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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# AUTONOMY, DEGROWTH AND PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

## Voices of solidarity economy activists amid economic crisis in Greece

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing upon in-depth interviews with key informants of grassroots alternative organisations in anti-austerity Greece, the study sheds light on the structures of meanings of invisible voices, revealing the motives, worldviews and value-systems that lay behind their actions. Using critical discourse analysis, the text offers a thorough understanding of the meaning and experience of building social and economic experiments with transformative potential within the solidarity economy alternative, in the context of the Greek economic crisis. The narratives of solidarity economy informants reveal militant investigations, romantic humanism, egalitarian goals and an ethos of collectivism that call into question the prevalent capitalist imaginary. Participants employ utopian thinking, imagining a future that departs significantly from what we know. They call on us to re-assess hegemonic values and norms in the light of alternative realities which embody forms of workers' cooperativism, participatory actions and ways of being, which prefigure the future vision of another form of social life.

**KEYWORDS:** autonomy, collectivity, crisis, degrowth, prefigurative politics, self-organisation, self-valorisation, solidarity economy

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## 1. Introduction

The unfolding recent global financial crisis has intensified citizens' collective responses to confront the social, economic and political threats, especially in countries that have been affected most severely. Since 2010, Greece has experienced a sovereign debt crisis and draconian austerity measures, which have led to a deterioration of the level of living and working conditions for the majority of people and increasing unemployment, precariousness and poverty. In this context, several grassroots groups, inspired by social movement discourses, have turned towards alternative forms of social organisation beyond state regulations and the market-driven economy.

The paper deals with the field of social and solidarity economy, which today is at the heart of numerous economic and social debates (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Allard, Davidson and Matthaei 2008; Miller 2010; Amin 2011; Dacheux and Goujon 2011; Laville 2014). Social economy and solidarity economy have been used interchangeably, resulting in an overlapping of the two terms. The term solidarity economy is used in this paper, since it is more closely connected to the lexical repertoire of activists and the political imperative of grassroots collectives. Seeking to 'make the road by walking', solidarity economy constitutes a social movement with a transformative commitment that contests the dominant economic order and attempts to enrich and expand democracy through egalitarian decision-making, cooperation and mutuality (Dacheux and Goujon 2011, 211).

Drawing upon in-depth interviews with key informants of grassroots alternative organisations, primarily derived from the LIVEWHAT (Living with Hard Times)<sup>1</sup> project, the study sheds light on the structures of meanings of invisible voices revealing the motives, worldviews and value-systems that lay behind their practices. Using critical discourse analysis, the text offers a thorough understanding of the meaning and experience of building social and economic experiments with transformative potential within the solidarity economy alternative in the context of crisis.

Narrators draw meanings – or *give* meaning to – events and collective experiences and interactions within the space of solidarity economy to respond to the dire effects of the crisis that have changed their life trajectories. The narrators are activists who are involved in radical politics and social movement activities. Informed by conflicting ide-

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<sup>1</sup> Results presented in this paper have been obtained within the project "Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences" (LIVEWHAT). This project was funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme (Grant Agreement No. 613237). More information on the project is available at: <http://www.livewhat.unige.ch/>

logies and taking into consideration political issues, they construct ideoscapes of desirable utopian worlds and counter-narratives that extend beyond the neoliberal capitalist imaginary. Through their engagement in prefigurative politics, they generate new and future-oriented emancipatory forms of social and economic relations and attempt to manage common property resources for collective benefits.

The main aim of this paper is to shed light on the political imperatives and divergent ideological positions surrounding the actions of solidarity economy activists. The paper presents conceptual and methodological considerations for understanding the narratives used by activists to interpret the meaning of participating in solidarity economy alternatives. Then, it addresses the issue of the crisis as a rupture in the life trajectories of activists, the significance of prefigurative politics and the meaning of building autonomous spaces and trans-local networks that challenge the neoliberal growth model. Finally, the paper explores the different ideological currents that pervade the solidarity economy space, focusing both on the degrowth project towards a convivial utopia of an alternative society of frugal abundance and the imperative of autonomy, including working-class self-valorisation.

## **2. Ideoscapes of autonomy, degrowth and the commons**

Recent findings across European countries show that the South European countries, which were hit harder by austerity policies witnessed the creation of a higher number of initiatives and alternative organisations, centred towards covering urgent needs, compared to non-South European countries (Kousis 2017, 121). During the last few years, thousands of grassroots initiatives of collective forms of work, ranging from co-operatives and farmer-consumer networks to workers' collectivities and self-organised projects, have sprung all over the Greece (Nasioulas 2012; Petropoulou 2013; Rakopoulos 2014a; Rakopoulos 2014b; Sotiropoulos and Bourikos 2014; Kokkinakis 2015; Papadaki and Kalogeraki 2017).

Important actors, who get involved in these initiatives, draw inspiration from radical ideologies and employ a relevant vocabulary, in their effort to contextualise the act of creating autonomous communities and self-managed projects, often outside of dominant economic and social institutions. They emphasise the inherently political character of their actions, resist and sometimes subvert 'the dominant narratives of official mind and entrepreneurial mentality that surround' social life (Appadurai 2006, 589).

I would term the set of ideas and worldviews the narrators use as 'ideoscapes'. The term is employed by the eminent anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to set out 'concate-

nations of images, which are often directly political and frequently have to do either with the ideologies of states or the counter-ideologies of movements', oriented to challenge state power and to construct alternative visions towards post-capitalist societies. These ideoscapes consist of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which are composed of a set of ideas, terms and images including, for example, freedom, just, right, equality and democracy (2006, 591).

Solidarity economy groups use a variety of terms in the process of framing their everyday practices and policies revealing certain trends within new social movement discourses. Let us briefly clarify some concepts that narrators draw from a common toolkit that is familiar across political-orientated collectives to present values and beliefs that lay beyond everyday politics. Solidarity economy is an active process of collective visioning that tries to create alternative forms of an economy of the commons and opens up spaces of possibility to change unjust and exploitative economic relations. In this regard, it offers the prospect of an alternative society with a more socially and ecologically just, sustainable and egalitarian economy (Miller 2010; Dacheux and Goujon 2011).

Autonomy is a key term for many radical voices in the solidarity economy space. Autonomy is both a highly contextual and contested term used by different ideologies and projects and a practice that emphasises the paramount importance of the process and of the outcomes of everyday actions (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). Informed by Kantian conception, the term was initially used at the individual level to refer to the ability of an individual to carry out its will by itself and to generate, on its own terms, a set of moral principles (Böhm, Diverstein and Spicer 2010, 19). Often, in modern-day consumer societies, autonomy, similarly to other libertarian ideas, has been incorporated into the mainstream policies of European Union. As many critics put forward, autonomy is stripped down to consumer choices and practices aiming at increasing individualised capitalist entrepreneurs and reducing state intervention in market economies (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, 733).

Unlike liberal approaches of autonomy, in the social movement framework, the concept has been used in a collective level, concerning groups governed by self-established rules, self-determination, self-regulating practices that stand in stark opposition to the state and capitalist social and economic relations. In the 1960s, the term 'autonomia' was used by the Italian radical left and became a basic vehicle of a theoretical and political tendency that emphasised the self-organising capacity of labour and everyday practices framed by decentralised non-hierarchical structures (Cote 2003; Pickerill and Chatterton 2006; Böhm, Diverstein and Spicer 2010). The term of au-

tonomy entails seeking alternative ways of living by groups working together to prefigure alternative future realities through radical experiments within the present society.

According to the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, whose ideas have highly influenced the relevant discourse, autonomy rejects social heteronomy, created and maintained by privileged elites, oppressive norms and dominant forms of institutional order, such as the state, the market, the family and religion. In Castoriadis' thought, the collective and individual aspects of autonomy are highly interrelated, since individual autonomy implies the capacity of subjects to make choices under circumstances of freedom, while collective autonomy refers to 'a given society's or group's self-rule through the freedom of its institutions and equal participation in them' beyond the confines of capitalism, authoritarian socialism or representative democracy (Pickerill and Chatteron 2006, 733-4). According to Castoriadis, 'individuals aiming at autonomy cannot appear unless the social-historical field has already altered itself opening up a creative space of interrogation and reflection without bounds, such as an instituted or revealed truth' (Castoriadis 1992, 290).

Drawing on the collective action and social movement literature, Böhm, Diverstein and Spicer (2010) pointed out three main strands running through the discourse of autonomy. The first involves autonomy from the capitalist mode of production. It employs the idea of workers' self-valorisation (Negri 1991), a process of working-class self-determination which goes beyond the mere resistance to capitalist valorisation or the capitalist work relationship to a positive project of self-constitution (Cleaver 1992, 129). This vision involves the building of grassroots economic articulations, especially in the fabric of the post-industrial mode of labour associated with the production of 'immaterial' elements (such as affects, services, knowledge and culture). The second strand focuses on the demand of autonomy from state legislation and determination. The advocates of autonomy understand labour as the only constitutive power, rejecting the possibility of creating social change by taking control of the state and turning their actions towards social changes in everyday life. In this sense, open Marxists<sup>2</sup> promote collective actions that move beyond the institutional political space, attempting to transform public discourse through the power of autonomous self-constitution in wider spaces of social life. Italian autonomists employ a somewhat different approach,

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<sup>2</sup> Open Marxism is a school of thought which rejects the determinism and positivism that characterise contemporary orthodox Marxist tradition. Open Marxists try to reconstruct the pertinent theses of Marxism with a view to freeing them from the ballast of their dogmatic presentation. They underline the need for openness to praxis and history through a method of practical reflexivity towards a defetishised and emancipated social world (Bonefeld, Gunn, Holloway and Psychopedis 1995; Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis 1992; Holloway 2009).

trying to build communities of creativity that reverse the polarity between capital and labour in favour of the latter (Negri 1991; Coté 2003). The third discursive tradition puts forward the desire of building autonomous entities beyond the confines of development imaginary. Following a post-development perspective, theorists such as Escobar (1992), call for a defensive localisation against the dominant ethos of productivity and the hegemonic development agendas that subvert local cultures and differences (Böhm, Diverstein and Spicer 2010, 20-22).

Often, the critique of autonomous groups against development fetishism overlaps with the degrowth project, which is another source of inspiration for solidarity economy activists. The degrowth approach is a movement that links activism, focused on new collective ownership forms of ecological and social entrepreneurship, with political ecology theories. The degrowth movement challenges the notion that perpetual economic growth improves living conditions and raises well-being, making people better off and happy (Bauhardt 2014). Unlike the unlimited expansion of production, the degrowth project promotes a socially sustainable and equitable reduction of production and consumption, which increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global levels (Kallis 2011, 874; Schneider, Kallis and Martinez-Alier 2010, 512).

The advocates of solidarity economy implement self-management strategies to create grassroots cooperatives with some degree of economic autarky. Self-management is a form of organisational practice that establishes a more democratic, egalitarian and participatory decision-making process at all levels. Within the framework of anti-neoliberal movement discourse, the term refers to organisations that are characterised by the absence of the capitalist, hierarchical, intermediate managerial forms of direct control. In this regard, they expel the despotic rationality of capital from the sphere of production and promote the redistribution of income, generated in equal parts (Atzeni and Ghigliani 2007, 667-68). The concept of autarky refers to a form of self-sufficiency or economic independence. It is used by activists to conceptualise the process of building grassroots sustainable communities and organisations, which rely on their own resources and their own ability to satisfy social, economic and cultural needs (Müller, Stämpfli, Dold and Hammer 2011). Although the notions of collectives' autarky seem to be infeasible in the context of a globalised capitalist economy, where profit economy and the corporate control of goods and services prevail everywhere, it remains a strong desire for solidarity economy groups.

Members of the solidarity economy movement emphasise the importance of prefigurative politics and political action for the present (Melluci 1996) and seek to build places of the commons, within and against capitalism. Prefiguration politics refer to the

attempt of constructing alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel to or in the course of adversarial social movement projects (Yates 2015, 1). A central element of prefigurative politics is that, rather than the ends justifying the means, the means of prefiguration – referring to the attempted construction of building alternatives in the present – reflect the end (Maeckebergh 2009, 81; Yates 2015, 3).

Prefigurative politics is often interlinked with the politics of the commons, oriented towards uncoerced participation, shared ends and resources, cooperation, fairness and collective decisions. The politics of the commons claim the creation of networked autonomous spaces from which citizens seek to reclaim control over the condition of their reproduction, challenging the neoliberal politics of enclosures. The politics of the commons, in solidarity economy space, prefigure new modes of reproductive work based on the principles of collective solidarity, social justice and equity. According to Caffentzis and Federici there are a few general criteria to achieve these goals; Commons are not given, they are produced through cooperation in the production of our life and constitutive social practices, involving a commonwealth, in the form of shared natural or social resources. They are based on the principles of reciprocity between what is given and what is taken, of equal access to the means of reproduction and of collective decision-making, and require a specific localised community, which is created 'in the production of the relations by which a specific commons is brought into existence' (Caffentzis and Federici 2014, i101-i102).

### **3. Methodological and analytical considerations**

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article offers new possibilities for understanding human experience, lived realities and the meaning of participating in politically-oriented organisations of solidarity economy. The research data consists of field observations, informal discussions and in-depth interviews with activists of solidarity economy organisations. The main body of narratives was gathered between June and October 2016, through fieldwork in solidarity economy communities, in the context of the EU-funded project LIVEWHAT (Living with Hard Times)<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, in-depth interviews and informal group discussions were used, which were collected during the re-

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<sup>3</sup> More information about the method applied could be found at: LIVEWHAT, 2016. Integrated report on alternative forms of resilience in times of crises (Deliverable: 6.4)- PART 3: Qualitative Interviews with AAO Representatives (Available from: [http://www.unige.ch/livewhat/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LIVEWHAT\\_D6.4.pdf](http://www.unige.ch/livewhat/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LIVEWHAT_D6.4.pdf))

search activities of the *Laboratory of Social Analysis and Applied Social Research*<sup>4</sup>, in winter 2016. Since the objective of this paper is to reveal value systems and political imperatives that lay behind the solidarity economy space, I chose to focus on selected narratives, derived from activist groups associated with politically-oriented movements, and to exclude service-oriented groups, such as charities, NGOs and vulnerable groups.

The research focuses on seven striking exemplars of political-oriented collectives of solidarity economy in crisis-stricken Greece. They include a solidarity economy cooperative for alternative trade, a collectivity of alternative and solidarity trade, a coffee-shop that operates as a self-organised working collectivity, a cooperative scheme including small networked collectives, a self-managed cooperative of organic products, a community-supported agriculture group based on consumer/producer networks and an anarchist working collectivity. They reflect different ideological streams and diverse initiatives within solidarity economy space. Five organisations are located in urban areas, one in a semi-urban place and one in a rural landscape. Two organisations are informal and five operate officially under institutional regulations. The process of ethnographic fieldwork within these organisations offered opportunities for informal discussions with many participants and facilitated the choice of the key interviewees. They are active members of social movements and have played a leading role in the building of solidarity economy initiatives during the austerity era. All the interviewees are well-educated, although the majority of them work under precarious conditions. Six of them are male and one is female, a disproportion that reflects, to some extent, the gendered reality of the solidarity economy space.

I used critical discourse analysis that transcends the pure linguistic dimension of discourse and includes the historical, political and sociological aspects in the process of interpreting narratives and tracing diverse discourses, ideologies and imperatives within the relevant discourse. The main sources are in-depth interviews with activists that offer the possibility to shed light on the micro-dynamics of political participation, providing information on specific aspects of social solidarity groups, including motives, beliefs, attitudes, norms, ethics and identities (della Porta 2014, 228). Critical approaches view social reality as conceptually mediated with a reflexive character, since all practices are associated with representations, construals, conceptualisations or theories, which are part of these realities (Fairclough 2006, 9). According to Wodak (2007, 209), the critical stance implies a process of having distance from the data, making the respective political viewpoint clear and precise, and maintaining a self-reflective con-

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sciousness as a scholar researcher. Narratives are often sites of struggles in which traces of differing discourses, ideologies and imperatives are contending and struggling for domination. Analysts try to create critical knowledge that 'enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection' (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 7, 10).

#### **4. Crisis as a rupture: life trajectories in a changing society**

The research findings show that the situation of crisis has been experienced by narrators as a biographical rupture that sparked off their shift towards collective action and solidarity organisations. Over the last few years of the ongoing Greek economic crisis, the country has experienced a rapid expansion of poverty and a deprivation of the traditionally vulnerable population groups, the creation of the 'new poor', from ruined middle-class strata (Karamesini and Giakoumatos 2016), a harsh flexibilisation of labour markets and sweeping cuts in public health and social services (Pautz and Kominou 2013; Sotirakopoulos and Sotiropoulos 2013; Papatheodorou 2015; Adam and Papatheodorou 2016; Zaimakis 2016; Kousis 2017). The deterioration of the Greek people's living and working conditions led many citizens, from varying social strata and ideological orientations, to confront the effects of austerity through alternative forms of resilience, which move beyond mainstream economic practices (Kousis 2017, 121).

The newly emerged place of solidarity economy provided people with opportunities to reorganise everyday life, building alternatives to the dominant practices of our society. The first wave of solidarity and cooperative networks can be seen as a direct response to the dystopia of the crisis, which dramatically changed the lives of many people and was experienced as a collective trauma in their life trajectories. The collective responses and the expression of solidarity towards the people who were hit by the absurd austerity were at the epicentre of various narratives. The dystopia of the crisis led many people to seek strategies for surviving through a process of reorganising their livelihood politics. At the same time, the crisis provided a fertile ground for activists to put into practice the emancipatory potential of solidarity economy.

The following excerpts present two life stories of activists referring to the shattering effects of the crisis on the total quality of people's life and on their day-to-day working lives. Moreover, they stress the role of the crisis in seeking alternative modes of cooperative productions within the solidarity economy space. In the first story, a founding member of a local solidarity exchange network, who later participated in building a cooperative scheme – including small networked collectives – narrates the creation of the

former organisation within the context of mass mobilisations and protests that followed the onset of the crisis (Interview No.1). In the second text, a narrator who had already experimented with a grassroots collective during the pre-crisis era and later participated in the creation of a solidarity economy cooperative for alternative trade (Interview No.2), puts forward the importance of the adverse living conditions caused by the crisis, in the process of building grassroots economic experiments for livelihood purposes:

My relationship with the exchange networks started in 2011. [...] it had preceded the square movement and all these that we know; the world in general was awake and has framed this movement. We had numerous meetings and assemblies, with over 70-80 people from the beginning. [...] the cooperative was composed of people with different understandings of the political situation concerning the economic crisis of that time and we did not succeed, as a Network of Exchanges, to have a clear political frame of reference or a clear political orientation. We could describe our group as a team that aimed at boosting solidarity between us, enabling people to come together, creating communities, connecting people with local producers and consumers, having greater immediacy among us. [...] our orientation was not so much political, but our focus was more on the man and the difficult circumstances that Greek people have been experiencing. (Interview No.1)

Our collectivity was created at a time when the economic conditions in Greece were very difficult. [...] the issue of livelihood was more intense than it was in 2006, when we started the collectivity. The question was much more real, it was not just political. So, beyond the social pursuit and our political ends, there was a personal pursuit – how do I want to live? – because work is a very big part of our lives. (Interview No. 2)

The crisis was a watershed moment for the implementation of multiple experimentations in various domains of social life. In the first years of the crisis, an increasing mobility of activists, within and among various initiatives, was evident; accompanied by a shift towards more politically-oriented organisations. These circumstances offer fertile ground for divergent political cultures to bring their political projects into play. In this sense, ecologically conscious citizens turned their attention to a frugal way of life, adopting attitudes towards alternative material articulations around localised and more 'natural' food production-consumption networks. Similarly to the previous narrators, a political ecology activist of a community-supported agriculture group, based on consumer/producer networks, experienced the dystopia of the crisis as an opportunity to apply, in practice, pre-existing political ambitions concerning modes of sustainable organic agriculture and consumer/producer networks of fair trade:

We saw that there were people who actually produced healthy food before and during the period of crisis, but now they were 'vegetated' or they were just about to stop doing what they did. So, our team started from this need: People may continue to work in their lands and, why not, to show that it is possible to build new structures in which new producers could be involved in a sustainable way [of production]. (Interview No. 3)

The voices of solidarity economy practitioners show that during the period of the crisis, emancipatory visions have found their way into alternative modes of cooperative work. Activists express, in Shukaitis and Graeber's terms (2007, 20), a will towards the liberation of desire and the imagination, as well as an imperative to unveil a hidden form of domination that lies behind every aspect of everyday life, especially working life. In this regard, an important actor of a self-managed cooperative of organic products takes into account political issues associated with the de-growth movement and sets out political and ideological concerns that motivate their actions.

Over the crisis era [...] along with a colleague and friend, with whom we have been dealing with ecological and agricultural affairs for many years, we decided to [...] to start organising what was missing, what was absent from Greece to a large extent and, more generally, from contemporary societies over recent years: collectiveness. In this sense, we tried to organise [...] collectively, groups of farmers with our own philosophy of ecology. [...] So, we went and picked olives, and it was so beautiful this winter; so beautiful, we sat during the breaks, we did not have the stress of not paying the workers etc., we cooked, we broiled, we did not have the issue of efficiency and we had a great time. So, in one of the breaks, we were thinking why this life is not our daily life, the life we can have for our entire life. It is not just olive harvesting. [...] We start to imagine, in a more romantic sense, how we can build a community of autarky. (Interview No. 4)

This story shows the way in which the dystopia of the crisis sparkles earlier concerns regarding the overcoming of surplus values towards a liberating life beyond the grim sense of existential and social alienation. In this regard, the creation of new collectivities was experienced as an escape from everyday life routines and workplace disaffection towards an appealing prospect of convivial modes of collective production.

## **5. Post-capitalist imaginary, prefigurative politics and supralocal networks**

For many solidarity economy activists, the adverse conditions of austerity were interpreted as a symptom of wider controversies of the capitalist system and as a crisis of representative democracy. In this sense, they criticise the domestic political system

and international institutions, such as the European Union, and put forward expressions of Euroscepticism, which is popular in crisis-stricken Greece (Verney 2015). Local initiatives, based on direct democracy and collective decisions, were experienced as an antidote to the increasing concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the business owners, the state authorities and the supranational political elites. The following quotation exemplifies the above issues:

Before the onset of the financial crisis, when the economic system was self-regulating and the claims against the political system were limited [...] things were working. With the onset of the crisis, serious decisions had to be taken, concerning too many people and their own lives. It became obvious that the way of political representation, the political system, does not respond to the will of the people, especially in Greece. The lack of democracy in the European political structure has been evident during the era of the crisis. For many people who did not know how the European structure works [...] it became clear that this way leads to a deadlock. There is no representation. There is a veneer of representation [...] it became obvious that, at the national and supranational levels, political power went hand in hand, protected, and had interweaving interests with economic power. To a large extent, it created a depreciation of the political system. (Interview No. 2)

For many activists, the crisis' context was a fertile ground for articulating narratives that counter capitalism's global imperative. They emphasise the role of the world capitalist system in the genesis of financial crises and try to bring forward the transformative potential of solidarity economy. In this regard, they attempt to prefigure and materialise types of egalitarian relations of a desired future society and try to actualise their wishes under the present conditions of solidarity economy. The following excerpt exemplifies this ethical criticism against the structural inequalities and power relations, in the context of financial capitalism and reveals a main imperative of autonomous groups concerning the building of self-valorised spaces, liberated from capitalist values outside the dominant neoliberal economic paradigm.

It seems there was a process of maturity in the groups and assemblies of the movements that I took part in. [...] We are living in a time when the economic system has come, has even been transformed from what we called globalised capitalism to a financial capitalism with sharp juxtapositions in its interior, and great acuteness and austerity within society [...] Essentially, it turns the world upside-down. From the point of view that the economy has come to serve people and societies, we now have an economy that has come and oppressed the people and societies that are underneath. We could talk about capital, the ruling class, the powerful and powerless, the upper and the lower. Much has been said about this relationship, which is basically a capitalist relationship that governs our economy [...] It has been trans-

formed through globalisation, corporations, the transatlantic agreements that we are seeing now that lay totally aside the states and any concept of democracy [...] (Our) principle is to criticise and question the assumption that the values and practices of this economic system, namely the pursuit of profit, utilitarianism, individuality, competition, are a one-way solution. We had the impression that we could build an economic project based on alternative values: that is collective benefit instead of individual, meeting needs instead of profit, creation of relationships instead of fetishisation of money and objects. (Interview No. 1)

Along with a sharp critique of the capitalist valorisation that produces exchange values rather than use values, autonomous groups try to translate their ideas into actions of prefigurative politics that elaborate desired future conditions through present forms of self-valorisation (Mellucci 1996; Pickerill and Chatteron 2006). Narrators are pragmatists about what is feasible to change within the context of contemporary global capitalism and thus they seek to expand the limits of their political action beyond the space of autonomous, self-governed collectives. A main strategy to mobilise people for collective political action is the dissemination of the everyday practice of resistance in wider social domains. An illustrative example of this approach is presented in the following narrative:

Our purpose is to make material realities that can change society to some extent, since nowadays a total or radical change of society is impossible. When something changes socially, it is followed by politics [...] so, the basic aim is to spread the practice of what we do, to multiply the connections, to become a social reality, and the more this thing will become a reality, the more it will be necessary to change the political sphere, in a way. (Interview No. 2)

Oral testimonies of social solidarity groups illustrate that activists use a sociospatial strategy that goes beyond local context to encompass wider concerns and political projects. Indeed, activists of solidarity economy participate in multiple networks of exchanges and relations, which are woven among various organisations at the local, translocal and transnational levels. In doing so, they make meaningful connections, build political coalitions and draw inspiration from anti-capitalist and post-capitalist social movements across the world. By networking and connecting spaces in a transnational level, the activists create a vital social network of global solidarity and resistance blocks. In the two passages below, narrators emphasise the political signification of transnational networks of information, knowledge and products. In the first passage, a narrator who gets involved in the actions of a coffee-shop that operates as a self-organised working collectivity, presents the meaning and the political significance of forming strategic alliances with autonomous projects across the world (Interview No.

5). In the second quotation, a member of a collectivity of alternative and solidarity trade (Interview No. 6) reveals the ethos of solidarity with counterpart communities across the globe and highlights the idea of a wise frugality within a needs-oriented economy, which is able to secure the right to work:

All those who are in the group, and those who have participated in the group, are people who get involved in social movements, such as neighbourhood assemblies or squats in parks [...] we have made political trips in order to acquire experiences from the workers/occupied factories of the Brazilian Landless worker movement [...] The Kurdish issue is of high priority and we are also members of the Athenian Corporative Initiatives Network [...] so the issue of networking with other collectivities and the expression of solidarity with [the workers of the self-managed factory] VIOME is important [...] we import coffee from Mexican Tsiapas cooperatives of the Zapatistas movement [...] the import is being made directly and we have already visited the cooperative so we are in permanent contact. The other products are from two European fair trade organisations; El Puente in Germany and Libero Mondo in Italy. With these organisations, we contacted and chose to cooperate with them, because they have a perception of fair trade which is close to ours, more transformative rather than philanthropic. (Interview No. 5)

We support the social movement and the political action of Liberal Mondo and Zapatistas' movement by selling the products that they produce. Similarly, we politically support the occupied factory of VIOME [...] The outcome of these cooperatives will not provide us anything more than what each member needs to live and what the cooperative needs in order to continue its action and social provision. This is the purpose of their operation, and not to put forward an alternative model of enrichment. We propose an alternative working model in order for all people to have work, and not for some to get rich while others suffer from hunger. (Interview No. 6)

This research finding shows that the solidarity economy space is employed by its members as an experimental laboratory of innovative practices and ideas. They promote politics of the commons and try to apply heterotopian sites of resistance, in which the social imaginary of a world of autarky outside the world market can be applied. In an effort to archive their goals of escaping from the economic principle of endless growth (Fournier 2008), they develop networks with anonymous groups who are experimenting with the new, digital, decentralised, alternative currency, Bitcoin. In the text below, the narrator remarks on the potential role of the alternative currency movement towards a more egalitarian and democratic economy approach that can challenge the neoliberal growth model and brings forward the autonomous group's vision of an economy of autarky on the fringe of capitalist economy.

It is an international team that runs it [Bitcoin]; they are ambitious, over-ambitious, but it does not matter. They make a strong critique of how money works, who controls money. They want to convey a message, to build an infrastructure by which money and its circulation could be created, and not go through a central bank but be in the hands of many, a tool that serves society and not those who already have money [...] the Integral Cooperative comes to support its economic sustainability through some economic tools, I have already described, that have to do with alternative currency and other instruments associated with Bitcoin. I hope that if we (together with the initiatives that will come within the frame of the integral cooperative) manage to maintain the resources of the networks within our own ecosystem, using our own domestic currency and do not go out in the form of taxes, in the form of using the euro to buy goods, we could obtain a high level of autarchy. Then we could gain a possibility of obtaining sustainability. (Interview No. 4)

The potential role of alternative currency in challenging or breaking the mainstream economy raises vivid discussions across solidarity economy participants. Some tend to use alternative local currency networks to facilitate solidarity-based fair trade, empowering local people. Others recognise the revolutionary dynamic of alternative currency as a vehicle in the hands of alternative workers' collectives across the world that would subvert finance capitalism 'by changing the power relations from ones of economic domination and control of work, to free choices' (North 2006, 104).

## **6. Working without bosses: Building autonomous self-valorised spaces**

Within the radical political imaginary, the collapse of socialistic regimes and the ongoing crisis of western capitalism brought to light the issue of the transcendence of capitalism. Old queries about how a new desired society could be seen to be emerging out of the materiality of capitalism and the autonomy movement idea that the future can be found within the present conditions (Clever 1993) seems to be at the epicentre of the vivid debates within the solidarity economy space.

Advocates of autonomy criticise the process of capitalist valorisation that alienates labour and transforms peoples' corporal and temporal existence into things producing surplus values (Cote 2003). They emphasise the self-organising capacity of labour in constructing a different range of social values and attitudes. Self-management facilitates workers to gain control over the labour process, cultivates an ethos of collective responsibility and makes possible the effort to prefigure the forms of social life of the ideal society they wish to bring into being (Trott 2016). To do so, they propose a re-

organisation of every day social relationships, creating sites of resistance within public domains, attempting to materialise in practice, here and now, alternative desirable working conditions. Proposing their emancipatory project towards small-scale autonomous communities in the present, advocates of autonomy reject the Orthodox Marxist doctrine of the transgression of liberal capitalism through the leading role of the communist parties, which, as the vanguard of proletariat, would lead society to a transitional socialist order (Yates 2015, 3). In the following narrative, the political strategy of classical Marxism is questioned and, at the same time, the transformative potential of solidarity economy through alternative ways of organising economic life and innovative experiments in various social settings is highlighted:

There are two notions, one saying that until the magical moment of the fall of capitalism, we ought to be workers [...] we have a very different notion. We clearly believe that we have to try to do things. We may try to organise neighbourhood assemblies and self-organised health structures, occupied centres for refugees, alternative educational structures, kindergartens, libertarian centres. All these are part of the same goal. Attempts to make direct orders from producers without intermediaries or the collective cultivation of land are part of the same struggle [...] we have to try to build another type of everyday life for ourselves and since this is what we want to do, we have to claim it now, and thus be an example by saying that this can be done [...] our ultimate aim is for all workers to be employed under conditions of workers' self-management without bosses over their heads [...] not only do we equally share work hours, but we also share a deeper concern, a commitment, a consistency [...] for our imperatives, autonomy and self-management, are the focal points. (Interview No. 5)

The project of self-valorisation stresses the necessity of cultivating workers' capacities to construct their own values and forms of relations that challenge the social order and dominant cultural norms of neoliberal economy, including private property, productivism, vertical hierarchical relations, consumerism and alienation. On the contrary, they encourage new modes of collective management of property, without bosses, that indicate new ways of living based on horizontal relations, mutuality, cooperation, egalitarianism and collective property rights:

We wanted to try being in a working environment where we would operate without bosses. That is, we will all be people who will not accept orders, we will decide together. We can define the terms and the conditions we are working in, ourselves. [...] I want to live better and I want, in my job, not to take and not to give orders. I want to cooperate and to have comradeship relationships with my colleagues and not competitive ones. I want [my job] to have a social content, not to say that I just make money, but to feel that I contribute somewhat socially [...] our expectations are that it is feasible to create such a workplace both for our-



selves and for collective purposes and that it is also possible to multiply these initiatives and this way of thinking. [...] We are interested in organic agriculture, we are interested in horizontal working relationships, namely cooperative work that is another culture of how the economy could work. (Interview No. 2)

Building an alternative network of practice, fostering affective relations around alternative values and promoting an economy of the commons, autonomous groups call on like-minded communities to participate in joint political projects. Although devotees of alternative economy are aware of the limits of these economic experiments within neoliberal contexts, they see their initiatives as self-valorised laboratories, in which innovative ideas, information and social practices are exchanged freely outside the spirit of capitalism. The propagation of radical ideas within the body of society opens up windows for new debates about autonomy, direct democracy, self-management and creative-cooperative labour in alternative workplaces.

Terms such as de-growth, solidarity economy, even self-management, workers' collectives, cooperative. All these, were words that did not exist a decade ago [...] a [cooperative] coffee-shop cannot change things. A coffee-shop or a thousand coffee-shops, a thousand initiatives that work collectively and with self-management cannot throw away capitalism and that is clear to us. But all these joint efforts and the relevant discussion open up the debate. (Interview No. 5)

A new concept is being formed; the concept of alternative economy that has now begun being formed in Greece [...] it can be seen from various viewpoints, as supplementary to the dominant economy [...] but there is another way to see these things, i.e., to stand in opposition to the status quo [...] we try to change the life values and the concept of efficiency. Instead, we propose cooperation and having a great time. It is pleasurable to do something creative. (Interview No. 4)

What needs to be emphasised in these narratives is the strong desire of activists to escape from the neoliberal capitalist spirit through experimenting with new ways of being and emancipatory patterns of work relations that slip the constraints of capitalist instrumentalisation (Cleaver 1993, 10). In Latouche's terms, they seem to seek the exit 'from the impasse of a growth society involves finding ways of building an alternative world of voluntary sobriety and frugal abundance' (Latouche 2012, 74).

The solidarity economy movement is composed of a multiplicity of diverse ideological currents. In addition to the influential trend of autonomy, activists are inspired from political ecology, degrowth and anarchism and attempt to express in practice their values and political projects. Ecology activists, belonging to a community-supported agri-

culture group based on consumer/producer networks, emphasise forms of ethical consumerism based on local partnerships between farmers of organic food and ecologically conscious consumers. Similarly to other initiatives of like-minded communities around the globe, the group was informed by a nexus of ideological discourses and romantic idealisations (Thompson and Coskuner-Bali 2007; Lang 2010; Flora and Bregendahl 2012). The following narrative criticises the commercialisation of food consumption, highlights the importance of ecological values that motivate collective projects and reveal the meaning of building exchange networks between the producers and consumers of organic products without intermediaries.

I believe in ecology; in our direct relationships with land, between the producer and the food, outside of large supermarket chains or the importation of products coming from abroad, outside of all these forms of commercialisation. Our initiatives contribute to localisation: the promotion of local production and consumption of food. It is aimed at people who want to eat clean products and who are interested, not only to eat clean products coming from countries producing organic food, but also in supporting the local economy, in getting to know the people who produce this food and to develop with them direct relationships, and not commercial ones [...] we are discussing another way of economic solidarity, so that some households with higher income than others may support the effort of producers to continue to have the job they want. (Interview No. 3)

Many narrators lean towards the degrowth project, they point out a practice-oriented approach that promotes ecosystems of local forms of economic activity, based on the principles of sustainable degrowth and the moral economy of the commons. They often construct a counter-hegemonic narrative against the capitalist hubris of the unlimited, mindless expansion of production that destroys the planet and society, disrupts local traditions and ways of living and produces structural inequalities (Castoriadis 2010, 195; Asara, Profumi and Callis 2013, 236). The essential point here is the ethical critique of capitalist imaginary that pervades every aspect of contemporary society. The narrators put forward the necessity of developing another culture, another way of being, including collective consciousness and participatory politics (Castoriadis 2010). For some narrators, the road towards a socially and ecologically sustainable society presupposes new institutions and an emancipatory educational approach during the school age that could bring children closer to ecological values.

We were divided into working groups, and a working group was the supporting team of collective consciousness. For me and possibly for many others, it is necessary for people to develop collective consciousness. This is at stake today [...] People do not realise this juggernaut

of today's lifestyle, their mentalities respond passively to what happens and they possibly try to find an outlet in the margins. Personally, I see this as a reaction of people's mental pressure to the consumption sphere and the culture of productivity [...] nowadays, people are completely being removed from the natural environment, because education is not such as to bring them to cherish nature [...] so, we want young children to have an intuitive relationship with nature. That's why we have already begun and try to organise it: to make small workshops for preschool children, to put their hands on the soil, to plant, to see how they grow a sowing, to have a sense of the time, the connection of production with the season. (Interview No. 4)

Groups inspired by anarchist traditions, emphasise the importance of self-organised forms of workers' collectives in which the cultivation of a libertarian and anti-capitalist consciousness has been promoted, and political struggles towards a self-managed stateless socialism have been developed. These groups seem to employ collaborative social networks of like-minded activists. They prefer 'invisibility' outside institutional control, and their purpose is twofold. On the one hand, they address the livelihood problem of some unemployed and poor people who are involved in their networks. On the other hand, they facilitate the empowerment of wider political struggles and contentious politics that lay at the heart of the anarchist movement. Anarchist groups bring forward, not only issues of egalitarian remuneration, horizontal practices and collective engagement, but also ecological concerns about autarky and self-sufficiency. The narrative of a member of an anarchist working collectivity reveals some of these trends within the alternative economy movement.

We are oriented towards nutritional autarky. We try to look at other initiatives, beyond the harvesting of olives; now we have moved to honey. Here is the Bee Collective team that produces honey. There are some others who collect salt and send it abroad [...] Part of the production was sent to (the libertarian) structures in Athens and for the Collective Cuisine. We also sent enough to the immigrants and to squats. (Interview No. 7)

Anarchist groups claim the liberation of ordinary life from structures of consumerism, alienation, hierarchy and exploitation and link these notions with anarchist-inspired contentious politics and new organisational forms of collective action in the workplace and in everyday life. In this regard, they employ solidarity economy as a site of struggle that facilitates broader political projects and anarchist forms of politics in the streets.

## 7. Discussion

The dystopian conditions of poverty, unemployment, inequality, social exclusion, labour precarization and infringement of social rights in crisis-stricken Greece, impel us to turn our attention to the multiplicity of divergent ideoscapes and projects of solidarity economy. Activists' voices show that beneath the solidarity economy initiatives lie claims and radical political imaginary. The unfolding effects of the economic crisis in the living conditions of the majority of the population triggered this process and gave way to the participants' desire to build alternative economic models that extend beyond the market and the state.

For the proponents of the degrowth imperative, the reaction to the economic crisis must be inextricably social and ecological, paving the way for another frugal society of abundance. This means escaping from a consumer society with unbridled competition and unlimited growth. It is a path towards, in Ivan Illiche's terms, a way of life in a post-industrial economy' that provides people with the opportunity to reduce 'their market dependence, protesting an infrastructure within which techniques and tools serve the creation of unquantified use-values' (1977, 87-8).

Autonomous groups employ radical ideologies and experiment with innovative practices and the worker's self-instituting capacities and seek to construct libertarian ways of collective life outside of capital flows and state arrangements. Following the analysis of Laclau and Moufe (1985), Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer (2010) understood the autonomy project as an (im)possibility. This thesis indicates two main arguments. Firstly, autonomy remains a desire, which groups and individuals seek to actualise and experience. It is a promise that opens up a potential site of struggles in everyday life towards alternative forms of social organisation and egalitarian relations. Secondly, autonomous social movements are always embedded in specific, social, and political relations of market economy and capitalism 'that one cannot simply escape'. In the flexible conditions of late modernity, 'the capital, the state and the discourses of development continuously seek to "recuperate" autonomy and make it work for their own purposes' (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer 2010, 27-28).

While activists articulate a heterotopian vision for a better world that departs significantly from what we know, they confront many obstacles in their efforts to construct sustainable, autonomous, self-governed communities with freedom from external control and some level of autarky. Solidarity economy remains a marginal sector of Greek economy with exclusive small-scales and often fragmented initiatives. Their organisations have limited impact on society, low sustainability capability, limited life-spans and internal ideological conflicts. The self-organised cooperatives have limited possibilities

of creating long-term secure employment and adequate incomes in societies addicted to free market consumption. In the Greek edition of Massimo De Angelis' book *The Common, Enclosures and Crisis* (2013, 9), he underlines the limitations of the commons project in Greece:

While capital cannot offer any solution to the problems of social reproduction caused by the financial crisis, alternative ways of living, the commons that are constantly emerging in Greece, did not have the necessary development and extent to cope with the effects of the crisis and to offer alternatives to the majority of the people.

Solidarity groups employ a variety of strategies to implement their ideas in practice. Some autonomous groups employ small-scale economic activities, operating under the condition of 'invisibility' outside of state control and institutional arrangements. The circle of their economic activities is limited, without important impact on the wider society and realistic possibilities to expand their initiatives within different social and ideological milieus. Seeking to find more workable solutions to the crisis, other organisations eventually transform from informal to remunerative forms of cooperativism, operating under the legal framework of social and solidarity economy. They use limited institutional arrangements for their own purposes and selectively develop strategies of market economy in their effort to survive, although the transformative potential remains a strong political imperative. Rejecting the development of partnership with the public sector and private enterprise, solidarity economy actors claim the ideological purity of self-managed projects – even if they constitute a marginal 'island' behind the archipelago of mainstream economy – and avoid the risk of becoming a complementary mode of social production within the neoliberal growth model.

Despite these existing ambivalences and regardless of its sustainability, solidarity economy is a real laboratory of vivid debates about the meaning and significance of organising collective forms of material life within and against capitalism. The discourse of solidarity economy calls into question the neoliberal market logic and the rights of private property that, as Harvey wrote (2013, 3), 'trump all other notions of rights' and instead reveal egalitarian goals, an ethos of collectivism and romantic humanism. They call on us to re-assess hegemonic values and norms in the light of alternative realities which embody forms of workers' cooperativism, participatory actions and ways of being that prefigure the future vision of another form of social life. The meaningful experiment of solidarity economy initiatives offers an important reflexion on the future of the commons and on the possibility of building autonomous spaces within and against a neoliberal world committed to materialism, consumerism and individualism.

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