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Unwrapping solidarity? Society reborn in austerity

Solidarity: Another Greek paradox?

Solidarity is an emblematic analytical category of one of the most powerful traditions of social thought, one that treats society as a given. In Durkheim's theory it is wrapped up in a programme that marginalised the subject and denied agency. Yet Durkheimian solidarity contrasts with the highly agential meaning of the term 'solidarity' (*allilegyi*), even the programmatic character of its use, in the current Greek context. As the contributions in this special section show, when 'social cohesion' is under threat in conditions of austerity, solidarity becomes a project, an 'alternative horizon' aimed at combating alienation and atomisation. We have to take account of this paradox that puts into question the very status of solidarity as an analytical tool and invites us to consider the multiple meanings of the concept in different contexts.

This paradox is exacerbated if we consider the role that Greece has played in the theoretical battles on social structure. In the 1960s, in the classical works of the transactionalist school, Mediterranean societies were depicted as paradigmatic cases of 'social atomism' and the privileged topoi for the application of one of the more vibrant alternatives to structural functionalism, particularly in the study of political relations. At the level of Greek ethnography, the transactionalist critique resonated with the strong sense of fragmentation that the ethnographers of rural Greece depicted in their studies of familial and extra domestic sociality, but also the factional conflict, even the deep cleavages of national politics (Campbell 1964; Loizos 1975; Du Boulay 1974). Therefore, how can we speak of solidarity in a society that is riven by antagonism at all levels of social integration – between neighbours, villages or political factions – to such an extent as to challenge the very notion of integration?

Historicising 'solidarity'

One way to deal with this paradox is to historicise 'solidarity', i.e. to place its uses in different time frames and employ past ethnography as a historical source (Papataxiarchis 2005) in order to unravel its (re)configurations. In his cogent and theoretically elaborate introduction, Theodoros Rakopoulos suggests that 'solidarity' works as a 'conceptual bridge' between sociality and understandings of the self in crisis. Such a theoretical course demands paying attention to the place that solidarity occupies

in the dynamic of culturally specific everyday sociality – in and between households and larger formations – where the complex play of antagonism and coming togetherness, division and unity, is staged. In particular, it requires an analysis of ‘solidarity’ in connection with parallel forms of engagement with the ‘other’ such as ‘hospitality’ (*philoxenia*). It also entails placing ‘solidarity’ in the historical genealogy of segmentary practices.

In the long and medium term of post-war and post-junta Greece, the comparative assessment of the relevant ethnographic material shows that the deep cleavages of the civil war gradually gave their place to a more balanced and better integrated socio-political scene. The ethnographies of the 1980s suggest that atomism and fragmentation is historically relative. Yet the egotistic, agonistic reciprocity of the mountainous shepherding populations (with reciprocal theft as its emblem), studied by Campbell (1964) and Herzfeld (1985) in the 1950s or the 1970s, and the traditional or emerging socialities of the gift, which were studied by a younger generation of ethnographers in the 1980s and the 1990s (Cowan 1991; Papataxiarchis 1991), not only capture the varying (political) tones of social life in different historical epochs; they also have something in common as they are successive instances of a historically persistent segmentary logic (Herzfeld 1987) that provides the defining property of the Greek ‘regime of difference’ (Papataxiarchis 2006). They are all segmentary practices through which processual assimilation (see Brubaker 2001) is achieved at the level of informal interaction in everyday life.

In the short term, during the current crisis ‘solidarity’ has emerged as a new type of segmentary practice. As rightly stated by Rakopoulos, it organises a particular response to austerity. In comparative terms, certain aspects of this response are quite remarkable and therefore deserve our attention.

First, from the beginning of the crisis agonistic relationality was the defining feature of people’s response to austerity. This emerged as an aspect of the wider, political, grassroots mobilisations against the political mainstream and their ‘invasion’ at the sphere of high politics that eventually led to the collapse of the bipartisan political system.

Second, it is equally interesting that relationality was programmatic. It was informed by a broad range of distinct and mutually antagonistic ideological – ethnonational, religious, ‘humanitarian’, egalitarian, ‘solidarian’ – projects of remaking society. Despite their discursive autonomy, in practice, as Dimitrios Theodossopoulos so convincingly shows in his article, they were subjected to syncretisms that gave rise to synthetic forms such as the ‘humanitarian’ version of ‘solidarity’.

Third, the overall response to the crisis was largely mediated – not to say overwhelmed – by the gift. Gift giving – in the form of services (free medical care, direct access to agricultural producers), food, clothes, land or jobs offered to those who suffered from austerity, the poor, the homeless or the unemployed – spread everywhere. Together with this massive celebration of the gift, the crisis ignited an equally impressive contest among politicians, businesses, institutional agents and many others, who strove to occupy the important position of the donor *vis-à-vis* the victims of austerity.

In a country with a long history of patronage and in a conjuncture when the clientelistic networks of the two main parties were falling apart, this was not only a historical opportunity for new players to enter the political field. The gift also provided a historically established language for (re)thinking the ‘financial crisis’, in general, and debt, in particular. Of course this was not a neutral language. Quite the contrary.

Through projecting alternative understandings of 'the political', the support to those who suffered from the crisis was transformed into a site of contestation among competing ideologies.

Underlying all these ideological projects was an overarching concern that Rakopoulos calls 'egalitarian tension'. The obsession about the gift, its mix with 'solidarity' and the eventual reproduction of clientelism in new 'solidarian' forms in their turn gave rise to anxieties about egalitarianism. As is shown by all contributors, during that phase the gift was primarily contested from a perspective that originated in the logics of empowerment and/or disinterestedness.

What particularly concerned the defendants of disinterested solidarity was the structural vulnerability of all those who were deprived of a 'position' in the social space where sociality is conducted once hit by the crisis. Many suffered from the collapse of difference – since difference, as distance between '(social) positions', requires positionality. In other words they suffered from the collapse of what makes the play of segmentary opposition – and reciprocity – possible (Papataxiarchis 2006: 25–39). Those at the receiving end of 'solidarity', once they were deprived of the possibility of participating in the historically available cultural means of the making of social ties, were subjected to an extreme form of structural 'exclusion'. Their structural vulnerability, particularly as it exposed them to hierarchical inclusion and exploitation by power holders of all kinds, attracted the attention of principled egalitarians. 'Solidarity' as a political project aimed to empower them by 'bringing them back' into the game of sociality on 'horizontal, anti-hierarchical' terms.

In the current conjuncture of the 'European refugee crisis', as Katerina Rozakou vividly demonstrates in her nuanced account of new spaces of sociality between residents of Greece and refugees, we experience a further transmutation of 'solidarity' that replaces 'hospitality' as the dominant mode of engagement with refugees. When xenophobia reached a climax in the period before the national elections of 2012 and, paradoxically, appropriated the rhetoric of welcoming the newcomers, the concept of 'hospitality' towards the irregular migrants turned into a battleground (Papataxiarchis 2014). 'Hospitality' was eventually politicised, often in the Derridean form of 'absolute, unconditional hospitality', and turned against racism, but at a high cost. The concept of 'hospitality' eventually suffered from exhaustion, the very exhaustion of the regime of difference of which it is a principal index. The coming into power of the Radical Left and the gradual transformation of the 'migration issue' into the 'refugee issue' effected an impressive transformation. 'Hospitality' retreated to the discursive margins; it was outflanked by 'solidarity' as a mode of engagement with an 'other' who does not have and does not claim a place.

As the masses of refugees and irregular migrants were crossing the Eastern Aegean borders of Europe with a single purpose in their minds – to continue their journey into the northern regions of the continent – the activists of the 'solidarity movement', and with them many other 'well-wishers', found an ideal terrain to apply their anti-hierarchical, egalitarian agenda.

The extension of 'solidarity' into new fields of application has contributed to a spectacular growth of its popularity. 'Solidarity' has become a core metaphor. It affects not only ordinary attitudes but also the formal discourse of the Syriza government. It figures as an 'essence', endemic in the actions of particular individuals

or in places, thus constituting ‘the face’ of Greece, a positive image with which Greece is engaged in the European moral crisis, thus overshadowing the stereotype of the ‘scapegoat’. In this capacity ‘solidarity’ currently plays an important role in the conduct of European and global politics. A new patriotism of ‘solidarity’ is on the way.

‘Social kitchens’: cooking ‘society’

My understanding of the current Greek predicament, based on fieldwork in Northern Lesbos, the epicentre of the European refugee crisis (Papataxiarchis 2016), is that we are witnessing a new phase in the reconfiguration of ‘solidarity’, which again works as an umbrella covering a wide range of ideological attitudes and political projects, and an opportunity for the intensification of the gift craze. However, the stakes are different now.

The ‘new gift’ (to the refugees) is not politically functional in the way it was *vis-à-vis* the Greek citizens. In the former case the explosive issue of positionality is surpassed since the refugees have no claims to local status but just want to, and indeed as long as the Balkan route remains open do, move on. Their ethereal presence makes them immune to patronage and therefore the ideal recipients of forms of ‘solidarity’ that rely on gifts. The engagement with refugees, therefore, constitutes a terrain for ideological exercises that reinvigorate the debates on the uses of ‘solidarity’.

The defendants of disinterested solidarity – ‘purists’, ‘realists’ and others – try to keep ‘solidarity’ immune from ‘external’ uses. The society that is reborn in horizontal ‘solidarity’ is an ‘anti-structure’, and stands against the very political and economic forces that assigned society its exclusionary potential. For example, this perspective is reflected in the egalitarian model of the ‘social kitchen’, which they run in reception camps or public spaces, a model that in principle contrasts with the hierarchical model of soup kitchens, which operate under the auspices of institutional agents such as the church and function as ‘surrogate’ super kitchens that also sustain the households of the female volunteers (Douzina-Bakalaki 2016).

The egalitarian, collective production and consumption of food in public (in ‘initiatives’ on the island of Lesbos such as *O allos anthropos* and *Platanos*) is informed by the transcendental, anti-hierarchical and expressive logic of disinterested sociality that governs the sharing of alcoholic drinks in the coffeehouse. Thus it works as a *parea* (a circle of friends who drink together), despite the fact that it has the organisational features of a collectivity of ‘solidarians’.

The logic of disinterested sociality invades the domain of food and in this capacity is reconfigured, in political philosophical terms, as ‘horizontality’, ‘self organisation’ and authentic, anti-hierarchical ‘solidarity’. The agonistics of *kefi* (good life) are energised in a new direction, but always against the state and the market, always at a safe distance from money. Similar reconfigurations of the healthcare system are on the way in the social clinics, which are carefully and systematically analysed by Heath Cabot in her contribution. There the new approaches to health breed ‘alternative visions of citizenship, in which liveable lives are again made viable’. Yet such principled stances are for the few, since they are hard to sustain in real life. In actual practice, principled ‘solidarity’ is exposed to a variety of syncretisms with its alleged opposites – with philanthropy resting on the paternalistic notion of ‘help’ (Theodossopoulos, this issue),

or with the even more plain concerns of realists who eventually turn ‘solidarity’ into a profession (Rakopoulos 2015).

Unwrapping solidarity?

The spectacular success of ‘solidarity’ as programmatic sociality, as a multisemic project of remaking society in conditions of austerity or as a form of engagement of ordinary people in everyday practices that, besides their material benefits, reaffirm agency and recreate the social bond, the historical fluctuations in its application by a multiplicity of actors who are implicated in these ‘solidarity’ practices from different ideological angles and, therefore, its great semantic variation, are indexes of its great significance as a social and political phenomenon.

Yet there are good reasons for caution in the use of the concept as an analytical category. As an ethnographer, I have to admit my urge to problematise solidarity. The benefits of the deconstructive strategy are evident in the fresh ethnographic materials on forms of engagement with urban poor or the refugees (see, for example, Douzina-Bakalaki 2016; Rozakou 2016).

On this ground, I suggest keeping a safe distance from the ‘romance of solidarity’ and putting ‘solidarity’ in quotation marks, thus following its semantic variation as an emic category in multiple contexts of economic and political use. We have to consider what ‘solidarity’ does in connection to what solidarity ‘is’. This programme becomes pertinent particularly now, when the ‘romance of solidarity’ replaces the ‘romance of resistance’ that was violently disrupted by the historical defeat of the Syriza government last summer and the popularity of ‘solidarity’ reaches its apogee in Greece. Now that the ‘refugee issue’ adopts global proportions, ‘solidarity’ turns into a huge stake in European politics.

On the other hand, as a Greek citizen I have to admit that I have certain reservations about the deconstruction of solidarity as a radical political alternative. We should take on board the political (and ethical) consequences of taking the quotation marks out of solidarity for all those who are engaged in the multiple sites of the crisis. The metaphorical idea of society as an organic given became pertinent in conditions of war and social disarray. If solidarity without brackets amounts to a political programme of recapturing society – always from different ideological angles and in different political directions – one has to be aware of the negative political consequences of its deconstruction.

Unwrapping solidarity then? Yes, but only to a certain extent. Perhaps the middle ground of assigning solidarity a quasi-analytical status in reference to sociality, engagement and utopia and using it as a ‘bridge concept’ will allow us to keep the uneasy balance between thick descriptions of engagement and lending weight to a practice worthy of the status of essential. Particularly if we apply a certain economy in its use – refraining from employing the word ‘solidarity’ as an adjective and, more generally, avoiding grammatical usages that further fix its meaning.

An analytically careful, strategic essentialism of solidarity, after all, may be the solution. At least, for the time being!

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