Notes and Premonitions of a Coming Storm | Athens Log

Victor Stransky*

Wednesday September 19, 2018 –
Koukaki, Athens, Greece
@ 14:45

I was awoken by the alarming dark of comrade Andonis' living room, I have become accustomed to the past few days since arriving in my beloved Athens. There hasn't been a day when my utter exhaustion hasn't sedated me, leaving me comatose until early afternoon. The cool darkness of his apartment with its closed shutters recall the peculiar sensation of a bunker, or of the primordial serenity of the womb, or perhaps even the vacuum of quantized space.

The shower – now a dreary ritual, the jerk-off – a profane machination, the cigarette –an unpleasant yet irresistible indulgence. Clothes and shoes on, wallet, phone, keys and cigarettes. Lock the door down the stairs, onto the street and turn right towards Attiki metro station.

The sun was shining and the balmy heat of the city stuck into my skin while the rumba and cumbiaesque flow of the city remind me of a place I have never been to, of a song I have never heard before, but which I somehow knew intimately. I wove a hesitant path through the small, indistinguishable side streets, clinging to the shade like a lizard to a rock, crossed the train tracks much as I had done that now distant Sunday morning when I had arrived and had proceeded to find a party in Kerameikos, only today with the intent of finally visiting the old town of Athens.

On the surface level around the station, there was no obvious multitude of people, but upon entering the caverns below, I

was abruptly awash in a river of motion and excited particles – a hive, a collective mind, channeled the form and function of the urban landscape. The train was on the platform and the doors closed just as I shot in.

The train sped down the tracks, through the underground tube, until we eventually reached my destination and I got off at FIX station, where I was immediately engulfed in an urban landscape decidedly different from the ones I had grown accustomed to during my short stay in Athens. Yet it was disturbingly familiar. One could quickly absorb the subtle marks of the neighborhood – the nicely paved streets, the well-kept sidewalks, the trendy cafés, restaurants and knick-knack stores lined on the ground floor, nestled among tall trees and fine greenery abounding. I, of course, being as addicted to coffee and cigarettes as I am, searched in vain for a good 10 minutes before I could find a place with reasonably priced tiropita and coffee.

As I walked about the neighborhood my mind was quietly searching for people who were different from me in appearance, whereas in the other parts of the city I had been, the presence of different people and cultures was a staunch fact of life. That is not to say that there aren't people on the streets in this neighborhood. It seems to me that those I have seen dress similarly, have a similar anxious or arrogant air about them as they walk or talk and have the same skin color as me. What's more, my eyes have yet to catch the graffiti or the political posters upon the walls and façades of buildings. Instead, at each turn I am greeted by clean, sterile and recently renovated plaster, brick and cement – nice and pristine like the streets which lock them geometrically, which are obviously cleaned regularly by the municipal cleaning service.

Should all this mean that people in this neighborhood are happy and taken care of? Or that all is suddenly well with the world and that there are no more grievances among people?

I seriously doubt it.

There is another public ‘service’ which caught my attention very quickly, catching me quite off guard in fact, seeing how I had become happily accustomed to its utter absence. As I sit on this glitzy IKEA stool, consuming my over-priced coffee and pastry which I purchased from two markedly unfriendly workers (or perhaps they were the owners?) and as I write this cute little diary entry, there are not 1, not 2, but 3 police patrol cars parked on the street and sidewalk to my immediate right, only a few meters away.

Hill of Diateichisma, ancient Athens
@17:07

I left the café on Koukaki heading towards the Acropolis museum, planning to pass through the old quarter, circle around the citadel and find my way to the Pnyx, from where I would go on my way back to our beloved Exarchia.

A little way down up the road, the elite neighborhood of Koukaki gave way to the bustle of the touristic foothills of the Acropolis with its impressive southeastern fortification towering above the modern city and a huge Greek flag raised to the heavens from its bastion. Now the urban design was even more refined and maintained. The tramline and cobblestone streets, the marble, granite and limestone, white façades and the expensive souvenir shops, restaurants and cafés became ever more chic and bourgeois with each passing step and the human currents became more mixed, now with faces and voices from all corners of the world – most dressed crisply and smart, while others, those working cleaning the streets, cooking in the kitchens, minding the stalls, begging for money and so forth had an air that was in particularly stark contrast with the transient guests who flowed through the streets of the capital of the Greeks, whom on their part can

be seen chatting idly, going about their daily routines, well at ease in their urban domain.

The fine esplanade then gave way to the tight alleyways of an old merchant quarter, with one- or two-story buildings whose parterres brimmed with the commercial activity of luxury souvenirs dealers, gold jewelers, cosmetics dealers and fine restauranteurs. Faces of every color and voices of every continent can be seen and heard as one meanders about the channeled veins of this human organism – the neighborhood, all the while appearing eerily similar, despite a deceptive diversity. The style, the accessories, the contrived manner, the content of their conversations, the anxious walk, the uneasy glance over the shoulder all paint a picture of a people who to my mind seem ubiquitously out-of-place.

I eventually wound up at the Roman forum, whose ruins were less than spectacular, as I have come to recognize is the case for most of those found in the ancient city of King Thyssius, mere shadows of their former glory. Walking through shoddy enclosures, archeological digs and along dirt paths in the archeological park reserve, I couldn’t help but wonder at the fleeting nature of all things, just as many before me have surely contemplated, without finding much comfort.

The stone columns and foundations strewn about the sloping hillside, I feel, stare remorselessly into my soul, intent on reminding all mortal fools such as myself of the violent and unyielding passage of time, that lays waste to and renders even the greatest of cities unrecognizable. As one goes through the trees, up and down the hills, one catches glimpses of stone temples and pine and olive woods, all to the spectacular backdrop of today’s sprawling metropolis, in all of its arrogant and unapologetic modernity, stretching as far as the mountains and the sea will allow.

I now sit on a stone bench atop a terrace outcrop of the Hill of Diateichisma with a daunting frontal view of the Acropolis

as the sky makes its slow descent into the Western horizon. I will now make my way to the Pnyx, as I have resolved to confront a certain Socrates. There are questions I burn to know the answers to.

I fear our time and space to maneuver may be running out.

The Hill of the Pnyx, ancient Athens
@18:20

I now sit upon the stone incline of the Pnyx, the hill where Athenian democracy's experiment ran its course during its tumultuous first years in the time of Socrates. I find it fitting that I myself should be atop this rocky hill, pondering similar questions as the ancients might have. There was an infamous moment in history when the demos, despite its exclusion of women, slaves and migrants – the vast majority of the poor citizenry, managed to seize power from the autocrats, the oligarchs and the aristocrats of old and establish a new order – an order and an idea which would change the course of human history.

I do not mean to fetishize or glorify the achievements of antiquity or ages past but I have lately been unable to shake off a feeling of despair that has drowned me, my comrades and the movement at large, I feel. Athens was a democracy for a time, yet Athens was also an empire at this time, too – an empire of the mind, of the ship, of the merchant and of the sword. It was an empire of brutal patriarchy, of despicable slavery and exploitation, of exclusion and conquest, of divide et imperia, and it was run democratically no less. The Acropolis at which I now gaze for the final time before my departure bears testimony to this legacy of contradiction, of harmony and antagonism.

What are we to do today, in my time, in the age of global corporate capitalism? What are we to do in an age of empire

and oligarchy? What are we to do in an age of reckless, human abandon and environmental catastrophe? What are we to do to not only prevent our impending doom but to push towards a promising project of peace, prosperity, brotherhood, equality, discovery, sustainability and abundance? How may we topple the gods, our lords and masters and seize power from tyrants and oligarchs just as the people of Athens did nearly two and a half millennia ago? Will we, the people of the human race, succeed in changing the course of history? Will we succeed in bringing about a new age or will we succumb to darkness, violence, death, cruelty, stupidity, all-consuming wrath, waste and self-destruction? 'What are we to do?', I have asked, every day for as long as I can remember now.

And if we are to achieve a new, radical, local, regional and international democracy, what is to become of it? Will we once again succumb to the folly of empire building? Or to the despicable tragedy and waste that is human warfare? Will we succumb to the idiocy of the ill-informed, superstitious and vengeful mob, such as the one which unjustly sentenced the greatest mind of Athens to his death?

O, Socrates, how much you must know of the folly of human existence! How little must we have changed over the many thousands of years! Behold! See through my eyes how different the world is and how very little has changed! I gaze upon the time-ravaged ruins of your city and I gaze up at the same Moon in the clear September sky as you surely once did!

It is 19:00 and the church bells once again ring through the city, casting a lulling spell upon my restless mind.

Bar Karagiozis, Exarcheia, Athens
@20:43

A chilly breeze swept the Pnyx as the light began to fade and flushed the mountains, the valley and the sprawling city with

rose and pastel tones. My flight down the hill from the ancient gathering place brought me further and further into the old town, with ever more merchant stalls and restaurants lining the sloping gradient of the cobblestone road.

The road eventually brought me Thyseio station, an unassumingly small, surface level train station. It was there that the tracks run between the wooded archeological complex and the urbanized central city districts on their way to Monastiraki and the pulsating heart of modern Athens. Nothing but overpriced restaurants, tacky or trendy, lined the ground floors of the low buildings along the train tracks and the tourists stumbled along, verbally prodded from time to time by zealous maître-d's. They coaxed us to come sit in their establishment, much as any rancher would try to corral his unruly cattle after a day's grazing, while dozens of sly cats lie about, perched idly like spirit world sentinels upon marble columns and epitaphs, almost as if preying patiently upon the tourists as well.

It didn't take long before this rolling, open-air shopping mall of a street lead to Monastiraki square and what's left of Hadrian's majestic library jutted out from below us behind a wrought iron fence. This glorious building gave way to the left to an open plaza, blazing with the harmonious chaos of an ant colony.

It was the third time in my life I had found myself in that boiling cauldron of a public square and I couldn't help but remember my previous visit, as well as the precarious and protracted personal and mental breakdown I had been going through at the time. I was swept with the urge to go down the road to the left and end up around the gay bars in Kerameikos. I managed to keep course and sail straight through the stormy urban nexus and then I caught a southerly wind up the forbidding and dark avenue that led up to Omonoia Square. My ultimate destination being the anarchist stronghold of Exarcheia, which I had come to call home for the past days and

nights.

I met with comrade Ioanna and Andonis at one of the neighborhood cooperative bars and I was greeted with the usual warmth, casual gossip and political chit-chat that I've grown so fond of. We also talked about what had happened to comrade Yavor in the train after yesterday's demonstration, still somewhat flabbergasted at the idiocy of overly-eager Antifa youngsters to get into trouble and use violence against their enemies, even at the expense of mistaking a fellow comrade for a right-wing provocateur.

I cannot help but be overwhelmed with conflicting thoughts and feelings these past few months, as the daily drudgery of life and the complexities of revolutionary struggle under capitalist society have been ever more prone to taking their toll on my mortal body. I think again of Socrates, of those that came before him, of those that came after him. I think of the revolutions and the bloodshed and of the brutal repression of the State, of Capital, the barbaric tendencies of our societies. At the same time, I think of the noble and courageous struggles of everyday people through the ages, striving for life, freedom, equality and in pursuit of a fleeting happiness in a tomorrow that may never come.

Yesterday, as our large and diverse group spent our final night together at the bar, I couldn't help but stare out at nowhere in particular as my comrades danced frenetically around me, the music blasting favorite songs from times gone by, and I couldn't help but wonder about the future of Exarcheia neighborhood with all its problems and promising prospects. Will the enemies of revolution ultimately succeed once again in destroying any hope for an alternative to this slow, rolling, dystopian nightmare we are living in, or will we ourselves succumb to the dark abyss by virtue of our spectacular and all-too-human imperfections? What will become of all the people and places I have come to know and love and what is our place in these times of historic importance? What

decisions, what actions, what sacrifices and what bloody price must we pay on the day of reckoning?

I feel for those that I love and cherish. I feel for the untold masses whose only crime was being born into this world. This beautiful, beautiful world, bestowed with lives so precious that the folly of human avarice only makes their loss a tragedy all the more grotesque and unbearable.

I have met people from three continents during my stay here and I feel blessed to have been able to connect with each one, from the vendors on the street, to the beggar I gave some coins to, to the many inspiring comrades and everyday people who aspire to great change and sacrifice. But perhaps what struck me most was my acquaintance yesterday with a young, handsome man from Afghanistan named Kazem. We talked during the whole ride on the fully packed and sweltering bus to Keratsini for the demonstration marking the five-year anniversary of the murder of Pablo’s Fissas by members of the neo-nazi Golden Dawn party.

Kazem was one of the great number of migrant comrades attending the demonstration, who risk deportation and thus their lives by attending such marches together with their brothers and sisters from other parts of the world. I was much impressed by a similar situation at this year’s radical pride march in Madrid where a similar context can be observed. Comrade Kazem had had an utterly different life compared to my own and he has gone through so much hardship. The war, the poverty, the discrimination and racism, the hardship of crossing borders, the brutality of the State, the cruelty of society and finally the torture and humiliation of imprisonment – solely guilty for the crime of being born as he is and in his homeland. He is half a year younger than me, at the age of 22.

On the train to Thessaloniki
@00:03

The train glides with a soft rumble through the heart of Athens, passing by empty platforms through deserted stations. This time around I've been allocated a seat in a newer coach and I hope the 11-hour trip to Sofia will be less harrowing and unpleasant than the one on the way over.

I will miss Athens and the people I have met terribly. Exarcheia is a peculiar case. I don't think I can recall ever feeling so… *comfortable*, for lack of a better word, in any particular neighborhood in the world; not even in my beloved Madrid nor even in my hometown Sofia. It is truly one of the most remarkable places in the world at the moment, even with all its problematic tendencies, its troubled past and its uncertain future.

It would be beside the point to relay a list of all the occupied squats, the social centers, the migrant assistance centers, the communal garden, the anarchist bars, restaurants, shops, cafés, libraries, the assembly halls and public spaces, almost all of which are collectivized or at least run to high democratic standards. I am sure there are many stories and much data that have been dedicated to this amazing place. It is, however, the distinct feeling as one walks the streets – be it by day, or by night. It is the unique social contracts at play, known or unbeknownst to me. It is the dizzying kaleidoscope of cultural, social, ethnic and political diversity. It is the staunchness of a collective resistance so profound and it is a revolutionary fervor that permeates the air. It is the diligence and the consistency in people's behavior, a state of constant mobilization where every word, spoken or written and every action can be rich with meaning and can be a token of the power of one's will and the will of an entire community.

Exarcheia is a powder keg.

It is a black cat waiting to pounce on the poor fools who dare disturb the hornets' nest and it will never go down without a bitter fight to the finish. Exarcheia is a neighborhood where the State's repression agents such as the police do not formally or usually step foot in and it is where raids on their part have been met with riots, mass civil disobedience and militant resistance. It has been a stain on the vanity and arrogance of capitalist society and it has been a thorn in the side of the ruling class for a great many years now.

Thus, it has been subjected to the hybrid warfare of the capitalist State, where key services and infrastructure have been purposefully scaled down or outright neglected and where opportunistic drug dealers (most often undocumented migrants) find comfortable refuge from the many facets of repression they face from the State and society, bringing with their work a complex plethora of issues and social ills. Undercover cops, snitches and foreign agents abound in this revolutionary community under siege from within and from without, itself being not a fortress, but a porous ecosystem without physical barriers in the heart of central Athens, a mere stone's throw away from Greece's parliament, with its more-than-tarnished reputation and its even shakier political foundation. The people I had the honor to be alongside these past few days and nights, and whose names I have spared for the most part, are exceptional people.

That feeling of kinship, regardless of skin color, of ethnicity, of sex, of age, of gender, of orientation, of ability, of mind, that feeling of knowing and seeing the person in front of you and knowing what you are both about, will stay with me for the longest time, even if death should come to each of us personally, or to our comrades, or to our projects, or to the idea of a global eco-social, democratic, and anti-authoritarian revolution itself.

Should I happen to not live through a revolution or a crisis, God forbid, and I didn't get the chance to visit Exarcheia

again, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to think of it as a fraction of a glimpse into what human society could look like and how it could be organized, were it not for the fascistic exploitation of private Capital or the repression and domination of the State. Not to mention the tyranny, indentured servitude and environmental catastrophe that they imply.

What say you then, o, Socrates, patriarch of Western thought?!

What say you, who has no kind words for democracy nor for the stupidity and destructiveness of the masses, such as those who sentenced you to be murdered? What say you to the enlightened gods and emperors, to the tyrants, oligarchs and autocrats who rule this world? What say you to their faithful followers? What say you to these modern philosopher Kings of ours?

They and their children sit atop mountains of gold stacked upon mountains of corpses while rivers of blood gush down the slopes and the stench of misery and suffering drench the foul, polluted air of the entire globe! This is our day and age!

O, Socrates! What good is a life of reason if humanity should by chance make life on this planet no longer possible? What good are philosopher kings if even the greatest philosophers have led painfully imperfect, oh-so-painfully human lives?

To all of this, Socrates, I do not have the answers, nor, I think, do you. But there is, perhaps, one thing we can count on – the folly of mankind. Therefore, we must take appropriate action and we must plan accordingly.

Finished September 20, 2018
near Lamía, Greece
@ 02:09am

*Bulgarian activist, member of free social space “Fabrika Avtonomia” in Sofia