

# Samos Dreaming: Reflecting on the Life, History and Social Injustice on Greece's Samos Island

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*There is a tragic lack of attention given to the achievements and activities of people and communities in tackling the problems they confront. It is tragic because people need hope and inspiration in these dark times and the thousands upon thousands of grass root mobilisations across the globe provide this. But unless you are closely involved with such activities you are denied a crucial source of knowledge and understanding and with it the energy to mobilise or at least not to be left hopeless and demoralised.*

As with all important human and social phenomenon there are many issues at play; local and global – particular to place and circumstance and also general when it comes to managing societies that enrich the few at the expense and on the backs of the majority. The strategies of such domination shift and change over time and are multi-dimensional as authority perpetually struggles to explain why the many struggle and suffer whilst others flourish as they capture the wealth and riches created by the people. Such struggles are never ending and always evolving as circumstances change. And they are not restricted to one site or mode ranging from hard and violent to softly softly : tear gas to youth clubs.

Very few in the world today escape being caught up in endless efforts of authority to shape our thoughts and manage our behaviour according to their needs. Efforts that come in many forms. Many of you reading this will know all too well how religion and 'science' have been deployed over time to legitimate inhumanity. I recall how in my English primary school we boisterously sang the Christian hymn All Things Bright and Beautiful at our daily school assemblies.

About the wondrous world God has created with the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate. And then later as a social work student being showered with sociological and psychological theories that explained why the poor were to blame for their poverty and hardship. At least I did not have to endure in my schooling in the 1950s and 1960s the experiences of my mum and dad who sat in class rooms with maps of the British Empire – where the sun never sets- and be told of the great gifts the British Empire brought to backward and uncivilised peoples. Yet me and my friends had to confront a schooling system that embedded the privilege of the few. We all sat the 11plus exam at the end of our time in primary school. As an 11 year old I was frightened by the 11 plus. I have a twin brother. At 11 we had never been apart going to the same schools. I had nightmares about one of us passing and one failing and being sent off to different schools. Even at that age you just knew that it was much more than going to different schools. It was about different worlds. Even if we didn't understand it fully, even at 11 we knew that this exam was life defining. It was the entrance exam into British class society as it was then.

Passing the exam meant you were seen as a child with potential to be developed and encouraged. Failure was the reverse. You were not seen in terms of potential development. Instead your expectations were to be refocused shifting from the brain to the hand. If you passed you went to the grammar school for at least five years knowing that you were being prepared for a bright future in the middle and professional classes. If you failed it was 5 years in the secondary modern school and a future of menial labour. And in both regimes the impact of gender and race was enormous.

One of the most common cruelties of state schooling systems in many parts of the world is in its creation of failure. At very young ages children are labelled and treated as failures. They are told they are not intelligent, that they have no talent and to adjust their expectations of life accordingly. In a variety of ways and settings huge swathes of children internalise these negative judgements which come to shadow their lives whether or not they give in or fight back refusing to accept that they are stupid and useless.

This is just a tiny fragment of the processes at work. In different places and times similar socialisation processes are at work which are designed to cement and reaffirm privilege and power. It never stops. And it can never stop given the enduring characteristics of human beings. We all have agency. We all think. We are not pieces of plasticine to be moulded at will. There are billions of us around today and I would hazard a guess that many are at least like the frightened 11 year old boy facing the 11 plus who is troubled that what he faces is not right.

So how does this relate to my reaction to the work of the Lewisham (London) food bank which prompted this article? I was inspired by what the so called 'ordinary' people of the area were doing to feed and help those struggling including those with CoVid. Created in 2014 the We Care project is now feeding and supporting 5,000 people (and their pets!). They take no money from the state, local or central, which had in fact abandoned them. Now Covid is a major aspect of their work as it has deepened their poverty and hardship. They have created a charity shop to raise money which has allowed them to open a cafe as well as a community kitchen for those who no longer have the means to cook and prepare food. All this is done by volunteers. They have made a short film about their work:

"We are delighted that our film 'Feeding Lewisham', *made out of love* and with zero funds, has been selected for, and is winning, awards globally. We believe this is, in part because the world is all facing the same Covid challenges. But our film is also different. *It does not go down the misery and poverty porn route. Instead, it shows how powerful communities can be when governments and councils fail them. It shows how awesome we as neighbours can be – united in solidarity. And it shows black people as leaders not as victims.*"

( My emphasis:  
<https://www.thecanary.co/feature/2020/12/13/a-short-film-made-by-a-community-is-getting-international-recognition/>)

And listen to what they said about why they made the film:

"We cannot thank enough those people who gave their time and still do to help others during this crisis and those in the film team who gave hours of time for free because what was happening in Lewisham was *[too] important not to be told whilst the film also is a model for others to copy and be inspired by globally.*" (The Canary 13 Dec 2020)

I shouted out Yes ! when I read this. For here was yet another vivid example of how awesome we can be when we are united in solidarity. What is happening in Lewisham is happening world wide. People failed by their governments and elites uniting in solidarity to make a better life. I saw this myself in Easterhouse, Glasgow where the tenants of one of the biggest and poorest council estates in the UK created the Festival Society which gave us stunning performances transforming streets into massive theatres; that brought the holiday seaside into the centre of the community complete with deck chairs, donkeys, sand, a fun fair and sticks of their own Easterhouse rock ( a traditional seaside sweet).

Easterhouse was famous because of its knife, drug and gang crime with its population repeatedly insulted and dismissed. Many commentators said it was the worse place in Britain. BUT never a comment or a glimpse of a community recognising and drawing on its endless talents and achieving great things in the midst of harsh poverty and a depressing environment ( once described by the Scottish comedian, Billy Conolly) as a “desert with windows”.

No mention that they looked at their skills and found that collectively they had 57 trades which became the name of their company which took over an empty school and created workshops which in turn won major contracts for estate maintenance and repairs. No mention that they designed and built the largest outdoor mural in Britain and that contrary to mainstream sneering was never vandalised.

I saw something similar in Croxteth in north Liverpool where a similar mobilisation of an impoverished community following a fight to save a school has led to the creation of network of shops, a sports centre, community university and much more in terms of groups, networks and activities. And I saw the same energies and capacities being realised in the black and Hispanic communities of Fort Worth and Dallas, Texas which created and ran health clinics in the mid 1980s.



Part of the Easterhouse Mural

There are a multitude of such initiatives globally, some of enormous importance such as the

mobilisation of communities in various west African countries in their ultimately successful campaigns between 2014 and 2017 to defeat Ebola. In the Basque region of northern Spain the Mondragon Corporation founded in 1956 has become one of the largest companies in Spain, employing 81,507 workers in 2019 in 257 companies. Its core principles are co-operation and solidarity and the subservience of capital.

There are so many examples to learn from! Collectively they help and sustain literally millions of people whether in co-ops, credit unions, food banks, health centres, play and sports, song, dance, theatre, village and town councils and on the streets and in our homes. And it is not just the sheer scale of *what* they do, but *how* they do it. With dignity, respect, solidarity, understanding, love and laughter; all qualities which are almost invisible in official agencies of various kinds. (I have learnt over the years that if I don't hear laughter and don't see smiles in organisations you need to be on alert as these tend to be bad places.)

That so little of this is ever taught in schools and colleges and given such little media attention is deliberate. So much about these public mobilisations, especially amongst those described by Fanon as the *wretched of the earth* fundamentally challenge the core precepts which underpin the deep inequalities of today's world. Love trumps greed and happiness trumps wealth to put it simply. It is for good reason that authority tries to diminish, devalue and at times to destroy these grass roots activities and groups. This is especially clear in the state violence which is so often used against squatters for their violation of the sacredness accorded to private property. But there are many other examples across the spectrum where laws and statutes are dredged up or enacted to control grass root activity.

Occasionally we get some vivid examples of authority's fears as was the case during the early 1970s when across much of the advanced capitalist world (North America, Japan and Western Europe) women, black and minorities, gays, lesbians and transgender, anti-war movements, students and school kids and other stigmatised and neglected peoples took to the streets demanding and fighting for their fundamental rights including dignity and respect. The convulsion took many forms and was constantly shifting. Authority was frightened. The elites collected in the *Trilateral Commission* "a mechanism for lubricating the thrust of co-operation and co-ordination between the major capitalist economies" commissioned a report on '*The Crisis of Democracy*' undertaken by 3 conservative sociologists (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki). It was published in 1975 and is full of their pessimism and fear about the mass mobilisations underway. For them this was *the* crisis of democracy. There was no way they could accede to what they called a "democratic surge" because Crozier and his colleagues claimed that it would lead to "the disintegration of civil society, the breakdown of social discipline, the debility of leaders and the alienation of citizens". Their conclusion is simple; "democratic societies cannot work when the citizenry is not passive."

(As a brief aside it is worth noting at the time of the Report being published many in the Trilateral Commission were doubtful that they could control these movements or moderate their demands of the state. But some of their key proposals were pursued. They argued that too many schools and universities were encouraging students to question and challenge. The Trilaterals in the final analysis want obedience from their minions and not questions. This had to change. They also argued for a renewed and energetic focus on individualism with people being encouraged to see themselves foremost as consumers and not as citizens. Credit cards and consumer debt were seen as having great potential in controlling behaviour.)

The point I am trying to make is that despite the lack of attention and acknowledgement of these thousands of activities this should not be taken to mean they are not scrutinised and watched by authority. There are moments when this is all too apparent when undercover infiltration by the 'security service' (whose security?) is occasionally revealed. But in the main the potential challenge is handled in a vast diversity of ways. For authority generally, the activities of these autonomous movements of the people tend to be viewed as social rather than political problems. This categorisation is reinforced as so many autonomous movements have no significant links with organised politics and rarely use an overtly political vocabulary to describe or even organise their efforts. Moreover, throughout the world, those at the bottom of the social pile are all too often ignored and abandoned by mainstream political parties and groups, even those who claim to be concerned with injustice and poverty. Like, Ramsey MacDonald, one of the leaders of the British Labour Party a century ago who declared that they would never seek the support of those who lived in the slums.

So many in power fear their fellow people. Look at their private banks and strong rooms; look at where they live surrounded by fences and electronic security systems managed by private security firms and guards. Look at their expenditure on the police. Last week in Greece the government in Athens announced a record equipment budget for the police next year. Without any embarrassment or shame they were instead proud to be announcing that the increased budget would provide nearly 700 new police vehicles, nearly 2000 bullet proof vests, armoured boots and helmets plus the usual array of drones, cameras and chemical weapons. It is a budget which reveals much about the way in which the Greek state perceives its people.



Named the wall of shame, the 10 km wall separates rich and poor in Lima, Peru. The rich live amongst us, but you won't run into them (if they can help it)

For the past 15 years I have lived in a small mountain village on the Greek frontier island of Samos. This is the place where I now stand and dig. As regular readers of *Samos Chronicles* will know it is place of paradoxes and horrors. We have a beautiful nature but a refugee camp that defies humanity. The majority of the people, both refugees and locals alike, experience enduring poverty, few jobs and low pay. The 12 year economic and social crisis

has been crippling. Basic services have collapsed. The public buses would be museum pieces in many parts of western Europe, indeed the same could be said for most of the cars, trucks and lorries here. Their age, condition and that they comprise the majority of the vehicles on the island reveals much.

All of these issues have worsened with Covid. The Covid cases here are thankfully small but the lock-downs apply all the same with the closure of businesses and movement restrictions. Such regulations virtually wiped out the 2020 summer tourist season upon which so many depend on. Then came the devastating earthquake at the end of October 2020 which was terrifying as it was destructive. The great majority of the many who now have homes and lands to repair have no money for the work. There is no expectation that the state will come to their aid quickly. After all, it is commonplace here for newly retired workers to wait up to 3 years before they receive their pension. (There are 300,000 pension cases outstanding in Dec 2020!) Not surprisingly many here are demoralised and feeling battered; not knowing when the next blow will come or from where. They feel unprotected and extremely vulnerable.

What seems new here is not so much the disdain and distrust in the state – this has long been a feature of Greek life – but the erosion in personal confidence and capacity. Most on Samos know there will be little or no help from outside, but what is so saddening is to see young people in particular despair of their own capacity to do anything. There are, as everywhere, amazing talents amongst the people but without some sense of hope they are redundant. This is not it should be noted, the general case for the refugees here who are tireless in their efforts to survive during their detention on the island. But there is still a wide gap between many on Samos and the refugees so the possibilities for energising solidarities are still few.

We desperately need to rekindle hope. Not idle hopes that someone or other will come riding to rescue but hope about our capacity to make life better by working together. There is no other choice. Many here know this to be true but are not clear as to how to move forward and have little or no energy to act. Here we vividly see the consequences of the Greek state denying the people the opportunity to learn from *their* history.

Very few, and almost exclusively old people, know something of the extraordinary heroism of the Greek people during the Nazi occupation of the 1940s. Under the yoke of a brutal occupation the Greek people came to control most of the countryside. They found ways to feed themselves; they created schools, clinics, theatres; women were for the first time involved in elected local councils and many became celebrated partisans and resistance fighters. It is not an exaggeration to describe what was going on in occupied Greece as nothing less than a social revolution. Their so called military allies were appalled and from 1943 they worked endlessly to weaken and defeat what they considered to be a communist uprising. Arms and finances were re-directed away from the peoples' partisan units to create a conservative counter force. The British government which at that time was the dominant external power in war time Greece was adamant that the (widely hated) Greek monarchy had to be restored and that Greece's strategic geography meant it must remain with the West and not fall under the influence of the Soviet Union. Once the Nazis withdrew, civil war followed and with significant military support from the US and the UK the peoples' uprising was defeated. On Samos some of the older people remember as children, the shelling of left partisan groups in the mountains by British warships. In some parts of Greece napalm was dropped on civilian populations.

Many adults fled to neighbouring countries (often communist run such as a Yugoslavia) leaving their children behind in the care of friends and relatives. These in turn were rounded up by the thousands to be 're-educated' under the tutelage of queen, Frederica who with her husband had returned to Greece. As the saviour of these 'bandit children' she created around 54 Queens Camps charged with bringing these children back into the Greek family. For Frederica and her 'queens helpers' these children had to learn to see their parents not as heroes of resistance and progress but as basically evil people who wanted to destroy all that was great about Greece. Lady Norton, the wife of the British Ambassador to Greece was fulsome in her praise. After visiting a Queen's School on Leros in March 1950, she expressed admiration for the way in which it was "civilising the bandit children" by "eradicating the memory of the wild untamed years of the Civil War". Moreover, Greece "is the only country in the world where real creative work is being done to combat the cancer of Bolshevism." (Cited by Danforth and Boeschoten, *Children of the Greek Civil War* 2012, p.102).



JUNTOS SOMOS FUERTES TOGETHER WE ARE STRONG

The Greek state, to this day, works to keep this crucial period in Greek history hidden – "eradicating the memory". It is not unique to Greece as throughout the world similar processes to remove, ignore, ridicule the efforts of the people to survive, to organise and to achieve are ever present. Time and again we see that one of the first tasks of progressive social movements is their taking control over their history; of rescuing their past, and telling their story.

As far as I am aware no state school in Greece explores this relatively recent period of tumultuous social activity and change when the people across the country in small towns and villages took control of their lives and did amazing things in extraordinary circumstances. Yet we need this kind of inspiration like never before in places like Samos where a sense of defeat and hopelessness now shadows everyday life. We need to remember what so called ordinary people can and do achieve when they come together and simply refuse to give up. We have to rip down the curtains that try to stop us from seeing, understanding and imagining. We need to open eyes as to what popular mobilisations have achieved wherever they are. They give us reason to hope with confidence. They are an

under-estimated source of our power. So the more we know the better. The more we learn of these events and activities the stronger we become. The phobia of the powerful has always been the people throughout history. After all they are very few in number whereas we are billions strong. Time to rise me thinks!

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*This article was originally published on [Samos Chronicles](#). Chris Jones has been actively involved in the course of the last ten years in supporting the rights of refugees on Greece's Samos Island*

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