The spatiality of counter-austerity politics in Athens, Greece: Emergent 'urban solidarity spaces'

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Abstract

Grassroots responses and alternatives to austerity that have emerged in Athens and Greece call for a re-thinking of the recent neoliberal crisis through articulations of contestation 'from below'. This paper addresses this yet nascent theoretical debate through the notion of 'urban solidarity spaces', focusing on the spatiality of counter-austerity politics that emerges *in* and *out of* places and expands across urban space and beyond. From survival tactics grounded in Athenian neighbourhoods, such as local solidarity initiatives; to solidarity structures and cooperatives; and broader strategies of transformation and alternatives, such as the formation of a solidarity economy. These aim to constitute an empowering process of solidarity-making 'from below', and open up spaces for the practice of bottom-up democratic politics vis-à-vis austerity, a 'politics of fear' and crisis. The arguments raised here methodologically draw on activist ethnographic research in the 'Athens of crisis', between 2012 and 2013.

Keywords

Athens, counter-austerity politics, crisis, solidarity, urban movements

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摘要

面对雅典以及希腊全境出现的紧缩，来自草根的回应和替代之选呼吁通过表述"自下"而来的论争而重新思考近年来的新自由主义危机。本文通过"城市团结空间"的概念讨论了这一尚初生的理论争鸣，重点关注各个地方**内部**和**外部**涌现出并扩展到整个城市空间及外围的反紧缩政治斗争之空间性。从地方团结计划等植根于雅典街区的生存性策略，到团结结构和合作机制，以及团结经济的形成等更广范围的转型战略和替代方案，都旨在组成一个"自下而上"的团结赋能过程，为与紧缩、"恐惧政治"和危机相对的底层民主政治实践打开空间。本文的论证在方法论上借鉴 2012-2013 年"危机中的雅典"维权行动民族志研究。

关键词

雅典、反紧缩政治、危机、团结、城市运动

Introduction

In the article 'The Bank of Time' in the *Guardian*, Yaxley (2013) discusses the

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everyday life impacts of the crisis in the Athenian context and the responses put forward by grassroots activist groups. Through reporting on the Time Bank set up after the mass mobilisations and the Syntagma (Parliament) Square occupation in the summer of 2011, the author stresses the two-fold role of emergent initiatives across Athens and Greece: first, grassroots solidarity initiatives and collective organising 'from below' address everyday basic needs for food, clothing, services and health treatment. In this way, they deal with the severe impacts of austerity on the social reproduction of the city's population. Second, solidarity networks and structures become spaces where alternatives to austerity emerge, such as social/ solidarity economy and cooperativism (Rakopoulos, 2014a, 2014b). In this respect, solidarity-making 'from below' and mutual aid practices acquire a key empowering role vis-à-vis austerity, dominant conceptions of charity and the rise of a 'politics of fear' against 'the other' – the immigrant, the homeless, the unemployed, the 'nouveau poor' (Alexandri, 2015; Kaika, 2012; Leontidou, 2014). Additionally, solidarity structures act as spaces where alternative modes of economic conduct and social relations are narrated, imagined and experimented with through everyday practices grounded in neighbourhoods and spanning across the city of Athens and beyond.

This paper responds to recent calls made by scholars (Derickson et al., 2015; Featherstone et al., 2015; Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014) to rethink neoliberal crises 'from below', through emergent forms of contestation. These debates raise the key argument that so far scholars have primarily focused on the macro-economic effects of the recent global crisis (Harvey, 2012; Peck 2012) and its uneven variegated causes and effects (Peck et al., 2013), rather than on the ways it is being contested and subverted by grassroots movements (Featherstone, 2015).

In responding to these discussions, I develop an empirically informed account of the spatiality of counter-austerity politics in Athens through an analysis of emergent 'urban solidarity spaces'. The notion of 'urban solidarity spaces' involves the spatial practices of solidarity and struggle that unfold at the territorial, social and economy levels, and aims to further understandings of how people and communities contest crises. Additionally, it accounts for the alternatives articulated by the grassroots in contexts of austerity, and critically assesses their possibilities and limitations. In particular, I discuss 'urban solidarity spaces' through four interrelated foci: solidarity-making 'from below' as an empowering relation and narrative vis-à-vis charity and a 'politics of fear'; solidarity spaces as sites where differences and political antagonisms become negotiated; solidarity economy as an alternative to austerity and a site of internal contestation; and the spatiality of solidarity-making, namely networking among grassroots initiatives *in* and *across* urban space.

The arguments raised in this paper draw on eight months of ethnographic research and original empirical findings gathered in Athens between 2012 and 2013.[1] Research objectives involved the investigation of contentious politics in contexts of crisis through grounded insights into the everyday practices of activism in the Athenian context (Arampatzi, 2014). During this period, I engaged in critical collaboration with two grassroots groups based in Exarcheia – an Athens city centre neighbourhood – namely the 'Residents' Committee' and the 'Solidarity Network' of Exarcheia; participated in their day-to-day workings; conducted interviews with participants; gathered published material; recorded reflections in my field diary; followed weekly assemblies and public events organised; and traced their links to broader campaigns and mobilisations taking place across Athens at

the time. This experience brought forward the analytical and practical benefits of conducting 'activist ethnographies' (Chatterton et al., 2008, Routledge, 2009), as it contributed to in-depth understandings of how people contest neoliberal crises 'from below' and of enhanced solidarity-making and practices of contestation *on the ground*, enacted in multiple material embodied ways.

Re-thinking the Greek crisis through the trajectories of struggles in Athens

In re-thinking the recent crisis through forms of contestation, key continuities and transformations of struggles in the context of neoliberalising Athens contribute to our understanding of contemporary responses and alternatives to austerity.

In the first instance, neoliberal development introduced since the mid-1990s in Athens and Greece signified a shift in urban politics. Inherited urbanisation patterns of unregulated expansion and weak city-planning were combined with market-oriented policy focusing on public land speculation and the privatisation and commodification of urban space (Hadjimichalis, 2014; Kavoulakos, 2013). Similar to previous instances of neoliberal restructuring discussed in other contexts (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 1989, 2005; Peck and Tickell, 2002), in the period leading up to the 2004 Olympic Games, competitive capital investment became the vehicle for introducing leisure and sports-led redevelopment, cultural heritage entrepreneurialism and 'place-branding' in Athens. This international mega-event acquired a central role within the development of a discourse on the 'Greek success story', a country of the 'semi-periphery' of capitalist economies, entering at the time a new era of supposed prosperity and financial 'boosterism' (Petropoulou, 2010, 2014).

At the same time, urban movements in Athens have been historically developed mainly through informal forms of collective organising in response to weak welfare. According to Leontidou (1990, 2010), spontaneous popular squats that were formed in the post-war period tackled the lack in housing provision and gradually assumed control over social reproduction issues in the city. In the following years, these struggles over the use-value of urban space became incorporated through housing legislation that secured social cohesion and reproduction – for example state tolerance to squats and the 'antiparochi'[2] legislation. Since the mid-1990s in particular, urban struggles were manifested through neighbourhood-based initiatives that contested the lack of open public spaces in the city and reclaimed these vis-à-vis neoliberal policies (Kavoulakos, 2013). In the aftermath of the Olympics and as neoliberal policies reproduced and created new spatialities of uneven development – such as socio-spatial inequalities, environmental and urban space degradation and privatisation of public spaces in the city – localised initiatives started developing joint actions to contest these at the city level (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012; Portaliou, 2008). Regarding these, Kavoulakos (2013) notes that, in some cases, urban movements developed in Athens posed (defensive) claims towards local institutions against the privatisation of public spaces; while others, such as social centres, introduced de-commodified collective ways of organising social life in the city.

Moreover, the protests of 2008 that spread across Athens and other Greek cities signified a first wave of mass spontaneous responses to the global crisis and an attempt to politicise and contest its uneven causes and effects. In the following period, several commonly managed spaces, local initiatives, social centres and occupations of public spaces and buildings emerged, placing

collective (self)-organisation and self-empowerment at the heart of their practices in light of the commodification of public space, rising unemployment and precarity (Leontidou, 2010; Petropoulou, 2010). Following the voting of the first 'package' of austerity measures, the occupation of Syntagma Square in the summer of 2011 – aligned with the Spanish 'Indignados' and the Occupy movements spreading globally at the time – marked another key transformation within contestation to the crisis. If the 2008 protests instigated processes of grassroots collective organising, while at the same time raising issues of urban democracy and justice (Leontidou, 2010; Stavrides, 2009), the Syntagma occupation assembly became a laboratory for experimenting with practices of self-organisation, mutual aid and solidarity-making (Leontidou, 2012). This 'bottom-up democratic politics' constituted in Syntagma Square (Kaika and Karaliotas, 2016) became a 'cry' for 'real democracy', as articulated in the occupation banners, vis-à-vis representational politics, and an everyday practice of direct democracy grounded in collective organising in the occupation. In the post-Syntagma period, everyday practices of self-organisation and mutual support were dispersed across the city, through the formation of 'popular assemblies' in neighbourhoods and numerous locally-based solidarity initiatives and grassroots structures – such as time banks and barter markets, community cooking collectives, mutual aid networks of goods' distribution, work cooperatives and health structures.

Thus far, several scholars have argued on the urban dimensions of the global crisis (Harvey, 2012), and how 'austerity urbanism' has been enforced at the expense of already vulnerable social groups dependent upon social welfare and public services (Peck, 2012). In this sense, as Peck et al. (2013: 1092) note, cities have become spaces where

austerity assumes a central role within deepening capital enclosures and dispossession. In the case of Athens, in response to the European sovereign debt crisis since 2010, austerity and asphyxiating fiscal discipline imposed on public spending[3] led to the dismantling of the already weak welfare and public services, such as health and education, and paved the way to large-scale privatisations of public assets (Hadjimichalis, 2014). Further, increasing unemployment,[4] precarity[5] and homelessness due to a housing crisis underway,[6] as well as the mainstreaming of far-right discourses, such as the 'scapegoating' of immigrants, and the diffusion of a 'politics of fear' against dissident voices are only a few of the cumulative impacts of austerity at the everyday life level of the city.

At the same time, as noted in Peck (2012), cities assume a central role within the development of counter-austerity politics. In the Athens of crisis in particular, localised initiatives and solidarity structures formed during the past few years have been countering the effects of austerity on the social reproduction of urban populations, through everyday practices of mutual aid and solidarity-making *in* neighbourhoods and *across* the city. Moreover, solidarity initiatives serve as spaces where alternatives to austerity become grounded and negotiated in everyday life contexts, such as a social / solidarity / cooperative economy. Looking into such alternatives, Stavrides (2014: 546) notes that these emergent 'common spaces' are sites where new social bonds and forms of collective struggle and survival are constituted. Furthermore, Leontidou (2014) contends that these local initiatives and alternatives, constituted through spontaneity, informality and popular creativity, discursively undermine the neoliberal rationality of austerity as manifested in the European South, aiming to discipline and control the 'lazy, corrupt, irresponsible' Greeks. Similarly, Petropoulou (2014) re-assesses the role of 'spontaneity'

within grassroots resistances to the crisis based on their radical emancipatory potential vis-à-vis the neoliberal 'normalcy' of the crisis.

In furthering these debates and drawing on my field research findings, spontaneity and informality as discussed in Leontidou (2014) are indeed *organisational characteristics* of emergent urban solidarity spaces, articulated around horizontal formations and informal activist networks spanning across Athens and beyond. Drawing on Leontidou (2014) and Petropoulou (2014), spontaneity and informality are key traits of solidarity-making and resonate with the trajectories of grassroots collective organising and informal economies developed through popular squats and make-shift housing in post-war Athens. Within these, relations of mutuality, exchange, mutual aid and self-organisation contributed to the development of, what Graeber (2011) terms, 'human economies' that promoted non-commodified means of social reproduction – as opposed to 'market economies' (Petropoulou, 2014). However, I suggest that, while these are inherited organisational characteristics of urban struggles, the key counter-austerity bottom-up *narrative* that emerged recently revolves around *solidarity*, mutually constituted with practices that: tackle impoverishment; contest top-down charitable practices organised by, for example, corporate media; and challenge exclusionary opposition to the crisis, or what Featherstone (2015) calls 'nationed imaginaries' and practices, such as the 'Greeks-only' soup kitchens of the Golden Dawn ultra-right-wing party.

Additionally, urban solidarity spaces serve as sites where creative alternatives to austerity are constructed through the re-working of social relations and solidarity-making. Nevertheless, Stavrides (2014) fails to address how such commonly constructed spaces, being part of the world they strive to change, are also sites of broader *contested*

power relations, internal contradictions, antagonisms and creative tensions. Moreover, these internal divides reveal historical antagonisms between political cultures, identities and movements – Left, leftist, anarchist etc. During the 1990s, these were expressed through various forms of localised '(lower) middle-class' movements – relating according to Kavoulakos (2013) to the European 'new social movements' around identity politics – and autonomous cultures developed in social centres. Within the recently formed solidarity spaces, these often co-exist and overlap, a key transformation that shows how the emancipatory potential identified by Petropoulou (2014) within autonomous practices of grassroots groups and initiatives *is not mutually exclusive* to the pursuit of alternatives through the complementary contestation of state / economic institutions, such as in the formation of a social / solidarity economy.

These arguments are further contextualised and empirically informed in the following sections through a discussion of emergent 'urban solidarity spaces' in Athens. This analysis aims to nuance the role of 'solidarity' and bring forward the internal multiplicities, possibilities and limitations of solidarity-making as a spatial practice of contestation and alternative in the context of austerity.

Resisting austerity *in* and *across* Athens: Constituting 'urban solidarity spaces'

Grassroots responses to austerity that have emerged across Athenian neighbourhoods can be understood as practical alternatives to tackle the social reproduction needs of impoverished social groups. An indicative record[7] of such initiatives currently active shows more than 300 solidarity economy groups and networks operating across the metropolitan area of Athens. Looking into

their spatial distribution, Athens city centre areas concentrate most of solidarity economy activities, organised through neighbourhood committees, popular assemblies, social centres, community collectives, time banks, barter markets and health centres etc. Notably, the majority of solidarity initiatives serve as 'buffer mechanisms' in the face of collapsing welfare and public services. At the same time, solidarity initiatives become spaces where alternatives to austerity, such as a social / solidarity economy, are experimented with, contested and re-worked through everyday practices. These suggest a double role of urban solidarity spaces within counter-austerity politics, which holds various expressions, possibilities and limitations, depending on the particularities of solidarity groups and the broader context.

The two groups I collaborated with in Exarcheia, Athens, namely the Residents' Committee and the Solidarity Network, are methodologically employed to discuss the above in the context of Athens (Arampatzi, 2014). Based in Exarcheia, an Athens city centre lower-middle class area, historically prominent in the development of social movements[8] and political cultures, these groups operate based on volunteerism and self-organisation. Previously focusing on local neighbourhood issues, since 2012 the Residents' Committee has mobilised around a time bank, which mediates the exchange of services among participants (individuals and other local groups) based on time, rather than money. Through this project, place-based solidarity-making has set in motion a non-monetary local economy based on the skills, expertise and resources available among residents. The Time Bank's motto 'no one alone in the crisis' captures the double role of this solidarity project, which promotes mutual aid and inclusive participation, aiming to empower participants in light of exclusionary xenophobic sentiments, self-blame and precarity, while also setting in

motion an alternative form of social organisation, through a neighbourhood-based solidarity economy.

At the same time, the Solidarity Network of Exarcheia emerged out of the dispersal of contentious practices in the post-Syntagma occupation period in 2011. Local popular assemblies formed at the time in several neighbourhoods later developed into solidarity initiatives and networks. These countered the impact of austerity politics and the rise of xenophobia, mainly through employing survival tactics among disenfranchised people and immigrants – i.e. mutual aid, sharing resources, circulation of basic goods etc. The Solidarity Network of Exarcheia has been mobilising around similar issues, such as the gathering and distribution of basic goods through donations, crowdfunding and volunteerism. Further, this group has been active in broader campaigns and contestation around housing issues, such as taxation, mortgages and evictions. Nevertheless, the resources available to pursue actions through self-organisation, the services on offer for the Time Bank to operate and participation numbers in both of these groups' activities often pose pragmatic limitations to these projects. In light of these, cooperation 'from below' and links to other local and non-local groups – such as community cooking collectives, social centres and solidarity networks – are often pursed so as to enhance actions and campaigns.

The double role of urban solidarity spaces, i.e. tackling social reproduction issues and experimenting with alternatives to austerity, is further developed in the following sections. Following the two Exarcheia groups on the ground, their workings, campaigns, actions and produced narratives, I unpack emergent 'urban solidarity spaces' through four entwined analytical foci, which shed light into overlapping, complementary and, in some cases, contradictory and antagonistic aspects of solidarity-making: 1)

solidarity as counter-austerity narrative and practice; 2) solidarity as a site of contestation, based on difference and political antagonisms; 3) solidarity economy as an emergent alternative to austerity; and 4) the spatiality of solidarity-making, through networking 'from below', among the grassroots.

Solidarity as counter-austerity narrative and practice 'from below'

Solidarity as mutually constituted narrative and practice – or 'praxis' – 'from below' counters austerity in a practical, immediate way and aims to empower the disempowered. In the context of austerity and cuts in public spending, the living wage seems to acquire the role of 'a subsidy for survival'. At the same time, with the lack of social welfare, various institutions – for example, the Church, municipal authorities in Athens and surrounding areas, corporate media and retail firms – have stepped in to provide essential goods to deprived social groups. These charitable practices based on volunteerism and donations, such as food, clothes and medicine distribution, have become the means of survival for impoverished social groups. In some cases, such as the extreme-right Golden Dawn's 'Greeks-only' soup-kitchens, charitable practices have served as exclusionary mechanisms. In other cases, charity rhetoric has been employed to legitimise the rationality of austerity and transfer the financial burdens of public cuts to local or non-state institutions.

Moreover, such practices of basic goods distribution are also employed by grassroots groups, such as the Time Bank and the Solidarity Network of Exarcheia. Interestingly, however, participants strategically choose to nuance and contest the meaning and practice of charity as one-directional support to 'the ones in need'. Instead, they generate a counter-narrative and practice that emphasises the empowering aspect of

solidarity as *a relation forged from below*: 'solidarity is about understanding the other … our goal is to get others involved and activated; [solidarity] is also about relating to others and their needs … to feel able to give support and receive support' (activist, member of the Exarcheia Time Bank, personal interview, Athens 2013). In this sense, solidarity-making as a relation can be distinguished from the dominant perception of charity in two ways: first, as opposed to a 'disembodied caring from a distance' (Featherstone, 2012) between the donor and recipient of support, solidarity constitutes a lived shared experience forged *in common* among participants. Solidarity-making becomes constructed based on ongoing embodied interactions in order to mutually come up with solutions to practical issues and commonly identified needs. These proximate interactions during the organisation of frequent solidarity activities – for example bartering, goods' collection and distribution, community cooking collectives and 'without middlemen' food markets etc. – involve the development of reciprocal relations and affinity bonds among the people involved. Further, this type of solidarity-making sets in motion forms of alternative social and economic activity.

Second, as noted in the quote above, solidarity-making is understood as a means to activate and empower recipients of support. This resonates with Featherstone's (2012) account of solidarity as a relation that seeks to challenge forms of oppression and generate spaces for political struggle. In challenging forms of oppression, ethnographic findings reveal that solidarity initiatives have so far played a key role in countering exclusionary, racist and xenophobic practices against vulnerable social groups, such as attacks initiated by the far-right Golden Dawn against immigrants, activists etc. The intensity of austerity and 'the politics of fear' and 'moral panics' accompanying the

increasing precarity has often resulted in victimising and blaming 'the other'. Solidarity groups, such as the Exarcheia Time Bank, resist this type of 'social cannibalism' and serve as inclusionary spaces, bringing together residents from various social groups and backgrounds. Additionally, in the case of the Solidarity Network of Exarcheia, solidarity-making through direct action and electricity reconnections in indebted households unable to pay opened up new spaces for political struggle: 'For people who received practical support, as in power reconnections we made, it was decisive in changing their perception ever since on the type of solidarity practices we pursue' (activist, member of the Solidarity Network of Exarcheia, personal interview, Athens 2013). In this sense, these place-based solidarities were constructed through struggle and managed to generate new perceptions, or generate 'new ways of relating to others' (Featherstone, 2012), especially for people not previously involved in political activism.

The empowering aspect of solidarity-making is a key common mechanism in activities and practices grassroots initiatives employ in light of increasing unemployment, marginalisation and precarity among several social groups. In order to nuance solidarity-making, the following section discusses the multiplicities and differences among bottom-up initiatives in relation to their function and broader goals, political methodologies and the strategies they pursue.

The contested character of solidarity-making: Multiplicities and differences among solidarity groups

Solidarity _from below_ is narrated and practiced as a means to relate to 'others' – i.e. the newly marginalised by austerity – based on shared needs and experiences. The prioritisation of social needs over profit-making is a common characteristic of initiatives and networks mobilising around solidarity across Athens and Greece. We can distinguish between, first, initiatives and networks that gather and distribute basic goods, e.g. food and clothing, such as the Solidarity Network of Exarcheia, as well as structures that provide for primary health treatment for people with no access to medical insurance – for example migrants and the unemployed – such as social medical and pharmacy centres. A second category includes solidarity networks and structures that experiment with non-monetary or alternative currency-based exchange of products and services, such as the Time Bank of Exarcheia, and barter markets; networks that bypass intermediary official channels of food production and distribution, such as the 'without middlemen' markets (Rakopoulos, 2014a, 2014b); community cooking collectives that provide free meals and promote awareness around food issues; and workers' cooperatives mainly organised around the service sector, for example cafes, bars and restaurants.

Additionally, solidarity-making serves as a mechanism to activate, empower and mobilise people into forms of broader anti-austerity struggle and political strategies. Hence, in adding to Featherstone's (2012) account on solidarity as a relation forged _through_ political struggle, emergent urban solidarity spaces across Athens show that solidarity is also employed _for_ political struggle. On the one hand, these struggles converge into spatial practices grounded in localised initiatives, such as in instances of frequent interaction and cooperation between local groups. On the other hand, decisive here is to distinguish how differences in political strategies diverge and often become antagonistic to each other, in the ways in which they contest, engage with or bypass official channels and institutions. In this sense, solidarity-making becomes a site of internal contestation itself.

In particular, divergent political strategies relate to trajectories of political identities,

cultures, social movements and broader political actors in Greece – parliamentary or revolutionary Left, anarchist, autonomous etc. In turn, these cultures are reflected upon the ways in which solidarity initiatives perceive official institutions and state structures, i.e. whether they engage with official channels to articulate demands and utilise legal frameworks and receive financial support, such as the existing legislation on setting up 'social enterprises', or whether they reject state structures and bypass them, such as anarchist oriented 'anti-structures' etc. For example, in some cases, social medical clinics operate through volunteers, provide free primary health treatment and are subsidised by local authorities. In other cases, health clinics also rely on volunteerism but operate solely on self-organisation, fundraisers and the contribution of participants' resources.

Interestingly, the above differentiation between grassroots / autonomous and institutional politics often becomes blurred in horizontal cooperation tactics among solidarity groups. These tactics often reveal the key limitations of horizontalism, such as uneven power relations that are brought forward through a discussion of their spatiality below. Arguably, however, this bottom-up cooperation logic renders urban solidarity spaces porous and hybrid regarding how participants strategically engage with or bypass state power and institutions. In the cases of the Time Bank and Solidarity Network of Exarcheia, among others, attempts to horizontally organise joint actions with other local and non-local groups and networks are frequent and produce coordinative campaigns and events. These set in motion resources, skills, infrastructure and know-how available in the neighbourhood and, also, across the participants' network reach, and enhance actions.

In doing so, these two groups employ the networking capacity of a broader facilitator of grassroots cooperation and know-how sharing, the 'Solidarity for All' network. This network was initiated in 2012 and is subsidised by Syriza (the Coalition of the Radical Left party) and the volunteering of individual activists. Its role as a coordinating node among solidarity structures in Athens and Greece relies on the operation of an online platform, through which groups communicate, circulate know-how and share information. Further, this network contributes expertise on setting up solidarity structures through a broader 'social / solidarity economy' framework. Regarding this network's goals and functions, a member of the coordinating team noted that:

> The 'Solidarity for All' [network] was set up in order to strengthen social cohesion through solidarity-making in the face of a major crisis and, also, support a future political change [a government of Syriza]. Our goal is two-fold: first, set up networking, record solidarity groups and circulate information across Greece; and second, code problems people are facing in their existing groups and provide a framework, a 'guide of good conduct' for them; so that groups know, for example, specifics around food producers, quality and prices of products, where to find what etc … We have set our limits; we are not a formal coordinative structure giving directives to the groups we fund … what we do is circulate know-how and put groups into communication with each other … Also, there are certain criteria in order to subsidise partial infrastructure; because if people do not take the initiatives themselves, the logic underlying these projects [solidarity structures], which is essentially the empowering of agency, goes out the window! (Activist, personal interview, Athens 2013)

Evident here is a creative tension: on the one hand, the Solidarity for All network concentrates crucial resources and 'know-how', hence it assumes a powerful role among solidarity initiatives, unevenly positioned within

networking. As stated above, this key role is also employed to establish connections between the grassroots and the party of Syriza, in an attempt to create space for social movements to interact with state institutions and power. On the other hand, this network has served over the past few years as an enabling mechanism in the spatial expansion and reach of solidarity spaces across Athens and Greece. Therefore, the empowering potential of expansive solidarity-making among the grassroots co-exists with cooptation tactics adopted by a political party and limitations posed through the exercising of state power.

This creative tension between grassroots empowerment and incorporation into institutional politics arising in urban solidarity spaces is brought forward in attempts to form a social / solidarity economy. According to Rakopoulos (2014a), these attempts have acquired the role of the 'missing link' between the state, the market and the society. The following section contributes to this account of a social / solidarity economy, which is being developed based on *necessity* and negotiated as a strategic *alternative* to austerity in urban solidarity spaces across Athens.

Social / solidarity economy as a strategic alternative to austerity

Emergent urban solidarity spaces across Athens contribute to the formation of a social / solidarity economy through the circulation of resources and exchanges among groups. These develop based on necessity, respond to pragmatic issues and outcomes of austerity and aim to enhance their goals. At the same time, a social / solidarity economy serves as a broader alternative paradigm groups pursue – through divergent strategies, political methodologies and creative tensions, namely the autonomous and institutional politics discussed above. Within this alternative, wider aspirations for social

transformation – which have yet to be realised – set in motion the reconstitution of material and social relations.

In a framework guide circulated by the Solidarity for All network titled 'Building a New Cooperative Movement', solidarity structures and cooperatives are described as 'collective, democratic projects which aim to offer solutions to pragmatic needs in the interest of the employees involved as well as the local and regional societies' (Solidarity for All, 2013). This type of economic activity aims to contest and 'ground' economic processes that have increasingly become disembedded from social control (Rakopoulos, 2014b), and is directly organised through some form of social power, hence aims to empower participants and local societies (Wright, 2010). As a respondent from a local cooperative in Exarcheia noted, 'once a structure becomes financially sustainable, profit is re-invested on other complementary structures or infrastructure' (activist, personal interview, Athens 2013). Furthermore, this social power, being rooted in the capacity of people to organise collectively, also seeks to negotiate and transform social relations in the workplace and beyond. Recently set up structures and cooperatives in Athens organise decision-making horizontally and strive for collective accountability. At the same time, according to participants, these projects become 'learning laboratories' that contest broader relations of production and consumption: 'we raise issues of food production in relation to environmental impact … quality and price issues; also around the ongoing exploitation of migrant workers in food production' (activist, personal interview, Athens 2013). In this sense, as Rakopoulos (2014b: 97) notes, solidarity-making contributes to a form of 'political education' for people involved.

While these solidarity spaces respond to increasing unemployment and precarity, especially among the youth, they are often

faced with pragmatic limitations, such as sustainability and employment security. Additionally, divergent strategies within the formation of a social / solidarity economy bring forward creative tensions concerning state power and institutions. Solidarity structures originating in anarchist / autonomous politics, or 'anti-structures', seek to oppose and bypass the state to construct a self-organised, self-managed solidarity economy that will eventually replace official institutions. In a public event and open discussion on the 'solidarity / cooperative economy' organised in the Autonomous Social Centre in Exarcheia, Athens, several participants from solidarity initiatives discussed this as a piecemeal process of 'multiplying solidarity structures and cooperatives, while at the same time retaining the small scale of such projects' (field notes, Autonomous Social Centre public event titled Cooperative / Solidarity Economy, Athens 2013). This account of social economy renders the territorial level of the neighbourhood crucial to this process; and involves the (re-)constitution of autonomous solidarity spaces through incremental cumulative 'steps', moving 'against' and 'beyond' state power to achieve social transformation.

At the same time, in other cases of groups, this type of 'interstitial' strategy of social empowerment (Wright, 2010) co-exists in 'symbiosis' with state-oriented, (defensive) institutional demands and contestation of legislative frameworks. The Exarcheia Time Bank and Solidarity Network, while choosing to retain their autonomous character, at the same time strategically engage with broader actors to contest austerity politics, such as housing taxation and confiscations, cuts in public services, wage reductions etc. This is reflected in cooperation these groups pursue with other local and non-local actors across Athens and Greece, such as the Solidarity for All network, and joint (direct) actions and campaigns organised alongside trade unions, workplace collectives and non-local organisations. In discussing the logic of such 'symbiotic' or 'complementary' contestation, a member of the Exarcheia Solidarity Network who also volunteers in the local social medical clinic argued that:

> we cannot, and do not want to, replace social welfare and public services … medical and pharmacy social clinics and other solidarity structures provide for immediate relief [primary health services to the unemployed, migrants, people without insurance] but converge in the wider claim for free public health for all … we create links to medical staff unions to contribute to their struggle … all these act complementary to the local organising of movements. (Activist, personal interview, Athens 2013)

Therefore, this perception acknowledges that the possibility of a solidarity economy being empowering and effective lies in the complementarity of multiple, interstitial and symbiotic means and political strategies (Wright, 2010). At the same time, this co-existence and complementarity generates creative tensions, as discussed earlier, which hold possibilities and limitations for urban solidarity spaces to develop. These are manifested through the spatiality of solidarity-making and expansive actions.

The spatiality of solidarity-making: Networking across Athens and beyond

So far scholars looking into contestation to the Greek crisis highlighted notions of 'spontaneity' and 'horizontality' as key characteristics of emergent forms of collective organisation (Leontidou, 2014; Petropoulou, 2014; Stavrides, 2014). Indeed, what Kaika and Karaliotas (2016) called a 'bottom-up democratic politics' has gained prominence within responses to austerity politics. This is not only practiced as horizontal participation in and cooperation among solidarity groups – for

example, in frequent open assemblies and decision-making and coordinative actions and campaigns – but also reflects the necessity to effect some form of practical change at the everyday life level. For example, in his study of the 'without middlemen' food distribution network between producers and consumers, Rakopoulos (2014a, 2014b) identifies these two elements of emergent urban solidarity spaces; namely, the practical aspect of meeting basic needs and the simultaneous experimentation with alternative social and material relations. What is notably absent from these discussions, however, is an analysis of *how* such initiatives appear and develop, *where* they do, crucial for assessing the emancipatory potential as well as pragmatic limitations solidarity groups are faced with. Subsequently, I consider here the spatiality of solidarity-making that emerges *in* and *out of* places in Athens and develops across the city and beyond.

The spatiality of solidarity-making involves a 'politics of encounter' both in virtual and physical spaces (Leontidou, 2012; Merrifield, 2013). The increasing use of digital media – such as blogs, email lists, online platforms and other social media – facilitates communication among initiatives and circulation of information across activist networks. Furthermore, key sites across Athens provide opportunities for contacts. City centre areas, such as Syntagma Square and the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, hold a historic and symbolic role in the development of social movements and political cultures. Mass protests and rallies, as well as several public events in public spaces in the city, become moments of enhanced communication among groups. At the everyday life level these take place in informal meeting spots, weekly assemblies and gatherings of initiatives in social centres, occupations and public buildings, such as universities. These activities contest the notion of the 'public' under austerity as being increasingly

commodified and, according to an interviewee, 'they signify our call for inclusive participation' (activist, personal interview, Athens 2013). Additionally, communication, cooperation and networking 'from below' among solidarity groups are pertinent to a process of making informal fluid connections, often short-term, around tangible goals. Contacts are often made through informal and personal networks of participants which generate flexible relays of communication and are activated in order to pursue cooperation. This pertains to arguments raised by scholars who investigated recent transformations in social movements (Cumbers et al., 2008; Nicholls, 2007; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009); namely a departure from formal organisational structures and a growing culture of horizontal, informal membership and 'skill-sharing' based on specific projects and campaigns.

A recent example of these 'operational logics' of networking among solidarity groups is the city- and later nation-wide coordinative campaign against the 'haratsi' housing tax introduced since 2012.[9] This campaign organised by local solidarity groups, such as the Exarcheia Solidarity Network, popular assemblies and other workplace initiatives, involved legal actions, local direct actions and informative events and protests at local tax offices. The key coordinative mechanism that brought together more than 25 local groups in the beginning of 2013 was the monthly assembly meeting, organised and facilitated by two local groups rotating each month. Each participant group was represented through two spokes, who were also obliged to rotate within groups. This operation, as a participant described, was chosen in order to prevent the formation of leadership roles and ensure egalitarian participation:

> our coordinative assembly of this campaign, the rotating spokes and groups facilitators …

these were chosen so as to circulate responsibilities around groups and individuals … and encourage vibrant interactions and exchange of experience … also discourage leadership roles and bureaucratisation of coordination. (Activist, personal interview, Athens 2013)

According to Graeber (2002), emergent organisational characteristics of grassroots initiatives, such as horizontality, equal participation and consensus-building, enhance solidarity-making as they do not stifle dissenting voices or create leadership positions. Further, drawing on the Greek context, Leontidou (2014) and Petropoulou (2014) argue for a renewed understanding of spontaneity and informality within collective organising as lack of structured leadership, rather than lack of organisation.

Nevertheless, horizontal connections constituted among solidarity groups in Athens hold their own limitations. On the one hand, the overlapping participation of individuals in several groups enhances the circulation of information and know-how among grassroots initiatives. On the other hand, these individual activists – otherwise termed 'imagineers' (Routledge and Cumbers, 2009), diffusing imaginaries, discourses and crucial resources – concentrate social and political capital that generate divisions of labour among groups. Moreover, solidarity groups involved in coordinative campaigns hold uneven positions regarding access to crucial material and non-material resources, infrastructure, participation, affiliations to other organisations, legitimacy, public recognition etc. For example, the Solidarity for All network holds a privileged role, acting as a node of communication and facilitation among solidarity structures.

In turn, these often generate disagreements and tensions – albeit acknowledged as part of the process of collaboration – and at times can obstruct communication, limit the effectiveness of participation and actions and problematise horizontality. For example, in discussing informality in grassroots initiatives as a type of 'structurelessness' (Freeman, 1970), an activist argued that:

> Networking based on informal hierarchy reveals the worst kind of hierarchy, the one that cannot be controlled … Formal hierarchies do have control mechanisms – such as voting and change of positions through this … the informal ones are more diffused, more 'masked'. (Activist, personal interview, Athens 2013)

Therefore, an understanding of spontaneity and informality as organisational characteristics of horizontal networking among urban solidarity spaces also suggests 'messy', incomplete and hybrid horizontalities, created by potential informal hierarchies. According to Freeman (1970), even in cases of flexible and redistributive structures, regarding power and resources among participants, these 'hidden hierarchies' are inevitable due to different skills, abilities, predispositions and backgrounds. With this said, rather than romanticising emergent forms of contestation to crisis, I suggest that the task in hand is to bring forward and negotiate such problems and limitations that grassroots initiatives are faced with. This does not only analytically enrich interpretations of contentious politics but also contributes to broader constructive critiques that seek to *empower* ongoing counter-austerity struggles.

Conclusions

This paper discussed the spatiality of emergent counter-austerity politics in the context of Athens, Greece. The arguments raised respond to recent debates among scholars who call for bottom-up approaches to neoliberal crises, interpreted through the same ways people contest and subvert them *on the ground* (Featherstone et al., 2015;

Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014). To this end, I looked into the trajectories of urban struggles, focusing on recent forms of contestation emerging in Athens' post-neoliberal development – from resistance to policies of commodification of urban space and environmental decay in the post-Olympics period, to the 'youth uprising' in 2008 and subsequent contestation of crisis in the Syntagma Square occupation. In particular, austerity-oriented politics introduced since 2010 in Greece have been anticipated with collective organising and solidarity-making in local neighbourhood contexts and across Athens. These emergent 'urban solidarity spaces' (i.e. solidarity initiatives, networks and structures) tackle practical social reproduction issues, resist exclusionary opposition to crisis and xenophobic tendencies in the public sphere – that led to the rise of the ultra-right-wing Golden Dawn – and experiment with alternative ways of organising social and economic relations through the formation of a solidarity economy.

In accounting for these, I developed an account of 'urban solidarity spaces' and suggested four interrelated analytical foci for further investigation into contestation to neoliberal crises 'from below'. These involved, first, an understanding of solidarity as an empowering counter-austerity narrative produced 'from below' and forged within grassroots spaces, vis-à-vis the dominant rationality of austerity. Second, solidarity-making was discussed as an empowering process that also involves contradictions and creative tensions that originate in differences among groups and long-lasting political antagonisms and cultures. Third, I accounted for ways in which urban solidarity spaces contribute to the formation of a social / solidarity economy, which develops based on necessity and is negotiated as an alternative to austerity, 'in, against and beyond' state power. Fourth, I looked into the spatiality of solidarity-making and

horizontal networking among the grassroots and broader actors, across the city and beyond. This brought forward the empowering potential of grassroots initiatives and new articulations of bottom-up politics, as well as their limitations due to pragmatic issues and uneven power relations.

Thus far, emergent urban solidarity spaces and grassroots initiatives mobilising in Athens and Greece have been crucial in countering the impacts of the crisis at the everyday life level and experimenting with alternatives to austerity. Nevertheless, their future potential in consolidating broader spaces for social empowerment and political alternatives is still at stake and requires further investigation. Up until these lines were written, attempts by transnational power elites to stifle emergent alternatives to the neoliberal one have succeeded in imposing a new austerity agreement on Greece, voted and implemented by the coalition government of Syriza. At the same time, these attempts have triggered new processes of solidarity-making across the European grassroots. The example of the 'Twinning against Austerity' initiative that started in the spring of 2015 involves exchanges and practical solidarities forged among grassroots groups based in Greece and the UK and reveals that solidarities are able to transcend borders and power elites. In turn, these call for further research and participatory grounded ethnographies within struggles and solidarity-making to contribute to the production of alternative practices and knowledges of ongoing counter-austerity politics 'from below'.

commitment to social change became a glimpse of a hopeful future.

Notes

1. Fieldwork in Athens was conducted as part of my PhD research (Arampatzi, 2014). Empirical data gathered primarily included 53 in-depth semi-structured interviews, participant observation of grassroots groups' assemblies, activities and campaigns, as well as document/blog archival research.
2. 'Antiparochi' is a state law that applied to post-war housing and urban development in Greece and encouraged individualised housing provision as opposed to the social housing policy manifested in other countries at the time. Through 'antiparochi', small property owners exchanged their land for flat-ownership in the new housing unit built by independent developers.
3. Local municipal and regional authorities have undergone government funding cuts by up to 40% in specific cases.
4. An indicative overall unemployment rate provided by Eurostat Statistics for Greece in February 2015 was 25.4%, while youth unemployment (<25 years) at the time reached up to 50.1%.
5. Eurostat reported that in 2013 more than a third of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Greece (35.7 %).
6. In 2015, the new legislation around housing mortgages included in the third austerity agreement and voted by the Syriza government put at risk of housing confiscations 40% of bank mortgage holders.
7. See the 'Solidarity for All' online platform, available at: www.solidarity4all.gr.
8. Such as the 1973 social uprising against the dictatorship and the occupation of the adjacent Polytechnic School.
9. This tax was imposed on home-ownership and was being collected through electricity bills until recently. According to activists, the unjust character of this tax – which acquired the popular term 'haratsi' – lies in the fact that it cuts across all social groups – being a 'flat' tax – regardless of income or employment status.

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