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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Antifascist Mediation: Practices of Affirmative Biopolitics in Lesbos, Greece

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**ABSTRACT:** The practices of antifascists in Lesbos, Greece have highlighted, on the one hand, the biopolitical practices of the humanitarian sector and authorities and, on the other hand, they have shown the potentiality for an “affirmative” biopolitics. The different biopolitical orientations operational in Lesbos came clearly to the fore in the two cases of the Occupation of Sapphous Square and the Occupation of SYRIZA offices in Mytilene, Lesbos in autumn of 2017. The two cases additionally showed that mediation, too, is biopolitical, and therefore subject to the same bi-directionality insofar that both the humanitarian sector and the antifascists acted as mediators, albeit serving different political objectives. Furthermore, these practices in Lesbos allow us to understand biopolitics as bi-directional insofar that on the ground in Lesbos, which we also find in theoretical reflections, attempts have been made to disentangle life from the apparatuses that control, manage, and even exterminate life.

**KEYWORDS:** Affirmative-biopolitics, Antifascists, Biopolitics from Below, Lesbos, Mediation

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## 1. Introduction

In June 2022 a conference took place at the University of the Aegean in Mytilene, Lesbos.<sup>1</sup> While at the conference researchers and scholars addressed the many “facets” of mediation in the “humanitarian field”, the presentations on the situation and practices of mediation in Lesbos failed to account for the practices of a particular part of the wider antifascist movement on the island, namely the antifascists from Binio, a long-term

<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on protection in this paper is not only due to the title of this conference, but more so, because the discourses of the humanitarian sector have been around the protection of refuge-seekers’ lives, with which they justified their actions and/or inactions.

squatted space in the centre of the main town in Lesbos. This paper presents two cases of their involvement, occupations of Sapphous Square and SYRIZA offices, as mediation and from the vantage-point of a (migrant) participant of this movement, arguing that the movement has exposed the biopolitics of mediation on the island through practices of a counter-biopolitics, a biopolitics “from below”, or a communitarian biopolitics.

The diverse participants of Binio squat, a milieu of anti-authoritarians, share one common designation to which they themselves ascribe, namely: antifascist. As such, this group cannot be summed up or categorized under humanitarian or solidararian. The large set of literature on volunteerism and civil society actors (Theodossopoulos 2016; Fleischmann and Steinhilper 2017; Monforte and Maestri 2023), to name just a few, do not apply to this group, for they neither consider themselves volunteers or act for humanitarian reasons, nor were they using the term solidarity during the cases used in this paper; rather, they considered their actions as political acts necessitated by the state and its oppressive character. They have a close affinity with the movement in Athens and Thessaloniki as described by Olga Lafazanis and others (Kotronaki, Lafazani, and Maniatis 2018; Lafazani 2018; Karaliotas and Kapsali 2021). However, there remains a fundamental difference between the cases in Athens and Thessaloniki insofar that the occupation of Sapphous square was initiated and maintained throughout its course not for housing but to confront authorities explicitly with their right and demand to move; and, furthermore, the occupation of SYRIZA offices was not only temporary but also a political act of forcing the governing party to accept the demands of the refuge-seekers. While the cases of City Plaza in Athens (Kotronaki, Lafazani, and Maniatis 2018) and Orfanotrofio in Thessaloniki (Karaliotas and Kapsali 2021) were, more or less, occupations by the same movement in Greece, and their demands in respect to refuge-seekers echo each other, neither the occupation of Sapphous nor that of SYRIZA offices had the purpose of housing; the actions in Sapphous square and SYRIZA offices were direct actions oriented toward authorities for the freedom of movement for the refuge-seekers. As such, the two cases used in this paper are distinct from the general solidarity and politicization described in existing literature. Similarly, while they share affinities with the No Border movement insofar that they do “[see] themselves as a part of a global fight against systemic inequality” (Gauditz 2017, 4), the antifascists of Binio were not acting as part of a European network; rather, their network was at best confined to the wider anti-authoritarian movement in Greece.

Departing from this distinctiveness of the two occupations, this paper extends the argument of Rozakou (2012) that “humanitarianism and the management of refugees” in Greece is biopolitical insofar that this paper argues for a bi-directionality of biopolitical practices in Lesbos by taking the actions of the antifascists from Binio squat *vis a vis* refuge-seekers in the two cases in this paper as a counter-orientation to the biopolitics of management and control of lives practiced by the state and NGOs. It goes without saying that there exists a wide spectrum of non-governmental organizations (Cuttitta 2022). As such, the intent of this paper is not to homogenize wide spectrums of actors, be they on the non-governmental front or activist front. Rather, this paper attempts to show two biopolitical orientations operational in Lesbos, which came clearly to the fore in the most radically tense moments in Lesbos in 2017.

Aside from discussions regarding biopolitics as a politics of management, control, and even extermination of life (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2008; Esposito 2010; Tarizzo 2017), the same theorists have also attempted counter-orientations to such a biopolitics: in Esposito (2010, 2013) as “*communitas*”, in Foucault as “*way of life*” (2012), and Agamben in form of “*form-of-life*” (2013). One can claim that biopolitics is, theoretically and on the ground, bi-directional insofar that, while biopolitics as exercised by power is the management, control, and even extermination of life, resistances to such a biopolitics do also exist, resistances that also operate on life, resistances that have life at the centre of their actions. Following Esposito’s terminology we can term the former biopolitics an “*immunitarian*” and the latter a “*communitarian*” biopolitics, the latter of which properly means a politics affirmative of life. Esposito (2010, 2013) clearly distinguishes such a bi-

directionality in the differentiation between immunity and community. This bi-directionality of biopolitics is not a mere philosophical issue, it was and continues to be operational in Lesbos.

Simultaneously, this paper evaluates mediation based on such a bi-directionality of biopolitics. The notion of mediation/mediator goes back to the figure of broker “for anthropology in the context of decolonization and modernization theory in the 1950s and 1960s” (Lindquist 2015, 870), where anthropologists such as Fallers (1955) investigated the African Chief and Redfield (1956) peasant societies and their transitions. In Geertz we find the first indication of the political underpinnings of the broker insofar that the broker has become “a politician” (Geertz 1960, 247). However, the primary concern of anthropology has been “the moral ambiguity of the broker”, which “has remained constant across time and space” (Lindquist 2015, 873). While biopolitics of mediation has been noted in respect to humanitarian programs (Rombou-Levidi 2022), in this tradition there has been no evaluation of mediation based on the bi-directionality of biopolitics. This paper, therefore, attends to this task, namely: *how can we understand mediation in terms of the bi-directionality of biopolitics?* In Lesbos the differences between the operations of humanitarian organizations and the antifascists from Binio provide empirical insight as to how a) biopolitics is bi-directional and, b) how this bi-directionality manifests itself in practices of mediation, too.

In a context like Lesbos where refuge-seekers are kept and managed there are many forms of mediation, because the management and control of lives requires mediators. The various practices of mediation find their position in this relation between refuge-seekers’ lives and power’s intent to manage and control those lives. This paper intends to shed light on this positionality and the biopolitical orientations available by resorting to an auto-ethnography of practices of antifascists in the context of two cases involving refuge-seekers.

## 2. Approach

### 2.1 Methodology

This paper utilizes autoethnography as a method for both textual strategy and ethical, as well as political, considerations. Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017) provide five traits of autoethnography, namely: “autoethnographers speak against, or provide alternatives to, dominant [...] cultural scripts”, they also “articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience”; they, further, “show how researchers are implicated by their observations; autoethnographers “also describe moments of everyday experience that cannot be captured through traditional research methods”, and, finally, they “create texts that are accessible to larger audiences” (Adams et al. 2017, 3 f.). In a wonderful autoethnography of autoethnography, written in Farsi, Khosravi, departing from Saids ideas about exile and being out of place, argues that autoethnography is the practice of moving from personal experiences to the social realm, which means that “to put next to each other individual and singular experiences and historicizing them is a kind of resistance” (Khosravi 2023, translated by author). In this sense, autoethnography can also be refusal as pointed by Tuck and Yang (2014), namely turning the gaze toward power and its apparatuses.

In line with the above, this paper refuses the disclosure of ethnographic details about the situations and the people; instead, utilizing autoethnography, it attempts to locate and emphasize the logic operational in Lesbos, a biopolitical logic.<sup>2</sup> As an autoethnography it also attempts to supplement ethical requirements of the

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<sup>2</sup> This paper avoids Rancière and any discussions regarding “the political”. From Arendt onward the notion of the political takes its transformative character. However, as Oliver Marchart has pointed out, this distinction between politics and the political (police and politics) operates within the same logic as Heidegger’s “ontological difference”. Reiner Schurmann, whose book is dedicated to the memory of Arendt, argues that metaphysics is the positing of principles that govern all “things, words, and

academy, which did not exist in this case as the events preceded my return to a university setting years later. The work in Lesbos was primarily as an antifascist; observations, reflections, and writing are only secondarily part of such tasks.

## 2.1 Background

In the early days of the summer and autumn of 2015 when UNHCR had a skeletal presence on the north shore of Lesbos and the NGOs had, yet, to arrive, the *Antifascist Coordination of Lesbos* had set up a reception set of tents known as *Platanos* – named after the tree next to the small fishing village Skala Sikemnia, separated from the sea by a narrow dirt road leading to the north-west of the island. The 2015-16 situation on the north shore required immediate support for the people arriving on dinghies and small boats. For example, hyperthermia was one immediate concern that needed to be addressed for those arriving on each boat, and required thermal blankets at a scale beyond the capacities of the movement. Moreover, other critical supplies such as infant clothing - or clothes in general - were also scarce and difficult for the movement to collect at such a scale of need.

Thus emerged the need to coordinate with newly arriving NGOs and UNHCR, with whom political differences posed a significant barrier, and for some this was politically too costly to compromise. One assembly took this matter to the point of not participating in *Platanos*. While the details are a matter of interpretation, and the following is merely my generalization over in-depth debates, one thing can be said retrospectively with which everyone may, perhaps, agree to some extent: politically, the situation posed an impossible positionality for the antifascist movement, namely:

1. By cooperating with NGOs the antifascists were directly participating as extensions, that is humanitarian instruments, of the very powers which create(d) the conditions of ruination that pervade the lives of those who required the immediate help on the north shores of Lesbos.
2. What was immediately at stake in *Platanos* was nothing short of life itself: life beyond all and every ideology, every nation, every state, every border, governmental and non-governmental institution and organization.

Thus, for the first time in that magnitude, the movement in Lesbos found itself on the topos of life as the terrain where contemporary politics and the political potentialities find themselves grounded. However, as the situation of the antifascists illustrates in the above case, life as a terrain for politics and political action in resistance to it can only provide a milieu of orientations, which are fundamentally bi-directional. The bi-directionality, however, does not amount to a polarity in binary senses; rather, insofar that directionality implies orientation, in a sense of multiplicity, the manifold is bi-directional, that is: it has two orientations forward. Both orientations look forward, albeit in terms of differing interpretations of life and politics, which determine the respective practices.

The one orientation is directed toward an increasing domination, control and management of life – the classically known biopolitics, or in the hermeneutic constellation of immunity versus community posited by Esposito, the *immunitarian* biopolitics. The other, the antifascist biopolitics, is oriented toward the

deeds”. The political in the form of positing new principles that govern would be just another iteration of metaphysics. Instead, biopolitics as a conceptual framework offers itself as a possibility to continuously attempt a disentanglement of life from the matrices of the apparatuses that attempt to govern, control, and manage life. But a more detailed and elaborate discussion thereof is beyond the scope of this paper.

disentanglement of life from a politics of domination, control and management thereof. If the former has been termed here an immunitarian biopolitics, then the latter can be considered as a *communitarian*, or alternatively an “affirmative” biopolitics. While the difference between the biopolitics of the antifascists does not contrast with that of the NGOs from the above example, the struggles of refuge-seekers during the occupation of Sapphous square and the subsequent occupation of SYRIZA offices in Lesbos will highlight the contrasting orientations.

In Platanos, and thereafter in Moria for over a year, this contrast was present, yet it was not so clearly defined. On the one hand, solidarity as a grounding for action was a blurry concept insofar as the claim thereto was made by a diverse set of people with a just as diverse set of political orientations and positions. As such, solidarity became conflated with humanitarianism. On the other hand, all actions and the absence thereof were solely the domain of European actors on the island. The latter point was due to various reasons, some of which included:

1. Even after March 2016 and the imposition of the geographical limitations as part of the EU-Turkey Statement the refuge-seekers still seemed preoccupied with the possibility of escaping the island, insofar as the island had been a transit stop up to that point. Another year would pass before the refuge-seekers would begin organizing demonstrations against the harsh conditions in the camps and the geographical restrictions.
2. Following from the above, the refuge-seekers in Lesbos during 2016 had spent insufficient time together to form a community insofar that they could form communities of collective action.
3. While in 2016 and early 2017 NGOs and their volunteers were immersed in humanitarian work, the antifascists (albeit while facilitating basic needs) had, yet, to become involved in organizing with the refuge-seekers. The anniversary of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2017 offered impetus for an early point of cooperation between the broader antifascist movement in Lesbos and the refuge-seekers.

However, by early summer of 2017 the permanence of the situation in the camps and the indefinite sense of detention among refuge-seekers started to lead to further organizing – inside and outside Moria camp – which was initially and continuously blocked through various efforts of humanitarian mediators. The humanitarian actors inside the camp were mediators between the government and the refuge-seekers, yet their mediation meant ensuring that the refuge-seekers abide by the rules, norms, and conditions set up for them. That is: under the banners of protection and humanitarian aid, the humanitarian sector was clearly oriented toward the immunitarian orientation of biopolitics by ensuring the reproduction and maintenance of the biopolitics that is intent on managing and controlling lives. The interpreters working for these organizations were now “cultural mediators” who were communicating these desires of the state and its humanitarian extensions in the camp in culturally and linguistically effective ways, in order to ensure the consent of the refuge-seeking population living in extremely degrading conditions (Spathopoulou, Pauliina Kallio, and Hakli 2021). The resistances of refuge-seekers were, however, not just diffused through ‘culturally appropriate’ communication of the status quo that was expected to continue, but also in the way ‘community leaders’ were identified by authorities, or how community leaders who were organizing their communities to stand against the conditions were ‘moved’ using various techniques, such as lifting their geographical restrictions so they would move away from the island, or criminalizing them under various pretenses related to organizing and mobilizing their communities, where for the latter the case of Moria<sup>35</sup>—35 members of the African community—in July 2017 is the first and paradigmatic example (Legal Centre Lesbos 2018).

The first real instance of refuge-seekers' resistances that reached the social sphere in Lesbos was when Arash Hampay started a hunger strike in the main square of the town, Mytilene, in support of his brother and two other refuge-seekers who were in Moria's detention center and on the list to be deported to Turkey (Legal Centre Lesbos 2017). While the Moria35 were randomly charged for a demonstration that took place inside the Moria camp in July 2017, Hampay's sit-in and hunger strike proved effective and attracted much attention from activists and journalists alike. In a profound sense, one can claim that Hampay's urbanization<sup>3</sup> (Nabi 2020) of refuge-seekers' struggles inside the camp was a successful attempt to engage mediators other than the traditional machinery of humanitarianism in full-fledged operation inside the camp; and the responses to making the struggles of three refuge-seekers inside Moria's detention center visible were to such an extent effective that their objectives were reached by September 2017.

Although there appears to have been no direct connection and communication between Hampay's hunger strike and the initial action of the occupation of Sapphous square insofar as there existed no concerted form of organizing between the two events, the conditions in the camp and the permanence of the geographical limitations, which had people confined to the camps, certainly, had some kind of knowledge production effect. Next, let us consider the context out of which the Sapphous occupation emerged.

The occupation occurred within the following context: During the night of October 19, 2017, a severe fight broke out between the Syrian and Afghan refuge-seekers, which forced many Afghan families to sleep on the main road outside the camp. The following morning, approximately 120 of those who had spent the night sleeping on the road walked approximately seven kilometers to the central square of the town, Sapphous, and sat in, demanding freedom of movement and refusing to return to the camp. However, UNHCR and MerciCorp, acting, again, as the soft-power of the authorities, were quick to intimidate many back to the camp with the threat of losing their tent-spots and services, including the cash cards, which reduced the number to thirty-five refuge-seekers. The remaining thirty-five (hereafter Sapphous35) continued their sit-in in the square until November 21, 2017 when the authorities, the deputy chief of police and the state attorney of Lesbos, threatened the group with legal repercussions for camping in a public space. The resilience, determination, and organization among Sapphous35, as well as their coordination with activists, particularly the antifascists, would become the most successful struggle since 2015 in Lesbos. Throughout the occupation the thirty-five lives resisted all intimidations by organizations and authorities, which will be discussed further below as the monstrosity of immunitarian biopolitics. And to this immunitarian biopolitics the Sapphous35 offered a biopolitics that was affirmative of life, and they practiced a communitarian biopolitics with their common struggle and with their coordination with the antifascist movement on the island. In what follows I will provide an auto-ethnographic account of the situation and my role as a mediator of not just language, not just an interpreter of words but also of power and its monstrosity. The autoethnography uses two case studies that were part of the same situation and followed each other.

### **3. An Autoethnography of Research in the Struggles**

#### **3.1 Occupation of Sapphous Square**

On October 22, 2017 Sapphous square was a threshold situation, a situation at the limit insofar as it kept on escaping the control of those in the business of the control and management of refuge-seekers' lives. Schürmann (1987) and Esposito (2012, 2015) have both deployed the limit and threshold as *topoi* from where

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<sup>3</sup> Urbanization here refers to making the invisible struggles of refuge-seekers in the camp visible in the social sphere, in this case the centre of Mytilene.

a domain can be viewed not only from a different perspective, but also whence a domain can be viewed in its entirety. Esposito's "impolitical" is not an apolitical or non-political concept; it is a stance from the limit whence the categories of political can be deconstructed. It is this stance that leads him to the formulation of biopolitics in terms of *immunitas* and *communitas*, and eventually to the proposal of an affirmative biopolitics (Esposito 2012). Schürmann starts with the "hypothesis of closure" of metaphysics as a tradition of not just philosophy but also political practice. Starting from this hypothesis he can read the tradition of West, philosophical and political, as epochal figurations of principles, which govern life and its world, as well as all things, words, and deeds pertaining to it. For him this tradition has reached its planetary closure not as termination but fulfilment, the planetary governance of all things, words, and deeds under the principle of technology.

While their deployment of the threshold and limit as a methodological tool concerns the philosophical/metaphysical and political domains, from the threshold created by the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> the domain of the biopolitical paradigm operational in our contemporary era can, perhaps, be glimpsed with more clarity. On Sapphous square, in the middle of a little town that serves as the capital of the North Aegean Prefecture and an island that had become a *de facto* border for thousands of lives, thirty-five lives had decided not only to cross the borders of Greece and the EU without the permission and the immunitarian guarantee of these authorities, they were, furthermore, audaciously intent and determined to breach the borders imposed on them on the island. It was this extremely liminal, a pushing of the limits and borders that triggered a blunt exposure of the orientations operational in Lesbos. In a sense, the thirty-five *post-sacers*<sup>4</sup> (Nabi 2022) decided on the exception, which was the domain of the sovereign (Agamben 2005). Or put differently, the thirty-five punctuated the flow of the discourse and practices of authority on the island through a self-authorship that the discourses of power and its extensions in the form of humanitarianism and protection did not anticipate, nor could the authorities and the humanitarian sector tolerate such breach of their biopolitical architecture.

The question that must be raised here is: what potential for mediation does such a break with authority, such transgression, reveal? What potentialities exist for mediation when the oppressed punctuate the discourse of authority and power by bringing their very lives to the threshold of subjection and subjectivation, at the threshold of control and resistance? Through the following autoethnography, this paper will attempt to answer these questions.

Upon my own arrival I immediately visited the thirty-five refuge-seekers. Sapphous square was busier than usual, for aside of the usual traffic and banners one could find around the square, there were tents, sleeping bags, but also the continuous traffic of those who were supporting the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> with food, supplies, and conversations, planning, discussions, as well as friendship. In the days between October 22 and November 22, 2017 my main task was interpretation for Sapphous<sup>35</sup>, which also meant attending meetings and assemblies that involved various actors supporting the direct action. As an interpreter, of course, I was also a mediator; however, it was clear to me that, contrary to the practices of NGOs and their "cultural mediator" employees (Spathopoulou et al. 2021), there was no neutral position for mediation in such a situation, because it was not a mediation between two – more or less – equals; there was and still remains a clear relation of power to those subjected to it. As such, mediation was always biased, either mediating in the service of power, its commands and demands, or mediation in the service of empowering the oppressed and marginalized, the subjects of power

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of post-sacer is developed to highlight that, on the one hand, Agamben's sacer does not lend itself as an appropriate analytical tool for the analysis of refugee situations such as Lesbos and, on the other hand, to highlight the biopolitical grounding of economic and political management of the situation in the sense of Foucault's analysis of *Gesellschaftspolitik*. The post-sacer is not killable (although increasingly treated so through pushbacks); the post-sacer is maintained as bare life for economic and political value extraction.

in such situations. The situation in Lesbos was, and continues to be, biopolitical; the management of lives through clear state policy, with the full endorsement of the European Union, is manifested in the form of *the camp as a modern paradigm* of biopolitics (Agamben 1999). And in the last five years increasingly through pushbacks where, at the time of writing this paper, one of the largest shipwrecks off the Greek coast is said to have cost hundreds of lives. The securitization of the Borders of the EU is a politics grounded in the management and control of lives.

During my interpretations with journalists in particular, but also with other actors, I strove to apply the questions of interlocutors of Sapphous<sup>35</sup> such that I could shed light on the ways the West, and in particular the structures of power in the West, think and perceive themselves, their world, and consequently their others, where the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> were the exemplars of such otherness. For instance, during one interview, a journalist asked the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> the following: “Why are you refusing to go back to Moria?” Prior to conveying the question in its literal form, I explained the following to the two young women who were being interviewed:

It is useless to emphasize the lack of hygiene in the toilettes and showers, or to complain about the food, for that way the audience may conclude from it that you want a luxury life. Instead challenge the journalist to go and live in the camp for an indefinite time and with no clarity as to what will happen to their life. After that, perhaps, explain that you are not asking for anything other than your rights as an asylum seeker, to have the right to freely move within the territory of the host country, which is enshrined in the *1951 Convention* and finally, leave your answer with a question like ‘is not Europe bombing and sending soldiers to other countries because Europe claims to be upholding the values of freedom and rights? So, where are those freedoms and rights here in Europe? Is it just for Europeans or for everyone?’ So, now: he is asking why you refuse to go back to Moria.

Through such intermediary translation, I sought to mediate in a way that levelled the playing field of power; my mediation of power’s discourse and practices were part of our collective support to help Sapphous<sup>35</sup> respond and correspond to power, its discourses, and practices in a language that would unsettle power and its discourse.

Similarly, in meetings and assemblies I continuously attempted to give insights as to how the actors think, for instance: in discussions with antifascists about negotiating with SYRIZA members, I had to explain to the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> the rise of SYRIZA during the financial crisis, the referendum of July 2015, and the capitulation of SYRIZA and the acceptance of further austerity from ECB, IMF, and European Commission. After this explanation the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> responded with the acknowledgement that SYRIZA is the cause of the harsh conditions of Lesbos for refuge-seekers and the economic hardship of Greeks, but that the negotiations were necessary as the occupation of SYRIZA offices could not go on indefinitely and that the primary objective of the occupation was not the overthrow of SYRIZA but the freedom of movement for the Sapphous<sup>35</sup>, for otherwise they would feel that they are being used as instruments by antifascists for their own political ends. Sapphous<sup>35</sup>’s response became a turning point in their relationship with the antifascists, who thereafter increasingly sought to provide Sapphous<sup>35</sup> the necessary knowledge and understanding about SYRIZA during negotiations.

The attempt at a mediation that would empower the Sapphous<sup>35</sup> through providing insights into the perceptions of the West was progressively proving itself effective already in Sapphous square. In mid-November Barbara Lochbihler, German MEP and Foreign and Human Rights spokesperson for Greens/EFA Group in the European Parliament, visited Sapphous<sup>35</sup> as part of her trip to Lesbos. In the brief exchange she had with the Sapphous<sup>35</sup>, for which I was the interpreter, Lochbihler empathically announced to the



Sapphous35 that although there are people in Europe, like herself, who are supporting them, Europe at large “does not want you”. One of the Sapphous35 responded to Lochbihler with the following:

We can accept that Europe does not want us; but you have to stop your policies toward our countries, you have to stop exporting and providing weapons and money to those who make it impossible to live in our countries; then we are happy to go back and deal with our problems. But as long as you do not close your weapons and policies toward our countries you are part of the problem, and that is why we are here.

Barbara Lochbihler’s only response consisted of “you obviously know your politics!” This example demonstrates that just as biopolitics is bi-directional, so, too, mediation is bi-directional, because it is mediation on the terrain of life which serves political ends. In this instance, Lochbihler implicitly served as a mediator insofar as her emphasis on “Europe does not want you” had the implication that Moria camp, its degrading conditions, and the precarious conditions of the refuge-seekers was the only option for them. As such, Lochbihler, as a mediator claiming to sympathize with the Sapphous35, was reiterating the biopolitical demands of the authorities for the management and control of refuge-seekers’ lives, namely: Moria camp is the only option. But, as argued, mediation can instead take a life affirming orientation. My mediation of power’s discourse and practices gradually led to the Sapphous35 responding and corresponding to power, its discourses, and practices, in a language that would unsettle power and its discourse, as the case of Lochbihler demonstrates.

In addition to the presence of journalists and activists, the square was continuously monitored by the secret police, known as Asfalia. The only completely absent category of actors on the island were in fact those from the humanitarian sector. From UNHCR to organizations that continuously utilized the term solidarity, the entire humanitarian sector maintained a notable distance from the square. This did not apply just to the official presence of the organizations, but also to their employees and volunteers, who were otherwise moving and buzzing on and around the square with a hyper-visibility of shirts, badges, and vests announcing their organizations’ logos. This was the only period up to that point that Sapphous square was devoid of anything and anyone who was wearing gear that displayed a logo of any organization. The reasons behind this situation became clear during a Sapphous35 assembly, which urgently addressed the warning received from UNHCR. Namely: those who will not return to Moria camp will lose their tent or container spot that they were assigned to; and to add to the threat, MercyCorp, which was at the time managing the cash cards that provided each person with ninety Euros per month for personal necessities, had warned the group of the cancellation of their cards if they refused to return to the camp. It was during this assembly that a psychologist from Germany who was volunteering with the Dutch Boat Refugee Foundation informed us that their management team had recommended that the employees and volunteers do not go to the square and be seen with the Sapphous35, and if they would do so on their own private time, they could not be seen brandishing their organizations’ uniforms and logos. Any breach of the latter would result in their dismissal from the organization.

In a similar vein, *Médicines Sans Frontières* has refused to operate inside the camp throughout the years since 2016 (in relation to their stance against the “hotspot” approach to the situation). They did not provide any medical or psychological support during the entirety of both occupations, even though an elderly woman and two toddlers were among the group. The medical attention offered to Sapphous35 was instead provided by a local Greek doctor who visited the group daily, and who was often present at demonstrations organized by leftist groups or refugees. In the words of the refugees themselves:

It also needs to be mentioned that from the moment we arrived at Sappho Square we became invisible for all the international Non-governmental Organizations a prime example of which is the total absence of any medical and pharmaceutical care or any other type of support and assistance (Ubuntu 2017)

From the threats of UNHCR and MercyCorp to the abandonment of the occupiers by all humanitarian actors, the message that this absence conveyed was that these actors were intent on maintaining the status quo prescribed by the state authorities and the EU, namely: the continuation of the camp, even if their public rhetoric appealed to the contrary. Furthermore, during this period, up until November 22, there was no physical violence on part of the police except the continuous harassment through random checks of documents and the arrest of Hesam Shaeri Hesari (Ubuntu 2017). Until the end of the occupation of the square the humanitarian sector served as the first line - the soft violence - of authorities by attempting to discipline through the punishment of abandoning the Sapphous35.

Salerno argues that modernity and its accompanying economic system increasingly pervading all spheres of human existence are inevitably producing not only a sense of abandonment, but also the material actuality of abandonment; in his words, “to be modern is to feel disconnected, to be detached, and in a state of constant loss” (Salerno 2003, 47 f.). In Salerno’s sense, the Sapphous35 were the exemplars of abandonment insofar as they were not just abandoned to fend for themselves as contemporary neoliberal system abandons individuals to precarity, but also insofar as this abandonment came as a punishment. However, Nancy (1993) and Schürmann (1987) suggest a different abandonment. For both Nancy and Schürmann, in our contemporary era the way out of metaphysics is the abandonment of the principles and figures of metaphysics that have become exhausted. The Sapphous35, in Nancys and Schürmanns sense, had abandoned the monolithic and immunitarian care of the humanitarian sector tied to the monstrosity called Moria camp; and therewith they had opened up the space for a multiplicity of care and support, which was not subordinated to the desires and demands of authorities.

Following Schürmann and Esposito, the humanitarian sector in its diversity is determined by the principal of immunity, which is dictated in its structures, apparatuses and practices by the principle of governance of all “things, words, and deeds” that authority and the state represent. As such, in its diversity of brands, the humanitarian is *one*, it is governed by one principle, and that is the principle of governing the lives of the refuge-seekers through the “things, words and deeds” they offer or withhold. By abandoning the principles and apparatuses governing their lives, the Sapphous35 had radically broken off their subjection to the monstrosity that authority and its extensions in humanitarianism represent. And precisely via this radical break with the architecture of the governance of lives on the island, the Sapphous35 had opened a space for the anti-authoritarians in Mytilene, Lesbos.

These anti-authoritarians form a milieu of various left political orientations who do not subscribe to any totalizing “-ism”, apart from considering themselves as antifascist. While No Border Kitchen, a self-organized group (No Border Kitchen 2018), was not operating within Binio at the time of the occupation, they did provide food and essentials. who are explicitly against borders, and therewith against the very notion of sovereignty, and their antifascism is the hallmark of their practices, for in their view the nation-state is grounded in discrimination and hierarchization of society. Binio squat is the hub of the antifascists in Mytilene and Lesbos in general, with various assemblies, including Antifascist Coordination of Lesbos. The Binio antifascists were involved in various ways, such as: providing supplies, historical and structural knowledge of authorities and their actions, knowledge about the local population and the fascists and neo-Nazi (Golden Dawn) elements on the island, as well as rotational night watch on the square in case of fascist attacks against the Sapphous35. What the humanitarian sector refused to do, namely provide support, was taken over by the antifascists with the clear intent of supporting the struggle.

While the humanitarian sector attempted to dismantle Sapphous35's resolve, the continuous support and radical political solidarity offered by the antifascist milieu continuously strengthened the group's resolve to continue their struggle. If the humanitarian sector is considered to be mediation by recent reflections of anthropologists in Greece (Papataxiarchis 2022; Rombou-Levidi 2022), what these anthropologists have, at least, neglected is that the antifascists, too, acted and continue to act as mediators. What distinguishes the humanitarian from the antifascist mediation is the orientation of the thought and practice of mediation. The former is oriented toward the maintenance of the monstrosity of the immunitarian paradigm of biopolitics enshrined in camps and pushbacks, while the latter is oriented toward a communitarian approach with the obligation to give without expectation for reciprocity; the former are exempt from this obligation by the prescriptions of authority and the power of immunity, while the latter sees itself obliged to give what it has without the expectation of reward or legitimacy. For Esposito (2010) the root of immunity and community can be traced to "munus", which bears the meaning of a gift without the expectation of reciprocity. The im-muned is exempted from this gift, whereas the com-muned is obliged to give the gift without expectations of reciprocity. The humanitarian sector had here a double function; on the one hand, it was not obliged to provide services unless the refugee-seekers abided by the demands of authorities and, on the other hand, it was providing a gift on the condition of reciprocity, which is: the maintenance of the status quo. In the former sense the humanitarian sector acted as an apparatus of the authorities, while in the latter sense it acted as authority. The antifascists, on the other hand, served to empower the Sapphous35 in all the ways that were possible, and they acted to this end through horizontal decision-making, through continuously paying attention to the demands, expectations, plans, organizing approaches, and ideas of the Sapphous35.

This situation continued until November 21 when the authorities realized that the threats of the humanitarian sector were having no effect in dismantling the resolve of the Sapphous35 and therewith the occupation of the square. On November 21, 2017 the authorities intervened with the might of the law. The police, with the presence and legal authority of the state prosecutor of Lesbos, arrived at the square with a new threat, which was immanent and grounded in Greek law, namely: camping in public spaces is forbidden by Greek law. The threat, however, came with an offer, the offer that the Sapphous35 did not have to return to Moria camp, and that they would be housed in a facility near the town, and according to Greek law the Sapphous35 had the right to continue their protest. Upon hearing the threat and the offer the Sapphous35 immediately dismantled the tents and agreed to be transferred with a bus to the said facility, as long as they were allowed to return daily for their protest.

The authorities started organizing the transfer, and between 9 and 10 pm on the evening of November 21 a bus arrived at Sapphous square to transfer the group to the facility. However, two hours later I received a call from one member of the group. It turned out that the facility was approximately 30 minutes by bus away from the center of Mytilene. The person on the phone was outraged; they told me that the group "are not leaving the bus", and that they felt that the authorities "lied and tried to trick" them by moving them to a facility from where "it would take two hours to walk to the square to continue [their] protest." The group had, therefore, decided to return, but did not want to walk back with all their belongings in the middle of the night. They therefore remained in the bus, insisting that the driver take them back to the square. But the bus driver was refusing to do so. After informing the antifascists, their decision and response to the group was not to disembark and insist that they were brought back to town as we did not have the capacity to drive them all back.

The antifascists from Binio squat immediately started organizing and within a few minutes I was told to inform the Sapphous35 that they could return and, for the night, they could stay in the squat. At around 3 am I received a call from the group that they were dropped off at a parking lot to the south of the center. While

some antifascists had already gone to Binio to prepare the indoor space for 35 people to be able to sleep, at this point a group of them left *Cafe P* and made their way to the parking lot to help the group with their belongings. The situation became calm, but the antifascists also clearly stated that hosting them long-term was against their political position vis-à-vis the management of the situation by the state and authorities. It would effectively force the antifascists to become an extension of the authorities' management policies, which was fundamentally opposed to their political beliefs. Furthermore, any long-term hosting would also diffuse the charge of the Sapphous35's struggle insofar as it would actually help the authorities achieve their goal of keeping the protesters invisible.

At 10 am the following morning I received a call from one of the Sapphous35, informing me that they "are leaving [Binio squat] now to go to Sapphous to demonstrate". I replied that I would also leave immediately. As I arrived at the square Sapphous was full of riot police, known as MAT (The Units for the Reinstatement of Order). I walked toward them to find out what was happening. Upon their arrival at the square for their legal and legitimate demonstration the Sapphous35 were greeted with the violence of the MAT against men and women, hitting them and throwing them on the ground, and holding them down with their shields and boots while the supervisor of the secret police and the deputy chief of police department were aggressively sending everyone away – an international lawyer from Lesbos Legal Centre, a journalist, myself and everyone else that attempted to capture the violent approach. The group was pinned to the ground until 2 pm that afternoon until, with the intervention of Efi Latsoudi from Lesbos Solidarity<sup>5</sup>, the authorities ordered the MAT to stand down and a bus arrived to transfer the Sapphous35 to Lesbos Solidarity's accommodation, PIKPA, for three nights.

This example demonstrates that the situation can be read biopolitically. The biopolitics of the Greek state and the humanitarian sector on the island was clearly stated through their actions and inactions in the case of Sapphous35 and the occupation of the square, namely: the business of managing refugee-seekers' lives, in whatever manner desired, was the domain of the Greek state, the European Union and its deterrence policy, as well as the humanitarian extensions of this biopolitical paradigm. However, insofar as biopolitics is bi-directional, the antifascists acted in an orientation otherwise than the monstrosity of power and its protection; the antifascists acted biopolitically, but a biopolitics that was affirmative of life, one that was grounded in community, a biopolitics that meant being shared in life and the obligation toward it. The following case of the Occupation of SYRIZA headquarters in Lesbos will demonstrate this life affirming biopolitics that attempts to disentangle life from the matrices of power, which the antifascists in Lesbos practice and increasingly insert into their discourses.

### **3.1 The Occupation of SYRIZA Offices & Antifa Mediation**

On November 22, 2017 Lesbos Solidarity had agreed to host the Sapphous35 for only 3 nights to give the authorities time to find a suitable accommodation for the protesters, which meant that on Saturday November 25 the authorities had to transfer the group from PIKPA, a solidarity based squatted summer camp. Around noon, November 23, I received a call from an antifascist asking if I had time to interpret for them. I was picked up at Sapphous square half an hour later. As we started driving toward PIKPA I was informed that the Antifascist Coordination had a plan they wanted to discuss with the Sapphous35. In PIKPA we gathered in the common kitchen area and in the assembly four members of the Coordination Assembly explained the plan.

As we soon discovered in PIKPA, the plan included sending out a call for a demonstration denouncing the MAT violence against the group and the conditions on the island. The demonstration was to take place at noon,

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<sup>5</sup> Lesbos Solidarity is an NGO that started from grassroots activists in PIKPA solidarity accommodation and, since July 2016, the MOSAIK Support Centre.

followed by a route that would eventually pass by the offices of SYRIZA. At that point the antifascists would break into the offices and secure the premises, after which the Sapphous35 would follow. Once inside the occupation assembly would take place, during which the occupation would be announced with the demands of the group explicitly mentioned.

At the close of the meeting in PIKPA, after some questions concerning logistics and the possible outcomes, the Sapphous35 declared that they had “come this far, now [they] will not give up. We thank you for supporting us.” On Saturday November 25 the Antifascist Coordination, the amalgamate Marxist-Leninist party ANTARSIA, and some international activists on the island had gathered at noon at Sapphous square, but the Sapphous35 were late. I received a call from one of them that the police had stopped the public transit bus they had boarded to reach the town from PIKPA. After approximately one and half hours the police let them proceed to reach the square. Upon their arrival the demonstration started, and its course passed through the main market street, Ermou, heading south. On the return path we reached SYRIZA offices, in front of which the demonstration paused, where ANTARSIA – the only political party with which Binios Antifascist Coordination cooperated, moved in front of the police with their long and wide banner, blocking the authorities’ view of the entrance to the offices.

Antifascist Coordination members then opened the doors and moved into the offices to secure the premises as planned. Thereafter, Sapphous35 and I walked into the offices, along with some members of ANTARSIA. A sizable number of antifascists and ANTARSIA members remained outside for the protection of the facility. The occupation assembly was adjourned, a list of demands was formulated and the Occupation of SYRIZA Offices were officially announced with the reasons and demands (Ubuntu 2017).

One of the main demands of the occupation, like the occupation of the square, was the lifting of the geographical restrictions imposed on refuge-seekers since the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016. But the list also extended to the release of Hesam Shaeri Hesari and accommodation in Athens. The occupation lasted four weeks until December 22, 2017. In these four weeks the occupation achieved numerous things, but insofar as it concerns the current theme of mediation and its biopolitical bi-directionality the following are of relevance:

1. SYRIZA was the leftist governing party at the time, but it had a minority government, and it was not clear to SYRIZA when exactly the next elections would be. As such, a forced eviction of refuge-seekers and young Greek activists from the left would have been political suicide on part of SYRIZA. Therefore, the move was a safe bet; furthermore, this condition would force SYRIZA to negotiate a peaceful solution to the demands of the Sapphous35.
2. Because it was SYRIZA offices, the occupation gave little reason for the police to choose to enter and evict the occupation. The police in Greece are known among leftists to have generally right or far-right tendencies and political orientations. This character of the police forces in Greece showed itself insofar that during the occupation the police stopped checking IDs and harassing the Sapphous35 outside the squat – unlike during the occupation of Sapphous square.
3. Again, because it was the offices of SYRIZA that were occupied, the occupation kept not only fascists away from the squat, but the right and far-right shop owners became less hostile to the Sapphous35. This was demonstrated at a large demonstration by islanders against the rise in VAT. Prior to the demonstration, antifascists estimated that the course of the demonstration (composed of conservatives and the far-right) would pass by SYRIZA offices, and the antifascists expected potential attacks and violence. But contrary to these expectations, the islander’s path moved in the opposite direction, to the court house, which was actually irrelevant to the issue of increasing VAT.

As such, one can claim, and antifascists would agree, that the occupation was strategically a clever move that kept all hostile forces away from the Sapphous35. Moreover, the occupation was the most successful direct-action in the history of the island since 2015 insofar that in addition to the above accomplishments, it also forced SYRIZA to negotiate and, finally, accept the demands of the protesting refuge-seekers.

In the three negotiation meetings with SYRIZA that took place during the occupation, the antifascists were only insofar engaged in the meetings as they were present to communicate to the Sapphous35 what the SYRIZA members were discussing among themselves in Greek. The antifascists were mediators but in affirmative way; they did not step in the way or dictate but rather facilitated translation of power and its discourse in Greece. Additionally, they provided continuous insight to the Sapphous35 as to how SYRIZA thinks and calculates, how politics in Greece works in respect to occupations, what their perceptions were, and what loopholes and possibilities existed for the Sapphous35. It was through such mediating interventions that SYRIZA eventually agreed to provide all thirty-five with permission to leave the island, as well as ensuring that everyone received accommodation inside Athens as opposed to camps far outside the city.

If cultural mediators and the humanitarian sector as mediators between power and refuge-seekers are the front line of border management, which is accurately termed “humanitarian-border workers” (Spathopoulou et al. 2021), then the antifascists in Lesbos can be said to be political, anti-border, anti-nation, and therewith anti-immunitarian biopolitical current of our epoch, who have effectively grasped and disclosed the unsaid biopolitical practices on the island. As such, from their horizontal decision-making practices to their cooperation and co-organizing with refuge-seekers, showed the possibility of a politics that affirms life.

Furthermore, while in the two cases used in this paper the antifascists acted as mediators with an affirmative or communitarian biopolitics, in the years that have followed the occupation of SYRIZA offices these affirmative biopolitical actions have been increasingly coupled with explicit discourses on biopolitics. In early spring of 2023 one could find leaflets on the streets and sidewalks after antifascist demonstrations against neoliberalism and privatization, which read “shit on the biopolitical management of migrants and proletariat by the state and racists”; and similarly a leaflet distributed in Binio squat, written in four languages (English, Greek, Farsi and Arabic) started with the statement “we don’t want to live in a prison” and ended with a demonstration chant of refuge-seekers: “we want to work and live together. No ‘better’ camps, but NO camps at all.” The antifascists in Lesbos have clearly grasped and shown that contemporary struggles take place on the terrain of life, and that any antifascist discourse and action must be cognizant of the biopolitical regime, the immunitarian biopolitical paradigm, operational in our era. What must become more explicitly discussed and used as a basis for organization are the potentialities that life as a terrain for contemporary politics offers, the com-munitarian biopolitics that is affirmative of life, and its potential for disentangling life from the matrices of power and its apparatuses.

## 4. Conclusion

The practices in Lesbos allow us to understand biopolitics in a different light, namely: while biopolitics has been interpreted and practiced toward an increasing control, management, and even extermination of life, we find a counter-orientation operational in Lesbos, one which is affirmative of life. Our actions and practices were not part of the matrices of representation; rather, we presented our lives and were present with bodies and knowledge in the struggle of refuge-seekers against the biopolitics of control and management of their lives. As Carter explains in this special issue, antifascism is not just the ‘Black Block’ making physical attacks

on capitalist institutions; it is also about carving spaces for the struggles of the oppressed and marginalized, be these spaces for housing, sovereign spaces (Jones 2024) or other forms of struggles. It is, further, community building, such as the work of food and clothing distribution to refuge-seekers and locals alike. It is counter knowledge production in the form of radio programs, assemblies on different themes, continuous reflections on solidarity, possibilities of symbiosis in its literal meaning of living together, and it is about learning to work together to bring together the different but related causes of refuge-seekers and other marginalized, oppressed, impoverished communities. The two cases above show that in all the various forms of action practiced in Lesbos, life remains the terrain for struggles, and as mentioned, biopolitics is increasingly becoming part of our discourses in Lesbos. And this awareness of and acting with an affirmative biopolitics is, perhaps, our contribution to the wider antifascist movement globally.

Moreover, the two cases above show that antifascism is not about spectacular acts that the media can portray. Often the work is subtle and less visible, but much more helpful to those who are struggling against injustice, discrimination, racism, exclusion, and the violence accompanying them. Research, too, is an integral part of this necessary subtle work, but such research must disentangle itself from the extractive and exploitative character of research, which requires a research militancy; that is to say, it requires the researcher to refuse extraction and instead put knowledge and its production in the service of those who struggle. Refusing extraction also means avoiding ethnographic fixation in dissemination of knowledge produced; it means turning “the gaze on power” and its apparatuses and operations. The autoethnographic approach of this paper can offer, perhaps, one contribution to such a research militancy.

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