



## An interview with Maria Nikolakaki regarding the 2016 “Crossing Borders” conference in Lesbos, Greece

Raluca Bejan

To cite this article: Raluca Bejan (2017): An interview with Maria Nikolakaki regarding the 2016 “Crossing Borders” conference in Lesbos, Greece, *Transnational Social Review*, DOI: 10.1080/21931674.2017.1317199

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2017.1317199>



Published online: 16 May 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## An interview with Maria Nikolakaki regarding the 2016 “Crossing Borders” conference in Lesbos, Greece

Raluca Bejan

Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

The journey from Athens to the port of Mytilene, capital of Lesbos, takes about nine hours by boat. Formerly a highly visited tourist spot, packed with small cafés and local Greek stores, Lesbos has recently attracted international attention due to the high influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa arriving on the island’s shores. Alongside the Greek coastlines of Chios, Leros, and Samos, and Italy’s ports of Augusta, Lampedusa, Porte Empedocle, Pozzalo, Taranto, and Trapan, Lesbos nowadays constitutes a “hot” arrival “spot,” labeled as such by the European Commission to denote the high(er) inflow of refugees and asylum seekers.

In light of the European refugee crisis, an international conference was organized in Lesbos in the summer of 2016 to address issues related to citizenship, displaced migration, borders and identity, refugee and asylum law, as well as the larger socio-political phenomena of imperialism, colonialism, globalization, and capitalism, which are also grounding the refugee crisis as such. The *Crossing Borders* conference took place between 7–10 July 2016. It was the first event organized by the Cooperative Institute for Transnational Studies (CITS), in collaboration with the Sociology Department of the University of Aegean. The conference was sponsored by the Stop the War Coalition (UK), Peoples’ Assembly Against Austerity, Real News Network, Stopimperialism.org, and the National Greek Television. Featured speakers included Tariq Ali, Andrej Grubačić, Feyzi Ismail, Dimitris Lascaris, Zoe Konstantopoulou, Vicki Macris, Maria Nikolakaki, John Rees, and Kenneth Surin.

CITS was founded earlier in 2016 as an independent institution of higher learning, ideologically steered by radical politics and operating as a bottom-up educational system under the guiding principles of participation, collaboration, solidarity, democracy, and cooperativism, hence intended to work as a commons, with a general assembly bargained by all members, including teaching scholars and students. CITS also struck up an Advisory Board, comprising the well-known names of Tariq Ali, Étienne Balibar, Werner Bonefeld, Raquel Gutiérrez, John Holloway, Peter McLaren, Moishe Postone, Jacques Rancière, and Helena Sheehan.

The conference opened with an art exhibit on the refugee topic, encompassing paintings, photos, sketches, and a combination of video art installations. Bilingual conference panels, in Greek and English, were conducted for two days. Sessions incorporated roundtables as well as special events, such as the screening of *Janus’ Legacy: Refugee Passage to Europe*, a documentary film directed by Dimitris Papageorgiou and Alexandros Spathis, which was

focused on the 2015 refugee flow from Turkey to Greece. A visit to the Moria refugee camp was also scheduled to take place on the last day of the conference. The trip was canceled however, due to particular ideological confrontations that erupted during the event, criticizing the overall symposium as being methodologically and epistemologically grounded within a Eurocentric knowledge production system.

Below is presented an excerpt of an interview conducted with one of the founding members of CITS and the main organizer behind the *Crossing Borders* conference, Maria Nikolakaki. She discusses the general orientation of the Institute and her overall take on organizing the conference. Nikolakaki is an Associate Professor of Pedagogy and Education at the University of Peloponnese. The interview was conducted in Athens, in August 2016.

**RB:** “Could you tell me a little bit about the conference, its purpose and the themes addressed and how the idea of organizing the conference came about?”

**MN:** “Well [...] the *Crossing Borders* conference came as a thought during last year, when the migration crisis started to unfold in Europe, and especially in Greece, which is the first point of entry for people leaving the Middle East. Lesbos is one of the ‘hot’ places of the crisis, as more than 500,000 refugees landed so far on the island. The local people were actually very welcoming; they supported the refugees, they tried to do their best at accommodating them, fed them and helped them proceed with their journey, because Greece is not the place of their destination, it is merely a cross road of entry into other nations, particularly Germany. Lesbos hence came to symbolize a meeting place for people to show solidarity, and many celebrities, Susan Sarandon or the Pope or Ai Weiwei [...]”

**RB:** “As well as Angelina Jolie [...]”

**MN:** “Yes [...] they came along to show their solidarity with the refugees. Which is why we decided to work at CITS with the University of the Aegean, to organize a conference of *the left* in Lesbos.”

**RB:** “As this conference was organized by CITS, could you tell me a little bit more about the work of the Institute? In terms of its political and ideological orientation?”

**MN:** “Well, CITS is an attempt to challenge the concept of the neoliberal university, through the idea of a cooperative. Now, if you look at our constitution, you can see that it creates a space for higher education as the *commons*. This means that members are creating a cooperative society, a community. Each member has one vote on what will CITS become. We are planning three general assemblies of all members, students and teaching scholars that will determine where and how we want to go, as well as what needs to be done. And there will be an Executive Board, with people voted in to represent each Cooperative department. In turn, each department will vote whom they will delegate to the Executive Board. It is a totally self-run society, also with many challenging thoughts in progress. At the heart of CITS are its research centers, hence the aim is also to report on specific research, as all the Cooperative departments are to collaborate with these research centers. On the one hand, there is the opportunity to take courses on different methods of research, and at the same time, we have a journal and a blog, therefore we will have academic, peer-reviewed channels of knowledge production, but also a blog, through which we will try to make knowledge more accessible for those who are not part of academia, because we want to foster a connection with the social movements in the same time. This is a different way of running a university, an approach focused on the voices and agency of students and teaching scholars. More so, we do not have a top-down administrative structure. It is the people themselves who will administrate. The fees will be set at a minimum level, perhaps 100 euros a month, and the degrees will be accredited.”

**RB:** “I remember that speakers and presenters included activists, politicians and artists, alongside academics. Is this a specific approach supported by the Institute, in terms of political praxis?”

**MN:** “Exactly. It is a political stance. I think that the isolation of academics, meeting and talking solely amongst themselves, reproduces a non-desirable political discourse. I believe that we need to discuss thematically, with those who are concerned and involved with such societal issues on the ground, hence we need to break the walls of the Academy. For instance, at the *Crossing Borders* conference we had volunteers, refugees and artists that have had a very significant say on the refugee humanitarian crisis. And we had many intellectuals and political representatives coming with the idea of getting together, of collaborating, and of seriously starting to talk about praxis. I think at this point we have to concentrate on praxis and organization; we live in a time where class war has been intensified, and if we do not seriously look for solutions in response, we will be losing our time and energy.”

**RB:** “I have overheard some criticism of the conference, in terms of being publicized as the biggest meeting of the European left on the topic; more so, on the last day of the conference, some voices raised questions about the sessions, in terms of being theoretically Eurocentric, therefore I was wondering if you had any comments about that?”

**MN:** “Well, the point is that the papers sent in, the abstracts, were actually the ones that formulated the content of the conference; we could not define from before what people would want to talk about. Now, it was indeed a meeting of the left, especially the European left. People also criticized the fact that there was a Brexit discussion, but the point is that this conference just came after the Brexit vote, which was one of the biggest clashes against the EU, and I personally asked people to concentrate on this because it had repercussions on the refugee crisis.”

**RB:** “And migration issues were also present in the Brexit campaign [...]”

**MN:** “Exactly. And if you have John Rees, if you have Tariq Ali, it is an opportunity for the discussion to open to this issue, which, at the moment, constitutes one of the biggest challenges to the EU. There were also criticisms that the conference was creating borders rather than opening borders, but the point is that those who actually were putting that into discussion, were the ones literally closing the discussion, and closing the continuation of the conference, which aimed to end with an activist moment. The idea was to go into the Moria camp, we had a bus outside waiting for us, and we had permission to go in, hence to go where there are borders and break the borders; and to be able to write down a declaration that we, as conference delegates, went in there and saw what is unacceptable on a humanitarian basis, not only for Greece, not only for EU, but also for humanity as a whole. Because just yesterday I read this article outlining that the refugees in Moria are treated like animals and waiting in line under the sun for three hours to access food, that they have no facilities. So only from the point of what was described, it would have been important to go inside.

And the visit to the camp ended up being canceled. It was a pity. Such an ending of a conference would have been very significant, would have been an experience that all the delegates of the conference would go inside and observe what is going on. We need to be there, we do not need to just talk about things, we have to actually do things, and that is the challenge of the conferences that I am trying to put together, and also the challenge inherent within CITS. Because it is not about creating an isolating camp, where intellectuals and students just think about things. We need to be connected to the social movements, we need to get feedback on what is going on there, and as a critical pedagogue and a follower of Paulo Freire, my position is that we need to break borders, cross borders, and practice interdisciplinarity when talking about

specific themes; if you see the CITS departments, they are always in arrangement with the commons or the social movements. We try to connect the themes that traditional approaches to knowledge have left in isolation. At the end, it is about making knowledge useful, except that in the academic world, it becomes a competition in terms of how much one knows on an issue, without actually ever having to implement anything. We need to challenge that. And this is the opportunity to create the university that we want and need, for the people of the left. In a real and serious manner.”

**RB:** “Could you tell me a little bit about the art-based event that was organized in the opening night? Who were the artists? And what was their involvement?”

**MN:** “We actually called for artists to contribute their work to the discussion. As I say, a picture is worth a thousand words, and a piece of art can express more than any academic paper, so we wanted to include arts, which is also another approach of CITS, as in taking a stand that arts are an important language, that we need arts in order to better relate all the political ideas that we have. We had this call for arts on the refugee crisis, and many artists sent in their work, which we exhibited at Halim Bey – the municipal Art Gallery of Lesvos. I think it was a very important contribution to the conference; there were many beautiful pieces of art. Most artists were unknown, they were young and wanted to contribute to our event. And it was very important that their work could be seen throughout the conference.”

**RB:** “What would you say was the overall result of the conference?”

**MN:** “I think one of the things that we all agreed on is the fact that the EU agreement with Turkey, on how to deal with the refugees, is a disgrace, and we also agreed that we need to move to the next step, which is to create an anti-war movement, because the refugee flows will not stop if the wars will not stop. So we will try to create in the future, a network with the people that came to the conference. We are creating a newsletter to keep in contact. We will try to publish the papers in a book in Greek, and also have CITS electronic proceedings. We do not want the discussion to end with the conference and we also want to disseminate the knowledge that was produced at the conference. We were thinking of also having some online workshops during the winter, fall, and the spring sessions, so we can continue to work together and create a larger community on the issues related to the refugee crisis. And again, I find this crisis, along with the capitalist crisis, the most challenging disaster of the world today. As of right now, 16 million people are displaced. And that will not stop until the wars stop, and I am sorry to say but such an end does not seem likely to happen in the future, [...] especially seeing the prospect of the American elections. At the same time that we are challenging and discussing about the refugee crisis, we need to also see this dimension, which is of course, straightly linked to the capitalist crisis. As we know from the global predicament of the 1930s, this ended up with the World War II. I believe that capitalism intends to postpone its survival through wars, which is why we need to bring all these issues together into a discussion that can give us hope, also by organizing an anti-capitalist movement, which also involves the refugee crisis.”

**RB:** “Thank you so much for taking the time to answer my questions. Is there anything else would you like to add? About CITS? Or the conference?”

**MN:** “Well, it was a challenging conference in many ways. In fact there were some tensioned discourses right from the beginning, although these were not made publically visible. For example, in discussing the war in Syria, Tim Anderson, who is a leftist Professor at University of Sydney, argues that there is an imperialist game played in Syria, and it is not Assad per se the butcher who’s at fault, but rather the imperial powers and ISIS, as there was a plot of the West to undermine and take down Syria, in the same manner they took down Libya with Gaddafi and Iraq with Saddam. The idea is to vandalize the

President of a country, in order to undermine him and create internal chaos. Generally, this is Anderson's stance. Then, Syria Solidarity UK, published this letter saying it is shameful for the conference organizers, that someone favorable to Assad, the butcher, would be a speaker. And they were putting pressure onto people to not come. Then Syria Solidarity International got involved stating that Syria Solidarity UK is a sham, that they do not represent Syria Solidarity International, and that they want us to allow Professor Anderson the academic freedom to speak. There was also a petition asking the conference organizers to allow Tim Anderson to speak and to attend the conference. And about 300 people signed this petition. Amongst them was John Pilger. However, at the end, about four keynote speakers from UK did not attend because these considerations. Four leftists did not join because Tim Anderson was given the right of academic freedom, but they still choose not to come. Overall, it was a very demanding conference. It was not an easy event to coordinate and organize. And of course, instead of building it more, we were chopping it somehow. In the end it went well. Overall I think it was a good conference, and I am proud of it, particularly that, when my values were challenged, all of us from the organizing committee, we talked and placed the priorities straight, and held high the principle of academic freedom, although we lost some important speakers. And this made it even a bigger success, I believe."

Exarchia, Athens, August 2016

More information on CITS can be found here: <http://www.coop-its.org/>. The Institute's next conference-event will take place between 26–29 October 2017 at the University of Peloponnese, Corinth, Greece in collaboration with the California School of Integral Studies. It is organized as a centenary of reflections on the 1917 Russian Revolution.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank the interviewee for her time and willingness to participate in the discussion.