

Solidarity, Grassroots Initiatives and Power Relations¹

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Abstract

Although solidarity is not a recent phenomenon, the emergence of new or re-invented forms of production and sharing that are based on that principle, has raised again several burning questions of what solidarity is and how far it can go, particularly under circumstances that may prove devastating for individuals, households and communities. The present paper is a result of both theoretical and empirical research regarding several types of grassroots initiatives which have functioned in Greece during the last six years. It investigates solidarity-related economic structures in order to clarify related questions, shows the complexity of practiced solidarity, identifies the main lines where solidarity might collide with power at the expense of the disadvantaged, and explores possible means of preventing power from invading those structures and thereby interfering with the survival of people and their communities.

Keywords: solidarity, power, collective, Greece, grassroots

1. Introduction

This paper discusses issues concerning the idea and practice of solidarity in grassroots initiatives which self-identify and/or try to function as non- or anti-capitalist structures. My main question refers to how solidarity might be expressed when everything originates in a society where hierarchies and power relations are already defined, embedded and continuously reproduced; and how, under conditions which enhance individuality and competition to the extent of social dissolution, solidarity can create at least small starting points for a more human economy and society. Though clearly relevant to recent struggles in Greece and elsewhere in the European Union, this study is not limited to those instances. These are much broader questions.

A variety of initiatives and groups have been organised in Greece over the last six years into structures which claim solidarity as their main principle. In this paper, structures like cooperatives, which function already within some specific legal framework, are not analysed nor examined. The focus is on grassroots schemes, i.e. collective organised efforts, most of which have not acquired the status of legal entity, nor have they received any essential support by public authorities. Moreover, the focus is on schemes which attempt to function quite far away from the mainstream economic institutions, usually by refusing to use official currency and/or having sharing practices as the, or one of the, main modes of transaction.

The broad definition of “grassroots schemes” has been made without defining them as necessarily alternative and it is intentional in this paper. Defining them with their actual connection or non-connection to authorities is more accurate and does not label them with features that the groups themselves or their members might not be using either. Moreover, I am personally very reluctant to celebrate all of them as non-capitalist or alternative because this is something first to be decided by the schemes themselves, and second, to be judged in a long-term framework of analysis that is not available to researchers when the activity studied is still developing.

One more clarification for the term “scheme” I use in this paper. Although it has this “plotting” meaning, it is very widely used in parallel currency literature. Given that I have not many words to replace it

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apart from “initiative”, “group”, or “structure”, I keep “scheme” as a term too for the organised grassroots initiatives.

The following section refers to the definition of the term of solidarity, the general theoretical background, and the methodology of my study. Then case studies are described in section three. Questions and practices of solidarity are made specific in section four. Section five contrasts reproduction, reciprocity and solidarity and, the last section comprises, apart from conclusions, questions for further in-depth analysis and research.

2. Solidarity: Definition, Theory and Methods

2.1. What is Solidarity?

In this paper, the term “solidarity” is not related to mainstream approaches where it is perceived as constituted, inter-personal assistance based on similarities, mostly economic ones (Silver, 1994). The focus on class solidarity, for example, although it is important and illuminates several aspects of solidarity is not enough to explain the activity I am examining in this paper. Therefore, such approaches are quite static and western-European centred and do not really challenge the capitalist economy.

Solidarity, therefore, in this paper is not a static, much less a vintage or picturesque, social attribute. Instead, it is a transformative process which affects directly or indirectly multiple sights of power. Solidarity as a practice can initially have limited scope and aims, like sharing food or cultivating a plot of land collectively. However, in the medium and long term, it has the potential, within a broader context where egalitarian and emancipatory aims are pursued, to prioritise the needs and resistances of the people who receive the harshest attacks by capitalist aggressiveness (Raman, 2010). Therefore, working class solidarity is just one aspect of the practices where the subaltern individuals and groups are opposing forces which exploit and/or suppress them, and are forming or joining forces or groups which might give them more chances of individual and collective autonomy in both the economic and non-economic realms. If one wanted to approach solidarity in more generic terms, then it seems that the main aim can be what Raman (2010) calls a “historical agency in resistance”. That is the effort, whether conscious or unconscious, of certain people or groups to create a new political economic agenda beyond capitalism.

Emerging agencies of individuals and groups through solidarity are an element which is crucial in understanding solidarity as a collective emancipatory project and economic practice that goes beyond moral notions of goodness and kindness. Within the political economic context of a (collapsing) capitalist economy, working classes – but also many other social groups – are deprived of both their means of survival or means of production and any decision-making powers they might have had within a bourgeois democracy. Solidarity might be a route of reclaiming lost and creating new collective agencies which are crucial for material and social reproduction. For this reason, those same collective agencies are expressed as economic organising or economic bottom-up structures. In other words, the effort to find resources, whether those are material like foodstuff, or immaterial, like transaction arrangements, is aiming to enable more choices which the mainstream economy does not permit. Or, the solidarity structures are new spaces for collectively challenging the mainstream economy which devalues both humans and their skills and work (Eduards, 1994; Kabeer, 1999). Contrary to the construction of the “economic man” who is independent from other people and has no social connections nor influences by historical socio-economic contexts, I share the view that people have conscious (not only unconscious) motives that are bigger than them and that they are also capable of undertaking strategies to achieve their aims².

That solidarity practices can be conflictual or antagonistic with the capitalist, particularly neoliberal, policies deployed the last years in Europe and elsewhere is not a characteristic to be chastised, much less to be blamed as the reason of failure (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 19-28, 36-46, 75-92, 122-133, 176-177) in case a struggle does not end up with the results one would have expected. Because we need to recognise the violence, direct or systemic, used by late capitalism to achieve more shares out of nature and labour and the

² Based on a comment and idea by Professor John Harvey (Texas Christian University).

conflictual aspects which are inevitable within such context of violence.

Although the notion of agency is a perception that belongs to the modern Western European (and capitalist) construction of self and individual autonomy, it seemed that the analysis would be lacking without exploring the collective aspects of agency which emerge from grassroots efforts because those are not easily observable, particularly when a social activity is at the phase of becoming visible or of expanding. On the other hand, there might be other perceptions of collective agency or “shared we” that belong to other cultural and historical contexts, even if we do not know much about them nor even have appropriate words to describe them. The reason is that human agency or “shared we” can constitute a multi-aspect social struggle which does not only react to socio-economic conditions, but it also operates generatively and proactively. In collective terms, this brings solidarity to cover a variety of practices that militantly renegotiate socioeconomic conditions in the past, present and the future, through creative and inventive ways where critical judgement and imaginative recomposition redeem social groups from past patterns of interaction and reframe their abilities within existing constraints (Bandura, 2000; Jepperson & Meyer, 2000; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Nevertheless, writing in Greece about groups who practice solidarity in 2015 is an attempt to discuss the practice and not the terminology as such. Terminology might be useful for opening a discussion and raising issues that need to be addressed but it might not be enough to express the full historical context of the subject matter of this paper. That “solidarity” became a popular, even worn-out, political motto in Greek politics the last years, it means neither that the term has one meaning or connotation only, nor that mainstream political discourses about solidarity are necessarily reflecting what the practice of solidarity is struggling to preserve or to bring into that same word.

The historical retrospective study is beyond the scope of the present paper, and the only remark one could make at this point refers to the approach that collective structures and solidarity practices never ceased to exist in capitalist societies, either as resistance/non-capitalist choices or as survival practices that the capitalist system achieved to embed and exploit for its own purposes (Sotiropoulou, 2012a). The study in this case refers, thus, to the recent grassroots structures which in their majority, emerged during the last years in Greece, particularly since 2009 onwards. Those new or re-invented forms of production and sharing have adopted the principle of solidarity as essential in their ideology and practice. With this I intend to make clear that my analysis does not belong to the usual approach of linear causality between the emergence of grassroots initiatives and the “crisis” in Greece, because the actual and historical context is much more complicated than that which would sustain such a causal argument.

2.2. General Theoretical Background

Traditionally, reciprocity and solidarity are defined as follows: the former is regarded as the practice of rewarding, possibly with equal value, the offer made by a person to another; while solidarity is defined as the offer which is given without any expectation of reward, much less one of value equal to the first offer. While this approach is very common, it perceives both terms in a very static and instantaneous way, as if they have no long-term expression in an economy.

Economics has contributed to this distinction by viewing reciprocity as an instantaneous or well defined contract with separate time-points where everything is pre-arranged to be given and received. Economists think of solidarity as reciprocity extended through time, or, in the best case, as reciprocity arranged in the context of the life cycles of a community. Then, even in very interesting and actually communal-life oriented models, the members of a community are still perceived to be practicing solidarity and reciprocity as isolated agents, which seek profit or utility as their primary reason for engaging, not only in transactions, but mostly in collective arrangements and solidarity schemes. Not even the household level of communal life is taken into account, which makes the analyses stand very far from real life conditions, where most people and households are linked between each other with several bilateral and multi-lateral bonds (Fafchamps, 1992; Platteau, 1997; Collet et al., 2007; Lindenberg, 1988).

At the same time, in the initiatives and groups described in the next section, it seems that both reciprocity and solidarity are mixed in their discourse, with solidarity to prevail and reciprocity to be pictured as a practice always possible to be performed by everyone involved in the schemes, as all people's

contributions are to be valued. At the end, all people are considered as able to contribute and offer something and the schemes are trying to assist people to think of what they can offer – that they had not thought of as a possibility in the mainstream economy. Moreover, receiving is portrayed also as a form of solidarity and reciprocity, i.e. people who receive should accept the offers, so that they do not become the only ones to give and supersede the equality of the collective effort; and everyone who has given in the past needs to reciprocate in receiving from the one who have received before.

In other words, solidarity and reciprocity do not only have blurred boundaries between them – in several cases, the schemes have an explicit policy to encourage their members to perform reciprocity as solidary practice. Time Banks are very aware of people being reluctant to ask for what they need, so they hold discussions or workshops for people to express their needs, apart from saying what they want to offer. Parallel currency groups which have an accounting unit other than the time hours, support their members to find or create production skills through training workshops that might be very low cost or free of charge and they also teach their members to accept reward. Receiving as solidarity does not only help people to cover their needs without appearing “needy”, but it also assists the scheme itself to have more balanced accounts.

If this real-life approach blurs the distinction between solidarity and reciprocity, what about political economic implications of solidarity structures? What if people, apart from individual aims (like economic security, survival, ensuring their shares in the community’s wealth), have specific and general collective aims to attain too? What if they have broader political economic targets concerning their community and the natural and human environment they live in? What if collective arrangements and solidarity are perhaps the only methods to make those aims achievable?

Annette Weiner’s theory (Weiner, 1992) of why people get involved in transactions can shed light on these questions. People participate in several types of transactions, like exchange, gift-giving, giving-away things, potlatch, etc. not with the primary intention to participate in the transactions but aiming to get out of the transactions what they consider most valuable to them. That is, people have a political economic and not only economic relationship to the perception of value, which means that they understand very well the political implications of disposing of or not disposing of something that is in their possession or management. Weiner links this prioritisation of what can be exchanged, with the construction, re-construction, questioning and re-negotiation, even struggle, around social hierarchies that are defined via possessions (of material or non-material nature) and the ability of humans to decide about disposition or preservation of those possessions.

People want to gain from a transaction at the second phase, i.e. after deciding which item can be transacted. For example, when people say “water is not for sale” they are keeping it out of transaction not to gain money but exactly to gain access to water which is valuable and more important than money. By denying the monetisation and privatisation of water, they sustain its value and discard superficial monetary gains do not correspond to the value of water and the political independence this value entails for people who have access to water resources. Therefore, the argument is that through solidarity activity people are trying to keep out of negotiation not only their survival but also their political target not to succumb to an economic and political structure which intensifies social hierarchies and exploitation.

To achieve this, effort, work and thinking are needed, which entails not only labour in its limited meaning, but also all forms of human action in a wider context. So, production and reproduction of ideas and perceptions are also considered action creating and contributing to the value of some things in comparison to others (Graeber, 2006). In other words, solidarity and its political economic effects are created and reinforced through people’s participation in grassroots structures. The more the collective effort develops and evolves, the more specific and practical solidarity itself becomes and it touches and tackles issues which might be quite away from established theory and political discourse. Because, it seems that solidarity might provide people and groups with “...the freedom to choose what sort of obligations one wishes to enter into, and with whom” (Graeber, 2001, p. 221). Solidarity structures are clear attempts of people to undertake obligations according to their principles, agendas and intentions which usually do not usually coincide with those of the capitalist economy. Thus, people are the ones to work hard in order to produce not only the material means for their lives, but also the ideas and collective meanings needed for them to live in their communities as both individuals and social beings while avoiding injustices and inequalities.

Another source of theory is the work by Platteau (1997; 2006), by Baland and François (2005) and by Fauchamps (1992) concerning communities where informal solidarity arrangements are very common, as those communities have not been integrated into the capitalist system. Solidarity arrangements and collective agreements might not always be really assisting the poorest among a community. Whether solidarity is a really strong political economic principle and whether it is effectively practiced when and for those who need it most, depends on several factors, the essentials of which are income inequality and/or power inequality. These authors warn that an initially solidary collective arrangement without addressing inequalities and other social issues within the community, might lead not only to exploitation, hierarchy and injustice, but also to a quick dissolution of the community's practices in favour of capitalist structures and at the expense of nature, the commons and the poor and weak members of that same community.

Finally, the notion of "reproduction" that Weiner (1980) proposes is a term to assist us in thinking beyond reciprocity. Reciprocity and its narrow limits do not help when we need to explore new, more egalitarian and nature-friendly structures in our economies. In those instances, solidarity needs to be based on plurality of human experiences, encompassing their multiple identities and the political challenges those identities imply, i.e. we cannot deny that people are assigned identities whether they like it or not, and this might have several effects on their power to resist injustice (Allen, 1999). Reproducing injustices, particularly those based on gender, class or ethnicity (without precluding of course all injustices hidden behind other social discriminations) cannot be part of truthful solidarity (Federici, 2013; Tellis-Nayak, 1983; Talpade Mohanty, 2002). Instead, the term of reproduction is used so that we become aware of issues, problems and possibilities which grassroots schemes raise for us.

2.3. Methodology

In terms of methodology, this study is merely a theoretical exploration of terms and economic approaches. However, the case studies and the specific information referring to everyday practices in this paper are drawn from author's field research during the last six years with reference to grassroots, non-mainstream structures in Greece. Observation and observation by participation, free discussions with participants, attendance of meetings, assemblies, gatherings and fairs, and semi-structured interviews have been the methods of data gathering. Moreover, leaflets, posters and online sources like scheme websites, social media pages and discussion fora have also been sources of texts and information concerning practices and issues emerging from those same schemes.

All this research is conducted in the open, i.e. all participants know the author's researcher role and cooperation with a group or scheme never starts without them knowing in advance who the researcher is, what she is searching for, and how they can access the results of the research. In the event that the participants have a collective procedure for accepting a researcher to work with them, this procedure is followed as well. Confidentiality and community protection is also one of the main axes of research, and any special concern of the participants is respected and handled so that no individual or community is harmed by research.

3. The Solidarity Structures

In order to explore the above theoretical issues in relation to solidarity practices within the framework of the contradictions existing in a capitalist patriarchal society, I use the example of schemes which have been established currently in Greece. We can divide, for analytical purposes, the structures into two main categories: schemes whose main focus is on facilitating the performance of transactions over goods and services; and schemes whose main focus is on production and provision/sharing of goods and services. The first category can be distinguished by parallel currencies, exchange networks, free bazaars and networks, and *sui generis* schemes (Sotiropoulou, 2012d, pp. 81-126). The second category includes collective cultivations (either in urban or rural areas), kitchen collectives, social kitchens and social clinics, social education centres and conservatories.

"Parallel currencies" are the currencies created by the users themselves, in virtual or even in

material form, which are used as units of account by the scheme members to perform their transactions within the schemes. An “exchange network” is a scheme where transactions are taking place without the use of any accounting unit. Given that the research showed that barter may have several forms and there might be several arrangements which can be similar to barter, to name the schemes as barter networks or name their activity as barter only, would not be accurate.

The term free-exchange bazaar (χαριστικό-ανταλλακτικό παζάρι) is the term used for bazaars where people can bring things (clothes, shoes, toys, books, etc.) to exchange them or just give them away and they can take anything they believe might be useful to them. Free-exchange bazaars are distinguished into a) permanent, i.e. those which have a stable place where stuff for free provision and exchange is stored and displayed for any visitor or bazaar user: b) regular, i.e. those which are repeated by the same organisers, not necessarily at the same place and c) occasional bazaars, i.e. bazaars that are organised once by their organisers and they have not been repeated by the same organisers within the last two years. Free networks are online networks, the members of which notify when they want to give something away for free or when they need anything that might be available, but not yet announced online.

The *sui generis* schemes are those which cannot be categorised into any of the previous categories and one cannot discern any categories or any pattern of transaction which would create a new category yet out of the variety of schemes within this same category.

“Collective cultivations” (either in urban or rural areas) are projects where people cultivate together public or private land and they share the produce among them. Kitchen collectives are the initiatives where people bring food materials and cook together and then they share the meal they cooked. Social kitchens, social clinics, social education centres and social conservatories are the initiatives where the scheme members provide for free meals, medical care, tutoring and artistic education to people (adults and/or children) who cannot afford to cover those basic needs with their own incomes.

Many details about those types of grassroots structures, particularly those which are constructed on sharing principles and on non-remunerated provision of goods and services are included in the next section of this paper. I do not include them in this section in order to avoid unnecessary repetitions. What is important to note here, is that women participate vastly in all those initiatives and their participation covers both the everyday work needed for the schemes to function, but also the decision-making and coordination activities (Sotiropoulou, 2014). Another important point is that people who participate have various backgrounds, economic wealth, political experiences and social skills (Sotiropoulou, 2012d, pp. 169-244), which makes the entire activity very interesting in many aspects.

4. Charity vs Solidarity vs Reciprocity

4.1. Charity vs Solidarity

A major theme concerning all those structures is that they deny the practice of charity, i.e. the provision of things and services to other people on the mere basis that people are inevitably unequal and the wealthy with sensitive hearts should sooth the suffering of the poor. All schemes, even those who provide goods and services to people who are currently in distress, declare that they do not do this for charity but as a practice to deny the neoliberal policies which foster social and economic inequality leading to life danger for thousands of people.

Charity or philanthropy is a term that exists in Greek and is used when the people who offer assistance are not interested in changing the conditions which create the inequalities that, in turn, make charity necessary. Moreover, charity is when people do this to reaffirm their superior status and the inferior destitute status of the receivers. The grassroots groups in Greece explicitly deny this stance, both practically and discursively. Although they recognise the need for immediate, non-reciprocated assistance, they perceive and construct this assistance as a broader class and human resistance to injustice rather than affirmation of the existing inequalities. Many of the people who participate in the schemes are also active in social movements. Many other people might not adopt the leftist-marxist discourse but prefer to donate and work for grassroots groups than for the church or other charities. They also avoid anything that would link

them to the neo-nazi party of Golden Dawn and prefer to support grassroots groups which are explicitly open to all people irrespective of origin.

My intention is not to say that charity is better – quite the opposite. However, social movements who have marxist origins and their theorists need to see solidarity in a broader sense. They need to examine critically this disdain of movements against immediate non-reciprocated assistance as class resistance which is crucial for any anti-capitalist struggle. The disdain for actions of solidarity which entails provision of goods and services stems apparently from:

- a) sexism and patriarchal mentalities, because patriarchy disdains all activities that are reproductive and promotes only what is seen as manly-violent enough; and
- b) class bias, because the denial of assistance to a homeless person “because this is charity” is based on the fact that the theorist or activist who denies is already member of a higher class than the person who needs assistance.

An example can better illustrate the argument. Two years ago, after one of the anti-racist festivals which take place in Greek cities in early summer, the question was raised against the resistance character of the local social kitchen. The main argument was that the kitchen provides food to people who cannot acquire their daily meal otherwise, and that this is more of a charity, rather than a resistance, practice. The people of the social kitchen had to argue and defend their work and practice as deeply political, as having resistance nature and as being far from any charitable intention.

The entire discussion took place within a context of gendered and class perceptions on what is political and what is not, given that “simple” reproduction work, like cooking and meal sharing are widely considered to be low-politics and women’s work, contrary to big street demonstrations and clashes with the police, which is considered to be high-politics and “manly” behaviour. Reality however defies the stereotypes, at least over the last six years in Greece. Women participate vastly in solidarity structures, but men are also involved in all tasks without avoiding tasks which inside households are considered to be women’s work. Moreover, in street demonstrations women are also numerous and at the front line.

Of course, if one of the main aims of the anti-capitalist movement is to ensure survival of people apart from their political awareness and mobilisation, one would question even this distinction between charity and solidarity. Formally, charity reinforces the unequal social and political relations – and practically, charitable organisations and public services usually treat people in ways which make people in distress in a way that actually can make them want to avoid the charity spaces and offers – sometimes at the expense of their own survival. In many cases, people who receive food or clothes from solidarity structures explicitly refuse religious or state-run charities and they do this on the basis of the treatment they receive there. In winter 2012-2013 many homeless people in Athens chose not to receive emergency housing from public authorities despite the bad weather forecast. However, when social provision services are cutting their expenses while needs are increasing, and the Ministry of Health issues an order to prevent unofficial authorities being able to share food legally to people who are in distress, this means something in terms of whether sharing food is for or against neoliberal policies. Particularly when people from grassroots groups get detained for sharing food (DOCTV 2012), it seems that the act of food sharing itself might be quite anti-capitalist in its very sense.

4.2. Solidarity as Practice for Redefining Economic Deprivation in Political Terms

This is not an apology for charity, but for questioning the *political* and not the *practical* aspects of it. If people who do not wish to join a social kitchen or feel afraid of any political connotation joining might have and still want to share food with others, they add to the effort of fighting back an acute capitalisation of the economy, which leads directly to hunger for vast parts of the population. What would not add to the effort in any case, is a food sharing based on racist rules, for example, a food sharing excluding immigrants, people who have dark skin, or people who are not Greeks or who are in any way “different” from what the givers want them to be.

However, if the main aim of all those schemes and groups is to maintain equal relationships and avoid the establishment, the reproduction of hierarchies and detrimental power relations, charity is excluded

from the agenda. Solidarity is what we are left with, if we perceive the actual neoliberal policies as an attack to specific parts of the society, particularly those who produce everyday what is needed for the society to be reproduced and usually are called producers, labourers or workers. Women workers, whether they work paid or unpaid, male workers, small farmers, and self-employed people, all are pushed into precariousness where, under the severe privatisation of public goods and services, they are not likely to escape. To this, one should add immigrants and people who have immigrant origin in Greece, but the official policies prevent them from acquiring legal and any practical rights concerning their living and work conditions. Immigrants and immigrant-originating Greek people are one of the most vulnerable groups, given that they have to face permanent exclusion and discrimination, and unprecedented criminalisation and detention just for being without Greek citizenship.

The challenge is therefore, to cover material needs and support communal bonds while entire neighbourhoods, cities and regions are devastated by neoliberal policies and while the people involved have different backgrounds, sometimes deteriorating backgrounds. Thus, solidarity offers the chance to discuss economic deprivation in political terms instead of perceiving economic hardship as quite distinct from political discourse. Most important: solidarity permits discussion of solutions to economic deprivation in political terms, picturing economic activity within the grassroots schemes as having political importance in terms of social struggle.

The term “class” here is not used because in this case it seems too narrow. It does not mean that we have no class features in all this activity. To the contrary, there are signs of class struggle in all those schemes, although they do not perceive their activity as such. However, participation in those initiatives is not for the poor only, and many middle class or even wealthy people participate and contribute with materials, knowledge, land and personal work, just like anybody else participates according to their abilities. Then, if we have at the same scheme people of all economic and social classes, then we have not the typical class struggle case one would read in books.

Actually, what is happening is a very interesting effort to redefine solidarity in terms of not only class, but also of political economic aims which might be common for greater strata of society. In other words, the schemes we are discussing can be direct efforts for redistribution of wealth from those who have excess to those who have not. This redistribution is not taking place within a charity context, then the idea is that at some point, those needs and inequalities will not exist. But for the moment, it is not possible to discuss anti-capitalist or anti-exploitation movements without first ensuring that people can really perform this struggle in terms of materials and mere survival.

Moreover, as Platteau (2006) showed in his study, really working solidarity and community spirit cannot develop if big income discrepancies exist among the members of a community. The concession by some land owners to collective cultivation groups to cultivate their lands is a direct redistribution, particularly because the cultivators have not only access to their produce but they also decide collectively how to share it. Then, classes exist and people are aware of their existence, otherwise, performing redistribution in such a way would not be possible.

One would assume that the wealthy people who participate, are aware that social dissolution might not be in their long-term interests, given that privatisation of commons and public goods, and given the aggressiveness of the corporate sector which will attack the wealthy middle class just after the poor are exhausted. Then, instead of doing what other wealthy people do, i.e. to adopt an individualist stance and wait until the social unequal redistribution is over, they join the schemes to work for redistribution the other way round, i.e. from the wealthy to the poor.

This might not be enough, particularly because access to commons and public goods is not under the middle class's control but under the State's and high middle class's, i.e. banking and corporate control. Platteau states (2007), however, that income gap reduction also helps in the commons being protected from privatisation and in the better management of public goods. Then, solidarity seems to be an effective choice if the decision of the community is to keep the commons and their communal character intact, while ensuring that the attacks to the working class will not be received passively.

4.3. *Solidarity in Practice*

Nevertheless, solidarity is not a simple term, much less when it comes to its practical implementation. The first question raised concerns how we are sure that solidarity is practiced in a truly egalitarian way, when there exists already deprivation and economic and social inequality among the people involved in the solidarity practice. This is a crucial issue, given that all the schemes described above are established on this principle. But how easy is it to practice solidarity? And how easy is it for the people in distress to negotiate their own solidarity practice, i.e. to define their needs, ask for the needs to be met and define their own personal role in the community as full members and not permanent full receivers? Examining the schemes type-by-type we might discern possible points needing exploration and addressing.

Formally, one would exclude parallel currencies and exchange networks where the norm of remuneration exists one way or another, as those schemes seem to exclude solidarity in practice. However, not only do all those schemes concern solidarity and how it can be introduced in reciprocal exchanges, but issues of pricing and solidarity in valuing are also considered, perhaps in a very intense way. The problem, of course, that exists particularly for parallel currencies is that given their nominal parity (1:1) with the euro currency, the mainstream valuing is transferred within a parallel currency scheme, thus reproducing injustices which already exist in the capitalist economy (Sotiropoulou, 2015). In terms of solidarity, the replication of mainstream valuing puts the entire effort under question and perhaps this is one of the most hard-to-solve issues when accounting units are used in grassroots initiatives. In addition, the discussion on raising just the prices of some producers is quite limited in scope, as the quest for a fair and just price cannot be resolved by discussing prices only. Valuing may be abstract and pricing is just one part of valuing's expression and realisation within the economy.

Actually, the idea behind parallel currencies is that being in solidarity, scheme members can trust each other so that they can perform transactions without having a hard currency, backed by the sovereign guarantee of a state or transnational organisation. Then, people who have run out of official currency are able to buy things they need or sell their goods and services irrespective of whether the other members have official currency in their purse or not. Then, solidarity is placed in the trust of members to each other.

However, other economic relationships, like the educational background, or the property rights each scheme member has, are not challenged. Moreover, given that an unemployed person is already short of cash and of several goods and services and the variety and prices concerning those same goods and services is limited within the scheme, that person might incur debt to the scheme which will not be repaid unless he/she finds a job. If that person has not managed to sell services or goods for some time, he/she might reach the limit of debit within the system, then he/she might not be able to perform transactions or she/he is forced to receive very low payments for goods and services he/she provides. In other words, the wealthiest people in the mainstream economy are also able in a parallel currency scheme to wait for a good deal and negotiate better prices for themselves, while the poorest people in the mainstream economy, have still much less negotiation power within the parallel currency system, no matter how alternative the currency they use might be (Sotiropoulou, 2012b; 2012c).

In that respect, things might be slightly better in an exchange network, where there is no stable and common accounting unit for the goods and services exchanged. The author has witnessed a case in such a network bazaar, where a woman needed some kitchenware and she was in real hardship, then people were telling her that there was no need to reciprocate. She kept thanking the people telling them that she would go home to bring something in return. The author has still not decided what is better in terms of solidarity practice: should people have insisted not to receive something in return? Or would it be better for everyone, particularly because that woman wanted to, to agree with her to bring something to the network after six months, or whenever she was able to?

In that same network, the author met a lady who was selling handmade jewellery and asked her what she would expect in return, she replied "nothing, I do not need anything". That was alright for the researcher, but what about the network and the network members? If you are in a collective effort where people try to acquire goods and services they need and you do not need anything, how are other people able to have some of the things you offer? Was that "I do not need anything" just ignorance or an attempt to

acquire a better deal than the one she would achieve in a case where she would need something?

Talking about solidarity then, and permitting people to access goods and services in the way they want, it seems that free bazaars and networks are quite close to find some balance concerning this question. In free bazaars and networks, it is not required to reciprocate immediately, much less to reciprocate at the level of value or volume of the things you receive. However, people who are always receiving things without ever giving anything back, are considered to be abusing the scheme.

Then, non-reciprocation and non-measurement might also create imbalances in favour of “free-riders”, and scheme users who take advantage of the loose rules, might acquire stuff at the expense of the members who abide with the rules and give without instant and obligatory reward. In certain cases, even in bazaars and free networks, people under specific conditions (for example, people who have recently relocated, newcomers to the city, or people who are known to be in distress), might really have access to as many things as they need. Most active members of those schemes are performing those gratuitous transactions within a long-term context, i.e. they might take things today and bring other things into the scheme at the next bazaar of their neighbourhood or after they check out their closet.

Concerning the kitchen collectives and the collective cultivations, they have similar structure, although in terms of effort and long-term cooperation the latter have much more extended requirements. Collective work means that people need not only work together or manage to contribute as possible the materials needed for the project; but also that people might have different skills and abilities, which might entail an arrangement of the tasks to be done according to the needs and wants of each person involved.

Particularly regarding the collective cultivation, shifts in the everyday tasks, like watering, are arranged regularly so that work to be done is shared in a more efficient way among the cultivators. Moreover, this arrangement might be quite spontaneous, i.e. the ones who can go on one particular day, undertake the work that was about to be done by other members. Solidarity takes also the meaning of abiding with important rules, like the total avoidance of agricultural chemicals. This is very important in collective cultivations where each member has its own plot apart from the common plot where people cultivate what the collective has decided. Collective cultivations, therefore, can have under certain conditions, particular parts for each member household, apart from the common lot cultivated by all members. Of course, this has nothing to do with property rights. In several cases, the cultivation takes place in deserted open spaces, or urban lands, where the cultivators have no ownership or any intention to acquire ownership at all. In other cases, even in big urban centres like Athens, private land plots are given to collective cultivation projects without of course any conveyancing of property rights taking place or being intended. What is important in all those cases, is that use of the land is made accessible to everyone who wants to participate in the project. The produce therefore is shared among the collective.

In schemes like social kitchens things are even more complicated. Needs are imminent and they have to be covered every day, not just when there is an excess in goods, when the community members have spare time or when the needs of two people coincide so that they transact with each other. Materials need to be acquired in big quantities, stored and managed so that everyday hundreds of households can be provided with meals. Moreover, space to cook and space for people to eat their food is needed, given that many of them might not have access to housing, or to electricity and water or even to simple kitchenware at the places they live.

On the other hand, the work needed to be done in the case of schemes which provide directly goods and services to people is huge, in terms of processing materials, sharing, management and provision of the final service. Even if a scheme is run by an assembly, this might of course give the chance for everyone involved to raise an issue, but in the end, running assemblies is also a type of work, and requires time, effort and negotiation skills to be effective. Then, it is probable and rather normal that contradictions or even conflicts arise all the time, whether they are hidden or not, whether they are resolved immediately or postponed for the next assembly.

Additionally, in several cases the participation in a solidary scheme does not imply that everyone, both the givers and the receivers, have resolved all internal quests concerning social stereotypes, perceptions, privileges and hierarchies. This exists in all schemes and all movements, and no-one would expect perfection on both individual and collective levels, particularly when all this activity takes place under

emergency conditions. However, especially in the schemes whose scope is the provision of services and goods, this might have detrimental effects to the scheme, to the people who are involved, to the aims of the scheme and ultimately to the entire community.

First, the people who are receiving food or other services, are already very vulnerable in all terms, particularly in social terms. Any inconsiderate behaviour addressed to them is something they cannot address as they would be able to under other circumstances. The people who receive assistance cannot resist bad behaviour by their assistants or other receivers because they need the food and other services given by the groups, and they need to be there and deal with all the individuals involved in the provision setting. Second, it seems reasonable that schemes established to fight back hardship, bring people together from completely different backgrounds, and some of them might not even be confident using the Greek language or a language that is also spoken by the other people around. This “difference” can create misunderstanding even among the best-intentioned people – when it is acknowledged, problems are resolved in an easier way. Much less is there time to always explore collectively the misunderstandings that might come up just from the very fact that people have not yet established a common communication mode (Tannen, 1990).

Here, the term “difference” is used because “privilege” is quite a limited notion and sometimes, the giver might not be in a much better economic condition or social position than the receiver. In other words, many people who are unemployed and lack basic things to make a living opt to participate and work in such a scheme, which means that they offer to the scheme not because they are in a better position than the people who receive goods or services, but exactly because they have personal experience about how it feels to be in hardship.

4.4. Solidarity workers

Finally, another important issue refers to the solidarity the scheme and the receivers, but mostly the entire community, does or does not show to the givers themselves, i.e. to the solidarity workers. They might be coordinators, cooks, people who bring their excess food or other useful stuff, health workers or administrative assistants. Given the stereotype of the middle class wealthy charity giver, most people do not recognise the work done within the schemes as real work, i.e. effort which needs bodily strength, education and mind-focus, special skills and specific materials to be performed. To this, one should add the emotional effort and affective labour, without which no such collective provision would be possible, let alone that without such emotional work even minor issues would erupt into major conflicts (Weeks, 2007). In general, this is social work on a massive scale and action which requires time and coordination of the efforts and schedules of many people to be done in an effective way.

The case concerning the disdain towards social kitchens as non-resistance practices is mentioned previously in this paper. At this point, one should underline the pressure – both communal and political – imposed on the people who offer their work in the schemes. Particularly political pressure: as solidarity has entered the political agenda during the last years, then it becomes difficult to refuse to work in a scheme, as this would portray one as non-solidary. Pressure is “objective” in the sense that the needs of people are real and no-one wants to turn away from them; and it is “subjective”, because the main motto concerning the limits and the abilities of each one to offer is very liberal “well, everyone should offer what she/he can and set his/her own limits”.

However, transferring the responsibility of setting limits to individuals while the individual is involved in a collective effort does not seem very solidary and sets a paradigm of collective non-responsibility in relation to any abuses that might take place within a grassroots initiative. Moreover, even if we can resolve the issues concerning the relationships between givers and receivers, we cannot solve the problem of sustainability within collective grassroots structures by making overwork and excessive human effort an issue of individual responsibility. In many cases, the “psychological need” of the giver is mentioned as an argument for the overwork she/he does, let alone that many consider the “psychological need” enough an argument for all those people to remain without any recognition, reward and respect for their work.

Recalling individual reciprocity “I give you the chance to cover your psychological need – you give

me your effort, skills and work” is a non-solidary (probably hideous) attitude that stems from the old-type bourgeois notion of volunteering, which was covered well enough under the middle-class incomes which were thought to be “common” some years ago. Not only this: it is the argument often used by employers while trying to “hire” employees who are desperate to find employment, even without adequate or with no salary at all. What has solidarity to do with the idea that a worker can be treated like this, even if her work is offered within a non- or anti-capitalist setting like a grassroots scheme?

Nevertheless, it seems that individual reciprocity would not be enough of a solution even for this case, because the solidarity workers are primarily covering communal needs and not just the individual needs of some community members. Moreover, if we take into account the gendered nature of solidarity structures, one can anticipate where this lack of consideration concerning the solidarity workers would lead us. There is the risk that no matter how solidary an initiative is, if this issue is not tackled it could become gendered, or “feminised” non-remunerated, obligatory work for the sake of a community which is happy enough to transfer the costs of neoliberal policies to those who work for the entire community to survive the policies (Sotiropoulou, 2013).

With respect to “feminized”, the term is not used here within the context of thinking that all this reproduction work is naturally done by women. Quite the opposite: in a patriarchal society all hierarchies are based on the archetypal axis masculine-feminine, where the masculine is considered superior and able enough to decide that the work done by the feminine needs not to be recognised as work or remunerated in any way. Then, many men are also in danger of having their work “forgotten” and made “invisible” within the schemes. I can share here the finding that it is men, rather than women, in solidary initiatives that find it harder to recognise their own contribution as labour and the entire activity as resistance and hard work than women – which creates even more questions about how people are socially educated not to recognise their very own effort as work and social offering. At the end, gendering the schemes reveals injustices that the masculinist perception of solidarity in the mainstream political discourse hides behind the general enthusiasm that once we start being solidary we have no injustice nor inequality by definition.

5. Reciprocity, Solidarity and Reproduction

It seems that solidarity and reciprocity are intertwined as far as it concerns grassroots structures with horizontal decision-making. Moreover, it seems that reciprocity is a notion too narrow for collective arrangements, particularly those extending the features of the arrangement in the long term. Solidarity gives many good directions which can prove not only community-oriented but also very efficient in terms of reducing income inequalities and power imbalances. However, solidarity, given its free and flexible character, can also create passages for abusers and power-seeking people who will reverse the entire structure in favour of the few powerful and at the expense of the many which do not seek power and finally, at the expense of the entire community.

Reciprocity could be a rule of thumb but it cannot resolve individual issues only. In the previous section, it has been shown that it is not possible to resolve individually a problem which emerges within a collective arrangement. Actually, forwarding collective problems to individual solutions tends to enhance inequalities and exploitation instead of reducing them. Particularly when the needs of community are pressing, and the abusers find the situation open to their own ambitions, then questions on how to continue having both the collective arrangements and the political economic principles working effectively arise in the most imminent manner.

At this point, the idea of reproduction might be of great assistance to this discussion, the theory for which has been presented in section two of this paper. If the community has decided to make sure that its members not only survive but they can reproduce themselves as free and social beings, then this might give important directions on achieving the solidarity so much quested for. In other words, if people enter a collective economic arrangement and a transaction with the intention of keeping outside of the transaction their most valuable belongings, then, we know that to reproduce people within a community, this community needs to consider those belongings as really valuable to all.

Reproduction of a hierarchy then does not take place like a natural disaster, and the people who

attempt to take advantage of a situation so that a hierarchy is (re)produced, should know that people will not do the reproduction work needed for this hierarchy to be established. Actually, even if the people accept, for reasons of emergency to continue offering their effort and contributions, an initiative will start to be non-sustainable and highly unstable in terms of community provision. In terms of a scheme, people need to be aware – all the time – that without their own work, effort and creativity, no injustice will be possible to be established in a scheme where horizontal decision-making is established from the beginning.

Second, reproduction means that all those “low-profile” political economic tasks, like food production, child care, medical care, are really what every community needs most. We have seen that most of this work is provided without remuneration, i.e. without reciprocity, and the people who donate materials and/or their work are doing this within their effort to be solidary to other people. However, what about reproduction of this work and of course, of the people who provide it? How can those people recreate themselves in both biological and social terms to be able to offer their solidary labour the very next day or week? And if we value so much cooking, urban gardening, and medical care, how are we going to reproduce this work without exhausting the carers? In brief, isn't solidarity to make sure that all people doing that same work, no matter whether they do this in a household or in a collective kitchen, are receiving what they need to reproduce themselves as biological and social beings?

As we already know, reproduction work can be imbalanced in terms of rewards, particularly when it refers to children, elderly, or sick people. This is another reason why reciprocity cannot work in terms of individual relations. But, what about reciprocating socially the work done for example, in a social kitchen?

One would bring of course, the argument of reproduction taking place within a capitalist system, finally ending up providing that same system with services of population survival and working force improvement. This is exactly the question, because to reproduce capitalism or any other exploitative and unjust system, we would use the same means, processes and effort as we would do for reproducing our communities without capitalism. However, are those processes really the same? It seems that reproduction of injustices and inequalities is a key criterion not to be put at the margin of the discussion.

6. Instead of Conclusions: Now What?

While I am revising this paper the grassroots initiatives in Greece are facing their biggest challenge so far. While the central government officially delays or is unable to cover the limited social provisions that are supposed to be offered, dozens of thousands of refugees arrive to Greece trying to reach central Europe. People in Greece are using the already existing grassroots solidarity structures or form new ones to organise gathering and dissemination of much needed food, hygiene and clothing items and provision of medical support or shelter, because central government and big international organisations curiously do not provide the means nor the organisation and administration know-how to assist the refugees as international law requires (Daley 2015, Mackey 2015).

However, the challenge is huge, not only because the grassroots schemes have to support so many people either local or refugees; but also because neoliberal policies ravage social services from funding, materials and personnel and reduce incomes of the citizens. Solidarity does not mean that we create a society where it is normal to have hundreds of thousands of destitute people and small volunteering groups trying to alleviate their hunger or winter cold. Quite the opposite: Solidarity means that we solve the problems so that there is no need for anyone to rely on donations and private assistance for basic needs like shelter, food and healthcare and if there is such need, this should be exceptional and rare. In that sense, all solidarity expressed to the people who are under attack by neoliberal policies, whether they live in Greece or pass through the country to save their lives, has a lot of resistance potential.

Nevertheless, to make sure our grassroots structures are really solidary, we need to think very much about what we are really reproducing. As already mentioned, transferring survival means to people while the mainstream economy is trying to starve them, or just abandon them, is the first step of resisting that mainstream economy. Using, for example, people's (most of whom are women) unpaid work to provide cooked food to people, because this is something we consider normal work in a patriarchal society, is actually reproduction of patriarchy and of unpaid invisible work, under the justification of fighting poverty. A

scheme which is solidary and not just charitable, would reflect on who is working, for whom, under which conditions, and what hierarchies are established or enhanced while the scheme is functioning.

Moreover, the people who today receive food or medical assistance, are those same people who the mainstream economy deprived of necessities in order to make their own solidarity impossible to the rest of community members. It is right and absolutely necessary to provide immediately the necessity which is missing, i.e. to perform immediate wealth redistribution at small scale. But, those same people might need a more permanently equitable distribution of assets and materials so that they become more able to reproduce themselves and interact with others, not only as receivers but also as producers and contributors. Briefly speaking, to be solidary means that we also recognise the grassroots structures as the first step to devising more demands and solutions which would solve income and asset disparities in a more permanent manner.

In other words, if the aim is to reproduce free social humans within their communities, the expansion of solidarity structures might not only take the direction of covering small everyday needs, but also of covering long-term needs which might require public spaces, common facilities, more materials and more involvement of the communities affected. Silencing the people currently in hardship does not help, let alone that this is a completely colonial attitude, whether we talk about internal or external colonialism. Because, those same people are meant to be members of the communities we want to construct in the future where such distress will be unthinkable. Silencing the carers is also unhelpful, plus it creates a retrograde movement towards stereotypes that we fought too hard to highlight and eliminate.

Then perhaps, the notion of reproduction and of people being always aware of what they are reproducing and within which collective settings this reproduction takes place, might be a useful rule of thumb. Combined with that, it seems that solidarity might be a good starting point for opening the discussion of non-capitalist economic structures and how they might practically function here and now.

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