Ageing and immigration in the Greek capital. Policy issues and developments since the early 1990s

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The paper deals with socio-demographic change and spatial transformation in Athens during the post war period and, in particular, since the early 1990s. It focuses on the interaction of two parallel processes — the precipitated ageing of the native Greek population and the rapid increase of the city’s immigrant population — in terms of residential patterns that enable contact between the two groups, and of the poorly developed local welfare state, within which immigrants have been acting as a substitute for the underdeveloped services for the elderly.

The paper draws attention to recent changes in immigrants’ profiles and especially to the decreasing inflow — and more recently the outflow (GSPSC, 2011) — from neighbouring Balkan countries and the parallel increase of asylum seeking migrants and refugees from war zones in the broader Middle-East, Afghanistan and the Indian peninsula. These changes have led to a potentially less beneficial co-existence between ageing and immigration for both sides in a period where public funds for social policies as well as private funds for substitute solutions become scarce.

**Introduction**

Migration flows have been a constant feature of human societies as groups and individuals tried to escape harsh environmental conditions, wars and repression or simply sought regions that would offer opportunities for better life conditions and prospects. The industrial revolution triggered unprecedented waves of migration to the cities from the countryside, following the geographical restructuring of economic activities. At that stage, the countryside produced the healthy young generations that the unhealthy cities were going to consume, leading to vivid debates about the impact of

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the industrial urbanisation model on the health and survival of fiercely competing
nation-states (Lees, 1985). Capitalism and industrial development triggered impor-
tant migration waves at the international level, through uneven development, that
world wars and major geopolitical changes have contributed to increase even further
(Massey, 1988, 1990; Green, 2002). As a major social phenomenon, migration has
frequently been politicised; during the Cold War it became a symbol of freedom for
the West against its restriction in the East (Ventura and Groutsi, forthcoming). Sub-
sequently, globalisation has created, in principle, even more favourable conditions for
international migration and definitely increased migration flows. However, capitalist
globalisation has always been more about the free movement of capital than labour
force (Sassen, 1990) and migrant workers have encountered substantial problems in
their access to developed economy countries. Migrants have traditionally been con-
sidered with reserve by natives, or previously established migrant groups as they were
always considered a threat to locals’ socioeconomic status and/or safety (Esses et al.,
1998) often regardless of their belonging to the same ethnic group.1 During the last
two decades, the “undesirability” of migrants increased in parallel with the increas-
ingly difficult reproduction of intermediate social positions and the further decrease
of mobility chances from lower ones; and political systems — where migrants are
seldom fairly integrated — have systematically left them stripped of rights and social
protection. Globalisation has, therefore, increased flows and decreased protection for
holders of the migrant labour force commodity, leading them often to what Wacquant
(2008) describes as advanced marginality.

Ageing, on the other hand, has been developing steadily and with less complexity
compared to migration, as medical protection, nutrition and life conditions improved
impressively during the last century. Ageing social structures, however, have been an
issue for developed economy countries, where the ratio of the active to the total popu-
lation is decreasing creating a burden that has been dealt with in different ways within
different welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1996; Johnson and Zimmermann,
1993; Künemund and Rein, 1999; Zimmermann, 1995). Migration has been a way of
addressing discrepancies of labour markets in terms of age or skills for a long time in
host societies, creating however demographic and economic imbalances in the places
of origin (Philipov and Durbritz, 2003; Lowel and Findlay, 2001; Lambrianidis, 2011).
Under protectionist regimes migration was invited wherever growing economies
needed to supply their labour markets with larger numbers of workers to address
such discrepancies. Under capitalist globalisation, commodities and capital move
much more unrestrictedly than before, but the labour force commodity still encoun-
ters substantial protectionist barriers. Frontiers are not impermeable, however, and
pressures to migrate for economic, environmental or political reasons are increasing.

1 See Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (2001:41–42) concerning the attitude towards migrants from Auvergne
and other French provinces in XIXth century Paris, and Elias (1994) for the tension between the estab-
lished and the outsiders in a British town of the mid XXth century.
Depending on local social regulation regimes, immigrant labour force may be dealt with as a pure commodity whose owners are denuded of civil and social rights and, therefore, are forced to sell it cheap; or they may be provided with substantial social and political rights, and with viable options of integration. Countries with developed welfare states have been closer to the second option, but pressures on the welfare state from neoliberal policies have increasingly led to regression towards the first option in many countries hosting migrants around the world.

**Ageing and immigration in Athens: the issue and the data**

Ageing in this paper refers to the growing percentage of the elderly in the native Greek population during the last decades (Kotzamanis et al., 1998; Siambos, 2001); and immigration refers to the considerable part of the important wave of migration towards the broader south European region (King et al., 2000; King and Black, 1997) that Greece has absorbed since the early 1990s, mainly from neighbouring countries and especially from Albania (Cavounides, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, ageing and migration refer to simultaneous processes within different groups, who met in a specific urban space, leading them to become intertwined. The focus of the paper is on the ways these processes have interacted in the last 20 years.

In short, the argument is that the ageing of the native Greek population has created important issues of elderly care due to the residual character of the welfare state. The reason that these issues have not figured as pressing items on the social and political agenda is that they were resolved, for more than a decade, with the help of inexpensive migrant labour (Baldwin-Edwards and Arango, 1999; Anthias and Lazarides, 2000; Lyberaki, 2008); until certain parameters started to change and the situation started becoming problematic on both accounts.

To illustrate this argument, the broad data concerning ageing and immigration are first presented followed by a brief reference to the Greek welfare system and the role immigrants assumed in elderly care. The two processes are then mapped to show their spatial coincidence at the end of the 1990s; subsequently a few features of the housing system in Athens are discussed, since it was those features that enabled in fact the spatial mixing of immigrants with elderly natives of broader middle-class status. Finally, reference is made to changes during recent years that make previous arrangements difficult and also make the absence of policies on both accounts (immigration as well as elderly care) increasingly unsustainable.

The process of ageing in Athens during the second half of the 20th century is clear. The percentage of people over 65 has tripled following the trend of most cities in the economically developed world (Figure 1). In Athens, however, the ageing of the population structure has not only been the result of increased life expectancy, but also of a sharply falling national fertility rate since the 1980s (from 2.22 births per woman in 1980 to 1.31 in 1995 [LDSA, 2012]). The same trend is observed in the broader South European region, with Greece scoring nowadays lower than Italy and
Spain (see different fertility tables by the United Nations or the World Bank in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_territories_by_fertility_rate). On the other hand, the increase in the proportion of older people in the Greek population is not related to a baby boom as Greece, contrary to Spain or Italy, did not experience this phenomenon in the early post-war period.

Figure 1: Age structure of the population in Athens, 1951–2001

Immigrants in Greece were rare before the early 1990s when their number became rapidly substantial. Within that decade the percentage of foreign citizens in Athens increased from less than 2% to 11%; their percentage being higher in the active population (13%) (Kandylis et al., 2008:122). In terms of geographic distribution, the privileged area of immigrant settlement has been the central municipality of the city where they accounted for 20% of its population in 2001; more than 37% of immigrants live in that area compared to less than 18% of Greeks (Maloutas, 2007:748).

Contrary to previous waves of invited migration to the Fordist labour markets of Western and Northern Europe or to more recent waves of regulated migration to Canada or Australia, the wave of migration to Southern Europe since the early 1990s was rather “uninvited”. It was similar, in this sense, to the waves of native rural migration in the countries of the region during the 1950s and 1960s, which had also been unplanned and by and large unregulated. The immigrants of the 1990s in Athens were “uninvited” in the sense that it was mainly push factors in the places of origin rather than pull factors — i.e. the city’s economic performance — that attracted migration. Allen et al. (2004:59–68) depict the urbanisation model of South European cities and the ways it was shaped during the post-war period under conditions that differed substantially from the industrial city model, where industrial activity was the motor
of city growth. The large waves of internal migration largely exceeded the employment potential in the cities of the region and led to emigration to Western Europe and overseas in a parallel process to local cities’ rapid population growth.

Even though “uninvited”, the immigrants of the 1990s in Athens found specific niches in the local labour market: agriculture, construction and domestic services (Figure 2) were the sectors where immigrant labour was mostly absorbed; employment in domestic services — that declined substantially after the 1960s — has reached again important numbers being almost entirely covered by immigrants. During the 1990s immigrants have not displaced natives in the labour market, but mostly replaced them in lower status occupations they massively left behind due to a prolonged trend of upward social mobility (Maloutas, 2010). At the same time, cheap immigrant labour has helped the small family business to survive and the family household to preserve part of its traditional functions (Cavounides, 2003; Vaiou and Stratigaki, 2009; Vaiou, 2007; Maratou-Alipranti and Fakiolas, 2003; Sakellis and Spyropoulou, 2007; Psimmenos and Skannakis, 2008). The important presence of migrants in small family businesses is testified by the considerably smaller average size of firms they are employed in, compared to native Greeks (Kandylis et al., 2008:125).

Figure 2: Employment by sector of economic activity and nationality in the metropolitan region of Athens, 2001

A – Agriculture, fishery, forestry etc.; B – Mining, energy & water supply, recycling & waste disposal; C – Manufacturing; D – Construction; E – Wholesale & retail trade; F – Hotels and restaurants; G – Transport, storage, communications; H – Finance, investment, real estate services; I – Research, producer & IT services; J – Public administration, education & health; K – Personal, social & cultural services; L – Domestic services.
Source: Kandylis et al. (2008:125).

The massive participation of immigrants — in fact immigrant women — in domestic services has resolved, temporarily at least, a number of issues related to the role

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2 See the contributions to the special issue of the Greek Review of Social Research on “Gender and migration: Aspects of social integration and social policy” edited by Kassimati et al. (2007).
of the family in social reproduction. As in the rest of southern Europe, Greece has a residual welfare state combined to a family-centred welfare system, where the family provides services that are elsewhere usually provided by the welfare state (Allen et al., 2004; Ferrera, 1996). Daily care for the elderly is one of the important services provided by the family, testified by the extremely low percentage of elders that use institutional facilities. The sustainability of the traditional family-centred system is, however, questionable, as there are two reasons that make family-centred care for the elderly increasingly difficult. The first is the changing age and generation structure of the Greek family, with increasingly more recipients (elders) than providers (their children) of care; and the second is the growing scarcity of female domestic labour due to the increasing participation of women in the labour market (Figure 3) and especially of younger women (Figure 4). It was within this problematic situation that cheap female immigrant labour came to replace the traditional female roles within a large number and a broad social range of Greek households, involving elderly care as one of its main tasks.

Figure 3: Percentage of economically active women in Athens, 1961, 1991 and 2001

![Figure 3: Percentage of economically active women in Athens, 1961, 1991 and 2001](source: EKKE-ESYE (2005)).

Figure 4: Percentage of economically active women in Athens by age, 1991 and 2001

![Figure 4: Percentage of economically active women in Athens by age, 1991 and 2001](source: EKKE-ESYE (2005)).
Care for the elderly provided by immigrant women has not only supplied a workable solution — even though temporarily — for maintaining the increasingly difficult reproduction of traditional care practices within the local, family-centred, welfare system. It has also provided a large niche for the socioeconomic integration of immigrant women, enhanced by other aspects of domestic work that could have a positive side on that account, such as personal contact with the employer who often acts as a facilitator for legal procedures and/or further integration to the labour market or provides housing in case of live-in arrangements etc. (Vaiou, 2007; Psimmenos, 2007; Skamnakis, 2007; Psimmenos and Skamnakis, 2008; Kambouri, 2007). On the other hand, roles and relations within these practices remain deeply hierarchical and should not be romanticised.

The geography of old age and immigration in Athens

The geography of elders’ residential areas — especially persons over 75 among which are found the higher percentages of those that need care on a regular basis — shows a concentration around the city centre (figure 5) contrasted to the peripheral dispersion of younger ages. Immigrants, on the other hand, are even more concentrated in areas around the centre (figure 6) contrasting with natives who are everywhere, but proportionally more dispersed in the periphery. Immigrants and elderly natives in Athens have, therefore, met in space as they show the same broad location pattern.

Figure 5: Residential distribution of persons over 75 years of age in Athens, 2001

Data source: EKKE-ESYE (2005); map by the author.
The similar patterning of the residential location of immigrants and elderly native Greeks was in fact the unintended consequence of certain attributes of the local housing system. Athens may be a city with a long history, but its housing stock is quite recent — especially the six to eight floor small condominiums that dominate its broader centre. In 1950 there were less than 1,000 such condominiums, while 30 years after more than 34,000 were built (Maloutas and Karadimitriou, 2001) following a peculiar housing system that brought together small landowners and small building companies to produce condominiums through one-off building operations under very advantageous conditions in the form of tax reliefs (Leontidou, 1990). This affected mainly the city’s central areas, where population density increased impressively, with the central municipality gaining over 250,000 inhabitants (50% increase) only during the 1960s (Maloutas, 2000:29). Higher population density with no compensating improvement in infrastructure, during a period when the use of private cars increased substantially, brought decline and depreciation to the city centre that was heightened by air pollution, which became a permanent feature since the mid 1970s. As a result the upper-middle and middle middle-classes started losing interest in the centre and relocated to suburban areas in the north-east and the south and, subsequently, to the outer periphery. Within 20 years (between 1971 and 1991) the proportion of higher
occupational categories living in the central municipality dropped from 62% to 27% while the proportion of the working class remained practically unchanged (Maloutas, 1997). However, this important change was not mainly due to the relocation of middle-class households established in the centre, but to that of new middle-class households formed by their children, who avoided settling, following the traditional pattern, near their parental households. Furthermore, it was mainly the smaller apartments, systematically located on lower floors — and mostly hit by overbuilding since they were the ones that became darker and noisier — that were increasingly depreciated and often abandoned. Therefore, older people remained in the centre and larger apartments on higher floors continued to be occupied, while the downgraded apartments on lower floors were increasingly left vacant.

When immigrants arrived massively to Athens in the early 1990s, this depreciated and vacant housing stock was their only option. Rented social housing has never been developed in Greece, and, even if it was, immigrants would not have been eligible for public assistance due to their illegal status. As they rented this depreciated apartment stock they came close to a large number of middle-class elderly natives with whom they started establishing work relations.

At the same time, they contributed to forming an original type of vertical social and ethno-racial segregation in neighbourhoods that were initially dominated by the presence of middle-class groups and became socially and ethno-racially mixed through this process of vertical segregation within their individual buildings. Figures 7 and 8 show the social and ethno-racial differentiation by floor of residence, using data from a case study in the late 1990s. Figures 9, 10 and 11 show that although immigrants were mixed with native Greeks in most residential areas, their housing conditions (available surface per capita, age of house building and tenure) were lagging much behind.

Figure 7: Composition of residents by floor and occupational category in a densely built Athenian neighbourhood (Ampelokipi), 1998

![Figure 7: Composition of residents by floor and occupational category in a densely built Athenian neighbourhood (Ampelokipi), 1998](source: Maloutas and Karadimitriou (2001:706).)

Archived at Flinders University: dspace.flinders.edu.au
Figure 8: Composition of residents by floor and nationality in a densely built Athenian neighbourhood (Ampelokipi), 1998


Figure 9: Population by housing tenure and nationality, 2001


Figure 10: Population by average housing surface per capita and nationality, 2001

Changes after the 1990s

A number of changes during the last decade have made the fragile equilibrium between the ageing of the native population and the involvement of migrant labour force in elderly care increasingly less sustainable. The first change is that since the beginning of the 2000s, and even more so since 2005, Greece has moved from a period of sustained growth to a period of deepening economic crisis; Athens became less attractive for migrants and has even begun to lose part of its immigrant population, while the ageing process of its native Greek population structure continues. With the household income of native Greeks substantially reduced, increasing numbers of households have difficulties meeting the expenses of hiring private care for their elderly, even though immigrants’ salaries have been affected by the crisis as well. At the same time, public care for the elderly remains quasi-inexistent. Problems of elderly care may not have yet reached critical proportions, especially for middle and upper-middle class groups that were mainly involved in such private arrangements, but it is something that can be reasonably expected.

The second change refers to increasing needs for elderly care at the same time that resources to maintain current arrangements are restricted. The proportion of the elderly in the population rises and will eventually continue to, while less and less young adults have to undertake the cost of elderly care or provide it personally within traditional family arrangements. Younger generations are not only less numerous; their monetary and time resources are reduced as they — especially the women — have to participate in larger proportions than in previous decades to the active population. It is clear, therefore, that the issue of increasing difficulties in providing elderly care affects not only middle-class but also working class households, who were less involved with care provided by immigrants due to their comparatively reduced monetary resources.
and to the lower rate of women’s economic activity in working class households that increased their available female domestic labour.

The third change is related to the profile of new immigrant groups. The immigrants of the 1990s originated mainly from Eastern Europe, and in particular from Albania. Their gender profile and their skill level made them suitable for undertaking the tasks of elderly care. The wave of immigration from those countries has diminished as their economies stabilised and the Greek economy started to deteriorate. The new immigrant groups originate mainly from war zones in the broader Middle-East seeking refuge in Europe through Greece; they are mainly male, with rather low education level and reduced language and work skills (Kandylis et al., 2012). Therefore, they are practically much less suitable for elderly care than the immigrants of the previous decade.

Conclusion

The two issues of ageing and migration in Athens discussed in this paper have been rather successfully self-regulated for more than a decade within a combination of lacking social services to address problems of elderly care and a laissez-faire immigration policy. The native Greek population structure has been steadily ageing, while care for the elderly remained a task of the family within the family centred local welfare system. The increased pressure on younger generations, resulting both by their decreasing proportion and by the fast growing rate of employment for younger women, has been relieved since the early 1990s by immigrant women who undertook domestic work and elderly care for a broad social range of native Greek households. However, this self-regulation seems to be reaching its limits under the influence of combined changes related to the decreasing financial ability of native Greek households to employ private elderly care, the increasing need for elderly care and the changing profile of new immigrants that is less adapted to such employment tasks.

The main problem, in terms of addressing the growing social need for elderly care, is that the limits of self-regulation of both ageing and immigration are reached in a literal vacuum of policies and within a very ineffective welfare state, similar to other south European countries who are also structured following the residual welfare state model. This policy vacuum, entailing the absence of know-how among other things, is much harder to confront today with the limitation of resources induced by the sovereign debt crisis. Innovative solutions involving the opening of traditional family solidarity to the wider society may be an option worth assessing for the future.
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