



La crisis de los Refugiados en Grecia: El desarrollo del racismo. Respuestas antirracistas e implicaciones para el Trabajo Social

Refugee crisis in Greece: The development of racism, anti-racist responses and implications for social work

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Abstract:

Racism in Greece across time, has been constructed through social divisions and legitimized via violent and punitive policies. Reflecting on the historical development of racism and with a special focus on the current refugee crisis, this paper provides insights into the profession's ambiguous role that is called to undertake in the implementation of unjust and oppressive policies and reproduction of social inequalities. Based on the anti-racist and solidarity paradigm that has risen especially during the crisis, the discussion indicates the urgent need for social work to resist and struggle against racism via anti-oppressive action both at micro and macro levels.

Keywords: racism, social movements, Greece, refugee crisis, anti-racist social work.

Resumen:

El racismo en Grecia se ha venido construyendo a lo largo del tiempo a través de divisiones sociales y su legitimación se ha producido a raíz de políticas punitivas y violentas: Reflexionar acerca del desarrollo histórico del racismo poniendo el énfasis en la actual crisis de los refugiados es la clave del presente artículo.

Junto a ello se reflexiona acerca del papel ambiguo que en ocasiones desempeña la profesión del trabajo social en este ámbito cuando a menudo sin pretenderlo contribuye a implementar políticas injustas y a reproducir desigualdades sociales.

Basado en los paradigmas antirracista y de solidaridad que han emergido especialmente en los tiempos de crisis, la discusión de este artículo apunta a la urgente necesidad para el trabajo social de resistir contra el racismo por medio de una acción antiopresiva tanto a nivel macro como a nivel micro.

Palabras clave: Racismo, movimientos sociales, grecia, crisis de los Refugiados, trabajo social antirracista.

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1. The historical development of racism in Greece: a background note

Greece, is situated in South-eastern Europe, a geographical region that through time and space has been significantly diverse and multicultural. However, the nationalist ideology has been re-occurring across different socio-political contexts. Early references to 'Greekness' (Pavlou 2007) are found in ancient Greece, where the term 'barbarian' (*βάρβαρος* in Greek) was initially used for the people who didn't speak Greek. This term was used later to stereotypically describe people who were perceived to be brutal and uncivilized compared to the Greek ethos and customs. During the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires, Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities peacefully co-existed in the Balkan and Minor Asia region. The nationalist ideology appears to have been rising during the 19th century and especially following the vanishing of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. The socio-political events of those years resulted on massive deportations and violent integration of diverse communities/minorities in the Balkans, whilst the Greek Christian nationalist ideology was on the rise.

Following the establishment of the Republic of Greece and its current borders, the fascist regime of Metaxas (1936-1941) produced systematically the ideology of supreme 'nationality' and emphasized the ideals of family, religion and hard work for a 'new' Greece (Angouri and Wodak 2014). Brutal and oppressive state mechanisms were adopted which included the abolition of the communist party whilst thousands of 'opponents' including trade unionists were persecuted, imprisoned or even assassinated (Diamantopoulos 1997). It is important to note here that during those times and in the years that followed in the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), the nationalist ideology shifted towards the 'communist threat'. The rising influence of the National Liberation Movement (EAM) - the grassroots resistance movement during the Second World War - challenged the national and international elite agenda and therefore, the nationalist narrative was focused on the necessity to suppress and neutralize this influence. The anti-communist propaganda along with the political 'rehabilitation' strategies for the following decades until the collapse of the 1967-1974 junta, were justified under this logic, including massive assassinations, imprisonment, torture and exile of thousands of suspected leftists and communists. In light of the above, Greece's modern history reveals that the construction of racism was not based in

notions of race, but to what was perceived as an anti-communist national entity based on religious and political identities.

It was only in early 1990s, that this ideology shifted to race, religious and ethnic differences, following the mass migration of people from Eastern Europe who were perceived as a threat to the 'national (Greek) self'. In terms of policies at a European level, initiatives towards a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) were made in the 1990s, recognising the rights of asylum seekers under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees. These conventions were signed by the Greek state and have been included in their legal framework. However, following an increasing number of asylum seekers from former Soviet Union countries, European policies were mainly driven by a security-based discourse, emphasising border control and exclusionary processes (Vitus and Lidén 2010). Such measures and policies were reflected in deportation procedures, Schengen Accords, the Dublin Convention and Regulation, Eurodac and FRONTEX, which excluded asylum seekers from protection and recognition of their rights (Schuster 2011).

Similarly, in Greece, despite the increasing waves of migrants, the state's policy was mainly reactive with some ad hoc laws or presidential decrees and even in the early 2000s, it was characterized by a short-sighted and regulatory migration policy with no vision of long-term inclusive policies (Triantafyllidou 2009; 2014). Legislation following EU directions, considered migrants' social inclusion (3336/2007) (in employment and training) and definition of hatred acts as 'aggravating' (3719/2008). However, this limited legislation was itself tokenistic, as migrants and their children (even second generation) continued to be denied Greek nationality and almost 100% of applications for political asylum were rejected (Karantinos and Christophilopoulou 2010). The gaps in such legislation and advocacy for human and social rights have been demonstrated mainly by the growing anti-racist and mental health movements which emerged in the late 1990s (Teloni and Mantanika 2015). Nevertheless, within the blaming game by the media and institutional racism, migrants were associated and blamed for rising crime, unemployment rates and for changes in demographics of major urban centres such as Athens (Ellinas 2015). This narrative along with excessive border controls, constant police scoop operations and deportations fueled racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the following years, which was legitimized by media, politicians and Orthodox Church representatives. It was this context that both Greek society and the state were unprepared for the imminent financial crisis about to erupt and the subsequent refugee crisis of 2015.

2. The years of the refugee crisis: racism legitimization and naturalisation

Greece in 2015 experienced a 'double faceted crisis'. Already in recession for seven consecutive years from the financial crisis, the so-called 'refugee crisis' erupted with unprecedented numbers of refugees fleeing war and conflict affected countries.

According to data reported by UNHCR (2018), more than 1,000,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece in 2015 and early 2016. The number of arrivals through the northern land borders, declined after the Balkan border was closed in March 2016 and the EU - Turkey deal of fast-track procedures to return asylum seekers in Turkey.

The European closed and unwelcoming borders led to refugees taking extremely dangerous sea-routes, which has resulted to 11,948 people dying or gone missing so far at the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR 2018). Yet, refugees who survive their journey to Europe face further challenges and obstacles at their arrival. The supposedly 'fast-track' procedures of 15 days to examine eligibility and admissibility for asylum including appeal, take far longer (9-12 months) leaving people trapped in islands in limbo and despair. Also, dividing practices and differential treatment for people from specific nationalities considered as 'economic migrants' have led to further delays and frustration.

The detention policy of refugees has followed the 'hotspot' approach in Greece (and Italy) – facilities run now by the Greek army and police with restrictions and controls¹. In May 2018, the number of refugees and migrants trapped in Greek islands were about 14,000 whilst maximum capacity is for 8,759 people (Human Rights Watch 2018). There is extreme violation of human rights of refugees, as numerous reports reveal the severe overcrowding, significant shortages of basic shelter, unhygienic conditions, lack of information and mismanagement of asylum procedures, volatile atmosphere and sexual harassment (Medecins Sans Frontiers 2016; Human Rights Watch 2018). These brutal and inhumane conditions have contributed to deteriorating mental health for some refugees whilst the vulnerability of 3,150 unaccompanied migrant children (as of November 2017) places them in high risk for their safety and their rights. Amnesty International (2016) and Human Rights Watch (2018) report that children are routinely held in police stations for more than 15 days or end up in these detention sites waiting for placement in an overburdened shelter system, and therefore, are facing hazardous risks like illness, trafficking, separation from parents, extortion by smugglers, exploitation and abuse.

Considering these, refugee rights are violated within a wider oppressive context, where national and European policies for migration control conflict with their duty to safeguard them (Ottosson et al. 2012). In Greece, the unprecedented refugee crisis occurred at a time when the country was already facing a financial crisis since 2008, with tremendous social impact, austerity, fragmentation of social services and welfare policy cuts (Petmesidou 2013). The magnitude of the austerity Greece faces combined with the rise of anti-immigrant rhetoric of the last decade, cultivated into outright racism. The historical failure of Greek state to respond to migration was further exposed within the economic crisis, providing opportunities for political

¹ The hotspots are under the umbrella of the Ministry of Migration Policy and a number of services are involved (mainly NGOs as this paper will discuss further below).

agents to capitalise on pre-existing nationalist ideology (Fragoudaki 2013), a product of which is the rise of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

Golden Dawn, made it for the first time to the parliament in 2010 and its popularity decreased somewhat only after the assassination of the anti-fascist musician, Pavlos Fyssas, in September 2013, which led to the arrest of several members and MPs, including the party's leader Nikos Michaloliakos, whose trial is still taking place at the time of writing this paper. Yet, Golden Dawn is still represented in the Greek Parliament (elected as the third most popular party in the recent elections of January 2015) and in the European Commission (in the elections of May 2014). Supporters of Golden Dawn advocate for a nationalist homogenous state in which nationality is defined in terms of 'race, blood and ancestry' (Karamanidou 2016). Golden Dawn initiated a number of 'cleansing' operations, including brutal pogroms as well as the establishment of food and blood banks 'only for Greeks' (Ellinas 2015; Human Rights Watch 2014).

However, these actions need to be seen in a wider context of racism legitimisation and naturalisation, firstly through mainstreaming anti-immigrant positions by the media and politicians, where the influx of 'foreigners' is linked with crime and violence. Given that during a campaign for the 2012 national elections, the Conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras stated: "Greece today has become a centre for illegal immigrants...We must take our cities back..."; the actions of Golden Dawn, should not come as any surprise (Human Rights Watch 2014). Media further fuelled the us/them division. Beyond criminalising migrants for years by portraying them as danger to economy, public health, and religion, they have been amplifying and representing the hatred acts as the 'natural reaction' by 'common' frustrated people (Ellinas 2015; Triantafyllidou and Kouki 2014). These beliefs were reflected in a recent public opinion study by EKKE (2017) where 65% of the respondents expressed that migrants damage Greek economy, 59% that they take 'our' jobs, 63% that they have made Greece the worst place to live, and 44% that they are being treated in health-care better than Greeks.

Another component of racism naturalisation is the failure by the state and judiciary to respond to hate speech and racist attacks. As Karamanidou (2016) observes, violence has been legitimised through these authorities by denying its racialized nature and minimising the attacks to 'isolated' events that involve regrettable but understandable defence to the migration threat. Examples of such injustice are evidenced in court decisions made in 2014, when attacks on Pakistani men and the murder of a 27-year-old worker from Pakistan in Athens were not classified as racially motivated, whilst farmers who admitted shooting 28 Bangladeshi strawberry pickers who requested months of back pay they were owed, in Manolada (southern Peloponnese), were acquitted. Whilst an Anti-Racist Bill (4285/2014) came into force recently, still reports reveal rise of racist attack victims - 130 only in 2016 - (RVRN 2017) whilst brutal pogroms and terrorising migrants in hospitals and schools are continuously reported (Human Rights Watch 2014; 2018).

In light of the above, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the crisis and the harsh reality of austerity was used as an alibi to shift the focus against migration. Racism during these years is found not only in institutional but also everyday practices by 'common' people, supported and justified by media and normalised by the punitive national and European political structures. However, the years of the crisis revealed also a massive solidarity and anti-racist movement, as described below.

3. The years of the refugee crisis: anti-racist and solidarity responses

A strong anti-racist movement in Greece emerged in the late 1990s (Teloni and Mantanika 2015) as discussed earlier. However, since 2008 that Greece is in recession, numerous solidarity and resistance initiatives have developed across the country as a response to austerity and oppression.

Whilst the focus of this paper is not an in depth analysis of the austerity and its social impact in Greece, it is important to note that the continuous austerity measures led to dramatic cuts (ranging from 40% to 60%) in public social welfare services (Petmesidou 2013), a fragmented context that refugees were to face on their arrival in Greece. Therefore, services to refugees are mainly provided by NGOs across the country. During the refugee crisis, numerous different sectors and services (i.e. national third sector, semi-private and public sector as well as international services) are observed to be involved with some of them carrying short-term projects (3 months) with subsequent termination and the majority of these services are not officially registered. Therefore, information, such as which services are involved currently with refugees across the country, what involvement they carry out and for how long, are unknown.

Yet, at the same period, several grassroots solidarity initiatives flourished and responded to the unprecedented waves of refugees arriving in the land and sea borders of the country. These initiatives were spontaneous by local citizens, members of the anti-racist movement and activists from Greece and internationally, participating in the rescue of refugees from shipwrecking, their provision with food, water, blankets and dry clothes as well as medical care. It is important to highlight here the resilience and proactivity of the grassroots movement at a time that poverty and unemployment are on the rise in Greece. Beyond refugees' survival though, the anti-racist and solidarity movement responded also to refugees' intermediate but pivotal needs, such as teaching the Greek language, sharing information and legal advice about their rights and offering educational classes and creative activities for children. These interventions contributed massively to refugees' needs upon their arrival and this is why they have been described as the 'hidden welfare state' of Greece (Teloni and Adam 2016).

Apart from these micro-level interventions, the anti-racist movement developed macro-level engagement which included lobbying the state against the violation of human rights, monitoring racist attacks and community action (Lazaridis and Veikou

2016; Teloni and Mantanika 2015; Pavlou 2007). Through policy analysis and advocacy for refugee rights, the anti-racist movement has politically pressured the state and mobilised local communities for demonstrations and protests as well as for self-organised structures. For example, in reaction to the shootings of migrants in Manolada in Greece in 2013 (discussed above), several protests took place condemning migrants' high exploitation and demanded justice for their rights. Another campaign "Open up the islands – No more deaths from the cold" (Open the Islands Campaign, 2017), was signed by 40 solidarity groups and organizations, exposing the humiliating conditions at the Moria Hotspot (Lesvos) in the winter of 2016 which led to the death of six people. In addition, the self-organised shelter "Refugee Accommodation Space City Plaza" in Athens since 2015 by activists and refugees, is a vivid representation of an open anti-hierarchy community intervening both at micro and macro levels: refugees are directly involved in the decision making processes, they enjoy decent and quality conditions as well as advocate for their political and social rights.

In light of the above, the introduction of the Anti-Racist Bill in 2014 as well as the change of legal procedures on the citizenship rights of second-generation migrant families, can be seen as victories of the mobilization of the anti-racist movement. Although the racist ideology still permeates as discussed above, the anti-racist movement and its interventions provide a strong resistance paradigm 'from below'. This paradigm is also significant from a social work perspective as discussed in the following section.

4. Social work responses during the crisis

Social workers work in the frontline of the crisis within a context which as described earlier, involves discriminatory and dividing policies, fragmented resources and various different sectors and projects both national and international, where little information is known. With lack of official data currently, limited information exists also on the numbers, profile and role of social workers working with refugees in this context. The majority seem to be young graduates, employed in short term projects in NGOs, mostly funded by the European Union across the country. In regards to working conditions during the crisis, the massive cuts in salaries and continuous insecurity that social workers face, have been suggested to result to their 'proletarianisation', sharing similar experiences and difficulties with their service users (Pentaraki 2017).

Beyond though the exploitation and oppressive conditions that social workers face themselves, they are called to undertake an ambiguous role in settings such as detention centres and camps, where there is significant evidence of violation of human rights. Implementing the discriminatory national and European policies and the military approach that has been adopted in most of the borders and mainland centres of Greece, there is a great potential for social workers to oppress and

victimize asylum seekers. As Ioakimidis (2015) suggests though, a social work response committed to social justice cannot be further control, policing and manipulation. Therefore, it is worth wondering social work's answer to this oppressive context.

Social work in Greece, historically, has been constructed as a conservative and individualistic profession, which responded 'silently' and implemented oppressive policies during times of oppression, claiming notions of 'neutrality' and lacking a political critique (Ioakimidis 2011; Teloni 2011; Dedotsi and Young 2018). However, a gradual politicization and anti-oppressive stance of social work seems to be occurring in Greece (Ioakimidis and Teloni 2013) especially during the financial and refugee crisis, participating in solidarity activities and social action.

Examples of such activist interventions are found in the grassroots initiatives by social workers in the community, such as involvement in the anti-racist "Movement for the refugees and migrants' rights" (*Kinisi* in Greek) in Patras (Western Greece); the community and solidarity actions of the Greek branch of Social Work Action Network (SWAN); as well as the mobilization and participation of practitioners, academics and students in European anti-racist campaigns and solidarity initiatives (Teloni 2011; Teloni and Mantanika 2015). Research has also evidenced social workers' involvement in the spontaneous Solidarity Clinics that emerged as a response to the lack of primary health care for around 2.5 million people, who were excluded from the national health system during the crisis in Greece (Teloni and Adam 2016).

Social work's involvement with the wider social movements has not only contributed to their various multi-level political interventions but it also led to the profession's radical shift and enrichment of more critical approaches and practice. Whilst such initiatives are clear signs of resistance to racism and the neo-liberal context in Greece, still these seem to not reflect mainstream social work practice. In addition, there is very limited if any engagement of social work in public dialogue and policy making (Dedotsi, Young and Broadhurst 2016; Karagkounis 2017; Dedotsi and Young 2018). However, in the context of violation of human rights and persistence of racist ideology, social work's anti-oppressive values cannot be sacrificed to the reproduction of social inequalities.

5. Conclusions and implications for an anti-racist social work

This paper has critically discussed the construction of racism in Greece in its historical and political context and the anti-racist paradigm that has flourished in the years of the refugee crisis. It is evident, how (anti-) racism is found and re-produced both at micro-level activities and practices as well as at macro and institutional level where is further legitimized. The role of social workers at the forefront of the crisis is ambiguous, invited to implement discriminatory even brutal policies against their professional anti-oppressive values. However, how social work in Greece (and beyond) can reclaim anti-racist practice and solidarity with the oppressed?

Taking the insights of radical and critical social work (Bailey and Brake 1975; Langan and Lee 1989; Ferguson and Lavalette 2006; Clifford and Burke 2009), central to an anti-racist practice is the structural and political analysis of migration, recognizing that war and military interventions and historically colonial and post-colonial violence have led to the so called 'refugee crisis'. Such an analysis needs also to include the institutional legitimization of racism and injustice through the punitive and oppressive policies for the 'management' of refugee crisis and migration. Recognising, therefore, the structural causes of migration, social workers can understand not only the complex needs of refugees but also reflect on their political role and the policies of institutions in which they are situated (Humphries 2004).

Moreover, the conceptualization of oneself as 'maker of history' (Freire 1970) requires action. Historical examples within social work (i.e. Jane Addams, Thyra Edwards, Irena Sendlerowa) as well as the anti-racist movement and solidarity initiatives in Greece during the crisis and beyond, can provide social work with an inspiring paradigm of an anti-oppressive and emancipatory practice. In other words, anti-racist action could involve the collective participation of social workers against anti-migratory and austerity policies, violation of human rights, and through social movements, trade unions, academic and professional associations. Involving service users and citizens in the provision of services not only empowers vulnerable populations but also enriches significantly grassroots knowledge and participation. Actively involved in community and engaged with service user forums and anti-racist groups, social workers can expose and raise awareness for the construction of racism and migration as well as connect with the wider demands for justice and re-distribution of resources. Last but not least, advocacy, political pressure and lobbying for asylum seekers' rights at local and (inter-)national level can resist and influence policies that oppress and naturalise racism. Here, academic and professional associations have a key role in public dialogue to challenge and re-shape such policies.

As a concluding note, in times of crisis, it is more crucial than ever to reflect both individually and collectively on our role and the practices we are called to undertake in the construction of racism, oppression and injustice. The construction of racism, as evidenced in this discussion, shifts across time and space against the 'other', the perceived threat – the communist, the leftist, the migrant in the case of Greece – and it is legitimized in violent policies. Whilst further research is needed to explore in depth the political construction of social work with refugees across different settings in Greece and internationally, the struggle against racism based on the emancipatory values of our profession for social justice and social change can provide meaningful opportunities for resistance and solidarity with the oppressed.

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