

City of crisis (Preface)

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The crisis continues. The accumulated debts of the European states is rising steadily. Despite the undertaken efforts, economy of the member states of the European Union has not regained its path of development. The consequences of this crisis are numerous, profound and difficult to oversee (Bitzenis, 2015). Only sketching the ‘maybe worst’ social aspects of these consequences, one has to think of the remaining high youth unemployment and the effects on the individuals (Antonucci, 2014). This clearly means that the effects of the crisis will last longer than the hoped for economic recovery and might create a generation of young adults with the experience of devalued biographies and social exclusion (cp. Friedrich and Schreiner, 2013, Dølvik, 2015).

In political terms, the crisis has led to a vague emergence/ revival of nationalist, revanchist and populist movements, which in turn profoundly challenges the legitimacy of the European project (Macartney, 2013, Champeau, 2015; Dēmētriou, 2015; Scicluna, 2015). The political landscape in Europe has dramatically changed even in countries where the economic crisis is not as dramatic as in the Southern European countries, which this book intends to highlight.

Instead of defining any kind of theoretical starting point, the editors and authors of the book are trying to make sense of the current crisis by being both academic scholars and observers of the crisis, at the same time. Explanations for the current crisis might be formulated either in a more abstract manner or in a way that contextualizes the crisis with historical terms. Although contributions to this book are not restrained from heading towards these directions, the main direction of this work is to research on the interferences of the local, social and political contexts with the more global levels of the crisis. In this regard, the focus shifts

naturally from the global and national dimensions to local situations where coping with the impact of the crisis has to be realized. Cities are the place of vulnerability in this crisis (Ranci, 2014).

Being urban scholars, the contributors are giving an insightful view at the local situations in Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain. They are trying to use their findings to contribute to the analysis of the crisis in general and for the respective countries in particular. As the author are following theoretical approaches, different ways of academic discourse deriving from the local case studies are represented in this book. This is because – at least at this moment – no single narrative seems to exist that can cover all the aspects which are worked out in the following chapters. In the eyes of the editors, one part of the crisis lies exactly here: There are no strong explanations and narratives available, which could counterbalance the omnipresent simplifications of the populist movements. The public's inability to reflect on the crisis undoubtedly worsens the situation. This book is therefore motivated by the will to demonstrate that academia needs to face this dangerous lack of multifold narratives. As engaged academics, the sterilized form of reflection exposed cannot be the form of discussing the crisis where we are in. In contrast, the awareness of the incompleteness and temporality of the reflections represented on the next pages is taken up with a sense that voicing insights which admit turbulent changes might be the only way for a re-orientation.

Despite the fact that the urban level of society is the most vulnerable and therefore the most important area of people's life, there has been little attention paid by political and social studies on the question 'how the crisis impacts local societies'. Moreover, even in urban studies the crisis has so far gained little reflection. With a critical note, austerity has been identified as the main political ideology (Thompson, 2013) that has fostered the European crisis. While there is a good argument for this criticism, the complexity of the phenomena, which we subsume under the vague term of "crisis", needs to be kept upright if we want to understand its full outcome and its causes (Griggs, 2014; Tabb, 2014). One aspect that has been neglected in this discourse on city and austerity politics is the role of intermediate institutions. Coming from fields of architecture and urban planning, most contributions in this book are especially looking at their programs, actions and rooms to manoeuvre.

To find out what planning and architecture has to do with the generation of crisis, in particular by following neoliberal mindsets, and to

what extent planners, practitioners, academics and architects can react on this today, was the initial idea that brought the editors together. In a joint study program of the Bauhaus-University Weimar and the Politecnico de Madrid, students worked together to get an understanding of the role and impact of urban planning in the context of the European crisis. While Madrid was the obvious case for the Spanish students, the German team had to notice that austerity politics have a severe impact on social and financial affairs in German cities as well. Very soon, it became evident, that in the Spanish and German cases more is at stake: Processes of deindustrialisation, regional inequalities, contested welfare states, post-fordist modes of economy, increasing precariousness of work relations, and increasing hardship due to social exclusion cannot be left out when trying to understand the immense dynamics which are sometimes obscured by the discourse of “crisis”.

Thanks to the generosity of the German Academic Exchange Organisation (DAAD), this common learning process was financially supported. This also allowed us to invite scholars from other Southern European countries to exchange ideas on the topic of the “city of crisis” for a two-day seminar in Weimar, back in December 2013. This book is based mainly on the results of our debates and the shared feeling, which is that, it is most urgent to continue exchanging and reflecting on the crisis in the European cities, which is the final objective of this publication.

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