

SOLIDARITY'S TENSIONS

Informality, Sociality, and the Greek Crisis

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Abstract: During times of crisis, economic practices organized on principles of reciprocity often arise. Greece, with the vibrant sociality pertaining to its 'solidarity economy', is a case in point. This article is premised on the idea that crises make contradictions in societies more visible. I suggest that a central contradiction is at play in Greece between informal and formalized economic activity, as demonstrated in the tension between the fluid features of 'solidarity' networks and the formalization proposed or imposed on them by state institutions. In Thessaloniki, the informal solidarity economy proves to be more efficient than the work of NGOs. Arguing that such economic activities are built around the rise of new forms of sociality rather than a tendency toward bureaucratization, the article contributes to anthropological understandings of solidarity and welfare, as well as their relation.

Keywords: food distribution, Greek crisis, informal economy, sociality, solidarity economy, welfare

There is currently a vivid debate focusing on the phenomenon of the emergence of a 'solidarity economy' in Greece during the European sovereign debt crisis. Native uses of this new term have arisen and are developing in common parlance in multiple political trajectories and through organizations of varied interests, including the state and private institutions. The concept is used as both an organizing norm and an ideological canvas by the most contradictory political strategies imaginable. Evoked by the press, academia, the church, private and public bodies, political institutions, and leftist parties, it is now the axis of a number of diverse discourses and practices, from the local activities of the Soros Foundation to the 'comradeship' collective feasts of anarchist squats.

As with the notion of 'civil society', which has become a contested, politicized field, there urgently needs to be further clarity of the term 'solidarity'.



The Greek vicissitudes call for a careful conceptualization that could evaluate the term as a ‘native’ notion that mobilizes many in the context of the contemporary European debt crisis, which began at the end of 2009. Analytically, this article proposes to use the prisms of informality and sociality in order to appreciate fully the solidary potentials of the Greek social economy, which, for lack of another term, we could call the Greek ‘hidden welfare’.

Among the vibrant elements of economic activities that are making claims to solidarity are the hundreds of informal networks and associations that have sprung up in Greece since the onset of the sovereign debt crisis in March 2010 (Lieros 2012; NPI 2013). In the rich spectrum of this grassroots social economy, around 80 informal groups arrange new forms of agrarian products distribution from an ‘anti-middleman’ perspective. None of these groups existed when the crisis broke out.

The emergence of these networks underscores the pervasive nature of reciprocity in the face of the rolling back of centralized distribution systems, namely, the welfare state. Activities of horizontal reciprocity have acquired a multifarious identity under the umbrella term ‘solidarity economy’. Relevant research on such initiatives refers to a number of horizontal social policy activities through self-help (Miller 2010). These initiatives include time banks, classes for immigrants, exchange of skills, community doctors and pharmacists, and foodstuff distribution without middlemen.¹

The anti-middleman movement is an ensemble of groups that make arrangements for the immediate distribution of (usually fresh) agricultural products directly from producers to urban consumers, without the mediation of market middlemen (Agelopoulos 2013; Rakopoulos 2013, 2014a, 2014c). An anti-middleman group contacts producers, sets up a space in the city (most often a square, which is often illegally occupied), and organizes spontaneous open markets that last the better part of the day. These are spaces where producers either sell small quantities of groceries to individual consumers with shopping baskets or organize a massive system of preordering in order to sell large amounts of produce in bulk. A general but somewhat accurate categorization is that anti-middleman groups in Athens usually follow the second method. In Thessaloniki, Greece’s second-largest city, informal anti-middleman networks usually spring up among small committees working on a neighborhood level. These groups usually follow the first method—that of immediate distribution or “direct provision” of foodstuff, as they call it.

Solidarity: Unpacking a Charged Notion

This article draws on fieldwork undertaken among such groups in Thessaloniki. It aims to illuminate the solidarity economy developing in the Greek crisis as a hidden form of welfare that is negotiated through market exchange.² It analyzes the solidarity economy through the prism of informality and sociality, arguing that such activities are the expression of a localized informal economy. As groups providing horizontal self-help in crisis-ridden communities

constitute themselves as informal networks, the article elucidates how informality is a main feature of the nascent solidarity economy of Greece.

The social life pertaining to the formation of these groups in itself, as well as the social life developing within them, informs my understanding of 'sociality'—a term that is key to appreciating this solidarity economy. Sociality has a long-standing resonance in anthropology and—possibly because of this—is often treated indeterminately with no working definition when we make use of it. It is widely understood as the social life revolving around people's propensity to associate with other people and form social groups. This is my own view of the term. Rather than exploring 'belonging' or 'identity', I see sociality as a processual notion, developing along the lines of broader social change—and contributing to it—while taking up new idioms and directions along the way (Long and Moore 2014). In recent anthropology, this has involved socialities extending outside the *stricto sensu* realm of the 'social' (and toward animals, objects, etc.). However, data from the Thessaloniki case do not speak to this discussion.

Sociality here is taken to mean the informal establishment of social groups operating within and for the solidarity economy. This informs a central juxtaposition identified between sociality and organization—that is, direct or spontaneous action as opposed to action shaped by jural rules. This opposition is dialectical, and it is treated as such. Although I argue that (informal) sociality can be more efficient than (formal) organization, I do not propose a conceptual dichotomy or a binary opposition. On the contrary, informality is embedded in the formal rule system, which itself is laden with shady protectionist features, such as the very activity of market middlemen itself, as will be shown. Moreover, sociality, of course, is not politically unmarked, as my research participants' claims reveal. Informality and sociality are both seen as outcomes of the hardships brought on by the Greek crisis and as strategies deployed to overcome it. They thus do not defend a culturally embedded or structurally fossilized Greek informality. Instead, they build a protective web, or even a front of resistance, as a form of protection against the disastrous socio-economic policies promoted by the dominant power complex and the state's forceful attempts to intrude into all aspects of social life in order to discipline and subdue its citizens.

Participants draw from a range of social relations and reproduce their activities in terms of novel forms of sociality, while being suspicious of formalization and officialization.³ The article therefore engages with debates on the 'social economy' (Bryer 2012; Kasmir 2012), in light of new ideas (both local and scholarly) about the 'solidarity economy' (Laville 2010).⁴ It addresses emerging economic practices, focusing on the socially arranged ways that people respond to the crisis in Greece (Theodossopoulos 2013). Hence, we need to conceptualize solidarity initiatives and, in particular, cooperatives whose members engage in networks and activities unrelated to profit, but who refuse to be branded as doing 'charity' work (Bakalaki 2014) or 'volunteering' (Rozakou 2008, 2013).

Therefore, I should clarify that the term 'solidarity economy' will be used exclusively in its initial, politicized signification and within the paradigm of my

research participants. It will thus be understood as a native concept, used by political collectives of a broadly progressive, leftist, or anarchist orientation and by social movements and networks struggling for equality and social justice. This signification rests on conceptions of mutuality, reciprocal help, and self-organization—that is, on conceptions of struggle against austerity-driven policies and for alternative social spaces and structures to accommodate social justice. This usage is strongly differentiated from the depoliticized use of the term ‘solidarity’ expressed by entities such as the church, for which it is another word for charity; NGOs and civil society volunteering programs, which look to remedy the results of these policies; and, finally, the state, for which ‘solidarity’ is a word masking further taxation.

The networks of solidarity, I argue, constitute new forms of sociality in the development of a social economy in Greece. They take place in a country where there have been ongoing tensions concerning imperatives for the construction of a civil society repeatedly characterized as ‘weak’ (Sotiropoulos 2004; cf. Rozakou and Gara 2013). Conceptualizing these new social networks in order to explain what they do requires detailed ethnographic fieldwork among the people who are creating Greece’s grassroots social economy.

Crisis: Focusing on the Tensions That Matter

The emergence of services that work ‘from below’ and horizontally, rather than by means of central distribution, has been pervasive in the Greek crisis. Their spread is viral, and their affiliations varied, bringing to mind Koselleck’s (2002: 243) point that crises make contradictions become visible everywhere. In his discussion of history and crisis, Koselleck points out that the Greek meaning of the term ‘crisis’ evokes both judgment and calamity (*ibid.*). Echoing his work, Goddard (2006: 268) notes how a state of “routine contention” was in place in the 2001 Argentine crisis, bringing forward a number of dissenting voices and conflicts. The cultural content of people’s agency in the networks confronting and dealing with recession and austerity in Greece recalls a “public space of solidarity” (Kirmayer 1996: 189) in crises elsewhere.

Crises, I propose, should be seen in terms of the tensions that they raise and bring to the fore. In Greece, such a tension is the one between (what counts as) the formal and the informal economy. This is especially the case in the context of the rapid structural adjustment that the memoranda of understanding (MoU) bring about. The MoU, the two debt agreements that Greece signed with the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the EU Commission in 2010 and 2011, bind the country to fiscal austerity measures that have contributed to the ongoing recession. Austerity policies, while decidedly in the direction of more formality, have ironically triggered a number of networks that take the opposite path. A major contradiction here concerns the formality of the current social and solidarity economy of Greece. Why is this rising phenomenon totally dominated by informal networks (rather than, say, NGOs) that do not envision themselves as official organizations in the future?

Many anthropologists have assessed ongoing calamities in crisis-ridden Greece through axes of analysis that emphasize tensions. These tensions have been analyzed, for instance, in relation to the violent anti-austerity protests against the state (Dalakoglou 2011), the strains between state violence and protest (Herzfeld 2011), and the antagonism between dissent politics and those doubting it (Theodossopoulos 2013). As much as these insights are useful, there has not been an assessment of the relationship between official and unofficial recognitions of newly found economic activity. This relationship forms an axis around which a lot of correlations and controversies in Greek society unfold. In times of crisis, these tensions are viewed as a form of structural adjustment.

By focusing on the kind of crisis distinctions that matter (High 2012), which in Greece take the form of a political antithesis, we might be able to tackle two other interrelated antitheses associated with activism and solidarity. These form dichotomous paradigms that prove to be problematic in Greece's case because, as I will show, they do not explain the rapid changes in the country over the last several years. We need to move away from such taxonomies.

The first of these antitheses is the distinction between 'interest' and 'altruism'. In conceptualizing solidarity, we should challenge the dilemma presented by these notions, in contrast to much of the relevant literature (Hillenkamp 2013). Here, I shall argue, profit inherently stands between both parts of the solidarity economy's market relations, that is, between consumer and producer. This raises issues about the anthropology of reciprocity, often understood to be activities of disinterested individuals and groups.⁵ The anti-middleman network therefore presents a type of economic activity that cannot be easily classified with existing taxonomies. The movement makes use of the main characteristics of a conventional market exchange and hence does not escape the market through claims to 'community economics', as has been the case elsewhere (Rakopoulos 2014a).

Similarly, the second problematic antithesis is the distinction between 'market' and 'reciprocity', especially in the historical circumstance of deep crisis. It has been noted that a guiding principle of the solidarity economy seems to be the creation of systems that are an alternative to those of conventional political economy and indeed market exchange. These points on alternative currencies are raised in societies in crisis, as in post-2001 Argentina (D'Avella 2014; Saiag 2013). In the case of the anti-middleman movement, the situation is different. Unlike other forms of welfare in crisis-ridden southern Europe, which are largely based on barter, Greek anti-middleman groups do not aim to challenge the prevalent money-centered exchange systems. They manage their phenomenal rise in a closely framed performance of a conventional market. All transactions are made in euros, and there are no plans to change this. As classic economic anthropology has shown, money can prevent certain moral perils present in gift exchange, and markets, money, and reciprocity co-exist in integrated systems of exchange (Parry 1986). The vignette that follows suggests how money transactions and reciprocity become indiscernible, as well as how sociality is centered in the markets set up by the anti-middleman movement.

Inquiry into the Informal: A Means of Sociality

It is an unusually sunny Sunday morning in early December. At the Gefira stop, I get off the bus route that runs parallel to the promenade of Thessaloniki. From across the street I can see the small square of Politehnio where this week's anti-middleman food distribution is being set up by the local anti-middleman group, who call themselves "the Gefira team." I count about 15 stalls, which cover the entire rectangular space. I cross the highway and enter the square, where an estimated 50 other consumers also roam, and start shaking hands. Among other lesser-known faces, I recognize some of the Gefira group members—Irini, Giorgos, Ms Leni, Mr. Yannis, and Mr. Mpampis—who are all glad to see me.⁶ They are happy overall with their luck. Today was supposed to be a key moment for their movement. They were expecting the police to show up and ask them to leave the square, which they were occupying illegally. The group had been there since 7:30 AM, but it was now 11:00 AM, and so far there was no sign of the police.

The stalls offer various kinds of produce as this is a farmer's market—or rather a "direct provision from the producers," as the Gefira group describes it—and I am familiar with most of the farmers. Fresh groceries of all kinds are available. There is a stall with fish, one with meat, and a couple with olives and cheese. A number of stalls also offer vases of composted and processed products that the farmers prepare themselves. As always, prices are between 50 and 70 percent of retail prices in supermarkets, and the money is paid directly to the farmers. While people shop, the group's activists organize discussions around the square. Some producers I talk to stress to me that their profits have been fantastic. I am surprised to find out that the sea bass I just bought for 2 euros a kilo (which would cost over twice that amount in the supermarket) elicit more profit for the two fishermen selling them directly at the market than "anything we have seen before," as one of them puts it. "In fact," he adds, "we are seriously considering starting our own market in Damastos" (the small fishing town they come from).

This development would be within the Gefira team's hopes and plans, as I know from their assemblies. At one of them, Giorgos had pointed out that they need a 'cluster effect', that is, the dissemination of their work in various other locations, initiated by the producers themselves. The group intends to provide the know-how to the farmers so that they can start their own similar work.

As I roam around the square, I come across Ms Leni, a fifty-year-old, and start chatting with her. So far I have not had much of a chance to speak with her as she is not often at the assemblies of the Gefira group. She proposes that we take the bus and get off two stops away at the Kolokotroni square, where another food distribution is being arranged. I follow her, and 10 minutes later we are again surrounded by groceries, farmers behind stalls, and urban activists in the tiny square. People I know from other anti-middleman initiatives, operating in the center of Thessaloniki, show up as well. After we exchange greetings, they explain that they have been going around the food distribution sites in the city (numbering about eight today) to see whether the police have

actually prevented their activity. Apparently this has not happened, and the group members are delighted. They start commenting that “this is a victory for the movement.”

Sitting on a bench, Anna tells me that two policemen had come earlier to have a quick bite to eat in the tavern at the side of the square, which was bursting with people (it is a sunny Sunday after all, and it is already past noontime). As soon as he noticed the officers, a potato farmer had run to his pickup truck, which was parked nearby. He quickly started filling up the truck with the food-stuff on display in his stall and then started dismantling the stall, while his panicked wife, who had come to help sell the produce, also helped. Anna told me that this was the last time that their initiative, the informal Kolokotroni network, would ever collaborate with that farmer. She underlined that “[h]is behavior was opportunistic. This is a movement and a network of people based on trust and solidarity. And, actually, solidarity is based on trust. And we all have to be in this together. We can tolerate no such behaviors. This is a solidarity movement, and it is in danger. We need solidarity first of all between us, among farmers and activists, and consumers. We need the support and care of all.”

In the heat of the moment, Anna is worried about the commitment of farmers. A couple of hours later, after the market is disassembled and the farmers are heading back to their villages, those of us who are activists collect payment for our help. It consists of a meager quantity of groceries (potatoes, fish, etc.) in a bag. We are now relaxing in one corner of the park, and over some cigarettes and beer from the kiosk, I inquire about Anna’s concerns. She points out that there is often a sense of losing social trust when such things happen: “Thankfully, only a few producers have this individualism, this fear. For most, participating in the movement is as important as profits. Moreover, there is, of course, the feeling of belonging to a group itself.”

Informalities in Practice

Among the elements differentiating the above situation from a conventional market exchange, it is not so much that people refrain from the use of receipts and that the market is set up without permission or a merchant’s license. Rather, it is the reciprocal care among producers and activists (and, to a lesser extent, consumers) to protect the market and not run away in ‘individualistic fear’, as Anna would see it. Trivial as they might seem, these features are central elements of the sociality and informality characterizing the anti-middleman movement’s practice. For these reasons, such exchanges can be classified, with some caution, as a type of informal economy. In any case, participants in the networks organizing them (neighborhood assemblies in Thessaloniki) classify these markets as informal since the exchanges do not have—and do not wish to have—a legal form. It is for this reason that these groups are often persecuted by the police and prosecuted by the authorities. The main characteristics of the informal economy are in place in terms of how the solidarity economy practices are performed.

With regard to the ‘hidden’ aspect of the services discussed, most participants insist upon their informal character and the non-legal formation of their groups. This is despite the fact that they can now acquire a legal form as a result of novel Greek legislation that promotes social entrepreneurship in the form of Social Cooperative Enterprises, known as Koin.S.Ep.⁷ The participants in the Greek solidarity economy often express skepticism toward this new type of cooperativism.

The notion of the ‘informal economy’, introduced to social analysis by Keith Hart (1973), has been reproduced in many forms and has spread in all directions, to the extent that it has even been adopted in policies of the World Bank. Analytically, Hart (1988, 2007) established the informal economy as a means to understand developing economies around the world. He has insisted on the interplay between people’s localized entrepreneurial creativity and distant markets, where reciprocities work in tandem with money. Politically, the notion has been seen as a means of organizing ‘globalization’ (Hart 2012). The livelihoods school of sociology has developed the notion further; it is by no mistake that recent texts coming from that tradition examine ‘solidarities’ as a way of securing livelihoods (Hillenkamp 2013; Spencer and Pahl 2006). According to such readings, the informal economy has beneficial outcomes for communities and can even formulate grassroots activity on a national scale (MacGaffey 1991). A number of restitutions necessary for social life, it is argued, are pursued in that respect, especially as far as those most exposed to the effects of crises are concerned.

However, some currents of thought in sociology and social anthropology have questioned the limits of the informal economy. Polanyian-inspired contributions have raised the problem of resilience in the informal economy’s positive reciprocity, questioning whether it can replace centralized redistribution (Alexander 2009; Buğra 2007). Sociologists of work have seen hidden elements of exploitation inherent in informalized, precarious sectors that have advanced with the establishment of neo-liberal post-work regimes (Standing 2011). Marxist-inspired debates have taken the argument further.⁸ Anthropologists point to the limited degree of personal fulfillment in unreported female labor (Goddard 1996), as well as the fact that informal pluri-activity, which is now promoted by some state policies and actors of the aggressive capitalist market, obfuscates pauperization (Narotzky and Smith 2006).

The informal economy as an analytical category, however, draws our attention to the agency of people usually located at the outskirts of the conventional sociological taxonomies of the economic field. In other words, the informal economy does not have a founding actor or any institutional aspects: it is, by and large, a non-institutional creation that can be defined only by what it is not. To measure it would be to assess the ensemble of every economic activity that falls short of, but interacts with, the bureaucratic classifications of the state (Hart 2014). This includes activities that escape mediation (understood as market brokers, as well as state bureaucracy) but that also lack the safety nets of the official economy.

Escaping mediation resonates with the strategic and conceptual significance that the anti-middleman mobilization has for activists. The informal economy of

Greece's anti-middleman social networks is an ensemble of economic activities that are not recognized by the state and the licit market but rather are understood as mobilizations that bypass, or substitute for, the relevant institutions. The anti-middleman strategy, more specifically, sidelines the institutionalized power of the Agency for Open Markets of Thessaloniki,⁹ a market-state consortium whose goal is to protect the vested interests of stall owners in open markets.

But these informal networks are pitched against the middlemen, not the formalized economy. Many of my informants indeed pointed out that the middlemen themselves were “mobilizing fly-by-night means” or were in fact “crooks.” On one occasion, as a result of a lengthy conversation at Gefira, I was led to believe that a quasi-Mafia organization was connected to the Agency for Open Markets. Although this may have been an exaggeration, I did come across occasions when activists were spoken ill off by individuals linked to the Agency, who visited the impromptu markets to tell them off.

Apart from the dubious ways that middlemen defend their interests, their excessive gains made at the expense of both producers and consumers (and the multiplication of the products' prices from the former to the latter) have been the object of discussions for years in Greece's public sphere. The government, as a formalizing agent, has done nothing to control prices and reduce these gains. In addition, according to these discussions, middlemen partake in many ways in the informal economy. As a result of the almost generalized pauperization that the crisis has brought about, revenues have been dramatically reduced, but prices have remained extremely high. This is in large part because middlemen are ‘exempted’ from devaluation: their gains remain mostly unregulated. Food prices, among other things, are very high, and increasing numbers of households—of both producers and consumers—cannot manage. Thus, the anti-middleman movement is conceived as a collective survival strategy for both consumers and producers, as a resistance to the injustice they deal with, and even as a new economic model.

The case of the anti-middleman movement in Greece illuminates that informal economic activities can sometimes constitute social microcosms from which other aspects of the social body, especially marginalized activities, can derive benefit. These microcosms, with their efficiency, pervasiveness, and sustainability, now constitute a point of reference for thousands of Greek consumers. They have even gained international recognition.¹⁰

Informants' descriptions and references to the informal economy do not touch solely on economic conceptions of the term ‘market’. Rather, they understand the informal economy to be intertwined with social obligations that are greater than the contractual relation of buying food on the spot. For example, informants described the initiatives of the anti-middleman network as “the only thing that takes people out of their homes and into the streets in our area” or as “the only initiative that mobilizes people in the neighborhood today.” The term ‘market’ is proposed in its dialectical dimension, so we need to conceive of the food distributions as constituting new forms of sociality.¹¹ Interestingly, in Greek, the word ‘market’ (*agorá*) retains many of the connotations of the Ancient Greek term for the same word, implying a public space of

socio-political debate, activity, and creativity. This might suggest a potential role of the anti-middleman movement in re-envisioning the public sphere, as manifested in my informants' comment that the movement "mobilizes people in the neighborhood." As my informants put it, the food distribution centers constitute "the other market of the neighborhood," "a way to acquire access to a cheap market," and "a more friendly people's market."

As I have shown in the analysis above, as well as more extensively elsewhere (Rakopoulos 2014c), reading Greece's solidarity economy as a reaction to 'a state of emergency' (Athanasidou 2014) should be avoided. The organization of informal economic relations through forms of solidarity emerges in forms of sociality through existing relations of kinship, friendship, trust, and comradeship. These relations are socially arranged in the framework of neighborhood, in the way that informal economy has been observed in other contexts of deprivation (see Mollona 2005). The informal aspect of solidarity relies on socialization as a binding element among the different activities and desires of those who participate in the anti-middleman groups.

Informal Sociality: More Efficient than Organization?

The City Council and a Group of Friends

The informal network and the unofficial economy are notions that are continuously renegotiated in the anti-middleman movement. Their specific conceptualizations and overlapping meanings work to determine the choices and strategies of groups and the general agency of those participating in the movement. These two notions determine the social pervasiveness, efficiency, and relevance of their mobilization.

Participants in such networks express reservations about institutional prompts to 'round up' and transform themselves into legal associations.¹² Most resist the idea of becoming formalized and turning into what they call "organizations" (*organósis*). Informants emphasized that "a network and an organization are two different things" or stated "I would rather be in a team than in an organization." The reservations expressed in discussions at assemblies of the network were premised, to a great extent, on the political sentiment of the participants. They were also, however, a consequence of perceptions of the particular efficiency that the informality of their activities guarantee.

At the assembly of the Thessaloniki City Council in early December 2013, a meeting that was called specifically for the purpose of debating how legal enforcement of the anti-middleman initiatives could be revoked, it emerged that some saw the law on cooperative entrepreneurship as a way that the system could "incorporate the networks" or as a means "to tackle our social movement logic." Speaking either to me or publicly, members of anti-middleman groups in Thessaloniki stressed that "the system created the Koin.S.Ep as a legal response to the movement" and that "the movement could lose something of its meaning if it now follows the law."

The atmosphere was tense. The producers who attended the assembly of the municipality and the meetings of the Open Network¹³ expressed a similar discomfort about “more and further organization,” albeit in a different tone. During an intense debate with representatives of the Agency for Open Markets, an “institutional sympathy,” as Mayor Yiannis Boutaris put it, was finally expressed toward the movement. Elected officials within the City Council stressed in their speeches that they would “unofficially tolerate the illegalities,” which meant that the police should not intervene at the markets.¹⁴ It is particularly interesting that a thin red line connected the contradictory positions that (almost all) the local leaders expressed in their statement for an “unwavering commitment to ease out the anti-middleman solidarity economy’s problems.” The municipality, as a formal body, did not issue a statement; however, all of the councilors gave their word that they would do all they could to informally facilitate direct food distributions.

That same evening, around 15 people attended a meeting called by the Gefira group. Chatting on the topic of further organization, I asked explicitly what that would imply and whether the people who were present constituted a group of friends. Giorgos answered: “We do not come to the assembly for personal relations. That is what follows. But it’s the personal relations that keep the group going. And I prefer to hang out with people like this rather than drinking a stupid coffee.” Vangelis also noted: “This assembly cannot support the cohesion and the need to be present all the time that a cooperative demands. When a network becomes institutionalized, in my previous experience, the spark is gone. The whole thing would transform into something else.” In terms of socialization, Irini added: “I like that it is an alive, self-regulated, novel thing. I’d rather trust and be dependent on the reliability of people than that of institutions.” Everyone agreed, and Irini added: “Yes, we are slightly hedonistic in a political sense. We enjoy this process through mingling with each other and other people. Solidarity is about forming bonds.”

As these statements illustrate, the members consider their involvement in the networks as a field of sociality and view informal solidarity networks as groups of people brought together in intimate relationships.¹⁵ Some authorities, like the Thessaloniki City Council, seem sympathetic to this stance. The term ‘association’ brings to mind groups with a recognized form, which is the fulcrum of analyses centered on civil society. In such groups there are often tensions between members as to whether they regard themselves as associations or as ‘groups of friends’ (Rozakou 2013).

Paying attention to this tension between formal and informal categories through the prism of sociality is useful when analyzing associationism more broadly. Specifically, one wonders, if the field of solidarity is so vibrant, what accounts for the absence of associations sponsored by NGOs, the usual agents of civil society? Why is a whole field that blurs the boundaries of market and civil society ‘left’ to informal networks? The question arises as to whether such groups can be seen as novel welfare institutions that mark a move from centralized and distributive frameworks of welfare to horizontal and reciprocal ones.¹⁶ This tension between formal and informal notions of the solidarity economy

provides a useful way of assessing the limited impact of NGOs in this economy due to their incapacity to act as vectors of sociality.

Specters of Weber

A historical tension between the formal and the informal characterizes the efficiency of the Greek networks and the relative failure of NGOs in the solidarity food supply. With the term ‘efficiency’, we can denote localized influences in social processes: the provision of material foodstuff to households, relief for the poor, and a physical presence in the neighborhoods, as noted by many informants. Such a presence implies regular interaction between persons in neighborhood assemblies, meetings, initiatives, and informal discussions. It is considered a pivotal aspect of distribution itself. Its influence can be assessed qualitatively, rather than measured quantitatively, and compared with other solidarity initiatives organized by NGOs that have a legal status and statutory recognition.

For instance, Gefira distributes many tons of produce every month to approximately 500 households. However, it reaches even more people, as food distribution is more complex than it appears. Micro-networks of further redistribution develop among households. Following previous informal arrangements, buyers order and purchase produce in bulk and then redistribute it (without profit) to people whom they are close to. In this way, minor, informal snowballing processes take place, with the produce passing from buyers to family members and friends.

Meanwhile, NGO activity in the same neighborhood has ended in relative failure (Rakopoulos 2014b), demonstrating the incapacity of NGO leaders and volunteers to organize their presence locally and to challenge the feeling shared by the general public that their appeal is limited. This inadequate appeal of the NGO is related to the number of consumers and the volume of produce to be distributed. It also has to do with the ‘local knowledge’ of informants. Specifically, the locals I conversed with were not aware of the activities of this specific NGO and so could not comment on its work. The interventions of the NGO soon ceased, leaving the field of solidarity to the informal network Gefira.

The limited economic impact of NGOs in this area relates to their inability to incorporate sociality into their activities. The mobilization of community rests largely on informal appeals. During group assemblies in Thessaloniki, for example, research participants mentioned kinship relations, neighborhood, and affinity as the principal elements that were used to mobilize people in their efforts. In this way, the mobilization of neighborhoods was based on informal relations. By shifting trust away from institutions and into the realm of the everyday in times of crisis, informal network associations thrive, as they are grounded in bonds of trust linked to kin, kith, and friendship (Hart 1988).¹⁷

This reformalization is associated with the Weberian bureaucratization of charisma (Weber 1968: 249–251), whereby informal activities take on a (partially) bureaucratic form for the sake of their long-term reproduction, the

classic case being the routinization of Jesus's charisma in a church. Thus, the issue of time enters into the ethnography. Whether Thessaloniki's informal markets can be sustained indefinitely or whether they, too, will eventually be forced to make concessions to bureaucracy becomes the question.

In the literature on such groups and cooperatives, resilience is a recurrent theme and is discussed in relation to the difficulty of the reproduction of the group (Alexander 2009). Bureaucratization and the emergence of internal hierarchies within cooperatives is another related subject (Burawoy et al. 1991; Rakopoulos 2013). In conditions of economic radicalization in post-crisis periods (as in Argentina in 2001), researchers note the discontinuity between the survival of the social economy and the political projects of small institutions (Bryer 2012; Sitrin 2012). Through the process of bureaucratization, the risk of hierarchies favoring different valuations of labor arises, giving way to 'middle-class reforms' (Kasmir 1996).

Similarly, discourses of the solidarity economy among participants in Greece were often premised on a cautious objection to the 'recognition' that bureaucratization brings about, as it might undermine their groups' dynamic local impact. The rhetoric of 'selling out' or of 'being co-opted' was often dominant in assemblies and in the private views of many volunteer participants (Rakopoulos 2014b).

The ineffectiveness of NGOs indicates a limitation to the solidarity economy's formal features. Networks that adhered to informal social frameworks bound by friendship, affinity, and political sympathy (sometimes even located outside the lawful economy) are those that have prospered during the crisis. Indeed, the qualitative difference between NGOs and Koin.S.Ep is that the latter is not part of the formal economy but is a body created to formalize part of the legally uncharted field of the Greek solidarity economy. This is a crucial area of what might be called the 'hidden welfare' of the crisis, of which the anti-middleman movement of food distribution is a key aspect.

The power play of this tension between formal and informal is accentuated, perhaps more than ever, if we take into account the normativity of the MoU that Greece signed. The policy applying the MoU constitutes an unprecedented move, by Greek standards. It has worked to impose official policies on the informal economy¹⁸ through institutionalized regulations. Interestingly, in scholarly debates there is a distinct lack of attention paid to this claim of a shift from the informal to the formalized economy brought about by the crisis in Greece. The MoU do not mark the moment of this shift but instead serve as an abrupt attempt at formalization, which Greece's society cannot afford. Indeed, it is interesting to think of the emergence of such networks during the crisis as a means of resistance to the officialization of informality. The rise of new forms of sociality, such as the anti-middleman networks, is characteristic of social reactions to austerity-driven crises. Seen in this light, solidarity networks play a (hidden?) power game with the dominant power complex and the state, and vice-versa, informality being a strategy in this game. It is possible that these networks might yet formalize in their own ways, engendering new forms of social life and social bonds.

Toward a Conclusion: The Solidarity Economy and the Scope of the Informal

Reciprocity and market exchange co-exist in the anti-middleman movement of Greece,¹⁹ and there is a strong affinity between the solidarity economy and informality. More profit for producers, less cost for consumers, sociality that binds activists together in the formation of markets—all of these work together to create an integrated realm. Central to the formation of the direct provision markets is the informality of their relations and transactions. Instead of tracing solidarity in the domain of disinterestedness, however, I have shown that the informality and efficiency of the movement is made possible through a sense of sociality that is called on to mobilize individuals and groups.

But we cannot afford to overestimate informality by seeing it outside the historical circumstance in which the Greek solidarity economy seems to be developing. At present, these groups are limited to playing an antagonistic role, one of ‘hidden welfare’, vis-à-vis the state. They largely instrumentalize distribution of food in order to produce political effects (in the broader sense of the term), and social trust, which tends to vanish nowadays in Greek society, is one of these effects. The groups resist officialization not because they are embedded in a culturally produced informal economy, but because they suspect that the state will incorporate and suffocate them. Informality, then, can be thought of as an act both of resistance to incorporation and of disobedience.

Importantly, the anti-middleman network overall presents a type of economic activity that is not easily classifiable using existing taxonomies. Due to their spontaneity and the insistence on the preservation of their informality, the food markets set up by the movement resist classification in formalized systems of market behavior. They have become spheres of sociality, but also sites where money transactions and reciprocity collide and become interconnected, where reciprocity is not an outcome of disinterested charity but co-exists with money in an integrated system of market exchange.

Straightforward taxonomies prove to be analytically poor during crises, when contradictions become more visible. This article moves away from such simple dichotomies to a more useful assessment of a tension underpinning the social economy of the Greek crisis. Focusing on a tension that matters—the one between formal and informal activity—helps us progress beyond problematic distinctions and actually bridge them. The difference here is the tension between formalization and sociality.

Skepticism toward processes of formalization is a key feature of the solidarity economy in contemporary Thessaloniki. It is an outcome of one of its most composite, almost foundational dimensions—namely, that solidarity is premised on forms of agency associated with sociality and informal conduct. The interpersonal relationships among participants in informal networks and between the networks and the neighborhoods where their members live are the key components of this sociality, an understanding of which seems to be lacking in formally structured NGOs. This tension can be seen in the efficiency of the anti-middleman movement and in its participants’ self-image and aims.

Sociality constitutes an important field of interaction and political interplay in Greece today.

As I have noted elsewhere (Rakopoulos 2013, 2015), the emerging solidarity economy is a mode of economic activity in crisis-ridden Greece that is not vertical, as has been suggested for the third sector, but is rather horizontal. Enabling social relations to operate both through the market and the state (with the tolerance of institutions such as city councils) and through friendship bonds, the solidarity economy prioritizes intimate relations of the everyday to supplement the contractual dimension of markets (Hart 2001). The non-contractual binding elements outside the contract are, of course, significant in anthropological theory, stemming from Durkheim and Mauss, a tradition in which I locate Hart's work (see Hart 2007).

Ethnographic data from Thessaloniki confirm this point, as anti-middleman initiatives have been established and developed through both neighborhood committees and city council assemblies in various districts. So far, we have not seen many informal networks reorganizing as cooperatives or corporate organizations. There is the exception of Bioscoop, which organizes consumers in a cooperative fashion and indeed stems from the informal economy of the anti-middleman movement to a great extent. There are also three smaller enterprises that organize distribution in a more integrated fashion (in what is called 'integral cooperative organization'), one of which is still in the making. Future developments will show whether such networks will continue to emerge or develop further in the course of the movement, perhaps through interaction with other institutional settings and other types of policies. At present, the social experience of Greece's novel solidarity economy suggests that it still draws on the unofficial realm of sociality and is dependent on informalities. This study thus frames the concept of solidarity as a political and cultural material that mobilizes the agency of many in the midst of the ongoing Greek crisis.

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Notes

1. The analysis presented here is not, by way of extrapolation, applicable to all forms and networks of the solidarity economy. The anti-middleman movement is part of a wide constellation of networks in which many of the same people are involved. Although the tension between informality and formalization does not seem to pertain with community doctors and time banks to the degree that it does in the anti-middleman network, it should be stressed that the anti-middleman movement articulates with such practices and that often, as in the current hibernation of the movement, some of the practitioners’ enthusiasm is channeled through these other practices.
2. This exchange is not only money-centered. In the anti-middlemen market, producers also offer free products to be distributed to people in need. This makes more visible the political (in the widest sense) and transformative goals of these networks and shows that the ‘economy’ is instrumentalized in this direction by the anti-middleman networks. It also qualifies the characterization of solidary economy as ‘hidden welfare’.
3. Unlike in Thessaloniki, in Athens there has been some concern about turning informal groups into cooperatives, thus guaranteeing some degree of formality in their activities (Rakopoulos 2015).
4. The terms ‘social economy’ and ‘solidarity economy’ have been associated in a range of publications, and the abbreviation SSE is often used in this regard (Miller 2010). The term ‘solidarity economy’ arises mostly in French sociology, while Anglophone literature is more reluctant to adopt it (Dacheux and Goujon 2011). As I have pointed out elsewhere (Rakopoulos 2013, 2014c), solidarity economy concerns the specifics of a social economy focused on social reproduction through cooperativism.
5. For ‘disinterested sociality’ in the case of Greece, see Papatziarchis (1999).
6. Pseudonyms are used to preserve research participants’ anonymity.
7. Koin.S.Ep is a new legal form that came about in Greece with Law No. 4019/2011. The law is largely a response to the ongoing anti-middleman mobilization and reflects the state’s desire to contain it.
8. Such critique can be traced, in a primal form, to the work of Rosa Luxemburg ([1913] 2003). Imperialism, she underlines, is but a systematized mechanism of creating organic relations between domestic and capitalist economies for the reproduction of cheap labor power. In anthropology, Claude Meillassoux (1981) first discussed the ‘articulation’ of wage labor with subsistence landholding in the peripheral branch of the global distribution of labor.
9. This is another example of the fine overlapping between categories: institutionalization does not necessarily mean becoming formalized. Although institutionalized,

- the Agency fosters much informal and even illicit activity. Many stall owners do not possess a written license from the authorities and often fashion a temporary or even a forged one.
10. Outlets that have commented on the Greek anti-middleman movement include the *New York Times* (“a new kind of economy with little precedent in modern Europe”) and Dutch public television channels (“the reply to the crisis comes from Greece”). See <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/29/world/europe/after-crisis-greeks-work-to-promote-social-economy.html> and <http://tegenlicht.vpro.nl/afleveringen/2013-2014/griekenland.html>.
 11. In relevant ethnographic discussions of Greece, sociality is frequently rendered as a powerful analytical tool to approach what is often classified as ‘political activity’. See Papataxiarchis (1999) and other contributions largely deriving from that approach (e.g., Rozakou 2008).
 12. This is true of the specific networks in Thessaloniki and cannot be generalized to all solidarity groups in Greece.
 13. The Open Network is a constellation of the various informal groups of solidarity economy in Thessaloniki. Operating as a loose web of networks, it has managed to call about five general assemblies in its two and one-half years of existence. The decisions that are made are morally binding for all groups but remain very general in their content.
 14. The police often assert themselves by using force against participants, imposing fines, and bringing the farmers and urban activists involved to court, after having been sued by the Agency for Open Markets—without, however, a dramatic lapse in the networks’ activities.
 15. As an example of such close relationships, Giorgos and Irini met through the anti-middleman group and eventually became romantically involved.
 16. It might be fruitful to examine horizontality from the perspective of an increasing concern for reimagining democracy and, especially, for exploring direct democracy processes. This concern, which has been developing in Greece and elsewhere over the last few years, was reinforced after the ‘movement of the squares’ in 2011. Horizontality does not preclude institutionalization (see Kioupiolis and Katsambekis 2014).
 17. The crisis caused a lack of trust in state distribution systems, such as social security and the welfare state at large, a tendency that is well-rooted in Greece.
 18. Greece’s informal economy was estimated before the crisis at 27 percent of the country’s GDP, the largest in Europe.
 19. Some of the social life described and analyzed in this piece has changed since the fieldwork that yielded data for it was completed. Ongoing fieldwork in the same site has faced new developments, such as the election of a government that is theoretically more friendly toward the solidarity economy, as well as a new austerity package and the provisional dismantling of one group discussed in this piece. This highlights the limitations of ethnography in crisis, that is, in times of compressed historical processes (Rakopoulos 2014c). Rather than seeing ethnography as a snapshot, or seeing crises as ruptures or deviations from ‘normal’ history, or evoking the well-known idiom of ‘transition’ in our historical imagination, we can consider that acceleration takes place in crises in different and parallel gears, which academic publications cannot fully capture. This multi-gear acceleration is not only the outcome of crises but also at their pivotal core and thus could help to conceptualize them.
 20. At the time of final writing of this article (October 2014), a minor part of the movement in Thessaloniki has opted for setting up a shop—the Bios Coop, a non-profit consumer cooperative grocery—and thus formalize more fully. Similarly, as I have noted elsewhere for Athens (Rakopoulos 2015), many have deemed that

the reproduction of the movement is a priority. Such forms of formalization were already emerging as themes in the periodic meetings that these networks have held during the crisis. Two small-scale towns have even managed to coordinate anti-middleman cooperatives on a larger scale. At the same time, many networks have chosen to hibernate and suspend their informal activity for a while. Thus, there are two lines, with both being present in Thessaloniki and at the country level: one has opted for informality, the other for formalization. Yet it is important is to acknowledge how their objectives also intersect.

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