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Constructing Solidarity as Resistive and Creative Agency in Austerity Greece

Abstract:

Recent scholarship on the global financial crisis and its geographical underpinnings has highlighted its macro-economic causes and variegated effects in Europe and beyond. Drawing on the case of Greece, this paper contends that these discussions fall short in uncovering the social impact of the European crisis and austerity politics introduced since 2010. In adding to debates that call for nuanced approached to crises, through the very forms and means people and communities contest and subvert these 'from below', the paper discusses solidarity, its meaning and practices, in constructing resistance to austerity and grassroots creativity. In particular, it shows how solidarity initiatives and networks have acted as survival means in the face of a social reproduction crisis for vulnerable social groups and, at the same time, opened up spaces for political struggle against austerity to unfold. Furthermore, it interrogates the formation of a social/solidarity economy as an alternative platform for re-instituting socio-economic relations in an era of austerity. Finally, through reflecting upon the role of the solidarity movement, the paper critically assesses their potential in foregrounding a political project of social transformation, *in-the-making* and still at stake. The article draws on engaged ethnographic research, conducted in Athens, Greece, between 2012 and 2013.

Keywords: Austerity, Crisis, Greece, Solidarity, Social Economy

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1. Introduction

Jon Henley in his article in *The Guardian* titled "Greece's solidarity movement: it's a whole new model- and it's working" (2015), highlights the key role of existing solidarity initiatives, networks of exchange, community cooking collectives and social clinics in filling the gaps left by austerity and, at the same time, introducing a new paradigm for socio-economic organisation. The main problematic raised in this article refers to the relationship between this type of emergent bottom-up social infrastructure and a broader political project of social transformation at the time imagined and promised by the government of Syriza. While the latter still remains largely at stake and is currently under contestation, given Syriza's recent shift to a 'Real Politik' that fails to escape the neoliberal austerity confines, the solidarity movement remains active and continues to serve as both a buffer for the severe impacts of deepening austerity and a platform for grassroots creativity and experimentation with alternatives.

Much of the debates around the 2008 global financial crisis have focused on its macro-economic causes and variegated effects across various geographical contexts (Blyth 2013, Peck et al. 2013, Harvey 2014). Nevertheless, as recent scholarship stressed (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014, Derickson et al. 2015, Featherstone et al. 2015, Huke et al. 2015) these fall short in analytical interpretations of the ways and means grassroots movements disrupt, contest and subvert crises 'from below' and their potential in producing resistive agency. The latter debates are considered crucial as they strive to shift the focus of critical analysis from domination to emancipation and bring forward the always incomplete, hence contested, character of the neoliberal project. Furthermore, the goal is to nuance the role of emergent subjectivities, either oppositional/ resistive to austerity and crises or otherwise, as constitutive of the development of context-specific neoliberalism(s) and 'actually existing resistance(s)' (Huke et al. 2015). Based on these, this paper draws on the Greek context to discuss emergent forms of contestation to austerity politics, as manifested 'from below' since 2010. In particular, the paper focuses on solidarity, its local meanings and practices, in constructing resistive subjectivity and grassroots creativity. In this regard, I suggest that solidarity holds a three-fold role in existing grassroots movements in Greece, in forging mutual support and survival to an ongoing crisis of social reproduction, and fostering spaces for political struggle and resistance to austerity, as well as alternative ways of social and economic conduct to emerge (Arampatzi 2016). This type of 'pragmatically prefigurative' subjectivity (Bailey et al., forthcoming this issue) and its transformative

potential is critically reflected upon, in terms of re-constituting socio-economic relations, through formations of a social/solidarity economy and experimenting with a bottom-up democratic politics of grassroots self-organisation and creativity.

The paper methodologically draws on engaged ethnographic research conducted in Athens, Greece between 2012 and 2013. Through participating *in* and collaborating *with* two local groups in the city center neighbourhood of Exarcheia, namely the Residents' committee and their Time bank project, and the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, solidarity as narrated, imagined and practiced emerged as both a conceptual and a political tool that permeated everyday activities and broader collective action taking place in Athens at the time, vis-à-vis austerity, precarity and a 'politics of fear' and xenophobia.

2. The (more than a) 'Greek Crisis' and its discontents

After six consecutive years of severe austerity measures, implemented by Greek governments in order to secure bailout funds from the institutional creditors, also known as 'the troika'- i.e. the European Central Bank (ECB), the European Commission (EC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), recently turned 'quartet' with the addition of the European Stability Mechanism, Greece still by far remains *in crisis*. Ignoring the opposition to austerity and the myriad resistances that have emerged over this period of time, the alternating Greek governments and the creditors pushed forward a structural adjustment programme that, coupled with the 'relief' funds, would supposedly secure a Greek exit from the crisis and sustainable economic growth. What was a marginal critique of these actions a few years ago, articulated mainly by critical scholars and activist groups that saw the disastrous outcomes of this programme approaching fast, is now being validated by a recent research report published in the *Handelsblatt* and conducted by the Berlin-based European School of Management and Technology. The report highlights that only less than 5% of the total loans ended in the Greek state budget (and potentially benefited Greek citizens), while more than 95% was used to service previous debt and interest payments (Handelsblatt 2016). Not to mention that these loans include conditions requiring the nationalisation of the losses of banks, on two separate occasions, with no similar nationalisation of their gains. This has led to increases in public debt weighing upon current and future generations of Greeks. In other words, what has become evident is a vicious circle of *debt-servicing through debt-generation*, constantly perpetuated and creating a new subjectivity, in a top-down fashion,

which Lazzarato (2012) names, the 'indebted man'. In this instance, debt becomes an obligation of future value and a control mechanism, inscribing the perpetual repayment on populations as a new morality of guilt, blame, duty and fear (Lazzarato 2012).

In putting the 'Greek' crisis in context, the 'domino' effect of the 2008 US crash, which had far-reaching impact on global financial institutions, placed the Eurozone under pressure and triggered a sovereign debt crisis. As one of the weakest links in the common currency chain of participant countries, Greece saw its debt skyrocketing, despite subsequent bailouts and austerity, and at the same time its GDP shrank by 25% (Lapavitsas 2012). Despite much public debate since 2010 on what has been termed the 'Greek crisis' it is only recently that this rhetoric is beginning to unravel. As argued by several key scholars (Laskos and Tsakalotos 2013, Varoufakis 2013), there can be no such thing as a 'Greek crisis', despite the initial attempts of European and Greek public officials and media to demonize the 'lazy, corrupt, irresponsible' Greeks and discursively contain what later exploded as a crisis at the European scale. Instead, as Varoufakis (2013) pointed out through the 'Global Minotaur' metaphor, Greece and its current predicament can be understood as a symptom of broader transformations happening in the global economy since the 1970's (even traced back to earlier periods of recession). These are the increasing and deepening dependency of national economies upon particular mechanisms of global processes of financialization. In a similar vein, Laskos and Tsakalotos (2013) contend that, in this context, Greece is far from being a 'special', 'unique' or 'exceptional' case within the complex processes of neoliberal globalisation; neither is the crisis 'Greek', being a result of 'underdevelopment' or an 'incomplete fruition of the neoliberal modernising drive' within the Eurozone and in lack of structural (neoliberal) reforms that would solve all of the country's problems. Rather, as they argue, "the Greek crisis represents a crisis of a particular political settlement" (Laskos and Tsakalotos 2013: 1), meaning a cross- articulation of neoliberal capitalist crises (one of their intense instances being the 2008 one) and a deeply problematic financial architecture underlying the Eurozone, rooted in the unevenness of participating economies and resulting in contrasting regional inequalities (Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014).

Austerity measures introduced in Greece since 2010 had an immediate impact. The stifling of public spending has seriously deteriorated, and brought to their knees, key services and infrastructure, such as welfare and provision, and the health and educational systems. At the same time, conditions of the loans have included large-scale privatisations of public assets and 'commons', such as ports, airports and land (Hadjimichalis 2014). These were coupled

with drastic cuts in wages and pensions, unemployment and other benefits, labour right reforms and taxation on housing, which is a key pillar of social reproduction for Greeks as a result of the 'antiparochi' system. [1] The far-reaching impact of austerity is reflected in high unemployment rates[2] (over 25% in 2016 for the overall population), especially among the youth (exceeding in the same year the rate of 52%), and a decrease in income for those still employed yet under 'flexicarious' conditions. Finally, since the ban on housing confiscations was legally lifted, a housing crisis is currently underway, as homeowners have proven incapable of servicing individual debt and mortgages, leading to a series of ongoing evictions and auctions by the banks. Similarly, austerity politics were manifested in other European countries, such as Portugal, Spain, Ireland and the UK to name a few. At the same time, the crisis had variegated causes and effects, their outcomes being primarily evident on cities and regions through deepening processes of capital enclosures, dispossession and impoverisation (Harvey 2012, Peck et al. 2013). As Laskos and Tsakalotos (2013) point out, in this case, this process of deepening of the neoliberal order did not seek any sort of consent or compromise, as in previous instances of crises; rather, it was the 'stick' instead of the 'carrot' employed as means to further the gains of those at the top and repress those at the receiving end of austerity.

Nevertheless, these processes have not moved forward smoothly, rather they have been forcefully challenged. Looking into the trajectories of struggles that challenged the neoliberal project and its multiple complex manifestations, the crisis not only instigated intense *moments* of mass mobilisations (such as the movements that occupied urban squares around the world and protested against austerity measures, including the Spanish 'Indignados', the Greek 'squares' movement' and the Occupy movements). More importantly, as regards to a deeper questioning of neoliberal austerity, these managed to open up new pathways into alternatives to the neoliberal one and *processes* of reconfiguration of bottom-up emancipatory agency and grassroots creativity. In the Greek case, this became evident in the period during and following the mass protests at Syntagma (Parliament) square in Athens city center. In the occupied square assembly, participants raised questions as to

[1] 'Antiparochi' (meaning 'instead of provision') was legislated in post-war Greece and denoted the start of a period of intensified urbanisation and mass internal migration to Greek cities. Through the 'antiparochi' law, private property in the form of land plot was exchanged for flat-ownership in the new buildings, developed by private constructors. Often, 'antiparochi' is juxtaposed to social and public housing development in the European North, as it acted in a similar way by securing the social reproduction of big parts of the population, albeit being based on individualised rather than state-led housing policies.

[2] Source: Eurostat, 'Unemployment Statistics' 2016

'who is to blame' for the crisis, demanded (but most importantly, re-modelled) deliberative democratic practices and organised their everyday life in the occupation through self-organisation, solidarity and horizontal decision-making (Leontidou 2012, Kaika and Karaliotas 2014, Arampatzi 2016). This intense politicisation dynamic that converged at the squares, was later dispersed across the city of Athens and other cities and became grounded in local neighbourhood assemblies, social centers, solidarity initiatives and networks, to name a few. The activities organised within these newly formed activist spaces, alongside the participation of previous forms of organisation, traditional or participatory- such as unions and bottom-up assemblies- have so far successfully managed to act as survival means for large parts of the population, marginalised and excluded from public services, the homeless and unemployed, as well as immigrants reaching Greece by the thousands since the summer of 2015. Moreover, within these 'solidarity spaces' (Arampatzi 2016), a broader project of social transformation, constructed in a bottom-up fashion, is being modelled, through alternatives that aim to challenge the neoliberal order and touch upon multiple levels of the social and economic life.

What is crucial to acknowledge here is the fact that over the past few years, despite widespread repression, the demonization of resistance in public media and the politics of fear unleashed through multiple ways into the public sphere, the squares' movement and subsequent forms of grassroots resistance and alternatives have managed to simultaneously serve as 'buffer mechanisms' for the repercussions of the crisis *and* as spaces of creative experimentation at the grassroots level. As Laskos and Tsakalotos (2013: 113) put it, the stakes for the emergent movements have not only been over the spoils of war, but over the very terrain of the battle. In this sense, what is highly relevant for the scope of this paper is the need to grasp the way in which emergent forms of contestation to the crisis and austerity have interpreted the conjuncture as an opportunity to overturn both the rules of the game and the table upon which the game is set as expressed through the 61% 'No' to austerity vote in the Greek referendum, in July 2015.

Moreover, the role of these emergent forms of contestation can be understood as a process of constructing in a bottom-up fashion, what Bailey et al. term, 'disruptive subjectivities' (Bailey et al., forthcoming), vis-à-vis top-down indebtedness, guilt and shameful subjects (Lazzarato 2012). Following recent scholarship that calls for interpretations of crises through looking into the very same forms through which these are being contested, subverted, embodied and narrated by people and communities (Derickson et

al. 2015, Featherstone et al. 2015, Hadjimichalis and Hudson 2014, Huke et al. 2015), the remaining part of this paper shifts the focus towards emergent resistance and solidarity practices in Greece (and especially Athens). This analytical shift, from domination to resistance practices, enriches our understandings of the multiple, fluid and, at times, 'invisible' forms of contestation. Furthermore, in both scholarly analytical, and politically meaningful, terms it can serve as a useful emancipatory toolbox, employed to deconstruct (discursively *and* materially), the always incomplete, unstable and frail nature of neoliberalism(s). This brings forward the possibility of social transformation that lies within struggles.

3. Grassroots solidarity: securing survival, opening up spaces for political struggle and introducing alternatives

The post-squares' movement period was marked by a dispersal of political activism across neighbourhoods in Greek cities. The intense activity and mobilisations taking place in urban squares across the country not only marked a cycle of protest that managed to bring together traditional actors and movements; but also initiated the diffusion of new practices that people experimented with at the occupied squares. In organising their day-to-day lives in the occupations, mutual aid, solidarity and self-organisation became particularly prominent means of collective action (Leontidou 2012, Kaika and Karaliotas 2014). In Athens, following the forced eviction of the Syntagma occupation in the summer of 2011, such practices became transposed in local squares across neighbourhoods, where popular assemblies formed and picked up the thread of counter-austerity struggle. By the end of 2012, more than 200 solidarity initiatives and networks had been created across Greece, forming a broader solidarity movement that in 2016 counts more than 400 groups[3]. Through these, *solidarity* has acquired a renewed meaning among grassroots struggles that have actively engaged in the production of a subversive agency to counter austerity and experiment with alternatives (Arampatzi 2016).

In this regard, the role of solidarity initiatives, structures and networks in the current context has been crucial in countering the impact of deepening austerity and producing practical alternatives to deal with growing needs of social groups. Drawing on their respective communities' needs and local contexts, solidarity groups so far have been

[3] Source: 'Solidarity for All', solidarity4all.gr

organising activities that: first, respond to pressing social reproduction needs, such as the gathering and distribution of basic goods, for example food and clothing; and, second, provide primary health treatment, through self-organised medical clinics and pharmacies that treat a growing number of the population with no access to health insurance, such as the unemployed and migrants. At the same time, and closely linked to these groups, solidarity networks have mobilised to respond to the pressures imposed on individual debt-holders through housing legislation and taxation. Other solidarity activities focus on the development of alternative social and economic relations, as part of a broader struggle of social transformation. While still nascent, these solidarity groups aspire to form a social or solidarity economy to act as both a 'buffer' and an alternative to collapsing welfare provisions. Time banks, alternative currency networks, 'without middlemen markets' and peer-to-peer services, cooperatives and community cooking collectives are only a few of the examples of such endeavours. These have been run through newly formed independent projects or already existing social centers, occupations and neighbourhood assemblies.

Within this broad array of solidarity initiatives and networks mobilising in Athens and other places across Greece, the Time bank and Solidarity network of Exarcheia are representative examples of local groups- based in a city center area, historically prominent among social movements- which were both formed over the past few years, as responses to the crisis. In 2012, the local Residents' committee of Exarcheia- ran through a neighbourhood assembly on a weekly basis since 2007- decided to set up an alternative network exchanging services based on time, rather than money. Through the Time bank, the locals have managed to create non-monetary economic activity, which draws upon local resources, skills, knowledge and available social capital in the area. This type of neighbourhood-based solidarity economy has managed so far to sustain a network of basic exchanges, while at the same time enhancing community bonds and social cohesion in the area. The notion of solidarity and cooperation promoted by the Time bank, as described by one member, is about "building relations among equals… we try to mobilise people as active participants, not as mere recipients of services" (activist, member of the Exarcheia Time bank, personal interview, Athens 2012). In this sense, solidarity as narrated and practiced through local groups serves: first, as means for survival and a mechanism for securing the social reproduction of vulnerable groups in the context of austerity; second, as a way for opening up political struggle that challenges, undermines and subverts dominant perceptions and practices of charity and philanthropy that perpetuate forms of oppression; and, third, as a

model for enacting different (often non-commodified) types of social *relations* that aim to empower and transform 'passive' recipients of support into 'active' participants of struggle (Featherstone 2012, Arampatzi 2016).

Furthermore, the Solidarity network operates based on the principles of mutual aid and self-organisation around the circulation of basic survival goods that are crucial to impoverished social groups. This network was formed in 2012 and reflects the intense grassroots activity that followed the squares' movement. Prior to the network, the local popular assembly of Exarcheia mobilised around the impact of austerity in the local context, while the formation of the network continued this emergent culture of self-organisation. In the past few years this group has mobilised around housing issues, such as taxation and mortgages, pursuing direct action to block auctions and re-connect electricity in households unable to service their debt. In a similar vein to the Time bank, solidarity in this group is understood and practiced as a commonly embodied and lived experience, based on practical needs and shared aspirations. According to a member of the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, "solidarity is about accepting the other as equal, in the sense of acknowledging that any minute each one of us could be in the same, or even worse, situation than them" (activist, member of the Solidarity network of Exarcheia, personal interview, Athens, 2013). As the above groups experiment with creating practical *alternatives* to tackle the impacts of austerity, they are often faced with practical *limitations* to their goals and actions. Self-organisation, volunteering and crowdfunding are the key mechanisms of mobilisations of such local solidarity groups. Nevertheless, these pose issues, such as a frequent lack in resources, efficiency and influence on broader power relations. These are being acknowledged and dealt with on an everyday basis in their operation, as groups often seek to connect and cooperate with other local and non-local actors, to effect campaigns and wider collective action.

Since their formation, the Time bank and Solidarity network of Exarcheia have actively engaged in attempts to create broader alternatives in the sphere of social reproduction. These resulted in connections to broader campaigns and actions, such as struggles around housing issues, and participation in broader formations of a social/ solidarity economy through links to the 'Solidarity for All' network. This network, also based in Athens city center, was formed in 2012 by members of Syriza (the coalition of the radical left party, currently in office) and non-aligned activists. Its primary goal was to act as a coordinative platform for solidarity structures, initiatives and networks popping up across Greece at the

time. The framework through which this network operates instigated a process of creating a social/ solidarity economy, through enhancing links and cooperation among solidarity groups and local communities, in the face of the economic crisis and as a strategic alternative to austerity neoliberalism. As highlighted in a report document titled *Building hope against fear and devastation* produced by the Solidarity for All network,

> the solidarity movement has emerged as a positive social experiment within the ruins of the crisis. It outlines a political culture, which through its own infrastructure creates the conditions and potential practices of commons to address public needs. A movement organised around everyday needs, which highlights the importance of addressing the humanitarian crisis as a field of political resistance and suggests a new kind of social relationship and collective subject… Its objective is not to substitute the collapsing public welfare system, or to only build alternatives within a system of inequalities. On the contrary, it seeks to contribute to the development of a different concept and response to people's common needs- for everyone and with the participation of everyone- by instigating practices, spaces and processes that will facilitate change at every level, from the bottom up… The solidarity movement acknowledges that its potential for social transformation goes hand in hand with the fight for political change (Solidarity for All, 2015: 16).

What is evident above, among the key goals set by the Solidarity for All network, is the will to politicise *solidarity*, as a relation that opens up spaces for political struggle to emerge (Featherstone 2012), and as a grounded practice aimed towards social transformation. In discussing the role of the Exarcheia Time bank within this broader framework of solidarity, as an enabling mechanism that politicises social struggles, an activist mentioned that "we choose to define solidarity as entwined with resistance and struggle for social change and we want this notion of solidarity to spread across struggles for political emancipation" (activist, member of the Exarcheia Time bank, personal interview, Athens 2012). Arguably this perception and practice of solidarity moves beyond philanthropic support, which is often one-directional, and links to struggle for broader change. It is crucial to note that the aspirations set by the two groups in Exarcheia, as well as the Solidarity for All network, have developed over the past few years in close relationship to broader mobilisations opposing austerity and the memoranda, as well as the electoral rise of Syriza

since 2012, leading to the election of the Syriza-led coalition government in early 2015. Hence, we can trace evident synergies among this type of 'complementary contestation' (Arampatzi 2014) taking place at various levels (social, economic, political), and developing 'in, against and beyond' state structures. This is notwithstanding the internal multiplicities and differences of solidarity initiatives, as well as the political a(nta)gonisms at play. In order to nuance this key link between grassroots mobilisations and broader political developments, it is important to mention that, despite the recent shift of Syriza to an austerity-oriented agenda, the solidarity movements are still in place and continue to actively challenge the latter, as well as promote a different paradigm of socio-economic organisation. Moreover, their role so far in responding to the refugee crisis has been crucial. Several of the already existing solidarity initiatives and structures have served as spaces where refugees are welcomed and hosted, despite ongoing attempts from mainstream media to undermine their crucial role in the broader, deeply problematic conjuncture.

4. Interrogating the transformative potential of solidarity movements in re-constituting socio-economic relations

The discussion above has raised two key questions in relation to the empirical reality that grassroots movements are grounded in: first, what is the role of the newly formed solidarity movements in the context of deepening austerity in Greece? Second, based on how local groups and communities narrate and practice solidarity, can we foreground *solidarity* as *both* a conceptual and political tool so as to unpack ongoing forms of contestation to crises and austerity 'from below'? In this section, I suggest that both of these questions are closely linked to the broader discussion of political alternatives, as imagined and experimented with, in a bottom-up fashion, by grassroots movements. This discussion aims, on the one hand to partly counter the analytically stagnant 'left melancholy', currently widespread among the Left, given the recent post-crisis political developments of neoliberal entrenchment across Europe (Huke et al. 2015); and, on the other hand, to bring forward and critically reflect upon aspects of a diverse and multiple, yet actually existing, world of 'cracks'.

As noted earlier by activists participating in solidarity initiatives in Athens, solidarity holds a two-fold role in current grassroots mobilisations: first, it serves as means to counter the impact of austerity and empower participants vis-à-vis precarisation, impoverisation and indebtedness. Second, it aims to act as a transformative force for participants, engaging them

in political struggle and generating new spaces for modelling alternatives. It is within the latter processes, I suggest, that we can analytically locate and interrogate the transformative potential of solidarity movements, as attempts to re-institute social relations and a broader platform of a social/solidarity economy, operating at three simultaneous levels: the social, the economic and the territorial/spatial. While a discussion of the latter falls beyond the scope of this paper, it is nevertheless considered crucial for interpreting the 'whys' and 'hows' solidarity movements emerge, and where they do, through an analysis of their *spatiality* and geographical context (Arampatzi 2016).

At the socio-economic level, existing solidarity movements in Greece are striving to turn a crisis of social reproduction into an attempt to re-institute social reproduction itself. This includes an attempt to reconstitute production processes, as in cases of cooperatives and occupied factories. In acknowledging shortcomings and limits to their function, cooperation among localised solidarity initiatives often occurs in such a way that provides for complementary needs, resources and infrastructure between multiple groups that are often from divergent backgrounds. As one activist put it,

> multiple structures that have been created due to the crisis raised questions on how to practice politics in a new way… it is not enough anymore to produce political imperatives…we try to focus on our needs instead, the ones we share with other people, and cooperate" (activist, member of the Exarcheia Time bank, personal interview, Athens 2013).

The type of material pragmatism that creates practical alternatives described in this quote holds a present-tense dimension, being dictated by a pressing conjuncture, but is also employed for contesting 'the ways things are done' in mainstream politics and at the same time re-constituting participation in a different way.

In this sense, we can think of such examples as *prefigurative*, to the extent that social change is not merely imagined as such, or left lingering as a future project. On the contrary, as noted by another activist, it is being modelled through practice:

> solidarity structures respond to immediate needs but there is much more to them… they help people realise that there is another world possible, one of cooperation and solidarity… which is not just about the relief of starving people, the homeless of those who cannot pay for their taxes… it is a promise of a different you and a different me

> and we experiment with it through everyday practice" (activist, member of the Exarcheia Solidarity network, personal interview, Athens, 2013).

The above resonates with Dinerstein's (2015: 114) account of 'concrete utopias', which draws on the Argentine crisis context to suggest that the constitutive element of the realisation of such prefigurative examples are the praxis-oriented experimentations into the *yet-to-be-fullfilled*, "the seeds of which exist within the present reality in a latent form". Drawing on Dinerstein's (2015) analysis, the 'different self'- or the lack of another society, as mentioned above - refers to a political subject that discovers the 'absence' and acts on it collectively, to anticipate the future in a present creative process of exploration of 'concrete utopias'.

The above open up issues of deliberative democratic participation vis-à-vis representative politics that have so far failed to address the needs and interests of the working and lower-middle classes. These issues are central in the agendas of several movements that have appeared over the past few years- such as the Greek squares' movement, the Spanish 'Indignados' and the Occupy movements - which often remained defensive or denunciatory, in their demands for 'real democracy', a key motto in several occupied public spaces around the world between 2011-2012. Notwithstanding the importance of these, the key element of the solidarity movements in Greece is a move beyond making demands to the state (which nevertheless are also made), towards the creation of new forms of organisation that favour broader and inclusive participation, such as open assemblies, informal membership, rotation of spokespeople, self-organisation, skill-sharing, and horizontal operation (albeit often messy and incomplete) (Arampatzi 2016). As Leontidou (2014) points out, these emergent movements are not about 'structurelessness' but rather about lack of structured leadership, as they organise around different types of structures.

Moreover, the transformative potential of such initiatives at the level of social relations also rests on their function as *educational laboratories* for participants, in multiple ways. In this regard, as an activist member of the Exarcheia Time bank noted,

> each [solidarity] structure, based on the small scale of the neighbourhood, creates a model, an example of encounter and solidarity 'in practice'… in this sense, solidarity initiatives open up new political spaces, towards possibilities beyond traditional- party and union- politics" (activist, member of the Exarcheia Time bank, personal interview, Athens 2013).

We can think of solidarity initiatives as spaces constituted at the everyday life level, that is the neighbourhood, where participants actively engage with direct decision-making and horizontal operational logics. We can locate the educational, and hence transformative potential of solidarity spaces and practices in this sense, in their ability to activate and create political 'subjects'. These engage in a process of 'informal learning-in-struggle' (Vieta 2014), devote their material and non-material resources, know-how and skills, share needs and aspirations, make decisions collectively, and develop common 'vocabularies' and actions to solve common problems.

The educational capacity of solidarity movements that instigates transformative processes further extends to the problematic of 'economic democracy', an issue long forgotten in liberal democracies, yet still relevant and extremely crucial in the context of deepening austerity. In his study of the 'without middlemen' movement, a national network of producer- to- consumer open air markets, bypassing official market mechanisms and brokers, Rakopoulos (2015) locates the contestation of economic democracy within solidarity movements as constitutive of their operation. He employs a commonly used word among activists in Greece - 'kinimatikotita', or 'movementality' - to show how solidarity movements mobilise, activate, educate and expand their reach, in their attempts to contest austerity and produce alternatives (Rakopoulos 2015). In this regard, 'movementality' becomes a key mechanism of political education and mobilisation for the production of resistive subjectivities and the creation of alternatives, grounded in the sphere of social reproduction.

The foregoing discussion raises issues around the interplay of social and economic activities that takes place in solidarity movements which are currently active. These create new forms of socialisation, political participation and alternative forms of economic conduct, alternative currency networks, as in the case of the Time bank, and cooperatives. This is particularly relevant for discussions on their potential to transform existing socio-economic relations, drawing on practices and aspirations of a social/ solidarity economy. We can locate the notion and practices of social/solidarity economies within broader debates on 'diverse economies' and 'alternative spaces', as is prominent in the work of Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008). Their influential work argues for a nuanced approach to the dominant narrative of the capitalist project, as a coherent, complete entity of stabilised relations between labour, private property and surplus value extraction; and places under examination socio-economic processes that contest, subvert, hybridise and fall outside the reach of capitalist relations, for example through cooperative forms of labour, collective ownership, informal economies and

alternative networks of exchange. More particularly, Moulaert and Ailenei (2005) designate social/ solidarity economies within the realm of practices and economic activity, employed to serve social needs, in the forms of not-for-profit enterprises, and voluntary and cooperative sectors that operate independently of the state. These types of practices and alternative economic conduct, according to the authors, have historically re-emerged in periods of crisis and, based on past examples, have led to social policy reforms and their integration into welfare systems- as in cases of post-war Western European states. Additionally, depending on the context and the political environment in question, social/ solidarity economies develop hybrid and multiple typologies, forms and practices with different scalar reach and transformative effects (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005).

Drawing on Fuller and Jonas (2003), Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015) problematize notions of diverse economies operationalized by civil society actors and suggest instead multiple, contingent and context-specific typologies that nuance existing ones and challenge dominant narratives of 'alterity'. In particular, a typology suggested in this regard distinguishes between different types of 'alternative institutions': first, 'alternative-additional' to the ones operating through official state structures, second, 'alternative-substitutional' for state institutions that are not in place any longer or have ceased to operate fully and, third, 'alternative- oppositional', involving the ones that operate based on principles and goals different from mainstream institutions (Gritzas and Kavoulakos 2015). This typology of alternative institutions resonates to an extent with Wright's (2010) account of social transformation strategies that: first, aim to create 'ruptures' with state capitalism; second, through a piecemeal process, create 'interstitial' spaces, where alternatives are experimented with; and third, co-exist with, instrumentally employ and produce 'symbiotic' politics to state institutions.

Looking into how solidarity movements in Greece engage with the notion and practice of the social/solidarity economy resonates with key theoretical typologies regarding diverse economies, alternative institutions and strategies of social transformation. In a recent interview in *Counterpunch* (2016), Christos Giovanopoulos, a member of the Solidarity for All network, highlighted the key role of existing solidarity movements in Greece in constructing 'alternative institutions'

> the political context within which this [solidarity] movement emerged has entangled needs, desires and emotions with the will to resist and change matters by becoming

> active and by creating. This is exactly where the dominant unjust system has failed you. Here lies the transformative potential of the grassroots solidarity movement, which is active beyond the confines of being merely support structures. This is where it differs from charities, NGOs, and the 'civil society'- named 'big society' (UK) or 'participatory society' (Netherlands)…[which] in reality, are instrumental to the neoliberal social model… In contrast, the solidarity movement does not hide its political role and what it stands for, including its aim to produce social and political change, and to create the material conditions that permit a different democratic paradigm to emerge… (Counterpunch 2016).

Hence, solidarity is imagined and practiced as part and parcel of a broader struggle for social change that also involves the democratisation of the economy and institutions. In this sense, the formation of a social/solidarity economy becomes a key platform for re-introducing the meaning and practice of social justice into the economy, through forms of grassroots creativity and innovation (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005).

Moreover, diverse solidarity initiatives produce multiple responses, through contesting, engaging with and/or bypassing state structures. The multiplicities of backgrounds, goals and means among solidarity groups in real life practices often produce even more complex divergences and convergences that nuance the above typologies of either 'in', or 'against', or 'beyond' state solutions, towards hybrid forms of contestation. Thus, we can nuance and expand the above typologies of 'alterity' discussed in Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015), and think instead of 'alternative-oppositional/ transformative' institutions, such as the solidarity movements, as *resistive* of austerity and, at the same time, *creative* and *innovative* in their potential to transform existing, and producing new types of socio-economic relations. As mentioned by Giovanopoulos (Counterpunch 2016), eventually the transformative potential of solidarity movements involves an emancipatory project, towards popular participation in the exercising of power. That said, this potential still remains at stake, as the Syriza government struggles in-between the confines of EU-imposed austerity and its prior social agenda. The recently legislated framework of 'social solidarity' has managed to incorporate relief mechanisms for impoverished groups, such as taxation relief and benefits (albeit partial in their effect). Nevertheless, this has failed so far to enlarge bottom-up emancipatory spaces and, hence, enhance the transformative potential of the solidarity movements.

5. Conclusions

Solidarity as narrated and practiced in contemporary Greece has emerged as a crucial conceptual and political tool *by* and *for* grassroots movements. This paper focused on the role of solidarity in constructing resistive and creative agency in an era of deepening austerity in Greece and Europe. From local solidarity initiatives and mutual aid structures, to community cooking collectives, farmers markets, cooperatives and alternative currency networks, solidarity has acquired a renewed meaning within practices of resistance and struggle against austerity. In putting the Greek crisis in context and tracing its roots in broader processes of neoliberalisation and a vicious circle of indebtedness and austerity, contemporary movements in Greece politicise its effects and strive to produce alternatives, wherein solidarity holds a prominent role. Moreover, in responding to recent calls by scholars to shift the attention to resistive and disruptive agency in order to nuance approaches to neoliberal crises and produce analytical tools to overcome the widespread 'left melancholy', the paper suggested that solidarity holds a three-fold role within emergent forms of contestation 'from below' in austerity Greece: first, it serves as survival infrastructure for impoverished groups, unemployed and immigrants; second, it strives to activate and mobilise participants into political struggle against austerity; and, third, it has managed to open spaces for grassroots creativity and alternatives to emerge.

In the last instance, attempts to form a social/solidarity economy that prioritizes social needs over profit-making, through cooperativism and mutual support have succeeded so far in countering growing unemployment and precarity. Additonally, the educational effect of such experiments has been crucial in engaging participants in horizontalist forms of decision-making and egalitarian organising. This emergent paradigm, currently at stake, places popular participation and self-organisation at the heart of social and economic activity. Therefore, the transformative potential of solidarity movements currently active in Greece involves the articulation of new socio-economic relations, closely linked to a new culture of bottom-up political participation. It is crucial to note that this emergent paradigm faces pragmatic limitations in its attempts to become foregrounded as a broader political project of social transformation, due to internal contradictions and the recent developments in Europe and Greece, i.e. the third loaning agreement and the subsequent new austerity 'package' voted by (a-formerly-known-as) radical left government in 2015. Arguably, however, the above dynamic, by and large fostered within the solidarity movement, being still visible and heard through the loud 'No' vote to austerity articulated through the 2015 Greek referendum calls

for an emancipatory project of a 'politics of hope'. This is now more than relevant and timely to reflect upon.

6. References

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