

Modalities of solidarity in Greece: a civil society at the cross-roads

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By [Giota Alevizou](#)

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As Greece has yet again become the epicentre of the European debt crisis, with collective negotiations for a fairer deal culminating before the end of February, its plight for survival has reached a new sense of [moral urgency](#) about the future of democracy in Europe. It would seem that a fresh air of political creativity may be blowing from Greece.

Certainly statistics about rising unemployment, falling GDP, and the corrosion of the social state and democratic practices which have plighted Greece over the last years, neither capture people's experiences of contemporary realities nor the psychological pressures that had been exerted by elite politicians and mainstream media domestically and abroad, competing to dictate the urgency of austerity measures. What has been less reported, until more recently, is that these very measures have also ushered new ecologies of [\(alternative\) political creativity](#) and civic agency. These have been channelled by larger, but also smaller-scale [mobilisations](#), [local assemblies as well as grass-roots and solidarity initiatives](#), nurturing a culture that desires social change.

Many have attempted to map these initiatives: [Synathina](#), a digital platform that is instigated by the vice mayor for Civil Society in Athens, seeks to represent small scale networked action and to network participants in local, cultural initiatives and to open up possibilities for new relationships among citizens, and between citizens and public institutions. Others, like the [Solidarity for all Network](#) (supported by the recently elected Syriza), have documented [solidarity initiatives](#) across Greece and seek to provide networking tools for decentralized organizing practices, and the development of solidarity among participants in these initiatives, as well as set up a new agenda for collective action. Others like [Omikron Project](#), started by Mehran Khalili, (a British-Iranian political communications specialist who lives in Athens) and a group of Greek journalists, designers and film-makers, as an ad campaign. They created short films to counter the image of Greeks as lazy victims of the economic crisis and to challenge stereotypes, questioning the ways the crisis is portrayed in the international media. More so, they documented the rise of the grassroots groups in Greece and produced an annual list and infographic. As a media scholar I am intrigued about the tensions embedded in the way that crisis in Greece has been represented by the media, but also how communication practices shape the nature and character of civic actions and initiatives. Much of the recent coverage in the mainstream press in Europe (and in Greece) over-emphasises the idea of populism as the driving force behind the anti-austerity projects in Southern Europe. It undermines the legitimacy of a new breed of political culture suggesting that it is driven by "one-off antagonistic spheres" emerging from the squares, or from "unrealistic" and "utopian" proposals, and fail to represent how these emerging movements of citizen participation arose as a genuinely alternative response to Europe's fiscal Odyssey.

I spoke to Omikron and members from several other solidarity initiatives and grassroots groups, mainly in Athens, back in September and October last year when I was there, with a larger team, as part of [a project](#) that explores approaches to civil society and methods around the cultivation of civic capacities in community actions.



Graffiti #Athens #Greece #Metaxourgeio #crisis #graffiti by @jorjito73 on instagram

Here I draw on some of these discussions, research and media coverage to offer my take (rather than a complete list) on civil society initiatives, addressing some aspects of solidarity, direct democracy, autonomous action and precarious creativity.

Solidarity initiatives: from social surgeries to alternative education hubs

The idea of solidarity has emerged from the need to address practical necessities and rising problems (e.g. unemployment, poverty, protection of labour rights and social security, food and health provision, the rise of fascism, lack of adequate provision for migrant rights, the dangers of social disintegration, etc.). Many initiatives have started by responding to social needs within a specified field (health, food, human rights). Some then gradually extended their activities to other sectors, coming to redefine, often, the meaning of property, expertise and sharing, and giving new meaning to processes of resistance or unruly action (squatting, cleaning up or reclaiming unused public spaces, putting pressure for accessibility and accountability) as well as to notions of self-organisation and structures of cooperation (e.g. time-banking, ad hoc volunteering and so on). The aim often is to create a space for meeting up and communication, but also conditions of re-socialisation through informal learning, participatory arts, and alternative entertainment.

Social pharmacies, and social surgeries, like the [Peristeri Health Centre](#), have sought to offer a solution to the collapse of public health care and more than 40 initiatives of this kind have sprung across Greece since 2011. Other initiatives like collective, social kitchens (e.g. [o Allos Anthropos – The Other Human](#)) emerged from the phenomenon of people rummaging through rubbish in food markets.

There are around 15-20 similar initiatives across Greece, operating from 1-3 times a week, and as blurring of boundaries between volunteers and those in need, many of which are striving (like the *Participatory Table*) to create conditions for involvement so that both food collection and cooking are followed by chatter and entertainment too.

Many such initiatives aim to foster relationships of equality that are set against structures of charity and philanthropy or dubious government support programmes. I met people from several such initiatives like [Steki Metanaston](#) (*Migrants' Meeting Point*) and [Dromoi Zois](#) (*Pathways to Life*) – both of which have been operating for several years helping refugees and migrants with basic legal support, tackling racism, addressing refugee child labour & discrimination by bringing together volunteers and citizen groups to provide language lessons, teaching assistance, other basic training as well as social and psychological support. For some, there is a conscious political agenda in these actions: “solidarity is a political struggle, yet one that gives more reasons for extroversion and a space to open up more pathways to expression”.

Local people's assemblies & experiments to direct democracy

Several local or neighbourhood assemblies have emerged in response to their need to take some sort of control of their lives, striving to have what starts as a personal sense of responsibility culminate to the collective effort needed to solve problems through direct autonomous action. “We wanted to shake people up, to get them out of their flats, to stop them being couch potatoes”, Andreas and Alkis, who participate in several collectivities around Plato Academy (e.g. [Steki, Solidarity Network Plato Academy](#)) – a deprived area of Athens, next to a historical landmark. The area has witnessed a fresh approach to solidarity and self-organisation with local assemblies, [cooperative cafes](#), and alternative [cultural & education clubs](#). There's one thing to take part in a mass protest in the square and another to instil political consciousness – beyond party politics and partisanship' – through meaningful action at the local level: ‘While on the one hand, the country has fallen back several decades on many fronts, the crisis, as the media call it, has created lots of opportunities to re-instate networks of collectivities and small local assemblies and escape from the lifestyle of consumerism and individualism of the late 1990s-early 2000s. And that's positive, to get to know each other, sit on the same table and have some idea about direct interventions.’ Andreas says.

Assemblies often emerge as a form for a) acting pressure to local authorities (e.g. reclaiming public spaces, or resisting commercial exploitation of such spaces); b) seeking space for low level resistance to national politics of

austerity and lack of transparency; and c) space for socialisation, communication and the solving of immediate problems. Some resort to unruly action and precarious methods (occupations, squatting, blockages) for resistance and social mobilization, instead of taking more bureaucratic routes for voicing concerns. Others strive to instil a more direct political ethos in actions, and a culture of direct democracy regardless of influence. There are more than 70 local assemblies with more than half of them in Athens alone; although it is difficult to generalise the style and content of direct democracy from the few assemblies I talked to, there's a sense that self-organization and self-governance adheres to a constitution of rules that are open to debate; as participation is also fluid, tensions emerge and decisions about course of actions are often open to negotiated and not necessarily dictated upon specific methodologies of social change.

Some initiatives like [Politeia 2.0](#) and [VouliWatch](#) attempt to participatory planning, the re-writing of the constitution and the processes of political accountability.

Alternative economies of sharing

There has been a rise in city gardening, food sharing networks (e.g. [To Myrmigi/the Ant](#); Market without Middlemen Initiative), a series of cooperatives (from coffee shops and taverns, like the Synargitiko Kafeneio of Adademy Platonos), alternative means for distributing natural resources (e.g. [Spithari](#)), open source hardware and software, design and architecture projects (e.g. [Traces of Commerce](#)) – with several initiatives taking a political stance in demonstrating how natural resources can be managed and alternative economies can be sustainable. Some of these initiatives are examples of activities that have collective benefit or serve interests of particular social groups. Social and cooperative enterprises, service exchange networks (time banks) are often managed by unemployed youth with the aim to regenerate unused spaces and promote fair trade. There also an online economy that promotes the use of alternative local currencies, and [networks](#) where people can exchange goods for services. Precarious action is often through experimentation constituted by the creation of direct relationships, the exchange of know-how and practices. Many such practices stumble across arcane constitutional frameworks and dubious competition laws (e.g. for flea markets), but they form a system of economic and political creativity in terms of the ways in which production and consumption can be managed and sustained.



Arts, Culture and precarious Creativity: a diverse ecology of actions and trends

There are numerous and diverse arts, design and culture initiatives from Collectives making street art, to others organising free cultural events, many documenting monuments through historical walks, recycling and reviving abandoned parks and unloved spaces (e.g. [Atenistas](#), [Alternative tours of Athens](#), [Embros Theatre](#)). Alongside them are projects documenting oral histories through audio and film (e.g. [OPIK](#), [City of Errors](#)) and local culture clubs organizing screenings and festivals in neighbourhoods. Some aim to re-instil a new sense of pride and resilience to racism and economic repression. Other initiatives take the 'right to the city' as an opportunity for collective imagination (Imagine the City) and seek to influence decision making and instil new institutional frameworks for city planning, by employing creative dialogue and participatory methods. As Aggeliki from the Kaliga Square Civic Union, notes: "Culture can often act as a backdrop for experimenting how to formulate political action; we strive to act as the mediators for petitions, organize meetings and challenge the institutional frameworks for more direct influence"



A new alternative?

Talking with people from many of the groups and initiatives mentioned above, and others, it has become clear that in order to make the most of their efforts, it is important to collect, publicise and promote the productive use of the accumulated know-how, as well as their material and immaterial assets. Some of them are made available on websites or end up circulating in social media. Most stay within the confine of the groups who generate them.

[Solidarity4All](#), [Synathina](#) and others have created platforms and means to bring together such resources, but the lines of communication are not always open.

Certainly citizen-led initiatives are facing severe challenges. Some have argued that new opportunities are opening up for civil societies that have historically been co-opted and pacified by governments in Greece and across Europe. In addition to the funding crisis, many established civil society organisations also experience [a crisis of relevance](#).

Many activists have criticized established philanthropic and non-government organizations being unsupportive of citizen-led movements seeking social and political change, and of being undemocratic and unaccountable, irrelevant and even complicit to established *status quo*. The tensions that often emerge then address the need to support a system that doesn't just provide symptomatic relief to social problems, but also challenges real power imbalances; indeed the development of such a system can address real reforms through structures of participation and accountability that can build, and sustain, capacities from bottom up besides tackling corruption [tax evasion](#) and addressing public sector reform.

As others have noted recently ([Pratt and Pooplewell, 2013](#)), these challenges raise questions about the ability of established institutions in Greece and in Europe to respond in progressive and innovative ways. A new wave of actions takes place which nurtures solidarity activism across Europe. It carries with it a new moral imperative to support a commitment to a broader, socially just and stronger reform process aimed at durably improving growth projects.

This is why it is important to mobilise the resources and assets that emerge from these movements and to unleash the creative energy and power of the grassroots groups. There is certainly a renewal of citizen participation in Greece, a new breed of civic culture from below, that strives not just to survive, but also to foster financial growth and political reform.

A short documentary discussing some aspects of this project as well as offering a snapshot from groups, ideas and debate captured in a networking workshop in Athens is [here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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