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'This is a cage for migrants': the rise of racism and the challenges for social work in the Greek context

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Greece has been an emblematic case for the European Union's implementation of anti-immigration securitisation and externalisation. These policies have been translated into non-tolerance and intimidation towards certain populations, which, in turn, has resulted in more and more violent forms of the rejection of migration, which has become mainstream. Parallel to this are racist attacks, pogroms and acts of violence committed by neo-Nazi groups. On the other hand, a growing anti-racist movement has emerged in the form of human rights defence and solidarity networks and anti-racist resistance. This article aims to show the ways in which the rise of situations of rejection and racism have come to challenge the work of social workers and to understand how social work can be rearticulated with regard to its core values of social change and social justice, the antithesis of the profession's traditional 'neutrality' and 'culture of silence'.

key words social work • Greece • anti-racist movement • anti-racist social work

Framing the rise of racism in Greece

EU and national migration policies of repression and intimidation

As the wars and interventions involving European Union (EU) countries in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere created massive waves of refugees, Europe gradually started another more silent 'war' – the repression and intimidation of immigrants.

Specifically, Europe became concerned about its openness in reaction to what was conceived as an 'invasive flow'. Its response was a common 'justice, freedom and security' policy, known as the Stockholm Programme (EU, 2010). The common policy can be summarised as developing cooperation and coordination in the so-called 'fight against irregular migration'.

The evolution of Europe's reaction towards immigration (see Morice, 2011) is a significant part of the character of 'externalisation', that is, the ways in which European migration policy has been gradually 'relocated' to the EU's eastern and southern external borders so as to better dissipate migration (see Migreurop, 2014). The mechanisms that support and ensure this evolution are Frontex (the European

Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union) and the Eurosur external border surveillance system (see Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2012).

After Italy and Spain ‘closed down’ their maritime borders,¹ the number of immigrants trying to enter Europe through Greece rose, as nationalities that previously did not transit through the country began using this route, thus showing that migration routes are related to blocking policies; they adjust with every change and become more and more difficult and costly for migrants.

The main instruments to prevent migration on the Greek–Turkish border are known as ‘pushbacks’.² In addition, there have been mass deportations using non-standard procedures and small-scale returns on the basis of an existing agreement between Greece and Turkey and other agreements such as the one between Italy and Greece and, also, the Dublin III Convention (EU, 2013).³

In designing its external borders, the EU has created a geography of externalisation and exclusion. Greece plays a significant part in this geography. Refugees and immigrants, when they finally manage to reach the EU’s borders (by avoiding and surviving the controls) mostly find themselves in limbo, ‘trapped’ in rundown districts in Athens but also in other Greek cities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) has described the situation in Greece as a ‘humanitarian crisis’ (UNHCR, 2010). The EU conceives of this crisis as a locally determined deficiency and expresses what it calls ‘solidarity’ by funding repressive mechanisms. In reality, this translates to a landscape of non-reception, a scenery of police raids and arbitrary detention (see Mantanika, 2014). The final objective is not only to keep away or out of sight a population that is not tolerated, but also to intimidate anyone who tries to cross the borders irregularly. To quote a senior police officer on the issue of migrants in Greece: ‘Our goal is to make their life unbearable’ (TVXS, 2013).

Greece has become an emblematic case study for the arbitrariness with which migrants have been treated. For many years, undocumented immigrants have had no way of obtaining regular status other than applying for asylum.⁴ In reality, refugees are being deported and asylum seekers, including minors, are being systematically detained. In general, they face appalling and inhuman conditions during detention and in everyday life.

One of the practices that are conducted for the sake of non-tolerance are the so-called ‘sweep’ operations. These are raids orchestrated by the authorities on places of residence, in public spaces or on the streets, in order to arrest or deter undocumented migrants. This is not a recent phenomenon; only it has become more and more established in recent years.

In 2007, the western port city of Patras was the scene of a major reaction against the existence of a self-organised camp where Afghans stayed while trying to cross the Adriatic Sea border. In one protest against the camp, organised by residents and businesspeople living and working near the area and supported by the municipal authorities, the main slogan was: ‘We are not going to let the dream of the refugees become the nightmare of our city.’ Almost a year later, the dismantling of the predominantly Afghan camp attracted considerable media publicity. During this period, raids in areas where migrants lived or gathered began to be trivialised. The same happened in May 2011 in Igoumenitsa, another port city on the western coast. Municipal and governmental practices of ‘migrant hunting’ were established not

only as a way to evict a population that was visible in the area but also as a dissuasive mechanism.

It is important to consider the more general framework in which the practices described above were taking place and how they evolved until recently. In December 2008, a teenage high-school student was shot dead in cold blood by a police special guard in central Athens, sparking weeks of civil unrest across the country (see Vradis Dalakoglou, 2011). At the same time, the underlying crisis began to unfold on multiple levels while the state and media narrative intensified the identification of social unrest with lawlessness and blind violence. The focus was put on certain urban districts that began to be portrayed as 'ghettos'. In a cynical way, one could say that the crisis was approached by the state as 'a problematic situation in the city' (Aftodioikisi, 2011). Athens' municipal council backed proposals calling for more police surveillance and plans for the gentrification of city-centre districts.

Government and the media stigmatised migrants, qualifying them as a health bomb in the city centre of Athens (Filippidis, 2013). The authorities carried out raids, which were treated as a spectacle by the media. The-then Health Minister, Andreas Loverdos, initiated what was described as a witch hunt against seropositive mainly Greek sex workers in downtown Athens, forcibly arresting, testing, detaining and prosecuting women. It was a highly publicised sweep operation that was accompanied by the publication in the media of the photos and personal details of the arrested seropositive women (<http://tinyurl.com/ke9xj3p>, in Greek).⁵ The Health Minister did not stop with the hunting operations and declarations; he proceeded to sign a health regulation in which health status was introduced as a grounds for the detention of migrants and asylum seekers. Along the same logic, some months later, the future Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras, stated at a pre-election rally: 'We shall reoccupy our cities and our neighborhoods... And the feeling of security shall be reinstated among their residents' (Filippidis, 2013). In August 2012, Nikos Dendias, Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, proceeded with another police operation codenamed '*Xenios Dias*' (Hospitable Zeus), a cynical label to describe police raids all over Greece. The EU's new and unprecedented '*Mos Maiorum*' police operation could be seen as the European extension of these sweep operations: from 13 to 26 October 2014, a joint operation coordinated by Italy and with the cooperation of Frontex aimed at apprehending 'irregular' migrants in the Schengen⁶ area. The objective was to gather information such as personal data and the routes people use in order to reach Europe (see Brenner, 2014).

The emergence of racism and neo-Nazism

The framework outlined above needs to be viewed against the background of the far-right parties and groups active in Greece (see Georgiadou, 2008). Although these groups have been present for a number of decades, the situation changed when the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party began gaining ground from older far-right parties and entered the Greek Parliament in 2012 after receiving 7% of the national vote. Party Members of Parliament (MPs) and party members have been implicated in several attacks.

While xenophobic incidents and racist manifestations are not recent phenomena (see Pavlou, 2007), what is new are the ways in which and the regularity with which forms of rejection are taking place. These are mainly directed against migrants. What

we have discussed up to this point of our analysis is the basis on which this rejection is manifested and also the framework that legitimises and trivialises it.

Racist violence committed by extreme right-wing groups has become a daily occurrence, especially in the central districts of Athens, starting from the closing down of a playground in Agios Panteleimonas Square. In November 2008, after a number of big demonstrations,⁷ the so-called indignant residents of Agios Panteleimonas closed down the playground and blocked migrants or ‘migrant-looking’ people from accessing the square. Around the same time, these residents formed informal groups to patrol the squares of the district, where they used violence to block foreigners from accessing public spaces.

This was the beginning of an era marked by attacks against migrants. Incidents of hate speech, beatings and serious injury became a daily occurrence. Groups linked to neo-Nazi Golden Dawn carried out pogroms and food drives for Greeks only. Strawberry plantation owners in Manolada, a provincial region, shot and wounded migrant workers who were demanding months of backpay. Not related to migration and smaller in scale, homophobic attacks, both verbal and physical, represent another rejection. All these examples, as well as a general climate of impunity, resulted in two racially motivated murders committed by Golden Dawn members and supporters – of Shehzad Luqman, a 27-year-old worker from Pakistan, in January 2013, and Pavlos Fyssas, a Greek leftist musician, in September 2013. Fyssas’ assassination generated considerable publicity and led to the arrest of dozens of Golden Dawn MPs and members, including party leader Nikos Michaloliakos, who are now in custody awaiting trial (see Psarras, 2014).

While the issue of racism and xenophobia is not a new nor exclusively a Greek phenomenon, in recent years a special manifestation of these problems has emerged in Greece.⁸ Research points to a new kind of rejection of immigrants with an explicit geographical reference: the district and, on a larger scale, Athens.⁹ This is a rejection expressed as a collective manifestation, whose central contention concerns the presence of immigrants in the same residential area or in the same public space as natives. In the narrative of rejection, elements choose to define themselves with the status of resident. This has not happened without the tolerance and assistance of the municipal authorities and the police (Kandyliis and Kavoulakos, 2011).

The presence of migrants is deemed a factor that devalues their neighbourhood and the properties within it. The narrative of ‘ghettoisation’, adopted by authorities, runs along the same logic.

What is useful for our analysis is the way Kandyliis and Kavoulakos (2011) show how a central Athens district has become symbolic for this new era of racism and xenophobia. They observe that the rejection narrative:

is initiated on a small spatial scale but is generalised on a local and national level. And vice versa: the small scale of the neighbourhood becomes the theatre of action of a much broader rejection. In this specific area, by focusing on issues of housing and public space, the narrative of rejection attempts to find social roots and develop action. (Kavoulakos and Kandyliis, 2011: 21)

The second interesting observation is that the exercise of sovereignty by a so-called native/indigenous population at the local but also national level has gone

unquestioned. This is reflected through the legitimating practices of the authorities as a normal reaction and a collateral effect.

Looking at this new era of racism in general, Triandafyllidou and Kouki (2014: 433) have noted 'a radicalisation of mainstreaming different forms of ethnic, racial or cultural inequality that are prevalent in daily life in the country, but also across Europe'.

The sweep operations, as described here, evolved from sporadic, non-orchestrated attempts to an official policy that was institutionalised at a national level with the *Xenios Dias* campaign, and at a EU level with the *Mos Maiorum* operation; what is common is the notion of 'cleaning up' neighbourhoods. In all these operations what is at stake is the non-tolerance of the visibility of a certain population in public spaces. One element that links these operations with the patrolling of the public space as a practice of this new era of racism is the fact that locality has become the factor that legitimises intervention. This evokes the sweep operations in Patras and Igoumenitsa. It is also reminiscent of the Prime Minister's "need to reoccupy our neighbourhoods" comment (Filippidis, 2013). What our analysis so far has tried to show is that practices similar to the 'taking the law into our own hands' approach, in order to evict and exclude certain populations from public view, have been taking place for some time now and that the authorities bear considerable responsibility for initiating and legitimising them.

If we step back for a more general view of the situation and take into consideration all the securitisation processes related to migration at a national and EU level, it is clear how the implemented policies of non-tolerance towards certain populations constitute the background to a situation of non-tolerance and xenophobia that has emerged more intensively in recent years.

Greece has never had a reception policy for migrants until the adoption of the Action Plan for the Management of Immigration. The issue of migration is more or less approached as a problem, as a state of emergency. And reactions to migration are always repressive measures and not long-term policies of reception and integration. This goes hand in hand with the state of the welfare system in Greece. Even before the crisis it was deficient, and much of it functioned through unofficial networks. Then with the crisis it has been one of the worst-hit areas. Migrants, being from the most disadvantaged sector of society that is supposed to be supported by social structures, have been left without any assistance. The already deficient welfare state in Greece has been replaced by what Vradis (2012) terms a 'welfare state'.¹⁰

What is interesting in Vradis' approach is the way in which – quite ironically – he identifies the migration policies of intimidation as a substitute for a welfare state. From the *Xenios Dias* operation, and the so-called 'reception' policies and mechanisms set up by the government under the Action Plan for the Management of Immigration, which was presented in 2010 and adopted in 2011 (see FIDH/Migreurop/EMHRN, 2014: 66–8), the approach to migration could be summarised by what the-then Interior Minister declared in January 2011: 'We open our hearts and we close our borders' (Ethnos, 2011). What is striking is the effort to coin euphemisms for all these practices of the control of mobility, detention, violence and intimidation for people who irregularly cross borders. This intimidating policy is the only alternative put forward by the government and the authorities to a system of reception based on welfare. And this could not be possible without the assistance and the encouragement of EU bodies.

The response of the movements

Solidarity networks and the anti-racist movement

In the Greek case, there has been resistance to the above-described anti-immigration policies dominant in the neoliberal context of the EU and Greece. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in full the initiatives taken by both the main political parties (left-wing parties, for example) as well as the anti-racist and anti-fascist movements. Still, a description of some of the basic elements of the response will hopefully complete the picture of the Greek context. In particular, the anti-racist movement constitutes an interesting approach for social and political action.

In terms of the main political arena, left-wing parties have been generally supportive of anti-racism, through a direct or indirect connection with the movements. In addition, over the last decade, dozens of initiatives have contributed to the formation of a strong anti-racist movement in Greece. In the ‘No to racism from the cradle’ campaign, established in 2005 by the United African Women Organisation in Greece (www.africanwomen.gr/?cat=5), anti-racist and feminist organisations demanded for the first time the rights of children of second-generation immigrants. The campaign used speeches, videos, demonstrations, media articles, petitions, coalitions with other organisations and unions, and interventions in the Greek Parliament. After campaigning for a number of years, some of their demands were included in legislation in 2010 (<http://allhleggyh.wordpress.com/2010/02/14/kounia-nomosxedio/#more-279>). In parallel, dozens of anti-racist organisations and initiatives have been set up (www.enallaktikos.gr/kg15el_antiratsistikes-antifasistikes-organwseis-festival_t102.html), while in recent years the number of anti-fascist organisations has grown, as will be discussed below.

The anti-racist movement has engaged on a number of diverse levels:

- Through collective action and in coalition with other organisations, it pressurises political parties and other groups for the rights of immigrants/refugees.
- It challenges the repressive policies of the Greek state and the EU and, more importantly, includes in its analysis the impact of these policies in violating human rights.
- In 2008, the anti-racist network of organisations started to register racist attacks on immigrants¹¹ – a gap identified by Pavlou (2007) – and it denounced all repressive or racist incidents. The registration of racist incidents was later adopted by non-governmental organisations.
- It has proposed specific measures and structures such as Open Centres for Refugees, which are the direct opposite of the idea behind the detention centres that the government has set up and which have resulted in a systematic abuse of human rights.
- It has developed grassroots welfare activity in the community. This has been achieved either through the provision of food, medical help and support in the refugee camps (Patras, Igoumenitsa) or through other structures such as the Greek school for immigrants, language school, legal advice from lawyers and so on.

Movements in and after 2008

As described above, there has been a movement in Greece focused on rights and anti-racism since the late 1990s. This movement operates through the mobilisation of typical and atypical networks. Nevertheless, since 2008 there has been a shift in the ways people mobilise, an evolution that draws its references from the post-2008 riots era and also from the 'indignant' movement of Athens' Syntagma Square in 2011 (see Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011). In addition, the basis for mobilisations has also evolved as a result of the economic crisis and the imposition of the so-called 'troika' era¹² in May 2010.

In terms of the evolution of the types of mobilisation, one may observe the emergence of more grassroots groups, identified in many cases by their locality and their attachment to a certain neighbourhood, such as resident assemblies (eg, the assemblies of Alsos Pagratiou, Voukoupou (ie, Vyronas, Kaisariani, Pagrati, and Petralona, all in Athens, or Agia Sofia in Patras). As regards the types of mobilisations, there have been more actions with a general humanitarian character and more groups have emerged to engage in anti-fascism.

For the purposes of our analysis, we will only refer here to those initiatives that have played a key role and which manifest primarily an anti-fascist character. However, this does not mean that they are the only ones to have been mobilised for that purpose.

One initiative, called Never Again (*Pote xana*: <http://potexana.wordpress.com/>), began as a gathering of political groups, associations, organisations and others in order to find a response to racist attacks. Other initiatives that run campaigns and support advocacy are the Movement against Racism and the Fascist Threat (*Kimisi enomenoi enantia sto ratsismo kai ti fasistiki apeili*: www.antiracismfascism.org/) and the Deport Racism Movement (*Kimisi apelaste to ratsismo*: www.kar.org.gr/). Furthermore, Open City (*Anoixti poli*: <http://old.anoihtipoli.gr/>) – the Athens municipal platform of the left-wing Syriza party – has been active in the movement in the Agios Panteleimonas district. At the same time, longstanding initiatives from the autonomous milieu, (anarchist-antiauthoritarian groups) such as the Villa Amalia (<http://villa-amalias.blogspot.gr/>) and Skaramaga (<http://en.squat.net/tag/skaramanga/>) squats, have played a significant role in the anti-fascist movement. Finally, the local assemblies described above have played an active role.

The main activities that these initiatives are engaged in are:

- demonstrations;
- awareness-raising campaigns with local residents on the issues of racism, intolerance and xenophobia;
- small festivals;
- solidarity activities;
- actions focused on schools and advocacy.

Another important event at a national level, but which managed to attract attention around Europe, was the mass hunger strike in early 2011 of 300 undocumented migrants in Athens and Thessaloniki, lasting 44 days, who demanded the 'legalisation' of all undocumented migrants in Greece (see Mantanika and Kouki 2011). While this event was not directly related to anti-racist/anti-fascist issues, it nevertheless constituted quite an extraordinary initiative at both a national and European level

because it succeeded in challenging the balance of power in this particular era of national and European anti-immigrant policies, on the one hand, and the rise in xenophobic and racist attacks, on the other. It was significant that a resolute demand for new legalisation processes was made at a time when the national and European agenda was limited to discussing border controls and migration deterrence.

Theoretical and practical implications for social work

The importance of awareness in the context of social work

In the previous sections, we attempted to analyse anti-immigration policy (at both national and European levels) and its consequences, and offer a parallel discussion on the rise of racism and fascism and a basic description of the voices of resistance. The choice of focusing on the above axes was based on a number of reasons.

First, knowledge of the structural causes of inequality and oppression is necessary for social workers to have in order to understand the structural causes of service users' problems or, as Lavalette and Penketh (2014a: 15) put it, 'the "public causes" of so much of the "private pain"'.

Second, this, in turn, could promote critical reflection on everyday practice.

Third, it is essential for social work to understand both the political reasons, as well as the procedures, for the demonisation of marginalised people (poor living in poverty, immigrants, Roma and so on). As it has been discussed in the first section, the media and politicians have established the 'immigration–danger' perception at a local level and the media have fuelled analogous perceptions at national and social levels. These perceptions easily create stereotypes, such as the immigrant threat to safety, and in Greek public dialogue they have helped to gradually establish the term 'illegal immigrant' (*lathrometanastis*) rather than the term 'undocumented immigrant'.

Social work students, like the majority in our societies, are influenced by dominant perceptions and could easily adopt media–constructed terminologies and stereotypes. For example, in the academic environment in Greece we have often experienced the use of the term '*lathrometanastis*' by young social work students. The classification of users into illegal/legal, deserving/undeserving etc influences people's perspective of 'what constitutes the problem' and eventually significantly affects the kind of intervention that is implemented. This raises the question about the significance of social work education not only in tackling such stereotypes but more importantly in disclosing and analysing in detail the structural causes of the social problem.

Contemporary social work education and racism

The historical and political evolution of social work has been well described by Ioakimidis (2008), who highlighted the top–down nature of its formation as well as its conservative character. For the scope of our analysis, a brief glimpse at contemporary social work education with regard to both the perceptions of students as well as contemporary curricula in relation to racism will suffice.

Concerning student perceptions of homosexuality, a study by Papadaki and Papadaki (2011: 265), of social work students in Crete Technological Educational Institute (TEI)¹³ demonstrated that a 'significant number of students 57.8% (n=186) said they were little/if not at all informed about homosexuality issues during their social work

training', while '39.5% would not treat a gay man/lesbian in the same way as they would treat heterosexuals'. Although the majority of the students (52.1%) viewed themselves as 'rather positive' or 'positive' towards homosexuals, two in five (40.9%) identified themselves as 'neutral'.

More recently, a study by Dedotsi et al (2015: 21) of social work students in Patras TEI had shown that:

Students' stereotypes and blaming approaches were observed to have remained unchallenged within their education, and a profound lack of understanding of the structural roots of oppression was revealed by the majority of them.... Consequently their role as social workers is perceived in narrow terms such as providing individual support to a distressed individual or taking no action because anything they might do is of little relevance in promoting change.

Given the general tendency in social work education in Greece towards individualistic approaches (Ioakimidis, 2008; Teloni, 2011a), we decided to analyse the current curricula of the four social work departments in Greece with regard to immigration policy and racism. Although it is possible that other taught modules in the departments may also refer to the issues of racism, multicultural social work and so on, the curriculum is still an indicator (with its restrictions) of the general tendency. Interestingly, our analysis revealed that the majority of social work departments now include modules concerning immigration policy and multicultural social work (see Table 1). In some, critical social work and anti-racist social work are the targets of the modules. Undoubtedly, this development is a positive step for social work education in Greece.

Still, it seems that multicultural social work dominates, at least in the titles of the modules.¹⁴ The multicultural approach 'lies at the core of the idea that most people are not racist but lack appropriate awareness of cultural differences' (Singh, 2014: 20). Undoubtedly, social workers need to know and respect different cultures and values; they also need to understand the complexity of the factors of an 'identity' (Lavalette

Table 1: Modules in social work departments in Greece

Academic department	Modules about racism, immigration policy, anti-racist social work and multicultural social work
Athens TEI, Department of Social Work	Multicultural social work, particular references to and emphasis on anti-racist practice and anti-racist pedagogy
Democritus University of Thrace, Department of Social Administration and Political Science	Critical social work and minorities (includes multicultural social work) Immigration and immigration policy References to critical and radical social work as the target of the modules
Crete TEI, Department of Social Work (Irakleio)	Multicultural social work (with references to racism, immigration policy and stereotypes and an emphasis on multiculturalism)
Patras TEI, Department of Social Work	A general module entitled 'Social work with population groups'

Sources: Athens TEI (2014), Crete TEI (2014), Democritus University (2014), Patras TEI (2014)

and Penketh, 2014b). However, as Dedotsi et al (2015) claim, a simplistic knowledge of each ethnic group does not necessarily result in an in-depth understanding of the structural causes of oppression of people nor does it result in an avoidance of 'blaming' them for being oppressed.

To our mind, more attention should be given in the curriculum to anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work, given the above-described context of the rise of racism and fascism. As Harrison and Burke (2014: 263) argue, 'cultural competencies' approaches tend to focus on the interaction between practitioners and individuals, while 'anti-racist practice was always based on a firm footing on the structural locations of racism within modern unequal and racist societies'.

Moreover, academic social work departments need to take initiatives to inform young students and the community on the history of fascism and, more importantly, to intervene in the community against such phenomena. The involvement of service users and activists in both social work training and practice is an important factor still not particularly present in Greek social work.

The link between social work and the movements

In the last main section of this article, we offered a short presentation of the voices of resistance against racism and fascism. In terms of radical approaches, the importance of linking social work with the movements has been discussed in detail by Lavalette and Ferguson (2007) and Ferguson (2008). As regards the link between social work and anti-racist movements in Greece, Teloni (2011b) argues that movements have shown alternative approaches and practices in community action, which, in turn, have practical implications for a type of social work that is engaged with its core mandates of social change and social justice.

More specifically, the link between social work and the movements permits the establishment of networks in the community and the facilitation of the support being provided to immigrants. Additionally, through an involvement in the movements, practitioners can obtain a broader understanding of the political causes that damage the lives of their clients, and they also have the opportunity to act at a macro level rather than remaining in micro-practice. Furthermore, the values of social work can influence and enrich the interventions of movements and vice versa. Finally, the welfare grassroots structures in anti-racist organisations (such as Greek language schools), healthcare and legal representation can offer practitioners alternative ways of working with people, based on their needs and far removed from the bureaucratic and individualistic approaches of social work.

Above all, linking social work and the movements is a collective activity of the profession, representing a form of social work that intervenes at social and political levels and demands social justice and social change. Consequently, it is crucial for social work to be aware of and linked to social and political movements. This necessity does not lie exclusively in the example of the anti-racist movement but it is of particular interest in contemporary Greece where dozens of self-organised grassroots initiatives¹⁵ have emerged over five years of crisis.¹⁶ For example, the 'majority of social medical centres are affiliated with social movements' (Adam and Papatheodorou, 2014: 9) that are based on solidarity-resistance. These also constitute a challenge to developing alternative ways in health and social care as well as community action.¹⁷

In this direction, in the past two years the Greek branch of the Social Work Action Network has been actively involved in the community with a number of initiatives and movements, as will be mentioned below.

Finally, as Ioakimidis et al (2014) claim, social workers in Greece, where austerity measures have resulted in the curtailment if not the complete abolition of benefits in the health and welfare sector (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013), find themselves with no means of providing material help. The traditional application of mainstream social work is now more than ever too little if not ineffective where poverty is the reality for the great proportion of Greece's inhabitants.

The 'culture of silence' versus the politicisation and radicalisation of social work

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss further the crisis and its consequences; however, contemporary social work is conducted in this context and a brief glimpse into the reality for practitioners is necessary for our discussion.

As it has been discussed elsewhere (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013), a welfare state was never a priority for the Greek state. Moreover, in recent years the neoliberal attack, using the alibi of the crisis particularly from 2010, has resulted in the rapid promotion of neoliberal policies (the privatisation of the public sector, massive cuts in salaries and pensions, dismissals, and curtailments in health and welfare provision) and the application of austerity measures, which have had tremendous consequences for the welfare and health sector and a damaging impact on society (see Kentikelenis et al, 2011; Asimopoulos, 2012; Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2012; Ifanti et al, 2013; Karanikolos et al, 2013; Adam and Papatheodorou, 2014; Kentikelenis et al, 2014; Pouloupoulos, 2014).

As regards social work practitioners in the public sector, even before the crisis, they experienced difficult working conditions, such as understaffing, overwork, low pay, political interference in the public sector and a lack of in-service training and support (Teloni, 2011a). Moreover, many were employed on short-term contracts and had lower salaries and harder working conditions than their colleagues who were employed in state services ten years before (Ioakimidis and Mpithimitris, 2009), a common divide-and-rule tactic in capitalism.

Since 2010 and the massive cuts in the public sector, with a parallel attack on working conditions (Kouzis, 2013), social workers in both the public and private sectors have found themselves facing the risk of poverty, a characteristic they share more than ever with their clients. In non-governmental organisations in particular, practitioners are experiencing insecurity, many are unpaid for months, while the salary in most cases is very low – as little as €550 per month in certain cases (Ioakimidis et al, 2014; Pouloupoulos, 2014).

These conditions do not encourage social workers to participate in public dialogue against racism and indeed the participation of social workers in anti-racism campaigns and in public dialogue (as well as for other social problems) is limited. However, social workers attempt to do their best in their everyday practice, dealing mainly with casework, with limited resources and attempting to advocate for their clients.

Traditionally, social work in Greece was rather 'silent' on public issues, having little or no intervention in public debate on social problems. Papadaki (2005) observed a 'culture of silence' as a characteristic in state social services. Rather than collectively confronting their hard working conditions as a problem per se, social workers did

their best as individuals, using defence strategies to cope with the stress and accepting workplace constraints. Consequently, a ‘culture of silence’ developed gradually while the alienating working conditions has put more pressure on practitioners.

The absence of social work in public dialogue is rooted in a series of factors, such as:

- the above-mentioned working conditions;
- the state’s abandonment of the welfare sector;
- the low status of social work;
- the historical evolution of social work in Greece as a conservative profession (Ioakimidis, 2008);
- the individualistic approaches that dominated in social work education in previous years.

However, the dominant culture of silence has consequences for both the human rights of service users and also the ideology of social workers. In the local elections of May 2014, two social workers ran as Golden Dawn candidates. As Dedotsi et al (2015: 9) claim:

Such an involvement is considered incompatible with the profession; the Greek Association of Social Workers (SKLE) is not a regulatory body with powers to intervene, for example there is no official register of social workers from which these candidates could be struck off, nor any system to make accountable or challenge the suitability of a social worker.

SKLE issued an announcement listing activities that it viewed as incompatible with the values of the profession (SKLE, 2014b) and there were several reactions by social workers in social media. Such phenomena are shocking for a profession whose core values are clearly against racism and fascism.

It is crucial for social work in Greece to have a decisive and unambiguous position against racism and fascism. The murders of immigrants and one Greek, the racist attacks and the constant violation of human rights do not permit a profession that acts for the rights of the people to maintain a position of ‘neutrality’. It is important on an institutional level but also in social work education and practice to ensure that anti-oppressive and anti-racist social work is part of the agenda. Social workers can tackle oppression and racism in their workplaces by being aware of the context of as well as the legislation on their clients’ rights; by advocating for the rights of their clients; by uniting their voice with that of the service users’ movements, etc. In achieving this, the role of education is essential, as is providing support to practitioners for demanding their rights in coalition with their clients’ rights, which after all, as discussed earlier, are now shared more than ever in the Greek context.

However, it seems that in Greece there are signs of a gradual politicisation of social work on various levels. In terms of combating racism and fascism, the Greek branch of the Social Work Action Network (Greek SWAN, 2014) has published press announcements and articles on its blog while its members participate in the anti-racist movement. More specifically, the members of Greek SWAN have attempted to apply radical approaches in practice through their systematic intervention in both grassroots welfare structures as well as poor communities. Additionally, they have developed anti-racist programmes for children in the community and more recently,

at a one-day conference in April 2014 in Athens, introduced these radical approaches to a Greek audience with the participation of a refugee on the panel.

In parallel, as Ioakimidis et al (2014) claim, a 'process of reconceptualisation' of social work has started in Greece, Portugal and Spain, where signs of politicisation and resistance have appeared. For example, in 2012, the Interior Minister, acting on a parliamentary question from Golden Dawn, demanded all public day nurseries to provide information about immigrant children. However, the reaction of social workers and day nursery teachers to such a racist demand was denial and disobedience (POE-OTA, 2012).

Moreover, after the 2013 elections to SKLE, the pressure for a more progressive SKLE – as opposed to its historically conservative role (Ioakimidis, 2011) – resulted in the election of a new radical platform instead of the traditional 'single list' consensus (Ioakimids et al, 2014: 295). This change was reflected in more politicised actions on the part of SKLE, such as participation in strikes and demonstrations against austerity measures. As regards racism, for the first time in its history, SKLE has officially participated in anti-racist demonstrations and also released a press statement against the racist attacks on migrant farm workers in Manolada (SKLE, 2014a).

At the academic level, critical and radical approaches have gradually made their appearance in Greece. A significant contribution in this direction was the first book published on critical and radical social work in Greece by Ioakimidis (2012), which brought together practitioners and academics from both Greece and Britain. Other publications by Ioakimidis (2008, 2011), Ioakimidis and Teloni (2013), Ioakimidis et al (2014) and Teloni (2011a, 2011b) have contributed to the emergence of radical approaches in the Greek context. More recently, references to radical and critical social work by academics such as Asimopoulos (2012), Dedotsi et al (2015), and Pouloupoulos (2014) have contributed significantly in the field.

Last but not least, Chris Jones (Jones and Chalalet, 2014) – one of the main authors of the Social Work Manifesto and a well-known academic in radical social work and policy analysis – regularly blogs on the inhuman conditions for immigrants in Greece and is making a significant contribution to spreading awareness and issuing calls for action.

In total, there are signs that the politicisation and, in some cases, radicalisation of social work will gradually flourish in the Greek context. Yet, much remains to be done to achieve a type of social work that is true to its humanitarian mission, acts collectively and intervenes in the social sphere, reclaiming its social and political role.

Conclusion

National and EU anti-immigration policies in synergy with the media constituted a dangerous amalgam that promoted the rise of racism and fascism in the Greek context. National policies in Greece are the application of EU policies, which are mainly suppressive and involve a systematic violation of human rights. On the other hand, the EU hypocritically condemns Greece for violations of human rights although the suppressive policies could not have been applied without the EU's funding and constitutional context. At the national level, both government and the media constructed an image of an immigrant threat to the security of Greece's citizens, which in turn facilitated the growth of racist attacks and fascism. In recent

years, numerous murders, racist attacks and pogroms have complemented the official policy of the sweeps, detention centres, violations and so on.

On the other hand, as it has been shown that the anti-racist movement has had a strong presence in Greece, where it has not only revealed the effects of anti-immigration policies but also defended in practice the rights of immigrants and refugees and, more importantly, created grassroots welfare structures of solidarity.

Hopefully, the above analysis will contribute to increasing the awareness of social workers. As we have argued, an in-depth knowledge of the structural causes of social problems as well as anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches are invaluable for social work. While there are signs that social work in Greece is becoming politicised, it still needs the collective involvement of the majority of social workers to oppose the neutrality of the 'culture of silence' that traditionally dominated the field. In this direction, the movements have shown the 'path' of community action in both anti-racist and solidarity activity. Social work needs to reclaim its social role and unite its voice with that of its service users in demanding social change and social justice. In other words, it needs to reclaim its basic mission.

Notes

¹ Italy has re-emerged as a 'gateway' in recent years.

² Migrants are being denied access to Greek territory: they are intercepted at sea or the land borders and are pushed back directly to Turkey; or are detained in different detention centres on the border in order to be deported.

³ Dublin III replaces Dublin II. For information on human rights violations linked to the Dublin Conventions, see ECRE (2013).

⁴ No formal standardised immigration admission procedure exists other than scarce regular migration schemes on invitation. The only way that the vast majority of migrants can reach the country is by crossing its borders irregularly. Only two regularisation laws have been passed, in 2001 and 2005 (Laws 2910/2001 and 3386/2005), which applied only to existing undocumented immigrants. Under these programmes, a number of migrants regularised their status, certainly under conditions. Since 2005, nothing similar has taken place. For more information on the situation of irregular immigrant workers and their integration, see Gropas and Triandafyllidou (2013).

⁵ For more information, see the film documentary *Ruins: Chronicle of an HIV witch-hunt* (<http://ruins-documentary.com/en/>).

⁶ The Schengen area comprises 26 European countries that have abolished passport and any other type of border control at their common borders, also referred to as internal borders. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/index_en.htm

⁷ These were organised by the so-called residents of the district, together with extreme right-wing groups. At the same time, and as an answer to that, anti-racists held protests against these demonstrations.

⁸ It is indicative that in just 14 months, from October 2011 to December 2012, 200 racist attacks were reported by the Racist Violence Recording Network. From January to December 2013, the same network documented 166 incidents of racist violence with at least 320 victims. For more information, see Racist Violence Recording Network (2012, 2013).

⁹ A very interesting illustration of this rejection in the region of Athens and especially in its central districts is the 'map of attacks on migrants in Athens' (from November 2009 to September 2014) (The City at a Time of Crisis, undated).

¹⁰ 'Imagine a welfare state without funds; now imagine the clientelism of the Greek state as a specific, skewed variant of welfare for Mediterranean climates. And think, finally, what happens when this is gone: when the state is no longer able to offer welfare (as limited as that might be) to its citizen-subjects. A pillar safeguarding the reproduction of the citizen-subject and the perpetuation of its relationship to the state had vanished.... It didn't take long to find another pillar, that of control through fear, which was epitomised by the complete criminalisation of the migrant subject' (Vradis, 2012).

¹¹ Racist Violence Recording Network, <http://www.unhcr.gr/1againstracism/en/category/racist-violence-recording-network>

¹² A €110 billion bailout agreement with the International Monetary Fund, the EU and the European Central Bank.

¹³ In total there are four social work academic departments in Greece. Three of them are operated by polytechnics (TEI) in Athens, Patras and Irakleio of Creta and another one at the Democritus University of Thrace. In 2013 the Greek government decided on the gradual close-down of the social work department in TEI of Patras.

¹⁴ Further research in the field is suggested.

¹⁵ See the section of this article entitled 'The response of the movements'.

¹⁶ As Robolis (2014) claims, a wider view of these kinds of initiatives might constitute a model against the domination of the markets.

¹⁷ For more information on grassroots initiatives across Greece, visit the site of the organization named as Solidarity for All, a collective which supports grassroots initiatives across Greece, <http://www.solidarity4all.gr/el/about-solidarity-initiative>

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