

Lesvos island, Greece
Spring of 2020

Pandemic & interculturality in dialogue



*Artist: Lida Xidia,
Quarantine design no.10 "Unequal battle?"
(Bic pen, colored pencils)*

A difficult, transitional, unstable and unpredictable period; action and life under conditions of insecurity; uncertainty about the present and the future, nostalgia for the past. No, we are not referring to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are referring to the everyday life, the normality of the 30 refugee families that have so far been part of [Mikros Dounias](#), our intercultural pedagogical project on the Greek island of Lesvos.

We, the team of Mikros Dounias, have identified four points where the two "crises", refugee one and pandemic one, have something in common. We came up with four parallel readings, which we present to you in the form of questions.

1. **Where does the daily presentation of people as mere numbers lead us?**



Artist: *Alexandros Karavas*
«Les Demoiselles...»

In Greece of the pandemic - in other countries too, we assume - numerous sources daily inform the citizens about the "current numbers": How many are the Covid-19 cases in each region of the country? How many people died in the United States in the last 24 hours? How many fewer deaths in Spain today than yesterday?

The management of the "refugee crisis" is quite similar: How many people currently "live" in Moria camp on Lesbos? What's the number of the new arrivals in Greece during the past month? How many unaccompanied minors from Greece will Luxembourg and Germany finally accept?

In the public discourse, but also in the context of the planning that (as those in charge claim) aims at the well-being of **refugees and migrants**, the latter **lose their status as specific persons**. They are presented as impersonal representatives of their country of origin or as numbers within the "population in transit".

Let us dedicate a few words to the concept of **empathy**. Empathy can generally be defined as a person's ability to cognitively and emotionally put himself/herself into another person's shoes. In the intercultural discourse, empathy can be defined as "the ability to question the social procedures that lead to the stigmatization of foreigners" and as "the ability of viewing refugees and migrants not as 'foreigners', but as concrete persons" (Govaris 2011: 182).

How can we communicate and live together if we don't really see who the other person is? **In Mikros Dounias, we** are happy to have created the conditions that allow us to **treat each other as the unique person that each one of us is.**

*Govaris, Christos (2011). Introduction to Intercultural Education. Athens: Diadrasi editions.

The abuse of the concept of individual responsibility makes us experience both anger and fear. The reason is that **we consider individual responsibility**, i.e. the responsibility of each person for their own actions, **fundamental for the creation of a society of equality and freedom.**

A similar pattern is often adopted in the intercultural dialogue. Both the responsibility for integration and the responsibility for building a non-racist personality are presented as matters that concern the individual. More specifically:

The responsibility for social and economic integration of refugees and migrants is transferred to them and, to a large extent, depends on their own personal abilities - mainly on their ability to adapt. At the same time, the low life standards of stigmatized and marginalized social groups are interpreted as a result of the "peculiarities" of their culture.

On the other hand, racism is interpreted as a problem resulting from a certain type of personality: in order to "cure" the racists, the law foresees specific punitive and disciplinary measures. At the same time, it is believed that prejudices, which lead to the oversimplified representation of the "other", stem from the individuals' inability to process the mass of information they receive from their environment.

We believe that social segregation and differentiation are not self-created inventions of the individuals. It is the structure and the meaning of each social reality that identifies and highlights the "foreigner", the person that does not belong to the established cultural reality.

In this context, **our main goal in Mikros Dounias is to cultivate the "intercultural competence" in children and adults.** This competence allows to its holders to explore and recognize the differences between cultures, without aiming at evaluating them as superior or inferior. **Linguistically,** the first goal we set for each new child that joins our group is the realization that the same meaning can be expressed in many different languages. The above is **possible in an environment of love, acceptance and practical cooperation towards a common goal:** the well-being of the children and the community of Mikros Dounias.

3. Does the construction of new personal and social borders help us?



*Artist: Lida Xidia
Quarantine design no.15
(Bic pen, colored pencils, watercolor)*

In Greece of the quarantine times, we are daily confronted with multiple indications of guilting the “other”. The legislative and executive powers, together with the media, are engaged in a constant hunt for and targeting of "our irresponsible fellow citizens". Simple citizens follow their example. **Guilting each other also takes place on an international level:** Each nation-state treats the other as a danger, as a source of infection. **As communication bridges are demolished, all kinds of borders are built or reinforced.**

The concept of guilting the "other", the "foreigner", also appears **when it comes to migration**. Refugees and migrants are accused of many different "sins", which we will not reproduce here. **At the same time, the management of the current "refugee crisis" proves the nation-states' lack of will and ability to collaborate, in order to identify solutions that respect human dignity.**

Our three years of experience in Mikros Dounias has shown us that there is another way – or, better said, another path. It might be long and arduous; however, it allows us to propose **solidarity, communication and co-configuration as realistic solutions to the complex question of intercultural coexistence.**

4. What is the earliest sign of civilization?



*Artist: Lida Xidia
Quarantine design no.6 "Rain"
(Bic pen, colored pencils)*

Who have been forgotten by the emergency Covid-19 measures?
The ones who live in emergency situations anyway – at least in Greece.

The incompatibility of the governmental measures against Covid-19 and the living conditions within refugee camps, such as Moria camp on Lesbos, have been reflected in numerous articles, videos and petitions. Despite the many appeals and the realistic proposals on the decongestion of refugee camps, there have been extremely few implementations.

We cannot find the words to express how we feel about this. We will limit our written reaction in quoting an **anthropological position**, which has been re-released in the context of Covid-19. A student once asked the famous American anthropologist Margaret Mead what was the earliest sign of civilization. Mead did not refer to "technological" achievements, such as tools and utensils, but to a 15,000-year-old femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. She explained that a member of the animal kingdom that breaks its leg is sentenced to death, as it is unable to search or hunt for food, find water, protect itself from dangers or from its hunters. What conclusion can we draw from the discovery of an ancient, restored human bone? That someone took the time and effort to help the injured human being recover: transported him/her to a safe place, bandaged the wound, provided him/her with food and water and cared for him/her until their physical condition was restored.

The first sign of civilization is showing care and solidarity to those who need it.

With our best wishes for health and solidarity,

The team of Mikros Dounias

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