Article

Subjects in crisis: Paradoxes of emancipation and alter-neoliberal critique

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Abstract
This article examines the formation of political subjectivity in times of neoliberalization and crisis. It does so by following the meaning-making practices of Penelope, a participant of the 2011 Syntagma Square occupation in Athens. The Syntagma Square encampment was at the heart of Greece's anti-austerity movement. Prior to this experience, Penelope says she 'wasn't the most sophisticated person' politically, yet that she 'changed' for the better precisely because of her participation. What does Penelope aspire to and what does she demarcate her self from against the backdrop of austerity neoliberalism, crisis, and her experience in the square? And what remains of her participation experience years on with regard to subjectivity? This article claims that the relationship between subject formation and emancipation under neoliberalism is paradoxical: in her effort to overcome neoliberal rationalities in Greece, Penelope is also unwittingly reproducing them. In disentangling this paradox, this article concludes with a theorization of what I call 'alter-neoliberal critique': against and beyond neoliberalism.

Keywords
alter-neoliberal critique, austerity, Greece, political subjectivity, radical imagination

Introduction

Penelope was 32 years old when she participated in the 2011 Syntagma Square occupation in Athens. Lasting over two months, the encampment, in the heart of the Greek capital, contested the government's policy of implementing the austerity programme set out by the troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Having described herself as 'apolitical' prior to Syntagma, Penelope highlights the collective and transformative character of her participation experience.

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> Before Syntagma, I didn't take part in demonstrations, I wasn't in the movements . . . I wasn't the most sophisticated person. Yet still I changed . . . and this is the value of Syntagma Square: That there this butterfly effect of inspiring one another, changing our way of life began. (Personal communication, October, 2014)

Indeed, the many protest camps that resisted authoritarianization, neoliberalism and precarious living conditions from Cairo to New York led scholars to point to the emergence of 'new' (Douzinas, 2013), 'insurgent' (Juris, 2013), or 'resisting' (Zevnik, 2014) political subjectivities. Studies on Syntagma assume the politicization of protesters' subjectivity to be the result of their participation in the direct-democratic practices of the square (Karaliotas, 2017; Prentoulis & Thomassen, 2014). Influenced predominantly by critical theory and radical political theory, this literature draws the contours of an emancipating subject that is the product of its exposure to quasi-egalitarian spaces of discontent. These studies provide valuable insights to the relationship between theory and the subject. However, there is little empirical research on the temporality vis-a-vis the processes and practices of (trans-)formation that led to this 'new' subject position, and what remains of this position years later.

This article addresses this gap by making a twofold intervention regarding the temporality and paradoxes of subject formation in times of crisis. First, it investigates how participants experience themselves subjectively prior, during and after situations of upheaval, by following the meaning-making practices of Penelope – a woman in her early 40s, who actively participated almost daily in the Syntagma Square occupation. Studies on anti-austerity protest have highlighted how activism becomes an intersectional way of being, motivated by affectivities of empathy and indignation (Davou & Demertzis, 2013), collectivist ethics (Craddock, 2019), solidarities of mutual aid (Rakopoulos, 2016) and radical imaginaries of how society should be (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014) in light of the privatization of care through the fading of welfare states (Emejulu & Bassel, 2018). As I have shown elsewhere (Soudias, 2018, 2020), the transformative quality of the Syntagma Square occupation lies in its radical imagination, which is (re-)produced through the prefigurative practice, and liminal spatiality of the encampment. First, this is because the extraordinary practice of occupying, opposite the Greek parliament, is an act *against* the politics of austerity, representational democracy and the period of neoliberal 'modernization' prior to the crisis. Second, the egalitarian and anti-authoritarian ethic of the square signifies a radical *alternative* to this order. As a result, Penelope describes herself today as 'politically mature', and orients her practices toward this radical imagination. Partaking in various solidarity initiatives in Athens, she continues to actively challenge neoliberal rationalities.

However, because neoliberalism incorporates critique into its mode of functioning (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2017), while Penelope is resisting neoliberal rationalities, she sometimes also unwittingly reproduces them. As Taylor (2013) illustrates regarding the Occupy movement, neoanarchist critiques of capitalism have been recuperated by the market in ways that perpetuate the reproduction of neoliberalism. Similarly, Theodossopoulos (2014) delineates how anti-austerity discourses in Greece reproduce hegemonic narratives, posing dilemmas to resistance. This article's second intervention, therefore, reconsiders the emancipatory quality of transformation under austerity neoliberalism – a cultural

formation that frames austerity measures through an individualizing neoliberal discourse (Gill & De Benedictis, 2016). By disentangling the paradoxes of political subjectivity between emancipation and reproduction, this article moves beyond Adorno's (1974, p. 39) mantra that 'wrong life cannot be lived rightly', and instead theorizes an alter-neoliberal critique.

To develop these considerations, the first part of this article elaborates my research approach. I then move on to follow the sequence of Penelope's self-described process of transformation before, during, and after participating in the Syntagma Square occupation. The first part examines the ways in which Penelope experienced herself *before* she participated in Syntagma. Here, she points to the era of modernization that peaked in the mid-2000s in Greece. Culturalist from the outset, modernization was to 'rationalize' Greece by reordering state–market–subject relations in ways that nurtured competitive, self-interested and self-responsible subjects. The second part examines Penelope's self-described transformative experience *during* Syntagma. I show how crisis discourse, austerity neoliberalism, and the radical imagination of Syntagma led Penelope to reconsider her taken-for-granted norms, especially regarding consumption, work and statehood. The third part addresses what remains of this experience years *after* her participation in the square. I argue that today, Penelope orients her ethical self toward the radical imagination. Yet, while Penelope is challenging neoliberal rationalities, she sometimes reproduces them. These findings allow us to conclude with an initial alter-neoliberal critique: against and beyond neoliberalism.

Approach

I met Penelope in October 2014 at the Festival for Solidarity and Cooperative Economy in Athens. I had just started fieldwork on subject formation in the Greece of crisis *through* the eyes of 29 participants of the Syntagma Square occupation. A common friend introduced us to each other, as Penelope was active throughout the entirety of the occupation, and part of what other interlocutors referred to as the 'core' of the encampment – those roughly 50 people who either went to the square every morning and stayed until late, or slept overnight in tents. Penelope stood out amongst my interlocutors, because of the auratic ways in which she illustrated her transformation: describing the square as a 'magical space' that 'improved' her and made her more politically 'active'. Penelope's case is paradigmatic for the broader findings of my study: a self-described previously 'apolitical' individual, who – through taking part in Syntagma – 'matured' to a politicized and emancipated subject; but one who also reproduces key neoliberal precepts she stands against.

In order to make sense of these observations, this article builds on what I call an Abductive-Situational Analysis, which synthesizes abductive analysis (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) and situational analysis (Clarke, 2005) to produce theoretical hunches for unexpected findings in ways that do justice precisely to the quasi-epiphanic quality of Penelope's self-described transformation. Epistemologically, Abductive-Situational Analysis is based on the anti-essentialist presumptions of American pragmatism that meaning-making occurs in tracing practices and their imaginable consequences (Cherryholmes, 1994). Indeed, for Penelope, 'all the actions that occurred were crucial

. . . they were the revolution' (October, 2014). This approach allows for theorizing a narrative of Penelope's experience of subject (trans-)formation based on recursive methodological movements between observing her (meaning-making) practices, mapping the relations among them, framing these findings with sensitizing theoretical notions, and carving out variation across my findings.[1]

Conceptually, this article rests on three considerations about the relationship between subjectivity, practice and experience. Firstly, I assume that the subject is not the foundation of (political) practices. Rather, the formation of subjectivity ought to be traced in these practices (Prozorev, 2014). In Penelope's words, the point is to find 'a practical way how [one] can change their life . . . to improve their overall life with actions' (October, 2014). How Penelope 'does' practices indicates the underlying principles of her undertaking, which constitute her self as an ethical, technical, ontological and epistemological being (Rose, 1999):

> *How* are we going to help each other? *How* are we going to solve our problems on our own, without needing the state? So self-organization . . .was a very important part that excited me and made me more active at some point. (October, 2014)

These practices are rendered meaningful in their variation from, for example, (technically) 'un-useful' or (ethically) 'wrong' practices. In effect, how Penelope identifies or dis-identifies with particular principles or practices, such as self-organization and the role of the state for service provision, denotes a practice of subjectivity.

Secondly, this approach considers Penelope's accounts as constitutive processes of meaning-making *in the moment of speaking*, rather than reflexive narrations of how things 'actually' were 'back then' (Bauman, 2008). Following Scott (1991, pp. 779–780), experience becomes 'not the origin of our explanation . . . but rather that which we seek to explain . . .', by tracing Penelope's meaning-making of practices. Here, it 'is structurally unimportant whether the past is "real" or "mythical", "moral" or "amoral"', as Victor Turner (1986, p. 36) remarks. Rather, the point is whether meaningful guidelines emerge as subjectivity in its demarcation from that perceived past.

Thirdly, tracing subjectivity in practice follows a Foucauldian (1997) conception, distinguishing between subjectification, or the ways in which the self is objectified as a subject through the exercise of power/knowledge by others; and subjectivation, or the ways in which individuals govern and fashion themselves into subjects based on what they assume to be worth striving for. Penelope illustrates these considerations regarding her changing position toward the police:

> The role of the cop, is a role that cannot work in a democratic regime . . . it's not the cop who will protect you from the thieves . . . It's the cop who will beat you . . . For what reason should he exist? Before Syntagma, these [things] I hadn't questioned. I saw the MAT [Police Units for the Reinstatement of Order] as enemies. And truly, they remain enemies. (February, 2016)

Political subjectivation, therefore, rests on the (normative) negativity of experience *against* the discourses and practices of power (Liebsch, 2016). As Penelope highlights, this requires dis-identifying from the 'previous' self, and the world around us (Prozorev,

2014). It signifies the requalification of ordinary experience (Rancière, 1999) with the ensuing perceived need or desire to change the practice that led to that experience. In these terms, I will delineate the temporality of Penelope's emancipation: how she struggles against the subjectification of the political logics of power, and how she partly reproduces these very logics through subjectivation.

'Before Syntagma'

> Because my parents suffered as kids – in their childhood in the village it was difficult – . . . they always had this stress that I need to study something and find a job to be well, economically. So basically, what all parents say to their kids, right? And of course, for me they had a lot of *expectations*. (February, 2017)

Penelope's parents moved to Athens during the urbanization wave of the 1980s. Her father found work as a bus driver, while her mother became a domestic worker. Both were ardent supporters of the social-democratic PASOK, one of the two major political parties at the time, along with conservative rival New Democracy. Under PASOK, there was considerable upward social mobility through policies of expanding state services, along with the imaginary promise to make everybody in Greece a member of the middle class (Marangudakis, 2019). Indeed, Penelope's parents managed to make a decent living and take out a mortgage to buy a house when she was 18 years old, pointing to the relative success of the capitalist imaginary in Greece at the time. For Castoriadis (1998), the capitalist imaginary shapes our expectations of what the future may hold for us, and what is worth striving for. It signifies a 'singular manner of living . . . the source of that which presents itself in every instance as an indisputable and undisputed meaning' (p. 145). In Penelope's upbringing, it appears, working hard and getting an education would allow her to generate the kind of human capital that makes her competitive enough in the labour market to find economic certainty and fortune in this imaginary. Hence, she went to England in 2001, at age 22, to pursue a degree in marketing and business. Her parents, in the hopes of providing a better future for their child, took out a loan to invest in her studies. With no delay, Penelope finished her studies and found a job in sales for a large clothing chain in London right after graduating. Capitalism, it appeared at the time, held its promise.

Meanwhile, Greece had undergone significant changes. In 2001, when the country joined the European Monetary Union, then-prime minister Costas Simitis jubilantly announced 'we're modernizing, we're becoming European. The barbershops will become hair salons and the coffee houses coffee shops' (as cited in Makridakis, 2015). Simitis and PASOK's wing of 'modernizers' were on a course to transform the country dramatically. The 2004 Olympics showed the world how far Greece had come in modernizing: by fethishizing its antiquity, Athens rebranded itself as a competitive and entrepreneurial city (Chatzidakis, 2014). While PASOK never made the exact contents of their project explicit, what was clear from the outset is that modernization really signifies *neoliberal* modernization. Privatization and forsaking the state's previous welfare functions (Douzinas, 2013) were to re-regulate state–market–subject relations, in the hopes of increasing national competitiveness. For Simitis, this reordering was the strongest

lever to 'exit from a reality of developmental deficits and social backwardness' (as cited in Featherstone, 2008, p. 177). Culturalist from the outset, modernization assumes a split between a 'Western' modernizing culture, drawing from Greek antiquity, and an 'Oriental' underdog culture inherited from Ottoman rule (Diamandouros, 1994). In the words of modernizing intellectuals Koliopoulos and Veremis (2010), the goal of modernization is to create a 'new economic environment in which success would come with a price tag that read: determination, risk taking, perseverance, self-discipline, and consistency' (p. 194). To fulfil this agenda, the state serves an ambiguous role: as an imaginary, it is framed as in need of reform. As an institutional arrangement, however, the state governs the transformation of state–market–subject relations. In this conception, neoliberalism is an interventionist epistemic agenda of extending the reach of market-based methods of evaluation to non-market phenomena: through the state and upon the state (Mirowski, 2014).

It was during this time that Penelope got homesick and decided to leave London for her native Athens. She quickly found a job at a major phone provider, which was established as a result of the privatization of telecommunication services. 'It was at the time when the crisis hadn't hit, where everybody had three mobiles' (February, 2017), Penelope recalls. Simultaneously, privatization and deregulation constructed conditions of competitive uncertainty at Penelope's work place:

> The entire work – the tasks, the way they were structured – was entirely capitalist. 'You are responsible for this. You need to sell this much. Your targets are these. Oh, you missed your targets? Why did you miss them?' Bawling, bad mood, pressure, stress . . . And all that for little money. (February, 2017)

Performance benchmarks and discourses around productivity intend to internalize norms of self-responsibility of wage-earners. Doing so disguises the transfer of risk onto individuals, which casts them into a 'state of permanent and incurable uncertainty' (Bauman, 2008, p. 91). Substituting qualitative judgement with quantitative evaluation of performance also serves to reduce wage-earners' imaginative and critical capacities:

> I used the tools . . . I learned in my studies a lot. But it was an environment that didn't care . . . about doing things differently . . . The motive was very particular, and we needed to follow that. You had to say particular things to costumers. You had targets that you needed to fulfil. And every time you have to say a lot of bullshit, because the products were not all good . . . We had complaints . . . Regardless, we needed to sell them! Well, this thing was a lie . . . And when they told me 'you missed your targets', because I was the head of a small sales-unit, I said 'we missed our marks because the product isn't good'. (February, 2017)

By disregarding the quality of the product in favour of the quantity of sales, performance metrics disenchant ethics and seek to shape calculating, and self-interested subjects (Moore & Robinson, 2015). Individualizing performance perpetuates competition between wage-earners analogous to what Foucault (1995, p. 217) calls 'permanent exercise of indefinite discipline'.

> At work sometimes there was competition of the likes of 'who's the best salesperson?' and 'who hits the targets?' and so on . . . A few salespeople were born to tell lies and born to sell. There were two to three people who . . . can sell you whatever they want. They are made to tell lies . . . like brokers who don't care what they sell. They don't give a shit about the ethical part. Such people were there. These are the appropriate people for such jobs. The rest was unhappy. (February, 2017)

As performance is measured along efficiency-maximization, the practice of lying may not be necessarily dubbed morally 'wrong', if it is motivated by a desire to win. This signifies a depoliticization of responsibility and an abandonment of how one 'ought' to behave as an ethical being. Under the disguise of meritocracy, solidarities and collectivities among wage-earners are broken, perpetuating a self-interested and entrepreneurial subjectivity. The threat of failure dangles over wage-earners' heads like the sword of Damocles, producing envy and distrust. 'The environment, the nature of the job, didn't make me happy', Penelope explains. 'I wasn't well. I was depressed, psychologically' (February, 2017). This underlines that privatization and labour-market flexibilization are not forms of de-regulation as much as they signify a neoliberal *reordering* of norms of economic activities, social relations, conduct and subjectivities (Dardot & Laval, 2017).

This reordering also impacted financial services in Greece. By removing consumer credit restrictions in 2003 (Placas, 2008), responsibility of fiscal discipline was further individualized. When the crisis hit Greece, the consequences of this individualization started to show.

> The truth is that my parents fell for [taking out a loan]. My father . . . worked difficult hours. And he had a plan in his life. He knew that when he would get his pension, he would get a decent one and he would get a bonus. But that time coincided with the crisis, which means that the bonus was lost and the pension is lower. [His] plan collapsed . . . (February, 2017)

For Penelope and her family, their normative assumptions of competing and planning for economic security unravelled during the crisis. As the promises of the capitalist imaginary started to crumble, Penelope first had to make sense of what the crisis meant, so as to then confront it.

'During Syntagma'

By the time the global financial crisis brought Greek banks to tumble, political and media discourses painted a picture in which a productive and competitive European north had to bail out a lazy and excessive south (Mylonas, 2012). 'Too many uncompetitive members of the Eurozone have lived beyond their means', Angela Merkel proclaimed (as cited in Deutscher Bundestag, 2010, p. 4128). In Greece, modernizers were satisfied they were right all along, claiming that the crisis was one of 'behaviors, values, attitudes, perceptions', attributed to the 'eastern culture of conduct', only to be overcome by fixing 'behavioral deficits' (Ioakimidis, 2011). On the one hand, this discourse moralizes the reasons for the crisis, analogous to what Jensen (2012, p. 8) refers to as 'tough love': 'indulgence, failure to set boundaries, moral laxity and disciplinary incompetence'. The

neoliberal dogma of self-responsibility is placed at the national level and reduces structural critique to self-critique: only Greece itself can be blamed for its crisis. The Greek state, on the other hand, draws from this discourse, but only to devolve responsibility to the individual, while legitimating austerity measures and neoliberal reform – in a disciplinary-paternalistic sense – as *necessary* for overcoming the crisis (Kallianos, 2018). In effect, while the crisis escalated the neoliberal precepts and culturalist assumption of modernization, its management through austerity was to underline that Greeks had to become ascetic in lifestyle and austere in virtue, and reduce their imagination of what is possible, to what is necessary. This austerity variant of neoliberalism frames austerity measures through an individualizing neoliberal discourse that emphasizes 'character' (Gill & De Benedictis, 2016). Here, discourses of resilience, entrepreneurialism, and 'bouncebackability', seek to mould subjects that individualize structural constraints and assume responsibility for the entirety of their life outcomes (Brown, 2015).

In Greece, austerity neoliberalism meant re-regulating the labour market and privatizing state services, but also dismantling the welfare system and demanding high taxes and low wages from the populace as a moral-economic debt repayment. This led to a rise of unemployment, homelessness, and a noticeable increase in mental health problems and suicides (Laskos & Tsakalotos, 2013). 'The crisis is economic . . . [it's] unemployment. It's a political crisis, a societal crisis, a *crisis of morality*', Penelope explains. 'A lot of people took out loans and now they don't have enough to eat. There were psychological shocks' (October, 2014). Instead of internalizing austerity neoliberalism, however, Penelope joined the protests in Syntagma Square *against* it.

> I went because I didn't like what happened. Politically, I mean there was the memorandum, the troika . . . All these things they wanted to put on us . . . I didn't want to go through this situation and *injustice.* (October, 2014)

Arguably, Penelope joined the protests precisely because austerity neoliberalism disenchants, rather than strengthens, the cogency of the capitalist imaginary. It does so in three interrelated ways. First, it breaks with the promise of economic security and lavish consumption by competing for middle-class belonging. In so doing, as Penelope indicates, austerity neoliberalism strips the capitalist imaginary of its liberal and moral justifications: the socialization of the crisis costs effectively suspends the rules of the market and the alleged fairness of competition. In turn, capitalism's moral imaginary is reduced to the valorization of survival as individual responsibility (cf. Davies, 2005). For Penelope, neoliberal austerity became *both unjust and unjustified*, shocking her out of her habitual acceptance of the culturalist narrative of the crisis and into a more critical stance.

> This crisis is an opportunity through which we all reflect how we will live. No, I don't need three mobile phones and two cars . . . Even what we eat, how we think, all this way of thinking about how we live our lives . . . the crisis was an opportunity to change that. (October, 2014)

Penelope's doxic assumptions about the capitalist imaginary are elevated to the level of discourse, where she critiques and reimagines them. Her participation in the square occupation played a pivotal role in this transformation. 'The most important thing . . . that I

felt inside of me regarding Syntagma is that it has changed me as a human', Penelope told me (October, 2014). Lasting from May to August 2011 and inscribed in a wider 'movement of the squares' that unfolded in cities all over Greece, the Syntagma Square occupation lay at the heart of the anti-austerity protests and represented an ideologically and socioeconomically heterogeneous convergence of those directly hit by the crisis. There were over two dozen thematic and organizational groups, as well as the general assembly, where everybody could participate, file motions, and vote upon them. The organizational groups ensured the running of the occupation, consisting of, for example, the general secretariat, the defence group and the medical clinic. The thematic groups put forward alternative visions of politics, including the direct-democracy group, the group on eco-communities and alternative currencies, or the time bank – the last of which Penelope helped to form.

> At the secretariat, everybody who had something to offer, suggested their ideas . . . We went there and suggested to establish a group of exchange of services and goods . . . [The secretariat] kept names of other participants who suggested similar ideas. With some magical way, this united us. We made a motion at the general assembly to establish a solidarity network . . . we researched all the possible ways in which we could exchange services and goods without money . . . And we decided finally that 'time bank' is the most effective and quick instrument to *turn this idea into practice.* (October, 2014)

Penelope highlights the direct-democratic processes of prefiguring radical ideas collectively. As I have shown elsewhere (Soudias, 2020), the square signifies a radical imagination of an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian ethic, grounded in practices of equality, self-governance and autonomy, self-organization, solidarity and collectivity. 'The change-oriented discussions [ζυμώσεις], the self-organization . . . all this was a magical thing' (October, 2014), Penelope underscores. As an embodied experience, the radical imagination was marked by affectivities Penelope and others described through 'belonging', 'being among like-minded people', or 'feeling united'.

> I developed many personal relationships with people, which I didn't have before. The most important thing is that I didn't feel alone. I mean, the loneliness of an activist [smirks] . . . who's like 'It's me and I am fighting alone' . . . can also be harmful, because you say to yourself 'fuck, what am I doing? I'm alone. What will I change all alone in this world?' This didn't exist. We were many . . . And this continued with many groups that were created after. (October, 2014)

As she smirks at the realization that she identifies herself as an activist, Penelope underlines how the collective experience of the square is antidotal to the loneliness and isolation in neoliberalism (cf. Monbiot, 2017). It is this collectivity that she attributes to her self-described transformation:

> The people I met there . . . opened my mind in the ways I think, how wrong I have been on some things. [Before Syntagma] I functioned more in terms of the *'I'* . . . Whereas there, I functioned more in terms of the *'We'*. (October, 2014)

The metaphor of 'opened my mind' points to a quasi-epiphanic experience that was only possible because it happened *between* Penelope and others. For Rancière (1999), being-between is precisely what constitutes the political community. The collective nature of this experience led Penelope to dis-identify with her former ethical self ('how wrong I have been'), which signifies a practice of political subjectivation. On this basis, she moves beyond the individuating principles of neoliberalism, and radically imagines collective understandings of being that seek to overcome the structuring logics of capitalism.

Conceptually, the radical imagination is characterized by a certain balance between anti-politics and alter-politics (Hage, 2015). *Anti-politics* is not defined by depoliticization. Rather, it signifies a rejection of the practices and discourses of power, requiring an act of distancing oneself from the existing order, and dis-identifying with a selfhood that reproduces this order. *Alter-politics* aims at providing alternatives to that order. As Penelope tells us at the beginning of this section, it was the question of 'how to do' radically alternative practices that sustained her activism in Syntagma. Yet, precisely because such practices question state-institutional arrangements, security forces repeatedly charged against the square violently to safeguard the status quo. Penelope's experience of being exposed to the violence of those very forces that claim to serve and protect led her to question a central assumption she held about representative democracy in Greece.

> This incident was a very crucial. I mean, *it stained me*. I understood. Very deep inside of me I felt, that I don't live in a democracy . . . It is authoritarianism and fascism with a very nice face on the outside. It looks democratic. (February, 2016)

As Penelope's experiences disrupt routinized habits of thought and conduct, they stimulate critique by questioning and politicizing doxic assumptions. Emphasizing that the police 'were not humans. They were robots [and] had no feelings' (October, 2014), Penelope underlines the affective embodiment of this experience, assuming a quasi-Manichean juxtaposition between the aspiring equality and self-governance of Syntagma, and the domination and subordination of the Greek state. Simultaneously, the collective nature of the experience of repression brought forth new expectations.

> [There was] unbelievable solidarity between the people who were here, [I felt] that I wasn't alone . . . I will be defended by the others. So this thing that *would* happen [referring to repression], we *would* deal with collectively. (February, 2016)

Penelope signifies her experiences with the injurious and precarizing practices of state-institutional arrangements through the commonality of vulnerability between participants. This commonality congeals in solidarity and the imagining of radically alternative practices ('we would deal with collectively'). Such practices form the basis of alternative modes of subjectivity and, by extension, society.

> [In Syntagma], my ideas about collectivity arose, because whatever we did there was collective. We cooked collectively . . . the assembly was collective . . . The groups had assemblies. This whole part of assemblies and direct democracy . . . arose from there. Before, I had no idea

about this model. Afterwards, I got into collaborative things. The logic in which I treated work, how I perceive work, and how I cooperate with others, changed completely. (February, 2017)

Penelope emphasizes that the radical imagination is alter-neoliberal in character precisely because it is grounded in practices that are ontologically and epistemologically fundamentally different from ordinary experience ('the logic . . . changed completely'). This form of critique begins with the acknowledgement that it is only possible with and within what one is against, so as to then exercise abductive discovery ('I had no idea about'). For Penelope, practising the radical imagination prefigures subjectivity with lasting consequences, precisely because it signifies the demarcation from previous ordinary habits of thought and conduct, and the reimagination and habitualization of new ones. This underlines that subjectivity is not the foundation of practices but rather formed in these.

'After Syntagma'

Years after her participation in Syntagma, Penelope orients her everyday conduct toward equality, self-governance and autonomy (from the state), self-organization, collectivity and solidarity. 'I see through myself, from [Syntagma] to now, a continuous education in many things I had no idea about before' (March, 2016), Penelope tells me, emphasizing the pedagogical character of her experience. The practices of the radical imagination of Syntagma have translated into 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 2008), and stand in stark contrast to Penelope's self-perception prior to her participation in the square.

Why should I get into the process of taking a job that gives me shitty money and a shitty mood? There's no way I will return to that model. I want to find ways in which I collaborate with people, where we do something common, where we are equal. (February, 2017)

In dis-identifying with her previous labour practices, Penelope judges her self, in the words of Rose (1999), as an 'ontological being' that stands against her previous habits and desires of work (anti-politics). In so doing, she gives us a glimpse into her self as a 'technical being', in that she points to the need of finding alternative practices and regimens ('want to find ways') towards work, in an effort to mould her self into an 'ethical being' informed by commonality, equality and collaboration (alter-politics). This transformation not only informs her approach to work, but also to leisure and consumption.

I have learned to be happy with nothing. We don't have any money, we all put together the money we have, collectively, buy two beers, and relax in the park . . . Others want to go out to eat, to drink in cafes and restaurants . . . Ok, every human is different. I have the DNA of my parents. But the DNA does not remain the same. We can change our DNA. (February, 2016)

In narrating her ethical self as quasi-ascetic ('happy with nothing'), Penelope highlights her efforts to depart from consumerism, focusing on spending time collectively, rather than meeting up merely to consume in places of leisure. Biological metaphors ('change our DNA') often point to the functions of social phenomena (Barnes, 2002). Changing

her practices, hence, serves the purpose of changing Penelope's subject position. Today, Penelope illustrates this through her various activities. She is an advocate for the Commons, for alternative currencies, and for social and solidarity economies. To sustain her activism, Penelope provides private English lessons. But she also works at a cooperative cafe and solidarity space:

> We aren't making a lot of money . . . But the energy of the group . . . gives me the security that whatever may happen in my life, I will at least have people who will help me . . . Nobody will starve . . . nobody will be alone . . . We will find ways to cope with [problems] collectively. And this is why I tell my parents 'don't worry about my future'. (June, 2018)

Penelope acknowledges that the capitalist imaginary her parents laid out to her did not hold its promise. But rather than being stifled by the precarizing qualities of uncertainty in neoliberalism, Penelope finds strength in the fact that the cafe provides her with the certainty of solidarity, overcoming collectively the modes of loneliness in neoliberalism I mentioned earlier.

Simultaneously, however, there are limits to Penelope's emancipation. For is learning 'to be happy with nothing' not partly the valorization of austerity? The fact that neoliberalism has survived for so long is not least because it managed to encroach upon competing worldviews (Plehwe et al., 2020). Self-organization, self-governance and the autonomy from the state are constitutive to the radical imagination of Syntagma indeed. But they are also intrinsic features of the neoliberal idea of a 'spontaneous order'. For Hayek (2005), such an order 'forms of itself' (p. 20) and is made possible not by state-institutional arrangements that order society, but precisely in their absence. It is true that Hayekian thought assumes such an order, paradoxically, will not come about naturally and must be constructed by state intervention (p. 46). It is also true that, as opposed to spontaneous orders, Penelope's practice is guided by solidarity, rather than competition. Yet, taking for granted – for the sake of argument – the 'legitimacy' of the state for ordering social relations: what are the consequences of Penelope's activities in the social and solidarity economy for the imagination of the state? Do they not contribute to the imagination of a state that is no longer responsible for welfare provision, thus unwittingly playing into neoliberal ideals?

As Boltanski and Chiapello (2017, p. 29) remark, 'the price paid by critique for being listened to, at least in part, is to see some of the values it had mobilized to oppose the form taken by the accumulation process being placed at the service of accumulation'. In light of Hayekian spontaneous orders, principles of autonomy, self-organization and self-governance may well reproduce neoliberal imaginaries of (social) organization. In reflecting upon her changing self since the Syntagma Square occupation, Penelope indicates these reproductive qualities on the level of subjectivity.

> Through this process I think I have become a lot better. And this leadership thing that I had, I kept. Because I consider that being a leader isn't necessarily bad. The question is how you inspire those around you to be leaders. Can you have a team where everybody is a leader or . . . to have the confidence to be a leader? I think leadership has to do with confidence. Many

people don't speak up because they don't have confidence to do so. Can I help them? Inspire them? Give them tools to make them more confident? (February, 2017)

Penelope refers precisely to the self-optimizing, empowering and self-realizing qualities that neoliberalism attributes to, and cherishes in, entrepreneurialism (McNay, 2009). Her account of leadership overlaps significantly with entrepreneurial self-help literature (Sinek, 2009). Self-help guru Peter Handal claims 'what really matters is that leaders are able to create enthusiasm, empower their people, instill confidence and be inspiring to the people around them' (as cited in Moran, 2013). Moreover, Penelope not only disregards the hierarchical presumptions implicit in 'leadership' that stand contrary to the anti-authoritarian and egalitarian ethic of Syntagma Square; by speaking of 'tools' and individualizing 'confidence', Penelope's assumptions reproduce paternalistic notions of empowering others in utilitarian terms, while placing responsibility for becoming 'confident' and a 'leader' firmly on the self (rather than on structural constraints). This feeds into the capitalist imaginary that 'we could all be entrepreneurially successful', as Rose (1999, p. 117) remarks, 'we could all learn to be self-realizing, if we learned the skills of self-presentation, self-direction and self-management'. These entrepreneurial qualities are also immanent in how Penelope organizes her activities.

A business plan . . . I find very important . . . in order to organize your work, it helps a lot so it is clearer to you what you want to do, how you want to do it . . . The SWOT analysis [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats] is the first [thing you do] . . . all these tools are totally 'marketist'. But if you look at their substance, some of them you can use for doing what you want to do *without losing, now listen: Your character*. Because you remember what we said the other day: Don't become the same shit as them. But as a tool, they aren't evil. (February, 2017)

SWOT analyses are modelled in the field of business strategy and designed for efficiency-maximization in competitive environments (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). While Penelope claims one should be allowed to make use of these 'marketist' tools if their conduct is guided by ethical principles ('without losing your character'), there are three interrelated dangers of fusing market-derived logics with social questions. Firstly, using market-based tools to solve social problems caused by markets ends up addressing the symptoms of inequality, rather than root causes (Mirowski, 2014). Secondly, organizational 'tools' are not epistemologically neutral. Drawing from market techniques subtly fosters a Benthamite 'ethic' and effectively economizes our very understandings of 'the social'. Conceivably, the endpoint of this transformation may well be that such issues as wealth distribution, inequality and precarity are framed solely as quantifiable aggregate costs (in a Coaseian sense), which ought to be evaluated by technocratic expert methodologies, and mitigated by the competitive innovations of market actors; rather than qualitative relations of inequality, which ought to be judged and negotiated by the demos, and overcome by the welfare state (or alternative modes of collective care and welfare provision). Thirdly, in turn, these developments contribute to the entrepreneurialization of solidarity. Here, solidarity becomes itself a field for economic exploitation, where the realities of inequality and precarity are treated as entrepreneurial opportunities for innovating services and products in the name of solidarity. What is to be done in light of these

paradoxes of emancipation? *How can we distinguish between emancipatory processes of transformation, and immanent critiques that reproduce and foster neoliberalism?*

Conclusion: Toward an alter-neoliberal critique

To tackle these questions, the first caveat is recognizing that my own analysis is trapped in these paradoxes. Penelope explains 'the change I told you about, I have experienced as an individual' (October, 2014), thus ascertaining assumptions of liberal subjectivity. In narrating her individualized account, my analysis seeks to give credit to the emancipatory ways in which she challenges power in times of crisis. But in so doing, I reproduce an epistemological individualism that does not do justice to the collective ontology of Syntagma. Analogous to Abu-Lughod's (1990) work on resistance, this is to highlight that the forms of critique we employ indicate the forms of power we are against. Alter-neoliberal critique, therefore, begins with the limit: it must acknowledge that it is itself structured within the realities of neoliberalism, so as to be able to prefigure an epistemologically and ontologically alternative vision of the world that may ultimately overcome neoliberalism. Such a critique balances what it can (currently) merely minimize reproducing, what it can transform, and whether both can be transgressed.

The key task of the minimizing qualities consists of deciphering the multiple codes and contents of neoliberalism's most ordinary forms (cf. Susen, 2014): to make visible the opaque ways in which neoliberalism manages to incorporate processes of resistance and critique for the purpose of its own reproduction. As an epistemic programme, neoliberalism draws from utilitarianism, neoclassical economics, behavioural psychology and, since the financial crisis, increasingly from behavioural economics and neurosciences, to perform critique on state–market–subject relations (Davies, 2015). The evaluative qualities of these positivist disciplines endow neoliberalism with scientific authority and creep into our conduct as self-critique through, for example, efficiency-maximization, risk-calculation, psychologized self-management and self-optimization. Analogous to what Bourdieu (2000, p. 68) refers to as 'denaturalization' and 'defatalization', an alter-neoliberal critique requires the acceptance of the factual orderings of these logics, i.e. that they are constructed. It also necessitates confrontation with the normative nature of these orderings, i.e. that they are value-laden.

This, in turn, forms the basis of the transformative qualities of an alter-neoliberal critique. Because neoliberalism plays on (moral) 'character', but only to achieve a utilitarian competitive order and altogether 'eliminate the very category of value in the ethical sense' (Fisher, 2009, p. 17), an alter-neoliberal critique is a predominantly moral practice. Drawing near the Boltanskian (2011) 'metapragmatic register', an alter-neoliberal critique is sustained by its moral justifications, where the necessity of alter-neoliberal critique presupposes the critique of the politics of necessity neoliberalism assumes for itself. This requires an uncompromising assault on the very technical, ethical, ontological and epistemological self-justifications of neoliberalism, by prefiguring radical alternatives that intend to overcome neoliberalism. Arguably, the radical imagination of Syntagma Square is one such alternative: equality, self-governance and autonomy, self-organization, solidarity and collectivity, based on an egalitarian and anti-authoritarian ethic, are antithetical to the competitive, self-interested, calculative, hierarchical and

subordinating qualities of neoliberal state–market–subject relations. Reproducing this conduct through the practice of subjectivity, as Penelope has shown, has pedagogical consequences (Soudias, 2021): just like her conduct is structured by her experiences in Syntagma, Penelope's conduct structures, in part, the solidarity groups she is active in and communities she engages with.

Finally, alter-neoliberal critique recognizes not only its own limits, but also the inter-sectional positionality and limits of those performing critique. Analogous to Spivak's (2012) 'affirmative sabotage', an alter-neoliberal critique is sympathetic to, and learns from, struggles that assume that instruments of domination can be manipulated to become techniques for their transgression. While it recognizes the cogency of transgression as both an analytical heuristic and a compelling object of analysis, the transformative quali-ties of an alter-neoliberal critique require us not to concede to the idea of transgression. This reveals the disposition of an alter-neoliberal critique towards its own limitations, which, drawing near Kierkegaard's (1985, p. 37) definition of a paradox, require us 'to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think'; but extends it in that we conceivably cannot think it *yet*. In shedding light on how the paradoxes of emancipation play out on the level of subjectivity, and trying to disentangle them in light of structural limits, my analysis hopefully forms the basis for an alter-neoliberal critique that makes visible the reproductive qualities of neoliberal rationalities so as to first limit, and then eventually overcome them.

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Note

1. Variation pertains to theorizing from the similarities and differences of practices within an interview with Penelope, over time in light of what Penelope narrates as 'before' and 'after', and across different situations. Recursive methodological movements allow for familiarizing, defamiliarizing and revisiting observations so as to guard against my 'favourite' theoriza-tions and facilitate alternative inferences. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, which I conducted with Penelope in Greek between 2014 and 2018. My analysis builds on constructivist grounded theory-coding, where I coded each interview in an initial coding round and a focused coding round (Charmaz, 2006), as well as multiple rounds of situational mapping (Clarke, 2005) to delineate the relations between codes. Apart from interviews, I went on ethnographic walks with Penelope in the Syntagma area, mapped the occupation situation vis-a-vis actors, practices, discourses together with her, and observed her conduct in solidarity events and meetings.

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