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**"Self-organization in Times of Austerity: The Solidarity Movement in Greece"**

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Southern Europe is in a crisis and Greece is the place where the austerity measures took, until now, the highest price in "human cost" as described in the "take a stand initiative"<sup>1</sup> of medanthro.net. Severe cuts in the public sectors of health, education, transportation and social security lead to a "situation where [...] individuals that formerly enjoyed a higher standard of consumption must now make do with less."<sup>2</sup> First some background information is needed to understand the current situation. I will introduce some key events in the younger political development in Greece, then I will describe how this paper is structured as a whole.

In the case of Greece, the circumstances created a strong anti-austerity movement which found one of its peaks in the squatting of the central places of nearly every city in the country in 2011. This event followed the M15 movement in Spain and is therefore called the "Greek Indignados"<sup>3</sup>. Before this, many young people were politicized in the successful protests against the privatisation of universities and the implementation of the so called Bologna process in the years 2006/07 and the murder of a fifteen year old boy<sup>4</sup> by the police in 2008. In the aftermath of the Greek Indignados a new and leftradical party was on the rise: Syriza<sup>5</sup>. After missing the takeover of government in 2012 by a few percent, they won the election of January 2016 with the promise that they would stop the memorandum laws and austerity measures. Their first big scores in the elections of 2012, in May<sup>6</sup> (16,8%) and in June<sup>7</sup> (26,89%) coincided with a decrease of militant mass protest as seen the years before. Syriza gave promises to the social movements to represent them in the parliament and that they would fight against the memoranda which were imposed by the so called Troika on Greece. After three years of being the biggest opposition force and employing the tactics of the "ripe fruit"<sup>8</sup>, they became the government. But the negotiations with the lenders proved to be harder than many had thought. In the end even Syriza could not prevent a third memorandum<sup>9</sup> which led to the implementation of even more austerity measures<sup>10</sup>. Former Syriza member Tonia told me that "[i]t is not possible to do a real alternative if you have these limits of memorandum"<sup>11</sup>

In this paper I explore the possibilities of the Greek population to cope with the situation besides

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1 Critical Anthropology of Health (2014)

2 Knight, Daniel; Steward, Charles (2016) P.2

3 cf. Sotirakopoulos, N.; Sotiropoulos, G. (2013)

4 Alexandros Grigoropoulos was shot by the policeman Epaminondas Korkoneas on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2008. K. claimed that he had fired warning shots while under attack and that G. was killed by an ricochet bullet. Süddeutsche Zeitung (17.05.2010) Witnesses of the incident told the court that K "had deliberately taken aim and fired." BBC (10.11.2010)

5 cf. Candeias, Mario; Völpel, Eva (2014) P.143-197

6 BBC (07.05.2012)

7 The Guardian (18.06.2012)

8 cf. Interview (21.02.2016) Appendix P.4

9 BBC (15.08.2015)

10 BBC (21.08.2015)

11 Interview (15.03.2016) Appendix P.12

the parliamentary politics and the negotiations with the "Troika". My hypothesis is that people whose dignity is under attack from austerity measures and who have lost the belief that the state could fix their problems will develop another kind of agency which allows them to fulfil their needs in another frame than the state. This goes together with the creation of new infrastructures, new modes of reproduction as well as alternative social organisation. First I will show on a quantitative and qualitative basis what is meant by "dignity under attack", then I will describe what is called "the Solidarity Movement" and analyze one particular project. For a conclusion I will evaluate whether the solidarity structures currently function as a substitute or as an alternative for a (functioning) welfare state. The empirical basis for this paper is found in several interviews, participant observations and discussions I had during a 6 week stay in Greece from February to March 2016<sup>12</sup>.

### **Dignity is under attack by austerity**

*"It's the first time that the current generation have the belief that they are going to live worse than the previous generation."*-Yiannos Giannadopoulos<sup>13</sup>

Susana Narotzky (2015) identifies dignity as one of the major motives for the political mobilisation of anti-austerity protests in Galicia /northern Spain. Dignity in her paper is understood as a moral frame of quality in which the reproduction of a population is organized. It is under attack where the "institutions that were directly in charge of protecting and promoting working people's well being"<sup>14</sup> fail to do so. This institutions are for example the health insurance system or the social security system. In 2014, 12,7% of the Greek population were not able to receive a medical examination or treatment that they would have needed; compared to 2011 (6,3%) the percentage had doubled. That class is a factor which determines the access to health care can be observed by the fact that only 3,2% of the top fifth of the society had to do without the services while 18,3% of the bottom 40% of society had no access to medical services<sup>15</sup>. The cause for this has to be searched in the costs of the health insurance and in rising unemployment rates. Eva, a member of the social clinic of Thessaloniki, which will be introduced later, told me that:

*"If you consider that from the statistics of the health services, we see that almost one third of the population, nearly 3 million people were uninsured and excluded from N[ational]H[earth]S[ystem]. And given the fact that most of them are adults and*

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12 I would like to thank etc.

13 Interview (21.2.2016); Appendix P.1

14 Narotzky, Susana (2015) P.3

15 cf. Hellenic Statistical Authority (March 2016), P.39

*also cover their kids through their insurance [...], [a]lmost 3-4 million people were without free health services."<sup>16</sup>*

Another front on which the dignity of the greek population is attacked is found in the current housing situation. Because no official data is available on homelessness I asked Eva, a member of the NGO "Emfasis" which is concerned with this problem in Athens. She told me that based on the estimations of her NGO about 25.000-27.000 people are homeless in Athens at the moment (not counting the refugees!)<sup>17</sup>. According to her statement, the growing number of homeless persons is closely connected to the financial crisis:

*"If you get laid off and you dont have a family that can support you. Where are you supposed to go? [...] Even if you get into a shelter it's just for a limited period of time, also the shelters are full, so even that might not be an option.[...] The homeless people are much more than they used to be. And also you come across a lot of people that are homeless with mental issues. However, because of the crumbling health care system they do not have access to any kind of therapy, which makes their mental health situation worse. More drug users are on the street as well, that was not the case a few years ago"<sup>18</sup>.*

This perception of a social worker in the streets of Athens can be corroborated by different facts. To start with the HIV-infection-rate which rose between 2011 and 2014 by 200%<sup>19</sup>, this can be traced back to a rise in intravenous drug use. The rise of mental issues<sup>20</sup> and drug consumption is probably connected to an anxious attitude towards an uncertain future. (For the connection between mental problems and unemployment see for example Marina Karanikolos et al. 2013)<sup>21</sup>. It is important to note here that this has a gender and age dimension: while women's unemployment rates were at 30,1% in 2012 at the same time persons under 25 years had to face an unemployment rate of 56,4%, the highest in Europe<sup>22</sup>. One main dynamic of austerity, which is found in many cases, can be illustrated by the following example. In 2013 the Greek health minister implemented the "mobility scheme" which was ordered by the "Troika". This led to the closure of several psychiatric hospitals<sup>23</sup>. These hospitals were closed at a time when they would have been needed as the suicide rate increased significantly. The Hellenic Statistical Authority recorded 407 suicides in 2011 and shows an even rising tendency with 508 (2012) and 533 in

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16 Interview (22.03.2016) Appendix P.13

17 Interview (14.03.2016) Appendix P.5

18 Interview (14.03.2016) Appendix P.5

19 The Guardian (21.04.2014)

20 Nearly everybody to whom i asked the question about this confirmed that they could spectate a rise of depression, panic attacks and anxiety in their environment.

21 cf. Karanikolos, Marina; et al (2013) P.4

22 Solidarity For All (March 2013)

23 cf. Keptalkinggreece (25.11.2013)

2013<sup>24</sup>. Other sources indicate an even higher amount of suicides. For instance, the New York Times reports 622 cases in 2011 and 598 in 2012<sup>25</sup>. The confusion about the numbers is understandable since it is not always clear whether the death was intentional or an accident. This might also be reinforced by the policies of the orthodox church, which sees people who commit suicide as sinners and even forbids them to get buried in the presence of a priest<sup>26</sup>.

What happens to the quality of life for a population which depends on certain infrastructures and from one day to another these structures crumble, fall apart or become inaccessible for them? Star (1999) points out that "the normally invisible quality of a working infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks: the server is down, the bridge washes out"<sup>27</sup>. The consequences are even more severe if almost a third of the population is pushed outside the health system. So what can be done in a situation in which the state is not able to provide basic reproduction to its citizens? (For the refugees, which are stuck in Greece at the moment, the situation is even worse, but this is another story). I will try to provide an answer to that question by illustrating the importance of what is called "the Solidarity Movement".

### **The Solidarity Movement**

*"[W]e have now more than 300, maybe more, solidarity groups [...] This solidarity groups are supporting people in very different ways, for example: with food supply or they were making solidarity kitchens, the health centers, there are solidarity lessons, because one of the first things that a family stopps in need is the lessons for the children for example music or foreign languages."*<sup>28</sup> -Tonia (S4A)

The origin of the movement can not be determined in detail, since some of the structures existed already before 2011. At this point of time various neighbourhood assemblies existed in Athens. Their existence can be traced back to the militant revolt of winter 2008. When the situation calmed again, many people shifted their attention away from the militant actions in the city centre and went back to their neighbourhoods and established these structures. Then in 2011, the "Greek Indignados" played a significant role in the further development of these assemblies. At the core of the Indignados at Syntagma in Athens was the "People's Assembly" which emphasized the importance of direct democracy<sup>29</sup> for the movement which "is antagonistic to the current representative democracy and that calls for a far more radical reconfiguration of political

24 Hellenic Statistical Authority; (14/05/2015)

25 New York Times; (04.04.2012)

26 cf. Branias, C. C. et al p.2

27 Star (1999) P.6

28 Interview (15.03.2016) P.9-10

29 cf. Nikos,Sotirakopoulos; George,Sotiropoulos (2013)

power and relations."<sup>30</sup> Tonia considers the Indignados and the experience that people should take their lives in their own hands as "the key"<sup>31</sup> in order to face the problems of unemployment and poverty which lead to a situation where individuals lose their self-determination and respect for themselves<sup>32</sup>. Her organisation "Solidarity For All" played a crucial role in establishing the networks after 2012.

### **Solidarity For All (S4A)**

S4A is an organisation located in Athens, which distributes money to different solidarity groups since they have access to a fund which was established by Syriza. Every member of parliament from this party pays 20% of their salary into this fund. When S4A started as a group in November 2012, about 50 solidarity groups were already formed in Greece. A very important factor for the successes of these organisations is the strong multiplication of resources through volunteer work. S4A estimated that they could support 500-600 families each year directly with their money by buying them food. But through giving the money to the right places in the solidarity networks a number of roughly 8000 families can be supported every year<sup>33</sup>.

### **Kiathess, the social clinic of Thessaloniki**

The roots of this project have to be searched in a solidarity campaign for 300 refugees who went on a hungerstrike in April 2011. The original idea of the collective was to provide medical treatment for refugees, but in November 2011, when the project started, the first memorandum was already signed and the first wave of austerity measures hit the Greek population. Many people lost their job and with that their health insurance. So after a few weeks the hospital had to support even more Greeks than refugees<sup>34</sup>. In a declaration of the clinic, which was published in 2015, they express their agenda of an unquestionable right to health services for everyone:

*"During the past years we, also, experienced in person how the questioning of the right to qualitative and free health care has started in immigrants and refugees, which gradually expanded to local Greek citizens. And we are willing and determined to defend this right, on the one hand, with the participation in the political and social fight of reconstructing a truly public and free universal health system and, on the other hand, **with the operation of a social clinic-pharmacy of solidarity in our city.**"<sup>35</sup>*

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30 Nikos, Sotirakopoulos; George, Sotiropoulos (2013) P.4

31 Interview (15.03.2016) Appendix P.10

32 cf. ibid Appendix P.11

33 cf. ibid Appendix P.12

34 cf. Interview (22.03.2016) Appendix P.13

35 Kiathess (2015)

The hospital is neither recognized nor supported by the government, it exists outside state structures. Nevertheless, it provides first level medical treatment. General practitioners, dentists and psychiatrists offer their knowledge for free<sup>36</sup>. The huge amount of work which stands behind this structure is rendered visible by the amount of people inside the hospital who come week by week to offer their time. This group consists of at least 300 people<sup>37</sup>. In addition to this Eva explained that Kiathess is connected with a wider network of some 200 people which involves specialized doctors who offer examinations in their free time or even in rare cases smuggle patients into the state hospitals under false names in order for them to get medical treatment on a higher level (like surgeries)<sup>38</sup>. The medicine comes from donations. From the data of their patients it can be reconstructed that, since the 2011, nearly 35.000 people visited the hospital, most of them more than one time<sup>39</sup>. But the work of the collective can not only be measured in quantitative effect:

*"Starting to come here in our clinic they [the patients] felt ashamed that they changed social category. And they actually changed social category but this happened so quickly and so violent that they could not realize what happened. And as a first reaction they had these feeling of shame of not having a job although it was not their responsibility. If you see now our patients coming in the clinic [...] [t]hey are coming in a different way. They have realized what happened. They understood that their healthcare right has some crucial difference from the other human rights."<sup>40</sup>*

Characteristically for what is called "framing"<sup>41</sup>, the social clinic provides the patients with the possibility to construct meaning to a situation where it seems to be the persons own fault to be outside the health system. For the members of Kiathess the current conditions of health care are "not something that happens like an accident. Parties and politicians that forced these kind of policies, and still force this policies know the results."<sup>42</sup>

The aspiration of horizontal and collective based agency in the hospital - all decisions are tried to be made in assemblies on the ground of consensus - leads to a new dynamic situation. This enables the production of a new kind of medical and social knowledge about the processes surrounding the project :

*"This experience affords a new knowledge, socially and professionally. Because all this projects, all over Greece, the solidarity clinics have horizontal organisation. They do not have this pyramid that is all over the public sector. So it is a different*

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36 cf. Interview (22.03.2016) Appendix P.13

37 cf. ibid. Appendix P.17

38 cf. ibid. Appendix P.18

39 cf. ibid. Appendix P.18

40 Ibid. Appendix P.15

41 Benford, Robert; Snow, David (2000)

42 Interview (22.03.2016) Appendix P.14



*way to work, this brings different relationships between the people that cooperate. This brings new knowledge on how to face patients, both for the GP (general practitioner) and the psychologist."*<sup>43</sup>

On the basis of this knowledge, the processes and the organisation of Kiathess can be described as an alternative self-organized infrastructure. But given the circumstances, can this structure function as an alternative to the state or is it more of a substitute in times of crisis?

### **Alternative or Substitute?**

First I want to point to the features that support the substitute argument. It is obvious that in the Solidarity Movement a lot of people work for free in services that, in their perception, should be provided by a functioning welfare state. By establishing the solidarity groups as a reliable infrastructure for the vulnerable parts of society, it may become static in the sense that most of the work has to be sacrificed in order to keep things just running. Because otherwise the consequences would not be bearable. In this position the Solidarity Movement threatens itself with what could be if they did not exist. This creates pressure on the structures. Eva from Kiathess told me that they would only be able to keep the project running if new people joined their collective. Most of the current members are "psychologically tired"<sup>44</sup>. Tonia mentioned that the volunteers need "renewing ideas. Because some moment we will come to an end, if this is not giving something more inspiring to the people than just trying and trying to fight."<sup>45</sup>.

On the other hand it can be argued that the work of the Solidarity Movement can be understood as a social experiment which creates a certain amount of new knowledge on how to organize society differently on a small scale. Most of the people involved in the Solidarity Movement are on this side. Also, the diffusion of the principle of horizontal organisation can be observed all over Greece. This includes the organisation in different aspects of reproductive work (Food<sup>46</sup>, Clothes<sup>47</sup>, Health<sup>48</sup>, Education<sup>49</sup>) and even found its way into the productive sphere, the best example for this is the occupied d factory of Vio.Me<sup>50</sup> in the suburbs of Thessaloniki. Other examples include media <sup>51</sup> and art<sup>52</sup>

43 Interview (22.03.2016) Appendix P.16

44 Ibid. Appendix P.17

45 Interview (15.03.2016) Appendix P.12

46 cf. Aljazeera (10.10.2015)

47 cf. Eecosphere (2015)

48 Besides Kiathess the MCCH in Athens is one of the biggest social clinics in Greece. cf. Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko

49 cf. Tutorpool

50 cf. Vio.Me

51 cf. Radiobubble

52 cf. Alpha-Movie

projects. The list could be prolonged, but the important point is the resonance which direct democracy, horizontal organization and the Solidarity Movement can enjoy at the moment in Greece. The impact of this should not be underestimated, since all of these social experiments carry the means for organizing society as a whole on a different agenda. Like for most experiments the outcome can not be predicted. As a conclusion it is only possible to say that the solidarity movement has created new social infrastructures which are for the moment both: substitute and alternative.

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