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Theodoros Rakopoulos

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Resonance of Solidarity: Meanings of a Local Concept in Anti-austerity Greece

Theodoros Rakopoulos

Abstract

Scholarly approaches to the Greek crisis usually centered on its political character, tackle it as “a state of exception” or emphasize its “exceptional” features. Departing from a discussion on the nature of the crisis, in this article I examine social reactions to “it,” focusing on grassroots economic activity. I undertake a case study of a “solidarity economy” movement and from there I explore the wider political repercussions of this activity that has appeared in contemporary Greece where grassroots social welfare projects are organized in order to address hardships in the actors’ livelihoods. In this way, I explore the meaning of solidarity, a term that has become ubiquitous in the public discourse of contemporary Greece. Through an ethnographic study of the activities of a movement that organizes anti-middleman food distributions in Greece, I argue that such activities not only tackle the immediate effects of the crisis but also pose a conscious, wider critique to austerity politics. Activists’ appeal to solidarity economies is informed by their aim to formulate more efficient distribution cooperatives in the future.

“Society’s protection?”: solidarity against the crisis

In this article I will examine the movement against market middlemen that has developed in Greece as a social response to austerity and recession measures. This activity, as well as others, typically understood as being part of an *oikonomia allilengis*, i.e., a “solidarity economy” (Laville 2010), comprises economic actions put to social use in that they offer mutual aid to but also raise a critique of the conventional economic imperatives currently at play in the country. Through an ethnographic exploration of the “anti-middleman” movement, I will show how some people in Athens have responded to the crisis by organizing networks of food distribution that sideline market brokers and so elucidate the multiple ways in which actors on the ground enact routes of economic organization that figure as alternatives to the mainstream ones. Solidarity discourse is becoming counter-hegemonic to that of debt among anti-middleman

movement participants, partly because it addresses the difficulties in access to basic resources such as food.¹

My ethnographic investigation departs from claims over the “exceptional” features of the Greek crisis (e.g., Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011) to focus instead on the imaginative ways in which people contest the crisis on the ground and explore emergent activities that go well beyond their immediate livelihood concerns. By elucidating how the grounded social activities of many Athenians are directed towards the immediate problems that have arisen from the recession, I aim to offer an insight into the responses to austerity that are often neglected by the existing literature on the crisis.

The prism of economic solidarity allows for an investigation of different types of societal “protection” (Polanyi 1957, 150) and follows from recent debates over the much-discussed Polanyian double movement (Hann 2007; Hann and Hart 2009, 5). The idea, especially for Greece, is that, in a place where the deregulated markets have had catastrophic results, such as with the neoliberal project currently at play, society reacts with multiple forms of “resistance” (Douzinas 2013; Tsakalotos and Laskos 2013) and responds to the disembeddedness of economy from society. That said one should be cautious about making unproblematic claims regarding such “societal responses” to crisis-laden neoliberalism (Burawoy 2010, 310). For this reason, it is beneficial to examine new local terms that arise in response to capitalist crises in order to decipher the very meanings of “society’s protection.” This approach, therefore, does not investigate crisis from above, but instead zooms in on the details of how crises affect people’s everyday lives and how (some) people in Greece respond to their effects. These organized responses are telling: people’s activities comprise a wider political program that is more ambitious than simply attending to their immediate hardships.

In this article I focus on one aspect of the grassroots anti-middleman movement, exploring the modalities of its situatedness in the politics of everyday life in Athens, especially because its participants’ claims for a “solidarity economy” movement echo a number of scholarly approaches (Hillenkamp 2013; Dacheaux and Goujon 2012). My approach positions this “solidarity” activity in the broader picture of the crisis, explaining how participants involved in this group extend the scope of their activities to imagine alternative modes of economic conduct. In this context I trace the use of the term “solidarity” in the interplay between its local and its analytical use.

To reconcile this tension is pragmatically difficult. The condensed historical circumstances of the crisis (Rakopoulos 2014d, 66) render problematic any attempt to consolidate the term as an analytical category. For this reason, while bearing in mind the theoretical discussion on adjacent and complementary terms (mutuality, reciprocity, mutual life, cooperation), I shall concentrate on the term’s local uses and meanings, by exploring processes on the ground that can help us grasp its relevance to people’s lives during the crisis.

With this article, then, I attempt a contribution to current discussions on the crisis and resistance to it in two ways. Firstly, my analysis reveals that, in the intimate activities grounded in informal networks, we encounter complicated, often ambitious worldviews that encompass wider realities and imaginations beyond people's immediate livelihood concerns. Greek anti-middleman activists hold an aspirant and conscious political worldview; they see their activities as a struggle against austerity where solidarity fuels a form of political education rather than just a moral economy of food consumption. Secondly, then, the article interrogates the term solidarity and assesses its meanings and its limits. Among the current numerous resonances of solidarity, there are precise and materially-oriented ones that are in use by anti-middleman activists in contemporary Athens; those are the ones that I will explore in the following analysis.

Crisis, exceptional cases and the state of exception: some thoughts

It is dizzying to consider the rapid unfolding of the crisis's events. Greece's sovereign debt levels were revealed, controversially, in February 2010. The level of debt led to the government's profoundly political choice to appeal for emergency loans. The first of two debt Memoranda (for an 110bn € loan) was signed in May 2010 between the Greek government and a tripartite coalition (what came to be known as "the troika") comprising the ECB (European Central Bank), the IMF (International Monetary Fund), and the EU (the EU Commission). The Memoranda allotted Greece the needed loans on the demand that the country would undergo radical structural adjustments, a process that has continued unabated since then. In order to actually release the funds, the "troika" demanded fast-track austerity politics and measures that would fuel the Greek economy. Another Memorandum followed in October 2012, loaning the country another 130bn €. This increased loan has complicated the situation even further: it seems utterly impossible that Greece will be able to repay the debt.

In economic terms, the crisis is hardly exceptional: Greece has been increasingly marginalized in globalized world capitalism since the crunch. Its own GDP has shrunk by 25% since the imposition of the troika's regulations. Public spending for health and education as well as wages and pensions have been slashed² and a great number of Greeks find it impossible to access basic health services (Kentikelenis et al. 2014). A recent study proposes the term "body economic" as an analytical framework to comprehend these scars on social cohesion attributable to the deterioration of services (Stuckler and Basu 2013). As austerity shapes the country's economic contraction, it also reveals the debt crisis as a political one (Varoufakis 2011). In the course of three and a half years, the country changed its executive administration four times.

Different forms of government have been implemented, ranging from a coalition from the far right to the center left in 2010 to the current bipartite coalition after an experiment in technocratic governance during mid-2011.

Expert policy and media discourses and analyses concerning the so-called PIIGS (mainly Southern- EU countries who have received financial support from the troika: P[ortugal] I[taly] I[reland] G[reece] S[pain]) have included accusations of recklessness, inefficiency, and corruption. These allegations have largely been associated with a naturalized “need” to cut the public sector through fierce austerity measures, in line with the mantra “it’s the economy, stupid” (Athanasίου 2012, 17). Greece is the only EU country, however, for which the possibility of expulsion from the Eurozone (the infamous “gexit”) has been repeatedly proposed, a threat that continues to linger in public debates.

Notwithstanding the *particularity* of the Greek case’s circumstance, we should therefore be weary of claims to its *exceptionality*, or the possibility that it is exempted from a canon. The “state of exception” paradigm fueled some of the first approaches to the crisis, with some scholarship arising out of contemporary Greek anthropology choosing, rather unreflectively, to utilize this as an all-encompassing analytical prism (for instance, Kyriakopoulos 2011; Avramopoulou 2011). A much discussed anthropological book, Athena Athanasίου’s *Crisis as a “state of exception”* draws on Foucault’s work and the notion of “exception” put forward by Giorgio Agamben (Athanasίου 2012). The book’s points regarding what the “state of exception” *does* (its performativity) are very useful; but readers might struggle to grasp the author’s somehow elusive working definition of the term “state of exception” here. (One reading of the book is that the crisis has been utilized by the Greek administration and the troika as an excuse to declare a state of exception, which means to take measures and decisions without the consent of the people.) The sense that this is an all-encompassing term becomes more evident in other recent work, which goes so far as to argue that Greece is “literally” a state of exception (Vradis and Dalakoglou 2011, 2). Ethnography would have helped unpack the claims advanced by these analytical tools and terms. However, the lack of dense ethnographic research to develop these claims is an issue common to most contributions that make use of the term. It is also interesting that this debate, although rooting its “state of exception” critique in economic crisis, does not look at economic life on the ground.

The term “state of exception” that the conservative jural theorist and philosopher Carl Schmitt crafted as a means to critique legal positivism might demand further conceptual elaboration before being put in use. We might need to question the canon from which Greece deviates as an exception (Rakopoulos 2014c, 193). It can be argued, in fact, that the austerity policies implemented in Greece seem to be part of a normative canon of legal and political measures

initiated across the EU and more broadly, instead of standing as an exception to this global phenomenon.

Of course, this discussion is complicated. There is—still—glossing over of the question of “exception,” which requires our attention—and my brief theoretical discussion here cannot do full justice to this pursuit. “Exception” is different from “the state of exception,” different from “emergency,” and different from “exceptionalism.” We are yet to encounter a theory that convincingly resolves the confusion (in local and scholarly approaches) of dealing with the conjunction of these terms in what can be called the *accelerated* social time of the crisis. We can have a case of “exceptionalism” that does not entail a “state of exception.” We can also have an “exceptional” case or situation in reference to Greece without arguing for “Greek exceptionalism” (as Lapavistas 2012, Tsoukalas 2010, 316, Kouvelakis 2010, 303, among others, have argued). The “state of exception” (whether developed by Schmitt 2007 [1927], Agamben 1998, Athanasiou 2012, or Douzinas 2013) refers to a juridical position, in which the Sovereign decides to suspend certain laws and legislation from the juridical body on a historical moment understood as a “state of emergency.” It has been amply documented that Greece has found itself in an unprecedented position globally, as a consequence of the rate at which wealth and value have decreased since the beginning of the crisis. Most agree that such a rapid rate of impoverishment has not been documented in the absence of war since the Crash of 1929 (Lapavistas 2012). However, this situation does not necessarily create the condition of “exceptionalism” for Greece and this is not, in my view, what authors argue. As a position, it does not accept the notion that Greece is in a distinctive position among other nations in the world, or that the Greeks are unique.

Instead of reviewing legislative and juridical acts in and of the “state of exception,” we might instead benefit from an assessment of the crisis through the prism of austerity-driven policies and their consequences on the ground, that is, in the practical matters of everyday life in Greece. As Stuckler and Basu (2013) have recently noted, it is not crisis and recession that should be the focus of our attention. Rather, we need to consider how *austerity* has affected social services and has led to pauperization, and how it has led to massive political discontent in the country.³ For these reasons and more, austerity and recession have also affected grassroots politics and practices that aim to tackle the immediate consequences of the crisis on the ground.

This is a focal point of the ethnographic discussion below. Within my informants’ discussions, one finds broader considerations of their own (and Greece’s) situatedness in the contemporary world. Of course, informants’ statements are in fact a discourse in need of deconstruction and exegesis. Therefore, rather than taking the rhetoric of the research participants as the basis for my interpretation, I aim to follow critically how their aims and practices move

beyond the immediate effects of their activity and seek to address a spectrum of broader political discontent. This link with politics is a line of analysis that follows the findings that my ethnography has brought about.

The scope of solidarity and the range of distribution

The way that solidarity economy is arranged on the ground uncovers a wide and diverse range of activities. Overall, these activities comprise a variety of movements that often intersect as they overlap with anti-middleman mobilization. Part of this mobilization is located in the *aganaktismenoi*—“exasperated” (Herzfeld 2011, 3) or “infuriated” movement (Theodossopoulos 2013, 201)—although the correct translation of the original Greek term is challenging.⁴ Similar mobilizations also include activities such as the establishment of time banks;⁵ an organized refusal to pay road tolls;⁶ collectively organized decisions to default on gas and electric bills; the circulation of alternative currencies; and provision of social welfare services from volunteer groups, soup kitchens, and other means of mutual aid. With the gradual collapse of the welfare state and social services, this tendency to undertake activities through the framework of solidarity economy is reflected in the proliferation of social services provided by volunteer-based groups: social doctors, pharmacists, and retail stores; neighborhood assemblies are usually established to decide on local actions and host such movements, groups, and schemes that make up the solidarity economy.

As Stergios Mitas (2013) points out, the domain of solidarity does not require any legal commitments—at best, it entails a degree of civic duty from people (mainly citizens). It is for this reason that solidarity has become such an all-encompassing catchword. It seemingly stands, especially during the crisis, as a shared consensus among people and communities. The word has been repeatedly chanted in recent years during rallies and demonstrations in the streets of Greek cities to express allegiance and sympathy with people and places as diverse as Palestine and Cuba, anarchist prisoners, and anti-fascist demonstrators. The meaning of the term in Greek political life has been increasingly broadened to include a whole spectrum of political tendencies.

Exploring the various resonances of the term, one wonders, in fact, if we could even argue that there is an attempt for applying meaning to solidarity. For instance, political figures, who have used the term emphatically in public debate on various occasions, in the last three years, include Germany’s Federal Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble and Germany’s Chancellor herself, Angela Merkel, Greece’s former Minister of Interior Affairs Theodoros Pangalos,⁷ and the current Prime Minister of Greece, Antonis Samaras in various occasions, among many others. Ironically, one early and somewhat politically charged use of the term in mainstream public discourse was that of

former Minister of Defense of Greece Akis Tsohatzopoulos, who was recently convicted of a number of criminal offenses.⁸

Notably, many of the people I encountered during my fieldwork were unhappy about this overuse of the term solidarity. Informants whom I had met through the Athens-based RA.ME, the organization I worked with, but who did not belong to it, often asserted that the term suffered from “overuse” or “abuse of usage.” As Yannis, a 32-year-old man loosely involved with the solidarity economy groups of Athens told me, “every time I hear the word solidarity, a sailor dies far at sea.”

It is therefore important to attempt to conceptualize the term at this time, and to do so by locating it within the set of activities that underline its material importance. Despite (or rather, because of) the definitions of solidarity noted above, we need to locate a conceptualization of the term within the realm of social life in contemporary Greece where solidarity as a claim and a material reality is most tangible. This realm of social life, I argue, is the distribution sector. In order to situate solidarity in Greece today then, I propose a slight shift in the focus of academic studies that engage with the social economy, a shift away from relations of production (Bryer 2011; Kasmir 2005; Hillenkamp 2013) and toward relations of distribution. In Greece, it is precisely the informal networks of distribution and their modes of functioning that encourage subjective conceptions of change (Rakopoulos 2014b).

Food distribution works as a bridge between agrarian producers and urban consumers and enables people to pursue imaginative schemes of scale and integration that either separate or bring people together. One important example is the establishment and operation of Sunday makeshift food markets in which my informants participate. As will be discussed below, my fieldwork in Greece suggests that the distribution sector thrives in accommodating the most successful and radicalized elements of what is called the solidarity economy. In material terms, the distribution sector reflects objective conditions as it allows cheap food to reach households and guarantees some remuneration for agrarian producers. It also fosters the development of political plans and participates in the formation of an alternative consciousness and subjectivity of the participants. Distribution can become, in this respect, a site for projects that imagine and enact, to an extent, the scaling up of the self and the scaling down of the overarching dire structural conditions of “the debt crisis.” Unlike examples of small-scale production (Rakopoulos 2014a), the activities of groups who operate within the distribution sector have a wider-reaching scope.

The figure of the “broker” has been a concern of economic and political anthropology in recent years, with certain authors advocating the need to renegotiate the term. The ability to locate certain labor markets within global distributions of labor has linked brokers to mafia-like organizations and the exploitation of daily workers (Gill 2001). Deborah James has pointed out that

the “return of the broker” is associated with middlemen’s capacities to operate in a multiplicity of forms. These forms simultaneously resemble the state (in that they offer protection), the market (in deploying deregulated conditions of exchange), and “traditional” patrons on the ground (2011, 319). Land property shifts, in which people cover the shady middle ground between institutions, reflect this diverse social context. However, they also reflect the distribution of foodstuff, which, as discussed below, is a vibrant social movement in Greece that aims to “cut out” (*na kóψει*) brokers altogether to ensure that agrarian produce is sold directly by farmers to urban and semi-urban residents.

Anti-middleman organizations: the case of RA.ME

At one social center based in a squat, the “Dasos,” I came in contact with participants of one of the most successful contemporary social movements of Greece, that is, the anti-middleman social network coalition. I found myself among twenty other people, both women and men, ranging from 20 to 70 years of age, who came from various walks of life: unemployed university graduates, working-class pensioners, bricklayers, automotive mechanics, an Albanian construction worker, and a few lower middle-class employees in the public sector. This informal group, RA.ME, based in Lithoupoli, became the focus of my research.⁹ The movement consisted of a combination of different informal groups that were oriented towards changing the material livelihoods of people in the area.

As part of an ongoing project¹⁰ that aims to elucidate wider developments in the solidarity economy of Greece, I have ethnographically studied and been involved with a number of such groups in Greece’s two largest cities, Athens and Thessaloniki. It is important to note, however, that the movement started in rural areas, and was spearheaded by farmers—particularly potato-growers in Katerini, a small city in the north. From there, the movement was embraced by urban-based, leftwing groups, and by other, informal movements. The people who participated in these initiatives, which started in early 2012, labeled them to be a solidarity economy. For the purposes of this article, I shall concentrate on findings from the Athens-based RA.ME, although features of the group can be seen in other informal groups as well (Rakopoulos 2014b) and in the broader anti-middleman movement.¹¹ At this stage, however, before I set out the details of RA.ME I will provide an overview of the diverse nature of the movement.

This diversity arises from the different social consistencies and sizes of the two cities. The Thessaloniki movement, originating from the organized dissent of the “*den plerono*” (“I don’t pay”) movement and other groups confronting broader problems of economic livelihood, developed specific actions that addressed the anti-middleman issue. In contrast, in Athens, the

anti-middleman groups that started by addressing immediate issues of material livelihood eventually came to address the wider solidarity economy. In what follows, I shall elucidate this contrast through an ethnographic exploration of the activities of RA.ME, an Athens-based group.

RA.ME appeals to urban consumers within Lithoupoli, a district of eighty thousand people. Lithoupoli is located in the westernmost corner of the “Western Districts,” a term that refers to the working-class, low-income, and most densely populated areas of Athens. Some 15% of the overall Greek population lives in the Western Districts, and it is these areas that have been most severely affected by the crisis. In Lithoupoli, as elsewhere in Greece, some residents, mainly young and unemployed, organize the distribution of agricultural products in their communities directly from farmers, without the mediation of market middlemen, and without gaining any profit for themselves. What I had heard about the organization before I began my research was confirmed the very first evening I visited “Dasos,” the social center where they hosted their assemblies and general activities. This was the site of the group’s sociality, the hub of exchange of ideas, and the place where they would meet when they were not in the streets distributing leaflets or in a square, organizing makeshift farmers’ markets. “Dasos” was based in a local squat of a municipal garden, its abandoned greenhouse, and a cafe. “The vicissitudes of the market render the prices stable and the drop in people’s income does not affect retail prices; it’s inhuman,” said Voula, a 55-year-old teacher involved in RA.ME. Therefore, as she described it “we decided we should take action and link with other anti-middleman movements in Greece, providing food products directly from producers to our town’s consumers.”

RA.ME is an anti-middleman organization with wide appeal within Athens, and it is part of the coalition of anti-middleman groups in Greece. In fact, its participants aim to make it a cooperative in the near future. The association operates on the premise of an informal solidarity network, organizing the collection and distribution of agrarian produce directly from producers to consumers, at sub-retail prices. The work of RA.ME and similar informal associations that are engaged in the distribution of foodstuff, however, also helped to illustrate another level of engagement, as their goals extend beyond food concerns to a broader agenda of political change.

Therefore, following the concerns of my research participants, I consider RA.ME within the context of the “anti-middleman movement.” The vast majority of initiatives in this movement have been established and developed since 2010. As one of its most successful cases, RA.ME is, in one respect, typical and representative of the movement, but it is also somewhat original, since most of its members were outspoken partisans of the Left and a few were members of SYRIZA. In some areas of the Western Districts, the Left, and—historically—the Communist Party of Greece, has had an enduring appeal. This tendency

is now shifting towards SYRIZA (although populist and even fascist parties get a fair share of following, too). Many RA.ME members are sympathetic to this party, thinking it could help their cause for building a model of economic relations based on solidarity and in the promotion of legislative frameworks that embrace cooperatives.

It is important to locate the solidarity economy within the political radicalization of Greece (deeply rooted in a history of politicized conflict as per Panourgíá 2009) in order to distinguish it from racist philanthropy: the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn has itself organized distributions of free seasonal food, albeit exclusively for the ethnically Greek poor. In line with its diverse membership, RA.ME aims to endorse and explore pluralistic forms of economic life that are alternative, if not inimical, to the dominant configuration of unitary economic utilitarianism. This is well rooted in the leftwing or progressive convictions of virtually every participant (informally, as there is no official membership). Its members strive to organize the distribution of basic foodstuffs through “direct” trade, as they describe it, as distinct from “fair trade,” as it is used as a method of political sensitization rather than an end in itself.

Every second Sunday, the public park of Lithoupoli becomes the site for food distribution organized by the group. There is movement of people from all sides of the park and many residents of the district as well as documented and undocumented resident immigrants rush uphill to the abandoned, but quite spacious park to buy produce. They pay the farmers directly at their makeshift tills, while RA.ME members help with the delivery of the produce and the accounting process. Many locals stop to chat with the organization’s volunteers, during and after the purchase of foodstuffs. Conversations address a wide range of topics, revolving around but not limited to food distribution and consumption. Many complain about their wages and pensions being slashed and consequent limits on their households’ food budget. They clearly recognize the need for anti-middleman action.

On my first Sunday at the park, I realized there was more to the event than “just” food distribution. For example, one man claimed, “there should be a RA.ME in every Athens district.” Of the many consumers who are happy to linger in the distribution sites chatting to farmers and RA.ME members (often, in fact, causing problems for those lining up for food), some claimed that they wished to become “more involved” and “learn more” about the anti-middleman initiatives. Kostas, a 50-year-old leftwing architect, now out of work, and a committed RA.ME activist, detached himself from the olive seller and climbed into the back of a farmer’s truck. He pulled out a megaphone and started to read out loud a statement by the organization. While some people went on about their business, many seemed to be interested in hearing the speech. Kostas spoke for about five minutes—not about food, but rather the

recently-announced cutbacks enacted by the government. He mentioned that “initiatives like this aim to contest what our country is currently undergoing.” A huge round of applause followed, involving virtually everyone in the park—far more than one hundred people at that point in the day.

The day went on, with further interactions and allusions to politics, such as the distribution of flyers, calling for support for “the solidarity economy” and “the spread of food distribution cooperatives,” as well as a number of conversations triggered by locals who have lost their jobs in the recent crisis. Towards the end of the day, as with every second Sunday in such events, some residents whom I had noticed earlier in the day buying products, returned to the park with bottles of moonshine and little plastic glasses. The RA.ME members, some glowing with elation, distributed glasses as they started drinking. Their discussions and debates on the “current state of play” and how it has to change became more heated as a result of the liquor. After we all helped to dismantle the market a couple of hours later, we headed to the “Dasos” social center for a small assembly in order to discuss future plans and to assess the events of the day. Once we settled there, we continued to drink and chat informally, but most people were focused on the events of the day and the shape of things to come.

From food distribution to wider claims

RA.ME organize their meetings in the “Dasos” social center. After that evening, and several more Sunday food distributions and meetings in the center, I noticed that RA.ME members, on a number of occasions, situated their activity within a broader framework of politically charged discourse. During one meeting with RA.ME members, one informant, Voula, told me what the organization was doing to overcome the immediate livelihood concerns that the austerity-driven crisis had brought about for locals. I asked her whether their “solidarity” was, then, a kind of self-help associationism? She responded, “We are aspiring to a shift in the way people think about the economy overall. This is why we engage in an activity of doing economy on the street.” She further suggested that the correlation between the crisis and the activities of the organization (and like those of similar groups) implies that looking at how people respond to the crisis is an important way of finding out “what the crisis is about.”

This suggestion reminded me that studying the Greek crisis would benefit from an ethnographic engagement, staying within local explanatory paradigms and, thus, studying it “from below” in a paradigm of social research that considers informants’ activities as a way of understanding the social processes that encompass their lives. Close ethnographic study illuminates the wide-reaching ideas and ambitious planning of anti-middleman participants in Athens far

more than other approaches. Although, from afar, RA.ME seems—very much like similar informal solidarity networks—to be a single-purpose group committed to food distribution (as many such groups are often described in journalistic accounts) ethnographic research illustrates a different and far more complicated picture of their activities. Close research reveals their ambitious aims and how members discuss them explicitly.

The discourse of solidarity among actors like the RA.ME members in Greece suggests that we need to revisit definitions of the term that are so prevalent in the mainstream media. Similar viewpoints were communicated to me on a number of occasions. As Roula, another informant in her early thirties, explained, “the fact that we are spreading the movement, spreading cooperatives, hopefully one day socialist cooperatives, means, in the end of the day that we are spreading the seed of solidarity. Solidarity is getting people involved in what you do.”

During a “Dasos” squat meeting, a participant, Kostas, is explicit about the other concerns of the movement: “This is not just a reaction to hardship. We have to understand this. The group has consolidated itself in a more conscious direction. What we do to change the distribution of food is great. But not enough. It is also the distribution of ideas that is at stake. And the building of co-ops.” When I prompted him to explain what was already common knowledge to others, another member, Anna, filled in for him in: “Distributing ideas and practices of solidarity is . . . how to put it . . . contagious. And it could build up to broader change. We act having in mind that this local solidarity economy is conducive to a scheme of generalized resistance to mainstream economics, to the Memorandum, to what’s been going on for so long.”

In another meeting, this tendency to organize around a broader political aim appeared even more important to the participants. Maria, a state employee in her late fifties, explained that the organization aims to be part of an assemblage of geographically scattered solidarity economy groups: “We are interested in formulating a cooperative movement that bit by bit would break away from the current market and into proposing an overall alternative to the crisis.” Voula, who held strong leftist convictions, added: “We struggle for cooperatives to be established. Their history implies they have previously been co-opted and today they do form part of the problem [of corporate capitalism], but that should not make us suspicious of the cooperative idea.”

At a later date, some of the RA.ME members traveled 430 kilometers north of Athens, to Pieria (where Katerini is), for the national meeting of anti-middleman groups. There, they learned about similar activities happening across the country, and signed the collective agreement (put forward by eighty similar groups, stating that their strife was not only “about food” but also “against fascism and austerity, and for a state favorable to cooperativism” (RA.ME 2013). The agreement also put forward a plan for deepening

and strengthening collaboration among such initiatives. When Kostas, one of the RA.ME members who traveled to Pieria for the meeting, came back to Lithoupoli, he told me that he now felt positive that the “plan was going somewhere.” During meetings of the association, participants affirmed that, with integration into the umbrella assemblages of the anti-middleman groups, they could envision their informal solidarity network as a cooperative in the future.

Tellingly, members of RA.ME often find a metaphor for their broader political claims in the figure of the middleman. In one of many weekly assemblies, one of the younger participants, Giorgos, characteristically pointed out to me that the Greek government “is, in a way, a kind of middleman itself, as it lets the troika’s Memoranda speak through it.” Another participant went as far as to claim that the government was “an appointee” of the troika, positioned to occupy the middle ground between “the people” and “the economy.” In this interesting and colorful set of metaphors, the problem of the middleman is located within the range of concerns that RA.ME participants entertain. When I asked how they planned to tackle this “indirect” system of markets and politics that was so amenable to middlemen, participants pointed out that their plan was to establish a constellation of horizontal cooperativist initiatives, and that the Pieria meeting might point in that direction. They would welcome a state that supported such a system and endorsed cooperativism in a wider legislative framework. They also embraced the idea of a different market configuration, particularly as they wished to transform their informal networks into remunerative cooperatives in order to guarantee resilience for their project.

From everyday politics to wider concerns: cooperativism as change

The closer I got to the members of RA.ME, the more I became aware of the bigger picture: the political program with which they identify, and the general principles to which they hold and within which they locate their activities. The further I moved through my fieldwork, from abstract conceptualizations of contemporary politics in Greece and into the everyday social interactions of people and communities, the more I came into contact with their active contestations and ideas over the historical circumstances that led to and still pertain to the crisis. The range of ideas they supported, the “political education” they aspired to contribute, as Voula put it in an assembly, the distribution of political discourse, and their sharing of discontent with consumers at the Sunday markets they established, all suggest their linkage of livelihood concerns with a political agenda.

This is the case with much anthropological research that has investigated the contemporary Greek context. Aligning with Herzfeld’s conceptualization of “cultural intimacy” (2005), anthropologists often note that there is a distinction between what is communicated in public and what is spoken during

intimate social interaction, and argue that the latter situation often encompasses broader ideas than the former. Herzfeld (1993) has also explored the distinction between abstract institutions associated with social service and ideas or activities of solidarity that play out through interpersonal relations at length. In fact, a fair amount of the ethnographic work that has been undertaken in small Greek communities has revealed the surprisingly capacious worldviews that informants hold. These views can be centered on visionary or imaginative neighborhoods (Vereni 2004) or can be associated with long-distance travel and memory or kin networks (Just 2000). Papataxiarchis discusses such tendencies in Greek ethnography, both within Greek society, now “submerged” in contested alterity (2006) as well as outside of Greece as indicative of the country’s own repositioning in the world (2010).

In this context, we might remember that Western financial institutions see their mirror image in a country whose marginality has located it at the threshold between being Western and “anti-Western.” This may be where the importance of the Greek crisis lies, as Mazower (2011) has noted, pointing to earlier findings by Herzfeld (1987). In Greece, we often find that people hold allegiances and hopes that relate to realities and imaginations much broader than their immediate lives or social contexts. Recent ethnographic work among the *aganaktismenoi* movement bears witness to this. As Theodossopoulos points out, local (protest) discourse in Greece has a “disemic” orientation, oscillating “between the informality of public representation and the informality of culturally intimate contexts” (2013, 219). In other scholarly work, dissent is analyzed in ways that allow native voices to emerge, underscoring the democratic claims from, for instance, participants in various leftist movements and engagements (Panourgía 2009). We can relativize, therefore, the distance between “everyday concerns” and encompassing processes.

RA.ME participants are aware of the importance of their activities in the everyday context, but they also locate them within the broader realities of the Greek situation and the crisis, which they wish to change. These considerations clearly move beyond the immediate effects of their activity and relate to a spectrum of political discontent. Giving voice to this creative, imaginary discontent implies that we can ethnographically capture, *in nuce*, in the practicalities of the everyday concerns of anti-middleman solidarity economy participants, those wider claims and concerns that encompass their broader realities. As Herzfeld (2011) has pointed out, ethnographic attention to the “maelstrom” caused *by* the crisis helps us grasp the bigger picture *of* the crisis. This kind of ethnographic work could be understood as embedding “the crisis” within the genealogy of the anthropological debate on “total social facts,” aiming to decipher what new social obligations and enduring historical meanings arise under its influence. For instance, it could mean political indebtedness as suggested by Marcel Mauss as a scholar of historical action. Mauss’s extensive political

writings in the 1920s culminated in his blueprint for a new method of studying “total social facts” in *The Gift* (Hart 2007, 370; cf. Graeber 2014).¹²

Therefore, locating the reactions to hardship within the paradigm of livelihoods does not do justice to the interplay of ideas present within the grounded social reality of the Greek crisis. A broader project of social transformation lies within the range of activities undertaken by the participants of the anti-middleman groups and their future plans. The participants aspire to new social and political configurations, and direct their everyday activities especially in the Sunday events, towards such direction.

The sympathy—and, often, outright allegiance—that many RA.ME members express with the Left is informed by declarations of leftist parties to embrace cooperativism and “grassroots solidarity economy activities” at large (RA.ME 2012c). RA.ME members therefore reject neither the state nor the market. Rather, by identifying with the Left, they express a belief in the distinction between capital and labor. They strive to link activist initiatives throughout Greece, to “get rid of middlemen in the wide sense of the word,” as stated in one of their written communiqués (RA.ME 2013b).

Cooperativist critiques to neoliberal regimes of labor are ubiquitous (Macpherson 2008). Yet the politics of cooperativism are born not of ideologies, but rather of practitioners, as ethnographies of agrarian cooperatives have shown (Stephen 2005). What is at stake in cooperativism is to achieve the goal of its transformation into a movement of political education while being mindful of the pragmatics on the ground. Informants repeatedly mentioned the need to make ends meet and to transform the voluntary nature of their activities into something more stable, which would allow them to dedicate themselves more fully to realizing their political commitments. All members shared the aspiration to shift from informal solidarity social networks of mutual aid into formalized cooperatives. Small-scale initiatives are in flux by definition, and it is difficult for such initiatives to develop a stable structure in order to attract funds through registration to funding-management bureaucracies (Alexander 2009). In light of this fluidity, Vargas-Cetina has described cooperatives as “ephemeral organizations” (2005).

Elsewhere, I have underscored the internal tensions present in co-op formulations that follow what Max Weber has described as “the routinization of charisma” (1968, 249–251).¹³ These tensions, Weber has shown us, are the outcome of bureaucratization, which are often in conflict with the political values of the political values of co-ops (Rakopoulos 2014b, 2014c, and forthcoming). However, research has also shown that, regardless of the fact that the pursuit of longevity for the co-ops might often lead to hierarchization, certain productive strategies have also developed in order to address this danger (Burawoy 1993, 16–17). The allegation of hierarchization can be traced through a long tradition of anthropological critique of the conditions of formalization of social

movements into associations with some salaried waged members, but it has yet to be the subject of detailed ethnographic research. In the case of RA.ME, such tensions might suggest the transformation of an informal solidarity network into a formal cooperative that would guarantee the institutional continuity of the anti-middlemen movement.

Conclusions: the solidarity economy in austerity Greece

Since the crisis began, anthropologists have pointed out the visceral, existential, and social outcomes associated with circumstances that preceded and have come to bear upon the crisis and social reactions to it. These include the rise of individual and state violence, organized and grassroots dissent in regards to university policies or austerity at large, suicide rates, and conspiracy theory discourses (Panourgjá 2010; Herzfeld 2011; Knight 2013; Theodossopoulos 2013; Pipyrou 2014; Bakalaki 2014). Ethnographic research is crucial to comprehending these phenomena, as it allows us to understand people's internalized political ideas and activities as they are integrated into the conditions of their social lives, and enables us to evaluate their activities from within a broader perspective. In this case, anti-middleman activists locate their everyday practices of conducting food distributions without middlemen in a context of political activity based upon an agenda of social change. They recognize solidarity as both an immediate and a future concern. Specifically, the cooperativism that my research participants construct, aspire to, and dream of is grounded in everyday life rather than located in political abstractions. Yet they are well aware of the broader social and political situation in which cooperativism has developed ("crisis"), and in which they might overcome and imagine a different political circumstance altogether ("solidarity").

This article has critically explored one successful instance of such grounded activity against market middlemen in Greece. It has proposed to study-up effects of the crisis, suggesting a move away from basing research on the recession and instead assessing the grounded alternative economies in urban Greece as conscious, politically organized movements whose discourse and ways of self-assessment encompass more than their immediate realities of hardship. In this way, I have shown that we might benefit from reviewing contemporary Greek organizations as arising and directed against austerity as the *cause* of crisis, and not as single-issue groups that tackle one aspect of livelihood hardship (in this case: food prices) that is the *outcome* of recession. The anti-middleman movement and similar grassroots activities are expressions of popular discontent and protest to austerity as a whole and not simply to recession. This explains why people involved in such initiatives at once embrace politically progressive ideas, envision their activities as a broader critique to the system, and project their future plans to establish cooperativism. Rooted in the

activity of anti-middleman groups is a nucleus of political consciousness that encompasses a broader range of concerns beyond food distribution. However, there is a tension between being ambitious and addressing practical matters in the reproduction of their activity.

The article has reviewed an anti-middleman group's case within the context of solidarity economy, an all-encompassing term that is claimed by many in contemporary Greece. Through this examination, the article makes a contribution to the current debate on the meanings of solidarity in contemporary Greece. It clarifies, through an ethnographic study, its political and politicized significations, and argues that it is mainly located within the distribution sector. Studying the crisis from below opens a comparative vantage point from which scholarship of the crisis in Greece can be situated alongside approaches to the "normalization" of neoliberal crises around the world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). Although non-exceptional, I argue that the Greek case is especially situated as to enable an exploration of the richness of social responses to crises. It also allows us to trace the processes of building "solidarity economies" as strategies to counter hardship, in the manner suggested by David Graeber (2012). As we have seen elsewhere in the aftermath of similar debt crises (e.g., see, Sitrin 2012 on Argentina), these comprise the organized popular responses that can be associated with economic models such as cooperative solidarity economies, conceived as alternatives to economies designed "from above."

The recent interest in Polanyian accounts of social responses to market aggression (Hann 2011; Resta and Catanzariti forthcoming) attests to a scholarly tendency to rethink the socially binding routes of cooperation within economic systems. This rethinking includes the re-conceptualization of economic activity, in line with the Maussian approach, in order to understand markets (such as the makeshift markets my informants organize) as social events (Sigaud 2002). The fact that anti-middleman cooperatives do not defy the state but, instead, suggest positive engagements with it, also confirms their desire to embrace cooperativism. In that respect, such activism is framed in dynamic configurations "between" the market and state policy; it becomes a struggle for different values, and possibly, for a different Greece. But this has yet to be seen and assessed.

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NOTES

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¹This might be especially urgent, given the possible positive understandings of moral debt, as a vector of reciprocal and solidarity relations, which could potentially renew David Graeber's influential approach on the meanings of debt (2011), especially in the light of a recent contribution that reviews the Greek debt crisis in the perspective of a *long durée* (Graeber 2011b). However, this is beyond the scope of the present text.

²Early measures affected the public sector with a 30% reduction in state spending, while the second Memorandum slashed the minimum salary by 32% and abolished collective bargaining and other long-established labor protections (Douzinas 2013, 11).

³There is an "accelerated historical time" in the ongoing sociopolitical facts in Greece in the last four years, as documented in the work, for instance, of the journal *Levga* (Λεύγα). Austerity has brought to the country massive political shifts with the result of unprecedented electoral power to both established political parties already represented in the Parliament (namely SYRIZA), and to formerly marginal extremist forces, such as the neo-Nazi organization Golden Dawn. SYRIZA (an abbreviation that stands for *Coalition of the Radical Left*), because of its vocal opposition, had been an influential but overall small party hovering around the 4% mark until 2012. In June's elections of that year, SYRIZA climbed from 4.3% to 27% of the vote, and it is currently Greece's leading opposition party in Parliament. Golden Dawn climbed from being a minute political force of 0.2% based on marginal fascist militias, to a 6.9% of the vote in 2012, and a 9.4% in the elections for the EU Parliament in 2014. The false and opportunistic discourse on "two extremes" that has developed in Greece by the parties of the government coalition since the elections of 2012 draws from this circumstantial rise in vote of the Left and the far-Right.

⁴It seems that none of the terms used ("exasperated," "indignated," or "infuriated") acutely follows the signification of the issue at hand. Translation for this neologism is difficult, of course, and its meanings are dynamic. But neither "exasperated" nor "indignated" follows the conceptual center of the original Greek term. Indignated (Theodossopoulos 2013) deviates towards the Spanish *indignado* (based on "dignity"); and finally, "infuriated" (Theodossopoulos 2013) denotes fury rather than the rightful and just anger that the term actually means. Douzinas (2013, 147) leaves the term untranslated.

⁵A number of digital banks that calculate and store hours of labor that are put to exchange among members have been constituted in Greece since 2010.

⁶This is the "Den plerono" movement, filled rampant with complexities and intricacies. The movement might have started out as a reaction by farmers who were being charged tolls on the national road system for very short distances and for farmers who had no other way of getting to their fields, but it has spilled out to include (and been appropriated by) Golden Dawn, along with other contingents easily duped by the populist discourses of the anti-austerity and anti-government movements. It is difficult to give a sense of these dynamics, but their complexity is telling in regards to the many vicissitudes of solidarity and activism in contemporary Greece. An analysis of pro- and anti-austerity or pro- and anti-Memorandum politics cannot unravel what is being played out here in terms of political sympathies and the reasons why would a movement that actually started out as a legitimate resistance to the arbitrariness of the private sector has become a movement against the state.

⁷Pangalos, in a recent article, alluded to “solidarity society and economy” as well as “solidarity Europe,” stating, “There is no Europe without Solidarity” (2013, 27). In the same edition, a number of other columnists took the issue to different directions, always with the idea of “Solidarity Europe” in mind.

⁸The politician, now imprisoned on charges of corruption and money laundering, condemned and isolated from the political class, has written a book in the form of a series of interviews that was influential at its time, where he engages with intellectuals on the meanings of solidarity. See Tsohatzopoulos 2001.

⁹Following the anthropological deontological code, the name of the actual area, as well as the names of the people quoted in this article have been changed in order to protect the identities of those involved. The original acronym of the organization is a play on words that both stands as a verb meaning “to break” and breaks down itself in the phrase: Organization Against Middlemen.

¹⁰I have been spending time around a group of research interlocutors, ethnographically studying the organization RA.ME through intermittent fieldwork, for the latter part of 2012 and throughout 2013. More fieldwork is scheduled for the period September 2014–June 2015, funded by a Wenner Gren grant.

¹¹Although not the immediate concern of the present article, one comparative point on the differences among anti-middleman groups sociologically should be underlined. By and large, the difference between such groups in Thessaloniki and Athens is that, in the last four years, the former have grown out of broader mobilizations, while the latter have grown independently and eventually merged with broader organizations (Rakopoulos 2014b).

¹²The genealogy of the term, of course, stems from Durkheim’s (1984) pursuit of what we have termed the non-contractual element in the contract. However, my Maussian inspiration to associate the total social fact with the Greek crisis (a political framework, where there is a rife resonance of the market and markets, such as the makeshift ones RA.ME produces), stems partly from a recent special issue dedicated to Mauss in the *Journal of Classical Sociology*. There, for instance, Hart notes that: “why then take seriously the relationship between Mauss’s sociology and his politics? Mauss, while tending to his uncle’s legacy, was making a profound break with the latter’s sociological reductionism in these years, opening himself to psychology and the humanities, while espousing a method of “total social facts” which underpins *The Gift*” (Hart 2014, 36). The way *The Gift* brings forward the *prestation totale*, a new sense of total social fact than that of Durkheim, is explained by Jane Guyer in the same series of essays—the gift is “total” in the sense of assembling a multiplicity of evocations and powers, differently configured, bounded and realized in different contexts over time and space (Guyer 2014, 11). This “pursuit of the whole,” present in theorists that understand the potential for historical research that *The Gift* brings about (Sigaud 2002), is an asset in our research of the ensemble of social relations present in the accelerated historical temporality of the Greek crisis.

¹³Literally, the “everyday-fication” of charisma, as the term *Veralltaglichung* indicates.

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