

SOLIDARITY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE DEINSTITUTION OF DISSENT

by Theodoros Rakopoulos (University of Bergen)

Originally published at *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, Occasional paper 6, available at: https://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_modern_greek_studies/Theodoros_Rakopoulos.pdf

As an anthropologist, I think in terms of the intersubjective constitution of knowledge among people who claim and use notions and terms “in the field” – that is, while doing fieldwork in a spatially defined social area of interest, as well as in the public sphere. In this context, I have been involved in deciphering and exploring the varied vicissitudes of one heated term that has become particularly salient in the vocabulary of the crisis, namely solidarity.

While investigating the grassroots ramifications of solidarity in one form of mobilization, the anti-middleman movement (Rakopoulos 2014a), I came across different usages and understandings of the term. The tensions and contradictions at play, when dealing with such a politically imbricated notion, the various claims placed on it and the antagonisms contesting the purity and clarity of its practice partly formed the core of my interest but were also salient among the participants of solidarity economy networks. By 2013, many dozens of activist groups across Greece were involved in this movement of food distribution without market middlemen. Since then, a diffusion and expansion into other forms of mobilization has taken place. More specifically, the grassroots groups committed to such praxis have diminished in numbers as other organizational arrangements (such as municipalities) entered the scene shaping the solidarity economy food distribution movement.

Solidarity was defined in quite clear formations by my research participants at the time, as a form of “mobilizing others” (Rakopoulos 2015) and, as I discussed in a recent *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* article, in terms of a strict antithesis to austerity (Rakopoulos 2014b). Some of this tendency developed in a movement upheld by the Left coalition party SYRIZA (among other players) and instigated a partial institutionalization of the social mobilization around food. Following and echoing this, the idea of solidarity started transforming from a politically loaded discursive feature of political

education to one that cross-fertilized with other, similar ideas (from charity to networking to comradeship). Discussions (and fears) of co-optation were rampant among many research participants throughout this course of events, along with a (still present) discussion of “conferring” movemental impetus to the institutional Left, which was expressed in participants’ waiting for a Left government’s friendly embrace while conferring some of their enthusiasm to that prospect. On some occasions, this expectation and enthusiasm eventually translated into a yearning towards institutional change rather than towards grassroots relief, and, to an extent, in the process pushed the movement to work in that direction. The idea is often discussed in Greek movement circles as *anathesi* (ανάθεση) or *he logiki tis anathesis* - the logic of conferring.

Of course, not all solidarity economy is Left-inspired or even socially progressive. Solidarity, a politicized reclaiming of charity but also—and crucially so—of reciprocity, opens up the discursive field of similarity and difference. Solidarity participants become engaged in sociality practices premised on ideas of egalitarianism, and see the receivers of their provisions as equals. However, this—often-imagined—equality can push in the direction of identity similarity, which is how the neo-Nazi organization Golden Dawn has laid claims for an “ethnically pure” solidarity. The neo-Nazi party’s discourse on the purity of racial “egalitarianism” (a contradiction in terms on its own) demands that Greeks be considered similar and be treated equally while all others be excluded from the party’s own (and in any case short-lived) solidarity networks.

The solidarity economy is actively anti-austerity and did not form as a provisional remedy to the dismantling of the welfare state, but rather as a political contestation of that prospect. In this way, the mobilization went hand in hand with the Left. However, many activists detect a recent shift in the positions of SYRIZA (the main contingent in the government since the elections held in January and, again, in September 2015) towards austerity. This shift seems to imply a turn from outright animosity towards austerity (an animosity that almost constituted a politically ontological differentiation from the pro-austerity parties), to an ambiguous embracement of positions that resemble tenets of liberal pragmatism. The new position attributed to SYRIZA with regard to austerity has serious repercussions for the solidarity economy, espe-

cially on its dialectical stake between the grassroots movement and the state.

This change *might* give impetus to the solidarity economy, after a period of hibernation. The transformation of SYRIZA from a dissent-driven party to a pragmatism-centered administrative apparatus not only allows for renewed dissent among activists, but it also signals the shifting center of dissent from the once radically and vocally anti-austerity party that institutionalized it to more loosely structured entities. This is what I call “the de-instituting of dissent” in Greece. It might be a process that affects, if not indeed reverses, the “conferral politics” period that some solidarity movements and networks have gone through. Many research participants with whom I have talked over a period of time (around three years) have said that they have been gradually withdrawing their consent from the institutionalized politics implied by “the logic of conferring.” Undoubtedly, this process is not yet fully visible or tangible, but speaking with solidarity economy participants on the ground reveals their shared disappointment about austerity and lack of support for the movement by the state, a disappointment that points towards a reshuffling of the relationship between the movement and the state.

This potentially new relationship between party/government and movement/solidarity economy has been heatedly discussed. Some try to draw new lines between the desire for the present expressed in the movements and the pragmatics of (what Stathis Gourgouris has called) “Left governmentality” that is organized by external factors (Gourgouris [2015](#)). Yet others see party and movement as antithetical. These latter voices argue that the social movements have been tricked into waiting for SYRIZA to deliver on its promises and that left pragmatism will destroy whatever solidarity economy stands for (Karyotis [2015](#)).

For me, the new configuration implies, first and foremost, that the institutionalization of solidarity, that is to say, the alleged passing of solidarity activity from a grassroots to a statal level that happened with the national elections in January 2015, which could have affected its political underpinnings, might now be prone to a serious disorientation process. In fact, it might even be diminished as a process, as many activists see (what they call) a “defeat” of SYRIZA in terms of the party’s position towards anti-austerity, and underscore that only a return to radical social movements could salvage the solidarity econo-

my of Greece. It is a fascinating turning point and it remains to be seen how things will develop. It certainly requires more fieldwork.

Let me then revisit the point that opened this piece. The processual making of terms such as solidarity, when its meanings become augmented under the present conditions of crisis, can involve subjects as widely different as unemployed youngsters in working class suburbs of Volos, or US academics. In mid-July 2015 Heath Cabot, an anthropologist colleague, and I organized a panel on solidarity networks for the conference “Democracy Rising” (organized in Athens by the leftist Global Centre for Advanced Studies). The panel was received with great enthusiasm and genuine international interest for the issues we are researching.

Cabot and I worked hard to bring together anthropologists interested in how the urgency of the notion is understood on the local level in crisis-ridden Greece. We discussed solidarity from an anthropological point of view, while stressing ethnography as a modality of comprehending its various political vicissitudes in contemporary Greece. I found the enthusiastic reception of our panel thrilling, and indeed promising of new research horizons. However, I also came across certain debatable and slippery remarks on solidarity in other discussions and panels that took place during the conference, where the term was invested with varying degrees of politicized voluntarism. In an electrified atmosphere during a plenary discussion,³ University of Toronto political economist Leo Panitch praised the solidarity networks of Greece as the way of all socialism, or at least a mode of development for the country. Panitch argued about the (administration of the) future, something that has been a stake for the Left since Leninist and Gramscian times, stressing that the future of the Greek economy at large lies with the grassroots solidarity networks. He emphatically noted how, in the sophisticated solidarity economies on the ground, Greeks have “already” engendered the conditions for surpassing neoliberal capitalism at a future stage. He specifically stressed the role of the organization Solidarity4all in organizing solidarity as a future prospect for the country.

³ The discussion also involved LSE economist and then MP of SYRIZA Costas Lapavistas, Birkbeck legal scholar and current MP Costas Douzinas, and Columbia University comparatist Stathis Gourgouris.

Is this a way to romanticize the solidarity economy or to overestimate its potential? My provisional answer is that both romanticization and overestimation are present here. The two, in fact, feed into each other and are exaggerated by the overall attention paid to Greece as the solidarity movement is gaining momentum. That is, a visiting intellectual such as Leo Panitch, despite his firm grasp on international (critique of) political economy, can see Greece in the spotlight of current events and aim to extrapolate from that a broader argument of political economy based on (apparently) thin evidence regarding matters on the ground. One wonders if soup kitchens, anti-middleman markets, or social pharmacies can formulate the basis for change of the political economy on a higher level (in this case that of the country as a whole). To go back to my earlier point on the relation between state and movement, Leo Panitch does not seem to acknowledge the worries of many solidarity participants that the state has penetrated and indeed capitalized on the grassroots solidarity economy (a point also made by Cabot in her piece in this section).

I have deep respect for the work and scholarship of Leo Panitch—which is why I see this position of his as an indication of a wider problem. Having conducted fieldwork with the anti-middleman movement and solidarity networks I have seen a different reality on the ground that allows me to argue that the position of Panitch in this regard unfortunately remains on the level of “recipes for the kitchens of the future” (to invoke an ironic and iconic phrase of Karl Marx in Volume I of *Das Kapital*). These distribution networks cannot shoulder the responsibility for a generalized paradigm shift; neither can they uphold the entire framework of the country's political economy (especially if shortages of imported basic resources, such as petrol and pharmaceuticals, become a real possibility).

The issue of solidarity economy is thus closely related to another problematic that centers on the question of why ethnography is not merely significant but necessary. We need more research on solidarity, and indeed participant observation for long periods among the activists of current solidarity economies, since these realities on the ground are shifting and transmogrifying quickly. Only immersed, sustained, and involved ethnography can capture the subtleties of such changes.

References:

- Gourgouris, Stathis. 2015. "The Syriza problem: radical democracy and left governmentality in Greece" *Open Democracy* (6 August). Accessed 7 August 2015.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/stathis-gourgouris/syriza-problem-radical-democracy-and-left-governmentality-in-g>
- Karyotis, Theodoros. 2015. "Greece, When the Social Movements Is All That Is Left" *Open Democracy* (24 September). Accessed 5 October 2015.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/theodoros-karyotis/greece-when-social-movements-are-all-that-is-left>
- Marx, Karl. 1992 [1867] *Das Kapital*, Vol 1. London: Penguin Classics
- Rakopoulos, Theodoros. 2014a. "The Crisis Seen from Below, Within and Against: From Solidarity Economy to Food Distribution Cooperatives in Greece." *Dialectical Anthropology* 38: 189-207.
- 2014b. "Resonance of Solidarity: Anti-Middleman Food Distribution in Anti-Austerity Greece." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32: 2 (October): 95–119.
- 2015. "The Solidarity Economy in the Greek Crisis: Movementality, Economic Democracy and Social Reproduction." In *Economy for and against Democracy*, edited by Keith Hart, 161–181. London and New York: Berghahn.