feverish atmosphere, many among the villagers feel a deep alienation. They go on living there, yet their minds are elsewhere: unsettled lives, displaced minds. Displacement becomes a general condition.

Engagement, however, is the other side of alienation. There is a lot of action taking place by the few locals and the visitors, yet it is action that is constantly emptied by what makes it possible – not only the resources, but the very human agents who go on being 'burned out' to be replaced by the next – action that relies not only on free gifts but on free (disposable) persons who are constantly replaced by enthusiastic newcomers. This kind of action overrides the place, changing the lives of its permanent inhabitants as well as the lives of all those who are temporarily involved in the 'making of history'.

The 'event' – which the refugee crisis is – seems to occupy the 'structure' – which the village community was. Almost. Because somewhere there is this deep structure – which a tradition of anthropological deconstructive thought has made us very suspicious of. It comprises this mysterious habit of 'saving' and 'caring', captured by the paradigmatic actions of T.M. and M.K., the ethos of living in a way that sustains the life of the 'other'. But it also includes its opposite: the deeply conservative tendency of 'survival' at the expense of the 'other'. So far, the altruistic ethos gives the tone, but with a high price: the very dissolution of community.

At the end of the day, what makes 'there' the solid foundation of being and a constant of the anthropological enterprise fades out. It is not decomposed in the many 'there's of multi-sited ethnography but just dissolves into geographical indeterminacy. 'There', as it is suspended by the refugee crisis, is a broken place. 'There' has become a figure of speech that has to be put in quotation marks.

Postscript

Since the publication of the first part of this essay in early April the situation on the ground has radically changed. The EU-Turkey agreement that came into effect on 20 March marked a new phase in the 'European refugee crisis'. The number of incoming refugees dramatically declined, thus rendering the 'structures' of first reception less important, while more than 50,000 are 'stuck' in Greece. A good number of them are currently settled in makeshift camps at strategic locations near the northern border or in the port of Piraeus. Others, the majority, are accommodated in the tents of official 'Hospitality Centres' that are dispersed all over the north and central peripheries of the country and in unofficial reception centres in Athens and other cities. From one of these informal centres, which is run by the 'Solidarity initiative for economic and political refugees', the occupied City Plaza hotel in the centre of Athens, the drawing of Raman H., a Kurdish boy from Syria who resides there with his parents and siblings, captures the spirit of the moment. In the poetic imagination of this young refugee, the 'flying tea pot' (see Fig. 7 here) became a suitable subject after 'the half sunk boat' another refugee child drew immediately after the traumatic journey (see Fig. 7 in Part 1). ●