TRADING NEW GROUND:
A Changing Moment for
Citizen Action in Greece
Cover photo:
Graffiti in central Athens sending a message of solidarity and hope. ‘Dikaioma.gr’ is the website of a citizen support network for workers and the unemployed. ‘Dikaioma’ means ‘right’ (as in human right).

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TRADING NEW GROUND:

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Introduction

Just over a year ago, on 23 May 2011, I was sitting on the pavement in front of the Spanish Embassy in Athens surrounded by around 30 or 40 people. The Indignados movement was filling the squares of Spain and every day, Spanish residents of Athens staged ‘real democracy’ demonstrations in front of their embassy. A few Greeks had joined them; the assemblies were mostly held in English. Looking at the people around me and having seen the photos of the crowded Plaza del Sol, I complained to a Greek friend sitting next to me: ‘Why don’t we see a mass mobilisation of people here? There has been a year of consecutive austerity packages that lead nowhere, what are people waiting for?’ His response was sharp: ‘You are not right in this. You are looking for a mass movement and not paying attention to the things happening below the radar. People’s lives are changing so fast, we are in shock, urged to reconsider our democracy while wondering how to make ends meet. But people are organising, new activity will come, the movement develops slowly but it does’. Two days later, from London, I watched on my PC screen as a spontaneous gathering of 200 thousand people turned into the Greek movement at Syntagma Square, which was then occupied for more than two months.

But my friend was right: before and after the Syntagma Square Movement (SSM), citizen agency was present, channelled in and nurtured by a number of smaller-scale mobilisations and initiatives. These initiatives are creating a galaxy of moments of citizen action in which a new culture of social change is being cultivated.

With this case study, I take a closer look at these moments of citizen organisation to evoke an understanding of the new civic practices they bring to the fore. I argue that the Greek ‘movement’ is shaped by an actual movement of an unprecedented number of citizens away from traditional, representative, recognised forms of citizen organisation to citizen-led, anti-hierarchical, horizontal networks that both resist the consequences of the crisis and create alternatives to the current democratic and economic model. This movement has been nurtured both inside small, diverse citizen initiatives and during moments of mass participation, such as the SSM and the 2008 Greek riots. Hence, this case study calls for a better understanding of the interplay between everyday resistance and significant political events.

I suggest that at the heart of this moment of political creativity are solidarity, unruly action, direct democracy, and autonomy, which are driving and shaping the claims, discourses, practices, and processes of emergent citizen action. These ‘driving forces’ open possibilities for new relationships between citizens themselves and between citizens, institutions, and resources, setting the ground for a new politics. Consequently, the Greek case suggests or confirms that a wind of change is blowing over citizen action in Europe. In the current European moment of increasing poverty, unemployment, and corrosion of the social state and democratic practices, this case study poses questions of if and how such political creativity can be understood, strengthened, and expanded.

The case study is based on both desk research using stories, actions, and analysis from citizens in Greece and on interviews and group discussions with individuals active in various citizen initiatives. It is also informed by, although not based on, theoretical insights on citizen action, politics, and movements.

The text is structured as follows: I first provide a brief introduction to the Greek context as it has been shaped by the last two years of structural adjustment. I then go on to introduce the methodological choices that informed this case study. The first section discusses the different faces of citizen action in the age of the ‘Greek crisis’ by examining both the role of mass movements and political events and the dynamics of emergent smaller-scale citizen initiatives. Instead of offering conclusions – which wouldn’t suit a rapidly changing context – the second section reflects on the contributions of the Greek case to our understanding of new civic practices and the challenges the latter pose for scholars, practitioners, and activists alike.
This case study is also a heated account of the present moment: it comes with all the strengths and limitations of attempting to capture and understand social phenomena in the making. Any reflections are to be constantly revisited and contested, so please share your thoughts and feedback (maro.pantaz@gmail).

Entering the scene

‘There is an urgent need to deconstruct the moral lessons that obscure the actual process at work in society’

Alain Badiou, Save the Greeks from their Saviours

Greece has been at the epicentre of the European debt crisis, and the site of the fastest structural adjustment programme witnessed in an EU country. The crisis has incurred dramatic transformations at the sociopolitical and economic levels and has brought the whole society to a crossroads.

Statistics cannot capture either people’s realities or the ‘war of words and hearts’ unleashed by media and political parties, who have repeatedly asserted the ‘absolute necessity of measures’ by declaring the country in a constant ‘state of emergency’. Facts and numbers can nevertheless be a useful if incomplete framework for the reader to approach the situation in Greece and Athens in 2012.

Restructuring people’s lives

Over the last two years, Greek governments have agreed to two loan agreements with the ‘troika’ formed by the IMF, the European Union (EU), and the European Central Bank (ECB). These loans are attached to a set of ‘conditionalities’ which include the implementation of heavy horizontal taxation, rapid deregulation in the labour market and health sector, privatisation of state property and natural resources, and immense cuts to state services.

Since Greece started implementing the conditionalities in 2010, unemployment has risen from 10.7 per cent in January 2010 to 22.5 per cent in April 2012 (1,147,372 unemployed in a country of 11 million), while figures for youth unemployment reached a historical high of 52.8 per cent in April 2012. Labour rights have been severely weakened through a new set of laws that abolished collective bargaining and withdrew crucial restrictions on companies’ rights for redundancies. The national minimum salary has gradually been reduced, pulling salaries in both the public and private sectors into a downward spiral. Additionally, all direct and indirect taxes have gradually increased.

Since the implementation of austerity measures began in 2010, 5 per cent of the Greek population (more than 500,000 people) have seen their incomes fall below the poverty line, increasing to 25 per cent the portion of the population living in poverty.

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1 Public letter from Badiou and other French intellectuals denouncing the hypocrisy of the ‘troika’ which, while claiming to be saving Greece, is actually pushing for neoliberal policies that serve the financial system and appoint technocratic governments without popular sovereignty. The letter calls for pan-European resistance and support of the Greek people. Accessed at http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/articles/save-the-greeks-from-their-saviors/.

2 A few interviewees have mentioned the neologism ‘survivalism’ to point out that ‘either people will stand for each other and demand a collective and fairer response to the crisis or we will just play the game of who will survive instead of another’.

3 For a detailed description of conditions, see for example Greece Macro Monitor, Eurobank research, February 2012 http://www.eurobank.gr/Uploads/Reports/FOCUS-%20February%202012%20.pdf.


5 ‘Gradually’ is a key word here, as governments have announced ‘new’ and always ‘final’ cuts to salaries/pensions or increases to taxes more than 8 times in the last two years. This meant that any budget planning by households or businesses was rendered useless with every new ‘measures package’ (in each case imposed under the imminent threat of ‘bankruptcy’).


All the above-mentioned measures have primarily targeted the working population and lower and middle classes, reducing their living standards while at the same time depriving them of basic mechanisms for social protection. The welfare state has been blatantly dismantled, with severe cuts to pensions, unemployment, and disability benefits and the introduction of fees at public hospitals. These policies resulted in large categories of the population struggling to cover their basic needs: the unemployed, uninsured, pensioners, large households. It also brought about a rapid deterioration in the provision of health care and education, the collapse of thousands of businesses, and a spike in mental illness, with Greece experiencing the fastest-growing suicide rate in the world.  

Whose democracy?

The fierce attacks on social and economic rights have not occurred without a corrosion of democracy and a deplorable impact on social cohesion. As previously seen in developing countries, the structural adjustment programme was accompanied by the derailment of democratic processes: an unelected technocrat government was appointed in November 2011 and crucial bills that fundamentally alter citizens’ rights were passed using fast-track processes – often with little or no deliberation in parliament and never in consultation with the people affected.

Police repression was increased to control public outrage. A report by Amnesty International points out that allegations of human rights violations by police during demonstrations ‘increased particularly in the period covering the introduction of severe austerity measures by the government.’ The report’s main conclusion is that far from being ‘isolated incidents’, as the government claims, these are a systemic problem further aggravated by the impunity with which these violations are treated.

Doctors’ associations have also accused the government of indiscriminately using dangerous chemicals to disperse peaceful protesters. Freedom of expression was also affected. Greece fell sharply in the 2010 World Press Freedom index, ending up last in Europe, in 70th place (it ranked 35th in 2009), with Reporters without Borders documenting physical attacks on journalists and claiming that ‘from one demonstration to the next, police violence against journalists seems to be becoming an inescapable part of the Greek crisis.’

Last but not least, the country has seen the fascist Golden Dawn party dramatically increase its power: following the last election, it has 18 Members of Parliament, while its militia attacks and harasses immigrants on the streets. Successive governments have scapegoated immigrants as the cause of Greece’s increasing social and financial problems and racist discourse is on the rise in Greece in mainstream and social media.

Traditional civil society has to a certain extent attempted to respond to the threats and consequences of the ‘crisis’. Trade unions have organised more than 17 national strikes in two years and a small number of NGOs have come up with renewed service delivery projects or anti-racist campaigns to address the rise of fascism. These actions, though important, haven’t yielded political results or attracted the genuine participation of citizens in constructing solutions and alternatives.

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10 For more information, see http://en.rsf.org/greece.html.
12 The most recent example is the newly appointed Minister of Public Order, who announced that ‘our country is under invasion’ and that ‘the illegal immigration problem is bigger than the financial one’. See Guardian report http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/07/greece-crackdown-illegal-immigrants-arrest.
13 More background on Greek civil society is in the ‘Treading New Grounds’ section.
Where now?
The austerity package is not only eroding basic social rights; it is also failing to achieve its declared goal of reducing the public debt. With Greece entering its 5th year of recession, almost every economic analyst from across the ideological spectrum agrees that the adjustment plan is not working, and is only driving the country deeper into recession. Instead of reducing the debt, it’s actually increasing it.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, there is a growing consensus that for the EU project to survive, European governments need to move beyond the current dogma of fiscal discipline and look for a new economic model that will reduce inequalities and asymmetries between countries at the core and the periphery of the Euro currency.

As Greece is negotiating 11.5 billion Euros in new cuts to reach yet another fiscal goal, European citizens are increasingly looking beyond the moral narrative of ‘reckless Greeks who do not try hard enough’ to unpack the ‘structural adjustment of the social state’ which is threatening all European societies. Greece is seen by many as the laboratory of a new ultra-neoliberal era, waiting to be rolled out in other European countries (Badiou, 2012).

These are desperate times for many people in Greece. These are also times full of a promise of change: the citizens of Greece, having felt on their skin the consequences of this pauperisation and democratic corrosion, might be the first to wake up so harshly from the dream of European ‘success’ and the happy years of cheap credit. In June 2012, more than 50 per cent of registered voters voted against austerity, and citizens gave 28 per cent of their votes to a radical left-wing party whose platform calls for a new Europe, one in which the political system controls the financial one, and not the other way around. The most promising development, though, is that citizens are moving beyond the mechanisms of representation and are constructing their own alternatives to address each facet of the crisis — ethical, democratic, and economic. Those alternatives are explored further in the sections that follow.

Methodological pathways

\textit{‘The movement is not (yet) an “object” of study. It is a lived experience and to speak about, understand or judge the “phenomenon” you need to have “lived” it.’}

M.G.\textsuperscript{15}

The quote above points out the theoretical, methodological, and ethical challenges of ‘objectifying’ and ‘studying’ social phenomena as they are evolving. As we are going through a period of heightened interest in studying and understanding the diverse expressions of citizen agency that of late flared around the world, I felt it was important to discuss the notions and processes I navigated and the challenges I had to keep in mind while researching this case study.

Looking for civil society inside the movement...or is it the other way round?
As this research was instigated by the \textit{Civil Society at Crossroads}\textsuperscript{16} initiative, an obvious question arose: How does the concept of ‘civil society’ fit in a case study on emergent, not yet ‘labelled’ forms of citizen action? A concept as vast as it is contested, ‘civil society’ has been interpreted in various ways to include groups of citizens pursuing their common interests, the realm of citizen activity that balances the power of the market and the state, people who want to do good, the public sphere where politics are shaped, and more. Rather than attempting an analysis of the different theoretical interpretations, which would go beyond the scope and approach of this case study, I chose to work with the understandings and notions of civil society that were relevant to the active participants of the Greek movement.

\textsuperscript{14} Exponents of this argument include for example the Nobel-laureate economist Paul Krugman and the Financial Times journalist Martin Wolf. Even the IMF has been warning of the danger to growth of cutting spending too fast.

\textsuperscript{15} Quote from an analysis of the Syntagma Square events by activist M.G. for Drasi Newspaper (2012) \textit{Experiences and Thoughts from the Squares} \url{http://efimeridadrasi.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/blog-post.html}.

\textsuperscript{16} For more on the initiative see \url{http://www.pria.org/civil-society-at-crossroads-}. 
The concept of civil society comes with specific connotations. Are you sure you want to use it for this work?’ This was the question some of the interview participants asked when I introduced the Civil Society at Crossroads initiative. The concept of civil society is connected to formal structures such as trade unions and NGOs that work through norms of representation and professionalised knowledge – something which, as many interviewees pointed out, ‘citizen action in Greece rejected and tried to overcome’. Participants also pointed out that civil society implies that all citizens have equal access to recognised democratic means for defending their interests and that the state is responsive to them – two assumptions that don’t hold true in Greece.

Taking into account these limitations to the concept of ‘civil society’ and the dynamics of grassroots action under construction in Greece, I went about this research consciously looking for those spaces and events where citizen action is channelled and nurtured beyond formal structures. I used this question as an entry point to my inquiry: What forms of participation did people look for when they felt the need to share their concerns and defend their rights and needs? When one looks for answers to this question, a world of collectivities, citizen initiatives, and acts of disobedience and solidarity is revealed – which some research participants argued is the ‘real civil society’. To help clarify these two competing understandings of civil society during a group discussion with young activists, we created the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>VS</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social projects and programmes</td>
<td>Social change processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks entrusted/assigned to leaders and</td>
<td>Self-organisation and direct democracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professionals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognised and socially acceptable forms of participation and claim making</td>
<td>Unruly and disruptive or illegal direct action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating specific problems and interests – depoliticising</td>
<td>Addressing multi-faceted crisis and putting forward holistic claims – politicising</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As a group discussion participant observed, the polymorphous galaxy of citizen initiatives in Greece constitutes a movement because it signifies a transition – a literal movement – from the A understanding of citizen organisation and action towards the B: people are rejecting or reshaping forms of civic association that are based on the A and are situating themselves as bodies and minds in the public space with the intentions to engage with the B. This case study is trying to understand the dynamics of this exact movement and the practices, claims, and discourses it brings to the fore.

**Methods and process**

Attempting to understand the above-mentioned dynamics in a rapidly changing context is a challenge. For this reason and consistent with the ‘emerging phenomenological’ approach of the Crossroads initiative, I chose a ‘snowball’ approach using people’s experiences as an entry point. I focused on conversations with people who have been directly involved with citizen action; they provided me with leads to different initiatives and with analysis of the dynamics of the ‘movement’ that they deemed most important. Those leads and analyses would force me to consider initiatives and actions that I wasn’t aware of or hadn’t paid significant attention to, thus creating a snowball effect of conversations and information that helped me to create a rich picture of the ‘movement’ and its main expressions.

In order to analyse this rich picture, my methodology was iterative, and based on informal conversations with a number of actors. Specifically:

17The word ‘collectivities’ is used throughout the text as a direct translation from the Greek word ‘syllogikotites’ that citizens widely use to refer to citizen groups and networks that are characterized by horizontal forms of organisation.
a) I organised interviews with members of six different initiatives that reflect different ‘faces’ of the emergent citizen struggles: a neighbourhood assembly, a workers’ association, a ‘disobedience’ movement, a resistance network, one solidarity, and one alternative-economy initiative. The interviews took the form of informal conversations to allow for bottom-up and collaborative sense-making of events. The questions were loosely structured around the activities of each initiative, their goals and motivations, difficulties and limitations, as well as their broader take on the current movement in Greece.

b) I ran two group sessions/small workshops, one with representatives from eight prominent NGOs and one with young activists who were part of the SSM and are all currently involved with different citizen initiatives. Here, my goal was to create an iterative process in which everyone (including me) was asked to share his or her observations on the changing forms of citizen action. Lessons were drawn through collective reflection and critical analysis.

The ‘findings’ of the discussions with the protagonists of the action were complemented by collection and analysis of secondary data: other case studies, think pieces, as well as posters, slogans, and social media content. These came from desk-research, the snowball effect described above, and my own archives from having followed the crisis over the last three years.

By collecting stories, facilitating analysis with diverse groups of people, and using secondary data-content analysis, the case study is not aiming for ‘triangulation’—as there is not one state of citizen action to be discovered—but for ‘crystallisation’, trying to capture the dynamics from multiple perspectives.

Athens as the focus
Citizen action is changing in quantity and quality across Greece, but this case study focuses on Athens. There are both feasibility and methodological reasons for this choice. As a metropolis of 3 million, Athens bears the brunt of the human cost of the crisis: the city has seen an unprecedented spike in unemployment, homelessness, and destitution. As the capital and centre for national decision-making, Athens has also been the centre of citizens’ struggles, witnessing the birth or reinforcement of myriads of citizen initiatives and collectivities. Although it hasn’t been possible to do fieldwork and extensive research for other cities, it is still reasonable to say that the majority of the expressions of the ‘movement’ present in Athens can also be found in most major Greek towns.

Positionality and ethics
Because ‘in a participative worldview, we always partake in what we describe’ (Reason, 1994:324), I made an effort to keep myself in the picture while preparing and writing this case study. My multiple roles and identities – researcher, facilitator, activist, Greek citizen, NGO practitioner – allow me to read reality from different angles but also influence the research process itself.

As a Greek citizen and an activist, I stand in solidarity with the struggles of the people I engaged with during research. In some cases, I also perceive myself as standing to gain from these struggles. I chose not to hide this crucial subjectivity and made sure to create conversations with research participants in which both sides exposed their views and thoughts rather than one in which I asked ‘objective questions’ about some distant situation. This helped create trust among participants and encouraged open dialogue. Many participants gave me advice about how to approach the writing; some said that the interviews helped them consolidate the insights from their experiences.

I also had to be aware of the delicate balance of distance and proximity to the research topic, which derives from the fact that I am a Greek citizen who worked for NGOs and with movements in Greece for a lengthy period, but is currently living and working abroad. This ‘far away so close’ relationship enables me to feel the complexities and nuances of the dynamics under study while also giving me the possibility of ‘zooming-out’ beyond the Greek context. It also meant I was in a different position than my interlocutors. I was aware

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that I could ‘exit’ – at least physically – this context of insecurity, poverty, and lack of opportunities once ‘my work was done’. To address this difference, I made sure to be honest about my intentions and role and the goal of the research, and to respect the limits to the trust and openness that participants were ready to give me.

For reasons of privacy and/or safety, participants’ names are concealed in the following sections (only initials are used); in some cases the names of the collectivities/initiatives are, too.
Treading new ground

What civic practices have developed in Greece during the years of crisis? What is the significance of political events and what is the content and role of the various on-going citizen initiatives? And what is the interplay between events and everyday action? This section provides answers to these questions and paints a rich yet in no way exhaustive picture of the new grounds citizens are treading.

This first part, ‘The events…’, discusses two moments of mass citizen participation: the riots of 2008 and the Syntagma Square Movement of summer 2011. Although the latter is widely recognised as the culmination of Greek resistance to the policies of the troika and the Greek government, both events played a crucial role in embodying and consolidating emergent elements of political culture. At the same time, they laid the ground for new civic practices.

The second part, ‘…And the everyday’, presents and explores the modalities, goals, and realities of new civic practices through the four faces of citizen action that underpin them: solidarity, direct democracy, unruly action, and autonomy.

The events...

A background to the events

The post-WWII history of the Greek state is dominated by the power of political parties. Such has been their influence in all domains of social life that academics have talked about ‘partitocracy’ and ‘colonisation of the associational sphere’ (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2002). Trade unions, student unions, social services, and even local sports and cultural associations were and to a large extent still are affiliated with one or another party. Some of the first organised movements for women’s rights and environmental issues in the 1970s and 1980s also occurred under the umbrella of the main political parties. Clientelistic practices were gradually and deeply ingrained into all sectors of public life, and, in combination with Greek society’s strong traditional kinship bonds, they in many ways replaced the role of a functioning social state and a strong civil society.

The grip of parties decreased somewhat beginning in the late 1980s, only to be replaced by the advancing power of the markets and the influence of a minority elite which controls the media and other vital business sectors, and to a large extent shapes the country’s political and cultural developments (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2002). This period saw the formation of NGOs which can be categorised as a) development NGOs working overseas; b) international NGOs campaigning on rights and environment in Greece; c) national or local NGOs providing social protection services; and d) small local NGOs working mainly on cultural or environmental issues at a very local level.

The growth of NGOs, the promotion of EU-funded youth programmes, and the 2004 Athens Olympics gave a boost to a culture of ‘volunteerism’, although one can say that the number of people that participated was not significant. In general, participation in NGOs has not been widespread in Greece, either because they have failed to breed a relationship of trust with the general public, or because citizens didn’t widely embrace NGOs’ causes. A study now to be finalised by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy concludes that many Greek NGOs suffer from a disabling legal environment characterized by weak accountability mechanisms and a state-dependency mentality as opposed to a citizen-driven culture.

The ‘implosion’¹⁹

In addition to the above-mentioned ‘partitocracy’ and later ‘elitocracy’ and the low interest in NGO-type action, or indeed because of it, Greek politics have always been characterised by a strong presence of

¹⁹The 2008 riots were first and successfully conceptualised as an ‘implosion’ by Christos Giovanopoulos in the 2010 article The dilemma of December, Dromos tis Aristeras Magazine.
popular protest movements and revolts. These movements define themselves as antagonistic to the state and from the 1990s onwards as antagonistic to policies of neoliberalisation.

Over the last two decades, three mass student movements (1991, 1999, and 2007) occupied hundreds of schools and universities across the country to resist education reform laws that would limit access to free public education or were perceived to be following an EU-promoted neoliberal approach to educational policy. National strikes are also a common phenomenon in Greece, with trade unions and workers resisting reforms of social protection policies, salary cuts, and so on. Last but not least, the country has a strong tradition of anarchist and extra-parliamentary left collectivities that have often staged protests, clashed with the police, and in many cases led the anti-racist/anti-fascist struggle in the country.

Examining the dynamics, claims, and organisational tactics of these movements is beyond the scope of this case study. But I feel it is important to point out that the impressive number of protests, strikes, clashes, and occupations that Greece has witnessed in the post-dictatorial period (since 1974) are telling of the howling distance between those who govern and those being governed. The widespread anti-systemic and reform-opposing culture in Greece is inextricably connected with the absence of meaningful state–citizen dialogue and participation. Citizens don’t feel included in or consulted by local, regional, or national bodies and decisions are seen as dictated by the country’s elites, the ultra-powerful political party offices, or distant EU bodies. The lack of genuine channels for citizen participation and the suppression of voices that are not rich, powerful, or connected to political parties has largely been managed and ‘kept under the carpet’ through corruption and clientelistic practices.

Much of this ‘manufactured consent’ between society and the political establishment collapsed in the days following 6 December 2008. That night, a policeman murdered in cold blood a 16-year-old boy in the Exarchia20 district of Athens. The event sparked three weeks of unprecedented riots all over Athens and the main cities of Greece. Thousands of people who normally have no role or space in co-shaping politics – young unemployed and precarious workers, marginalised immigrants, school students – immersed themselves in spontaneous direct action. Rioters looted and threw stones, and wrote texts and messages on walls, printed posters and leaflets, blocked streets and burned Christmas trees,21 creating an event that brought diverse people together to reclaim the streets as never before and reject the way politics were being run as a whole:

*Before December, we knew it already – no one was to be trusted, politics was corrupt, things were getting irreversibly worse all the time and there was nothing to do about it. But then we took to the streets, we found each other, and there was actually no need to read what other people wrote and do what other people had arranged to do and wait for others to think about what we want, no need to articulate demands and ask for marginal benefits so they could understand, no need to adopt argumentative strategies and representative ethics so as to reach a national consensus, no need to have a meaning within this frame, because we had no need of this frame, we create our own meanings… no one was representative of any group, but everyone was represented, nothing of what we asked for could be articulated in the language of political demands but everything was said…*22

As Hara (Kouki, 2010) brilliantly demonstrates, the December riots opened up a new space for politics exactly because ‘they escaped the language of those who have the power to define politics’ (Badiou, 2005). They created a moment of rupture with the way protest, anger, or demands were until then expressed or were expected to be expressed. Nothing was intended or asked but everything was said: messages against

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20 Exarchia is at the very centre of Athens and has historically been the neighbourhood of anarchist and autonomous politics as well as the area favoured by young alternative crowds. Governments are perceived as having repeatedly tried to criminalise the neighbourhood by keeping armed policemen at its perimetre 24/7 and doing frequent stop-and-search operations.

21 Symbolically, rioters burned the Christmas tree in Syntagma Square, which was advertised as the ‘tallest and brightest in Europe’. Prophetically, a photo with the Christmas tree being burnt went viral with the words ‘Wishes from Athens: Merry Crisis and a Happy New Year’.

media propaganda, police impunity, and lack of democracy filled the walls of the city. The invisible people of the city made themselves the center of politics, crying out ‘we are here, we are everything!’ (Douzinas, 2011).

‘December’, which has now taken its place in Greek history, was not a moment of explosion but of implosion: a system that couldn’t sustain itself anymore collapsed (Giovanopoulos, 2010). It felt as if a mirror were held up to society to show our lives as they really were: with no real opportunities, immersed in consumerism and individualism, while the law of the powerful and the corrupt prevails.

As the riots faded in early 2009, just a year before Greece started talks with the IMF, the protagonists of December thought that inevitably things would return to ‘normality’. But a new process of radicalisation had started in society. The ability of the governors to create consent had broken. December had triggered a new era of citizen agency: people started forming neighbourhood assemblies to discuss ‘what is happening in our lives’, turning to social media for alternative information, and embracing the power they have to create political events on their own terms.

Change of repertoire

Citizen action and contentious politics have their own repertoires: every time citizens stage a protest, the powerful will respond and adapt in a certain way; citizens will also learn from this and adapt future actions (Tilly, 2008). According to Tilly, citizen action ‘repertoires’ change incrementally through small innovations – for example, protesters might change the time, space, or words they use in their protests to avoid a specific reaction by the state or to provoke renewed interest. ‘Repertoires’ of claim-making can also change radically through large-scale innovations when there are drastic and shocking changes at the level of political regime.

After December 2008, the Greek political system, having lost its legitimacy, responded by proclaiming an even more cynical politics. Crucial decisions are made without and against the citizens. Any prior effort for social consensus is now blatantly disregarded. Consecutive governments have imposed measures they themselves characterise as ‘unfair’ and have used police repression and scare tactics to ensure compliance. Academics have talked about a ‘meta-democracy’ (Giovanopoulos, 2010; Douzinas, 2011).

23 Examples of messages and slogans: ‘Your democracy smells of teargas’, ‘What is impossible for this system, is our possibility’, ‘Go study accounting to take account of your miserable life’, ‘School desk – Couch – Grave’, ‘Police are speaking to you from the 9 o’clock news’.
But together with the political establishment, the old ways of antagonising it collapsed too: people started moving away from the old repertoires of protest that had become largely predictable and consequently easy for the powerful to manipulate (in framing public discourse) and to ignore (in making actual decisions). Citizens started rejecting old, representative and professionalised tactics for organising and progressively engaged with a political culture of unmediated presence via direct democracy practices in assemblies and direct voice in social media. These gradual changes in citizens’ repertoires – together with the drastic and shocking change of political regime after Greece went under ‘troika’ supervision – brought about the SSM, which lasted for two months between May and July 2011.  

The ‘movement of the squares’ crystallised and further developed this new political culture: ‘It publicised the knowledge that was already being developed in streets, neighbourhoods and social centres – that there is a new way for us to organise from below, to discuss our problems, to find joint solutions’.

At the SSM, protestors for the first time didn’t follow the ‘repertoire’ of marching under banners, chanting pre-decided slogans and returning home. Instead, they stayed in the square and tried to collectively shape a new claim that took no ideologies, slogans or tactics as given starting points. For the first time people were not making single-issue claims but instead staged an all-embracing protest, questioning the whole system of democracy and economy.

Crucially, on day one of the movement, the Syntagma’s people’s assembly voted for the slogan ‘direct democracy’ instead of ‘real democracy’ which was used by the Spanish Indignados. In this ways, the movement relocated the focus of the struggle from demanding a fairer implementation of the current democratic system to implementing another kind of democracy altogether, one in which all people are equally responsible for decisions that affect their lives. Even more crucial was the fact that the protesters created a process that reflected the essence of their claim: the Syntagma Square camp was run by the daily people’s popular assembly and a number of thematic groups (on economy, direct democracy, debt, etc.) and organisational teams (on food provision, safety, etc.) that were all directly accountable to the main assembly.

Participation in SSM gradually dwindled after three violent attacks by the police and once citizens started feeling that this vehicle for action had reached its full potential. The police evicted the remaining protestors on 29 July 2011. Some saw the end of the Syntagma occupation as a failure signifying one more return to ‘normality’, this time a much harsher normality than that of 2008. But in the same way that the practices and lessons of December gave life to new civic practices, the SSM also ‘never left the square’. Its practices, experiences and modalities were ‘trans-located’ and continued in other spaces and moments of solidarity, disobedience, and direct democracy that are debated in the next chapter.

...And the everyday

Faces of citizen action

This section draws on interviews and conversations with members of solidarity and resistance networks, people’s assemblies and alternative economy initiatives. It presents elements of these initiatives – not to analyse them as separate ‘units’ of action – but to use them as entry points to the different ‘faces’ of citizen organisation and action in Greece: solidarity, direct democracy, unruly action and autonomy.

These faces of citizen action are not distinct from one another: they complement and breathe from each other and co-exist within each of the different initiatives presented here. They are methodologies to use and

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24 The SSM – although a child of the Greek condition – took its form and texture through a dialogue with other processes. This dialogue consists both of processes of political identification (with the Egyptian demand for ‘everyone to have a share in shaping politics’ and the Spanish cry: ‘we are not commodities’) and of processes of developing new action repertoires (transferring everyday life/camping in the streets in Egypt and popular assemblies in Spain).

25 Excerpt from interview with C.M., member of a neighbourhood assembly defining itself as a network of solidarity and resistance.

26 Observation made by Ch. Giovanopoulos during an interview for this case study.
goals to aspire to, and they form part of both the practice and the language of citizen initiatives. Solidarity is expressing the need to fight isolation, as direct democracy is expressing the desire to infuse equality in and control over decision-making. Unruly action speaks to a lack of social justice while alternative economy practices attempt to create a fairer society through a new culture of production and consumption. Still, all these mechanisms, discourses and claims co-exist in most of the citizen action visible in Athens today: they reflect the growing popularity of the idea that solutions to our problems need to be collective and the methods we use need to reflect and prepare for the society we are aspiring to.
Solidarity

‘If we don’t model our vision in what we do, if we create in our collectivities the same relationships created outside (in the system), then we are just doing philanthropy’.27

As local authorities, the Greek Church, and a small number of NGOs organise soup kitchens and clothes/medicine/food banks for the steadily increasing number of people who can’t cover their basic needs, citizen groups are creating their own solidarity structures. These citizen initiatives are principally characterised by the relationships of equality that they aim to foster between those who participate in them and by the absolute rejection of the culture of social provision and charity.

One of the most striking examples of such an initiative is the ‘social kitchen’ started by K.M. The kitchen cooks and serves free food for all and it does it on the street! Everyday members of the kitchen carry the stoves, pots and everything else necessary to a different part of Athens. People and passers-by join in, cook altogether and then eat altogether on the street. The limits between ‘volunteers’ who come to support the kitchen and people who come in need for the food become blurred. In fact, a number of people who approached the kitchen in need for food became frequent cooks and organisers of it.

K.M. readily clarifies the essence of the initiative:

‘I get angry when journalists or others call it a ‘syssitio’28 – it is what it says; it is a ‘social kitchen’. I ask them: if someone comes to your home and you have cooked, won’t you give them a plate of food? So, the street is my home. They also ask me: do you give priority to the homeless and the unemployed? And I respond that there are no priorities, who comes eats. If someone comes to your home you won’t share your food with them, because there is someone hungrier who isn’t there, though?’29

Figure 2

Banner of ‘The Other Man’ that reads ‘free food for all’ placed at a park where the citizens where getting ready to cook

The ‘social kitchen’ is suitably named ‘O allosanthropos – The other man’.30 More than providing food, it is about a process of re-socialisation where people from diverse backgrounds can discover a new way of being in the city and society as the streets become our ‘home’. It is also about placing oneself in the midst

27 Comment made C.M. during interview with member of a solidarity network.
28 ‘Syssitio’: Greek word for soup kitchens, particularly relating to soup kitchens during the Nazi occupation when citizen formed huge queues for a piece of bread.
29 Excerpt from interview, Athens, June 2011.
30 ‘Anthropos’ in Greek refers to the concept of the ‘human being’. There is another word for ‘man’ (‘andras’).
of the activity (cooking, sharing food, serving, and eating – as I was asked to do immediately when I arrived there for the interview): ‘we are asking for participation – not donations’.

The idea started with K.M. and other members of the food provision team at the Syntagma Square camp. They didn’t like the way food provision was administered in the square because it was brought in readymade, and the SSM working groups had priority in being served. As they saw the growing number of people searching for food in the garbage, they decided to take action: they have now been cooking and sharing food every day for 7 months, serving anything between 70-300 dishes a day on the street. More than 150 people have been involved in supporting the initiative. Donations from companies are not accepted and all cooking ingredients are provided by participants.

‘The Other Man’ is just one of the many – simple in function but dense in meaning – collective kitchens that have sprung up across Athens. Those are joined by citizen networks that give or exchange clothes, by make-shift health centres run by doctors and citizens assisting them, by citizen groups that provide teaching assistance to kids, language training, and psychological support.

What makes these initiatives unique is that they are from citizens to citizens. As one of the coordinators of the Network of Solidarity and Resistance said: ‘We are not in any way different than the people who come to take the clothes, we also struggle financially, are unemployed or might be tomorrow’. In fact, the ‘Other Man’s’ M.K. was made redundant 2 years ago by a big telecoms company and is still unemployed. These initiatives constitute a citizen-led movement that is about dealing with the crisis through redefining the meaning of property and sharing, belonging and community. Rather than donating or contributing to social support programmes run by government and agencies, citizens are making themselves present and available in the social arena by exploring ways to make solidarity a lived reality through everyday actions and relationships.

**Direct democracy**

‘How long should an assembly last when we need to work the next day? How will we cover the needs of the unemployed? How can we coordinate with other local assemblies and what are the limitations of lacking a general political strategy?’

Questions such as the above have been at the core of many direct democracy initiatives growing in Athens and Greece: Citizens are resisting the deterioration of their lives in ways that pay due attention to both the process of organising and the form and content of the diverse actions that are needed to solve their problems.

‘Open Popular Assemblies’ (or neighbourhood assemblies) – both before and after the SSM – have been the main vehicle for rolling out this ‘direct democracy experiment’ at the local level. After and during Syntagma, neighbourhood assemblies multiplied. Currently, there are around thirty active assemblies in different neighbourhoods of Athens and another thirty in towns across Greece. Their scope, focus or size might differ, but in general terms, assemblies have embodied the call ‘to take our lives into our hands’ though shaping politics and practices at the local level.

As one member of an inner city neighbourhood assembly put it: ‘After one week at Syntagma, people spontaneously started our local assembly. The neighbourhood is our space of responsibility for collective action that speaks to local but also to broader problems. Many of us were in Syntagma but we felt we could take more meaningful action at the local level: the Syntagma assembly voted for taking down capitalism and rewriting the constitution 10 times!’ So, in many cases, local assemblies were born of the need to take

31 Excerpt from interview for the documentary ‘Solidarity: Antidote to Crisis’ prepared for the online portal www.tvxs.gr.
33 A comprehensive list of all popular people’s assemblies (and their websites) in Athens and Greece as well as a list of other collectivities and citizen initiatives can be found here http://goo.gl/9vUqS (in Greek).
actionable decisions, something that is often limited by the scope and size of national movements that situate themselves in the central political stage.

So what do assemblies actually focus on? Assemblies act as a) a form of pressure on local authorities (resisting the commercial exploitation of public spaces, demanding support for the homeless etc.); b) a space for socialisation, communication and the solving of immediate problems (supporting families left without electricity, creating green spaces, etc.); c) a vehicle for local-level resistance against the current national economic and political system (occupying local tax offices to protest against national taxes, awareness raising on national policies in local squares, etc.); d) a space for the creation of new social and activist relationships as a demonstration of the future society members aspire to.  

Different assemblies may state that they aim to one or many of these ‘functions’, or can embody one or all of them without necessarily stating it as such. The inner city neighbourhood assembly I spent time with was simultaneously taking or planning action to the following: ensure free access to the local hospital for all, plan a reach-out campaign to migrant communities, organise anti-fascist events, support indebted and low-income families and local citizens who are facing legal charges after participating in demonstrations.

The sheer range and scope of these actions demonstrate the merging between the social and the political within the assemblies’ functioning. Just as at Syntagma, most assemblies proclaim their non-ideological character: ‘The assembly is a social formation, not a political one. Many of us have specific ideological convictions or belong to political groups (e.g., left-wing parties or anti-capitalist groups) but we don’t disclose it in the assembly. In the assembly, all discourses are on the table, except the fascist one.’ When I pointed out that most of the actions they take imply specific ideological readings of reality or are deeply political, assembly members replied although what differentiates the assembly from other militant groups is the process that led to taking these actions. All actions are agreed upon after long debates on their necessity, justification and potential impact – there are no prescribed courses of action dictated by specific ideologies or methodologies for social change.

Next to this openness concerning methodologies and actions, the assembly has decided on a number of practices that defend its direct democracy character, namely, decisions are reached by consensus and not by voting (‘if someone doesn’t agree with an action, we don’t move on, we keep deliberating on it’); no one can represent the assembly (assembly members refused to meet with me individually as spokespeople, I could only put questions to the group); and the assembly is always held in a public and open space (they kept meeting in the neighbourhood square even during the harshest weeks of the winter).

Overall, the assemblies, just like SSM, operate as self-governed communities according to the principles of direct democracy: they make their own rules and processes which are always open to review and change. Members of the assemblies cannot have representative roles – only operational ones – and no one can assign actions to another member. Instead, members choose to take charge of the different actions.

What makes popular assemblies fascinating is their commitment to a non-instrumental use of direct democracy. It is not practiced just as a tool for achieving collaborative decisions but as an approach for how we can co-exist with our neighbours, colleagues or fellow citizens in structures that can produce fairer solutions to social problems and fairer management of public resources. Popular assemblies in neighbourhoods might be the most prominent expression of this approach, but direct democracy practices are increasingly applied within workers’ collectives, unemployed groups, base unions, hospital associations and schools, creating a pool of experience and practical knowledge of horizontal social-structure organisation.

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34 Adapted and enriched from Experiences and Opinions from the Participation in the Open Assembly of Citizens of S.Paraskevi (2011) in Marina Sitrin Horizontality: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina (part of the texts that accompanied the Greek publication of the book).
35 Excerpt from interview, Athens, June 2012.
Unruly action

‘These are actions legitimised in people’s consciousness’
Research participant, member of neighbourhood assembly

The years of the crisis have seen an increase in the number of people involved in forms of action that might appear disruptive, illegitimate or illegal when opposed to the recognised norms of social mobilisation and the democratic (or one might say bureaucratic) routes to voice public concern and exercise pressure. Such actions might aim to declare protest and exert pressure like the occupation of the Syntagma Square or the relatively frequent and symbolic occupations of town halls and public buildings by their employees and trade unions.

In other instances, acts of unruliness aim to reverse a perceived injustice in the present, albeit temporarily. Such were the actions of the ‘I don’t pay movement’, which in 2010 started lifting the bars at toll stations so that drivers wouldn’t have to pay the fare. These actions didn’t just vent anger and ‘save’ money: they were accompanied by detailed and comprehensive analysis of why the particularly high toll was unfair and shouldn’t be paid based on analysis of taxpayers’ spending for these roads, corruption scandals, and privatisation processes in which citizens were not consulted. One can download the ‘how to block toll stations’ guide from the ‘I don’t pay movement’ website together with legal advice on one’s rights as a citizen in relation to the issue of public roads. The ‘I don’t pay’ toll practice became a significant instance of mass public disobedience, with thousands of citizens lifting up the road bars when reaching a toll post.

As the crisis deepened, unruliness spread to other everyday interactions with the state: citizens are now occupying the tills at hospitals so that patients can be seen without cost, reconnecting the electricity in houses where public services have cut provision, or preventing tax offices from printing foreclosure notes and blocking ticket-issuing machines at public transport stations so that people can move about the city for free.

These moments of disobedience are easily characterised as ‘illegal’ or ‘self-serving’, but one needs to look beyond the discourse of the ‘immoral citizen’ echoed by media and government alike. Actions such as these appeal to another kind of ‘moral economy’ – an underlying understanding of what is fair and just that permeates a society in a given context (Thompson, 1971). When the state is understood to be acting in illegitimate ways, citizens step in to correct it, to show how they want to be governed (Hossain, 2011). For example, the act of occupying the hospital tills to ensure free medical screenings for all is posing the question of fair resource allocation and is showing the state in the most straightforward way how the health system should work.

What makes so many citizens support such actions? A young assembly member who is herself a tax inspector told me: ‘These actions are legitimised in people’s consciousness and by people’s participation.’ Indeed, I attended a meeting at which a three-hour blockade of a hospital till was planned; more than half the members of the 40-strong assembly committed to meet the next morning at 6am at the local square and make their way to West Athens’ main hospital. I later learned that the action was supported by members of assemblies from other neighbourhoods as well as by the hospital’s doctors.

This example demonstrates the increasing appeal of such interventions and the level of organising behind them.36 Citizens taking part in these actions are not by any means the stereotypical direct-action enthusiast or radical-left activist. The most telling story is the one of M.G., a middle-aged woman who has never been involved in activism or politics before the crisis hit. She saw TV coverage of the ‘I don’t pay’ movement and admired its members’ courage and action-not-words attitude. She called them up and joined the group. Now she is an active member of the pan-Athens ‘Solidarity-Resistance-Disobedience’ network, a group that developed out of the ‘I don’t pay’ group when members felt it was becoming too hierarchical. The network holds monthly assemblies to plan actions and then stages one action per week, demonstrating in front of

36 300 people, including a good number of immigrants without papers, were examined for free that day.
tax offices and at toll posts, and connecting electricity to households. M.G. spoke of how she stands in solidarity with marches and strikes but how ‘we need something more drastic – always peaceful – but drastic. These actions can break the intimidation tactics that the government has imposed on us’. When I asked her if the movement helped her change her view of things, she was direct: ‘I learned a lot I didn’t know. I learned my rights and that some things are public goods not to be taken away from anyone. Now I am not afraid anymore, I am a fighting citizen’.

M.G.’s words point to an interesting aspect of such networks: the hybrid function they perform. They set out to solve people’s problems through direct action (as many citizens don’t actually have enough to pay for tickets, tolls, etc.) and develop into awareness-raising and state-monitoring networks (citizens can reach members of the networks or visit their sites to learn their rights and see what each new government measure will mean for them in practice). The case of the ‘Charatsi’ tax is the most exemplary one: ‘I don’t pay’ movements, assemblies, and resistance networks fiercely opposed the measure and disseminated widely why and how not to pay, while at the same time establishing action squads that reconnect electricity to affected households. The issue received massive attention and the Constitutional Court deemed that it is unconstitutional to cut the electricity if someone doesn’t pay the tax. This was a partial victory for the movement, but activists insist that direct and unruly action is what can make the struggle effective: ‘What gave momentum to the movement [against the charatsi] was that we were actually reconnecting electricity for households that had been cut off. We showed people that this can be done, that we can fix it ourselves, we are not assigning the problem to someone else and waiting for them to decide’.

But as citizens are taking matters into their own hands, questions about the limits of unruliness come to the fore: to what extent are these actions ‘legitimised in peoples’ consciousness’? How do networks sustain and examine their own moral grounds? These are important questions that are being addressed through the same direct democratic processes that require openness – the assemblies of these networks are public – and consensus – all actions are thoroughly discussed and debated by a good number of diverse individuals. The words of one activist, spoken during an assembly discussion of foreclosures on people that couldn’t afford to pay taxes and bills, are indicative of discussions taking place throughout the networks: ‘If the tax office tries to take away someone’s home, we have to step in and stop it. We can’t allow evictions. But if it’s about foreclosing other goods, we need to think what we are defending here. We are talking about the right to shelter and basic common goods like electricity; it’s not about defending any kind of property’.

In conclusion, direct and unruly action has in many cases become the only tool citizens have to demand accountability and correct injustices, but it is also increasingly used with programmatic intent by horizontal networks who want to oppose government policy and empower other citizens to engage in peaceful disobedience.

**Autonomy**

‘Considering the multi-faceted crises of the current moment we believe that there is an immediate need and a great opportunity for creating a network of collaborative and solidarity economic initiatives, through which we will re-define our everyday life, both in parallel to and in antagonism with the dominant system.’

Founding Declaration, Nea Guinea collective

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37 To watch videos of this network’s actions and also short videos on other forms of action in Greece, visit [http://reelnews.co.uk/its-not-me-anymore-its-us-now-the-street-fighters-from-alanya/](http://reelnews.co.uk/its-not-me-anymore-its-us-now-the-street-fighters-from-alanya/).

38 What is popularly called ‘Charatsi’ was an emergency property tax which was introduced in 2011 and is meant to be in place until 2016. Each citizen has to pay the ‘Charatsi’ for the house she lives in as an added ‘contribution to the state’ in addition to regular property tax. In a canny move, the government inserted this tax as an added fee to electricity bills, announcing that electricity provision would be cut from households that refused to pay the extra tax. ‘Charatsi’ was a word used in the Ottoman Empire to describe the taxes imposed by the sultan on his subjects.

39 Informal conversation with a member of a solidarity and resistance network.

40 For more information, visit [www.neaguinea.org](http://www.neaguinea.org).
Autonomy in Greek means ‘self-governance’. It refers to a society that decides on its own rules and processes, which are then constantly reviewed and monitored by the society itself. Currently, a number of citizen initiatives are focusing on creating self-organised and self-governed practices of production, consumption, and work in an effort to approach autonomous practices not only in the social, but in the economic sphere as well.

There are currently more than 300 citizen initiatives in Greece based on the ideas of solidarity and/or exchange economy. Those initiatives differ much in terms of form, content, and focus. There are, for example, solidarity trade hubs that bring products directly from producers guaranteeing better prices both for producers and for consumers. These hubs operate according to fair-trade principles (production should respect nature and human rights) and at the same time encourage producers to form horizontal networks amongst themselves. There are also ‘exchange economy’ or ‘alternative currency’ networks – organised through websites – where people can exchange goods for services. Finally, there is a boom in city gardening, food sharing networks, and other practices that advocate self-management of food production and consumption.

Such initiatives encourage people to find new means to meet their needs given ever-decreasing income. At the same time, they are straightforwardly calling on citizens to self-organise their everyday lives and rethink their relationship with production, consumption, and the norms that govern resources management.

There is a telling increase in the number of cases in which citizens occupy a green area, either in use or abandoned by public institutions or private companies, and set up a gardening and food production collective there. As members of such initiatives, citizens (including little kids) teach themselves to grow vegetables and fruits, preserve local plants, and make basic products such as jams, oils, and more. All decisions on land management and activities are taken through direct-democracy procedures. As K.M., member of the assembly that runs an occupied park in Western Athens pointed out, these ‘are not green or ecological initiatives – it is a political action showing how natural resources can be collectively and democratically managed’.

In another example of promoting autonomy in everyday life, the Nea Guinea collective in Athens organises workshops on the self-management of health, food, energy, and clothing. They are calling it a struggle to ‘reclaim our lives’ through ‘economically sustainable’ and ‘socially just processes’. The name Nea Guinea

Figure 3

Writing on an Athens wall that reads: ‘Utopia is believing that the world will stay the same’

represents a utopia, a distant destination where solidarity and respect define human relations and humans’ relations with the ecosystem.

Both Nea Guinea and other initiatives operate as workers’ collectives. Workers’ collectives constitute an interesting hybrid between citizen initiatives and labour formations. They are run by an assembly of workers, all paid the same hourly rate; profits made are used to support the growth of similar initiatives. Workers’ collectives are both a livelihood and a political choice: they aim to address the major individual and societal issue of labour and at the same time to build, from the ground up, a new paradigm for how needs can be met, businesses run, people empowered.

The majority of these initiatives see themselves as part of the broader movement of direct democracy and resistance described in the sections above. They constitute the other side of unruliness, where injustices of the governed are not denounced through disobedience but are overcome through experimentation with the creation of different relationships and practices.

Reflections: A moment of change for citizen action in Greece (and Europe?)

As ‘structural adjustment is coming to the West’ (Khanna, 2012) and European peoples are crushed under harsh austerity, unemployment, and unrepresentative institutions, the following years might see rapid changes in the ‘repertoires’ of citizen action in Europe as a whole. Scholars and commentators alike have spoken of the Greek case as the preamble of a darker Europe to come and the Greek people’s struggles as the battlefield where the case for a European social state will be lost or won.

In the light of this current moment for Europe, what is significant or new about the developments in the Greek terrain of citizen action? How do these developments contribute to our understanding of citizen action and social change? In this last section of the case study, I collect some preliminary reflections on these questions with a view to add to the on-going debate among scholars, activists, and practitioners concerning the changing face of citizen action.

On the new and significant

The Greek case shows that while the social state disintegrates, ultra-neoliberalism invades every form of public life, and representative democracy collapses, citizens take centre stage and experiment with new civic practices. The new civic practices constitute both vehicles for resistance to attacks by the current socioeconomic system and hubs of political creativity, where alternatives to that system are created in the here and now. These are alternative ways people can be organised, needs can be met, decisions taken, spaces used, production and consumption managed – or to put it more simply, they are new political alternatives.

At the heart of the flourishing civic practices is the issue of democracy and in this sense, the Greek movement is in direct ‘dialogue’ with the political processes and claims that shaped the revolutions in the Middle East and the Occupy movements in Europe and the US. What all of these movements, including the Greek one, did was to raise the democratic question as the most important question of our times: ‘they made democracy the question’ (Sittrin, 2012).

In Greece, as elsewhere, democracy was not only expressed as a claim, but was reflected and enacted in the forms and the content of citizen action. Those forms – open assemblies and horizontal networks with loose leadership – rejected representation and chose unmediated presence, replaced the culture of ‘assigning tasks’ with direct action, challenged ‘expertise’ and opted for tacit and networked knowledge, overcame the logic of the majority and looked for consensus.

42 For more on this relationship see footnote 23.
What might be less evident in other countries and is of special interest in the case of Greece is the prominence and spread of direct democracy practices and the considerable citizen engagement with unruliness and civic disobedience.

As noted earlier in this text, the SSM transformed the Indignados’ claim ‘real democraciaya’ to ‘amési dimokratía tora’, thus making it clear that citizens were not negotiating marginal improvements to the current system but aspiring to a wholesomely different model of democracy. Although one can say that Greece (and Athens in particular) has a strong political tradition familiar with direct democracy practices, over the last two years the latter have been rolled out and ‘tested’ by an increasing number of citizens initiatives concerned with diverse areas of life: neighbourhood, labour, health, alternative economy, education, food production and dissemination. This rich body of experience can gradually serve as a pool of lessons and ideas for both Greek and European movements.

Similarly, the days of the ‘crisis’ saw unruly and direct action embraced by a large number of so-called ‘average citizens’ beyond the long-standing Greek tradition of anti-authoritarian activists. Motivated by indignation that ‘the absolute minimum conditions for securing economic and political justice are being violated’ (Tadros, 2012), citizens are organising and promoting massive disobedience to taxes and laws and are ‘rudely’ correcting an illegitimate state and market by blocking or taking over state functions. In this way, they reinstate what is fair and should be common and public, and demonstrate to the state how democracy should be working.

These practices are shaking the conventional paradigms of how citizenship is lived, rights are claimed, and power contested. Their contribution is that they are introducing a new political culture and new mechanisms of contestation (Khanna, 2012). Direct democracy, horizontality, and autonomy become the core of a vision of a different society — and this is a vision that has to be modelled in the process of the struggle; the process becomes the way to reach the goal. It is not about the ‘what’ but about the ‘how’.

**On understanding citizen action and social change: reflections for scholars**

Is this ‘how’ enough? And enough for what? The new forms of political action and citizen organisation around the world might have been registered and debated as significant and innovative, but there has also been mounting criticism and doubt about what this political creativity can actually achieve. What can citizen collectivities and networks such as the ones presented in this case study accomplish? To what extent can they affect change at the level of structural and systemic injustice in a country such as Greece?

I would argue that the formation, survival, and expansion of such initiatives have already achieved a great deal. They have moved political action beyond single-issue claims and put the underlying logics of the multifaceted crisis we are facing on the agenda. They have created spaces where individual and collective change is taking place every day, where the values of solidarity-autonomy-democracy operate, and where tools that ensure a more liveable reality are created (Wainwright, 2012; Sitrin, 2012). In these spaces the relationships between citizens themselves and between citizens and the institutions that govern our lives are transformed and reconsidered.

Will this new political culture lead to sustainable changes in the political establishment and in civil society? Or will the new modalities be co-opted by the powerful or weather away once the crisis fades – as an initial reading of the evolution of the citizen action that emerged from Argentina’s crisis suggests (Fiorentini, 2012)?

These are valid questions which I feel we are struggling to answer with our existing models and knowledge frames. In this sense, the current moment stands as an invitation to all of us to look deep into moments when structural and sustainable change was achieved or was diverted and consider what kind of

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43 ‘Amési Dimorkatía Tora’ means ‘Direct Democracy Now’.
44 For an account of these practices see section ‘Direct Democracy’.
45 See section ‘The events...’.
relationships, partnerships, and strategies are needed to sustain and expand the political creativity of this moment.

We also might benefit from re-examining what we understand as ‘structural’ change and where we expect it to come from. Citizen movements in Greece, as elsewhere, are focusing on creating alternatives through small-scale networked action rather than through united national fronts that put forward lists with specific demands. This new form of citizen agency suggests that old models of exerting political influence might not be relevant anymore – or at the very least might be a limited pathway to addressing complex global crises. Additionally, the pathways along which new forms of citizen action emerged over the past years in Greece highlight the often-underplayed interrelation between mass centralized political events (such as the riots of 2008 and the SSM) and everyday decentralized citizen activity. Political events that might appear ineligible to recognised ways of doing political methods or that are understood as a one-off venting of anger are actually the arenas where new political cultures that will lead to new forms of action are created – as this case study showed, the lessons of riots and Syntagma spilled over into the citizen initiatives.

Some discount these events as ‘having no real democratic outcomes’ and defend the importance of everyday practices. Others overlook the struggles going on in the everyday just waiting for the next eruption. Movement dynamics in Greece suggest that there is a cycle, a continuum of citizen action with cycles and peaks, its ebbs and flows (Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011). Events are ruptures in the everyday that allow reality to be renegotiated. Through providing new practical, imaginary, or discursive resources (Khanna, 2012), political events become the life-giving force or multipliers of new practices which in turn prepare the ground for new moments of mass participation in citizen action. Maybe we are in need of new frameworks to capture how modalities are diffused, expanded, and adjusted, and to understand the interplay between events and practices, resistance and alternatives.

On making links: reflections for practitioners and activists

As in most of the movements that swept the world in 2011, traditional civil society actors didn’t play a crucial role in developing new civic practices in Greece. Instead, citizens turned to informal, spontaneous, self-governed forms of organisation. Such a reality is consistent with the growing literature on the disconnectedness between CSOs and new grassroots movements (Civicus, 2011).

This comes as no surprise, if we consider the divergence between the project-based culture and the norms of hierarchy and expert knowledge that characterize many formal organisations and the radically political, non-representative, and inclusive ethics of citizen initiatives. The research for this case study confirmed that in Greece, too, there is ground for relationships of distrust or contempt to be reinforced between CSOs and citizen movements, based on competing perceptions of what an empowering and effective civil society is or should be. This raises questions about how and when traditional and emergent forms of civic agency find entry points for understand each other. A number of evolving challenges might be urging them to do so: When and how will unruly action be supported? This case study demonstrated the contribution of political events and unruly action in transforming citizen action and political culture. CSOs are encouraged by the increasing manifestations of social unrest around the world to consider new and sometimes ways disruptive forms of participation as legitimate channels through which citizen agency is nurtured. How and when can CSOs support square occupations, public disobedience flaws, and so on? How will horizontal networks of both ‘ruly’ and ‘unruly’ citizen initiatives work together? How will exclusionary forces be countered? The rise of fascism in Greece paints a black picture of the possible paths opened by crisis and austerity. The country is witnessing frightening and frequent manifestations of racist violence and growing nationalistic sentiments. The latter breed a kind of citizen action which might seek to correct the lack of social justice, but with very different underlying values. For example, far-right citizens’ groups are organising soup kitchens and other charitable initiatives strictly for Greek citizens. How will all progressive citizen forces work together to understand and prevent the causes that exacerbate such developments?
What is the future of direct democracy? Direct democracy is at the heart of the forms of organisation and action that citizens deployed to respond to the crisis. The concept, principles, and claim of direct democracy has the power to revolutionise the ‘mantra’ of consultation and participation, which in many cases has devolved into tokenism. In direct democracy, people are neither ‘key informants’ to consultations nor just participants in processes initiated by others. They take control of the decision-making and action-taking process: they are the ones who set it up and the ones who review and evaluate it. As representative democracy is being increasingly challenged, direct democracy is increasingly used by governments around the world in an effort to restore trust and legitimacy (see for example the ‘open government’ initiatives). But as has been the case with the participation trend, direct democracy can be instrumentalised and stripped of its transformative potential. How can NGOs and citizen movements alike advocate for direct democracy and influence the way it will be defined and practiced?

How do you stay connected to society? The NGO preoccupation with how to be ‘with’ and not ‘for’ society is also a challenge for new movements. The levels of presence and ownership that the new forms of citizen action entail are hard to maintain through the difficult conditions in which many people are living: ‘People are shocked by the levels of attack, some assemblies’ participation has decreased, it is easier to retreat to the old way of doing politics – assign responsibility to someone else.’ The openness of these initiatives can also pose a challenge, as no collectivity is free from internal power relations and attempts at co-option. Political party members and people from groups with specific ideological orientations join initiatives trying to win small political gains and to advocate a specific course of action, in this way limiting the possibilities for ‘genuine dialogue about the content and forms of actions’. How can practitioners and activists safeguard the open, inclusive, and bottom-up nature of their initiatives?

On a more personal note, I would strongly argue in favour of the personal learning journey on which social change professionals can go as they engage with emergent forms of citizen action. The professional practice and language of ‘making change happen’ (capacity building, empowerment, awareness raising, lobbying, and campaigning) becomes contrasted and mixed with the language of ‘horizontality’, ‘collective process shaping’, ‘anti-hierarchy’, ‘disobedience’ and ‘self-education’. This is not only a language game for practitioners and activists alike but an invitation to consider new interpretations of the essence of ‘citizen mobilisation and campaigning’.

The fact though that the language is different doesn’t necessarily mean that the practice always differs. I watched informal citizen groups discuss what would make a leaflet’s title catchier, when and how to organise a national day of action, and how to plan an event that balances action and discussion – themes all too familiar to many CSOs. Often feeling puzzled by the co-existence of diverse citizen action ‘cultures’ in one group, I repeatedly asked questions such as: ‘Is your motivation mainly meeting needs or creating new practices and relationships? Is this something that opposes and rejects the state or do you want to create dialogue with power?’ I was repeatedly reminded that I am trying to put thing into boxes, that I am thinking in a dichotomy of separating praxis and ethos that don’t concern citizens. This is action-led and not ideology- or strategy-led organising (Stanning, 2011): it is permeated by the intention and desire to do something together, learn from it, make the road by walking it. Citizens who engage in new forms of citizen action might believe in autonomous practices and want to change governing institutions, might want to find hands-on solutions to urgent problems and create new relationships and structures in the process; they can distrust some CSO practices and adopt others.

The new citizen initiatives are a living experiment in the forms citizen action can take when it frees itself from the conceptual and practical boundaries that limit many ‘formal’ civil society vehicles. They nevertheless remain entangled in a complex relationship with those boundaries (Tadros, 2011). And maybe we all can learn a lot from being part of this experimentation and learning to cope with ambiguity.

47 Excerpt from interview, Athens. It is telling that three different interviews mentioned this example: ‘People come to the group to ask support for reconnecting the electricity but when that it’s done, sometimes they are hesitant in continuing with the actions. We tell them that we can’t do it for them, we can do it together and then together we can help someone else to do the same.’

48 Announcement from citizen initiative ‘dokimi’.
References


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