

Solidarity

The economic and political crisis present in Greece since 2010 has brought about a number of radical and violent changes in the country and the society, none more troubling than the resultant humanitarian crisis that has left its indelible imprint on the breakdown of the long-held and recognized social safety net. Famine, lack of pharmaceuticals and medical care, and the rapid loss of sustaining income have brought the vast majority of the population to the brink of destitution. As a response to it a self-organized movement has appeared that seeks to address these emergencies on the local level with the institution of soup kitchens, exchange and barter markets, and free clinics. The Solidarity Movement, as it has come to be known, operates on a platform that is multiply complex. We asked Heath Cabot and Theodoros Rakopoulos, two young anthropologists who have been working on this movement, to offer us their insights.

Occasional Paper 7

The Banality of Solidarity

Heath Cabot, College of the Atlantic

As an anthropologist teaching at an interdisciplinary undergraduate institution, I frequently find myself faced with the question of what ethnography as a method and anthropology as a field have to offer to the world. While I often stumble at this question, two key responses have risen to the top. The first is Clifford Geertz's (1975) assertion that ethnography is about trying to elucidate "the stories people tell about themselves to themselves," and in doing so, to bring into the foreground the habits and value systems that form the commonsensical webs of meaning that shape everyday life and "culture" (itself a deeply contested concept). My second response invokes George Marcus and Michael Fischer's (1999) discussion of the power of anthropology as "cultural critique," a position that allows us to show the constructedness of systems of meaning (what we often translate as "culture")—systems with sometimes violent effects.

These two positions call for different, and perhaps contradictory, approaches from ethnographers. Geertz, on the one hand, argues for the power of interpreting the lifeworlds of research interlocutors in and on *their own terms*. Marcus and Fischer, on the other hand, underscore the critical power of the ethnographer, a gesture that allows us to undermine certain cultural forms and larger systems of knowledge and injustice.



*Heath Cabot is professor of anthropology at the College of the Atlantic, an interdisciplinary liberal arts college in Maine, USA. In Winter and Spring of 2015, she was a Fellow with the Fulbright Foundation in Greece and a visiting researcher at Panteion University for Social and Political Sciences in Athens. She is the author of *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece* (Penn Press 2014) and is currently conducting research on solidarity clinics and how notions of somatic and social health are reconfigured under austerity. Her research has also been funded by the US National Science Foundation, the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation.*

I would, however, argue that these threads are more complementary than they might first appear. Both are grounded on the ethnographer's obligation to understand how systems of public meaning (culture) emerge and are shaped according to certain internal logics, which may become clear to others through the ethnographer's interpretive, even if critical, work. But we may emphasize these approaches differently and differentially. Some ethnographers focus more on the meaning-making projects of those with whom we come into conversation and relation (Biehl 2005; Crapanzano 1980). Daniel Linger (2001) calls this approach "person-centered ethnography," arguing that individual persons are themselves the best experts when it comes to their lives and lifeworlds. Others place a greater emphasis on the critical power of the anthropologist to show how people are shaped or inscribed by culturally-inflected power relationships (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Farmer 2005; Fassin 2007).

I seek a middle ground—however unstable and imperfect: I try to take seriously the meaning-making work of research interlocutors, while also acknowledging the impingements of culture and the forms of structural violence that people face. This was the guiding approach for my book on asylum in Greece (2014), in which I sought to elucidate how persons attempt to create tolerable lives and partial forms of justice within often overwhelming constraints. But in my new project, which focuses on the role of social solidarity clinics/pharmacies in austerity-afflicted Greece, I engage frequently with another iteration of the above dilemma. Increasingly, I find myself faced with the politicization (or even political cooptation) of the term solidarity and of solidarity initiatives themselves. Politicians, activists, and intellectuals alike—Greeks and non-Greeks—have lately engaged with both the term and the practice of solidarity on a discursive level, seeking to invoke its widespread appeal in a variety of politically charged projects.

Many of these political mobilizations emerge from various hues of the Greek and international Left(s), proclaiming solidarity with refugees, prisoners, and (in the case of international leftists) even solidarity with Greeks at large. But solidarity is also discursively ambiguous and by no means should be celebrated as belonging only to the worlds of leftist politics. "Solidarity" is the name of the Orthodox Church's NGO, and it even makes appearances in corporate culture: for instance, the phone company OTE recently played on the imagery of solidarity with the slogan *μαζί είμαστε ένα* (together we are one). Golden Dawn, the neo-Nazi party, has called for "solidarity with Greeks," violently excluding non-Greeks from this formulation. Meanwhile, Greek solidarity movements have received widespread coverage in the European and international press and among left-leaning intellectuals and activists. While doing fieldwork in social clinics/pharmacies between January and August 2015, I regularly met journalists, activists, and academics passing through these sites and from places as diverse as Japan, France, Germany, Denmark, the U.K., the US, and Turkey. One of my interlocutors joked that their clinic was now a stop on the tourist route, right after the Acropolis.

As an ethnographer, my engagement in solidarity initiatives is on the level of analysis, trying to show how people themselves who are involved intimately with such movements describe and practice solidarity in ways that often do not cohere easily with emergent grand narratives of political struggle.

This presents a dilemma that is simultaneously analytical and ethico-political: to what extent should I, as an anthropologist, apply an external interpretive frame to solidarity, such as an approach that claims solidarity for politics? And to what extent should I highlight more internal meanings of solidarity by trusting my interlocutors themselves to interpret solidarity for me? Or perhaps there is another middle ground?

In order to illustrate this dilemma more effectively I too will draw on statements made by Leo Panitch at the conference “Democracy Rising” (Athens, July 2015), where Theodoros Rakopoulos and I organized a panel on the local meanings of solidarity in Greece. Panitch began by explaining that he felt great humility in being the first speaker on the panel—especially since he was not Greek. He devoted most of his speaking time to a discussion of solidarity movements in Greece, mentioning that while in Athens for the conference, he had the opportunity to “spend some time” with Solidarity4All (<http://www.solidarity4all.gr/>). This organization, Solidarity4All, serves as a support body and financial clearing-house for donations to the heterogeneous, informal, neighborhood-level initiatives that constitute the *κίνημα αλληλεγγύης* (solidarity movement) in Greece. Panitch then went on to state his great admiration for Solidarity4All and the movement at large, and he urged any future government to strongly support solidarity networks.

This sentiment may not sound particularly noteworthy on the surface—especially coming from a political economist who is anything but naïve about the complexities entailed in relationships between the state and civil society. The statement is, however, doubly problematic: first of all, it is a position imbued with the romanticization of human solidarity (as Rakopoulos highlights in his piece where he, also, engages with Panitch’s intervention); and secondly, it ignores the fact that such an idea—state support for solidarity initiatives—is one of the most hotly contested and troubling issues among solidarity workers themselves. Most solidarity workers insist that the state must maintain responsibility for healthcare provision in Greece, and that solidarity clinics are just temporary stop-gaps; many express fear that state support would be a form of semi-institutionalization. I have heard many solidarity workers actively object to any official state or governmental involvement, though some clinics cultivate relationships (both formal and informal) with government officials, municipal offices, or ministries. Others resist the ways in which state involvement might compromise the innovativeness, radicalism, or flexibility of their work. At a country-wide conference of various solidarity initiatives in May 2015, the debate regarding the relationship between solidarity initiatives and the state provided the most lively and vitriolic exchange during the meeting of social clinics/pharmacies: “We will never institutionalize ourselves—we will never join the government”—shouted one solidarity worker, himself a doctor and activist who has been active in social clinics since 2011. Another solidarity worker, however—with the rhetorical vigor often present in debates in Greece—countered that with a leftist government now in power, and with the state healthcare system under incredible stress, social clinics had a responsibility to advise and help the government. The discussion went on like that for almost an hour.

Furthermore, Solidarity4All must not be conflated with the solidarity movement. During my research I found that Solidarity4All is welcomed by some in the solidarity movement but is viewed with suspicion by others. Unlike grassroots solidarity initiatives, Solidarity4All does not run purely on voluntarism and historically has close ties to the SYRIZA party; they also engage in the management and distributions of funds. In contrast,

solidarity initiatives insist on the model of solidarity itself as an alternative to wage labor and monetary exchange (see Rakopoulos “Occasional Paper” 6). Many also frame financial donations as dangerous, associated with philanthropy or charity—modes of assistance that solidarity networks work hard to position themselves against as they object to the power relationships that such modalities entail. Many solidarity initiatives only accept donations in-kind. I have thus encountered a pronounced suspicion toward Solidarity4All with regard to *what exactly is* their status vis-à-vis the state and what exactly happens to the funds that they collect. I want to emphasize that by no means does this suspicion necessarily overlap with my own view of the organization’s important work. Nevertheless, these concerns are deeply relevant for the very people with whom Panitch proclaimed solidarity.

After the panel I approached Leo Panitch with the intention of sharing some of the insights that I have gathered on the ground, hoping to relate this tension to him and ask his thoughts. He responded that Gramsci had written in great detail about the role of the intellectual in the class struggle, and that what was at stake in my question was how intellectuals can disseminate and translate between the institutions of governance and civil society. Panitch is right to call our attention to this point, for Gramsci’s analysis goes precisely to the heart of the dilemmas of anthropologists (and other intellectuals) seeking to do politically engaged yet sensitive work on politically relevant issues. Throughout the GCAS conference, I found *solidarity* invoked not only to proclaim support for Greece and Greeks but to conjure a European or international Left, which had, for some participants, clearly appeared as visible or manifest at the conference. I have argued elsewhere (<http://www.analyzegreece.gr/topics/solidarity-resistance/item/303-heath-cabot>) that the pronounced “solidarity” (both as a practice and as a discourse surrounding such practices) of the international Left may run the risk of pushing to the margins the specificities (and diversities) of the predicaments that Greeks are facing now. But that is not my chief concern here. Rather, my question now is to what extent an engaged intellectual should be interpreting and ascribing politically relevant meanings to social phenomena, versus listening to those who live and struggle within those worlds we hope to understand—particularly when these interpretive projects may be in tension with each other.

Panitch simultaneously claimed humility in the face of Greek solidarity movements while prescribing a kind of solution—which itself was antithetical to the stated goals of many solidarity workers. I am much less confident in my response. Clearly, I am concerned about the political and ethical implications of marginalizing local perspectives on solidarity. Furthermore, from my field data, it is clear to me that the stated motivations of many solidarity workers do not necessarily cohere, in any easy way, with the projects of leftist politics. As such, the cooptation of solidarity work for the projects of an international or Greek Left not only potentially marginalizes local interpretations of solidarity but also bears the risk of eliding crucial perspectives on what makes solidarity happen, as a lived, even banal, every-day practice.

Solidarity work may be explicitly politically motivated for some practitioners—and it may be deeply imbued with political potential (Rakopoulos 2014). But many solidarity workers refuse to describe their work in terms that can be easily translated, for a researcher or engaged intellectual, into the realm of politics, class struggle, or even social justice more broadly. Anthropologists have issued important warnings telling us that we must be suspicious of claims to anti-politics, particularly in the realm of aid distribution. In the vein

of cultural critique, for instance, James Ferguson (1994), and more recently, Miriam Ticktin (Ticktin 2006, 2011) have argued that by couching humanitarian aid in terms of moral-ethical (and anti-political) projects, aid workers often elide the power relationships that their interventions enact. Solidarity certainly has moral-ethical dimensions that are worthy of unpacking with care (something that Theo Rakopoulos and I, independently of each other, are currently researching). Nevertheless, many solidarity workers articulate their labor not so much in moral terms but as unfolding in the banality (and even drudgery) of the everyday. I would suggest that such banality—which is easily shunted aside by a grander politicized narrative of solidarity work—is crucial in the labor and practice of solidarity. The banalities of solidarity, and their attendant small pleasures and struggles, often resist the narratives and discourses of politics, but they may nonetheless be crucial for the realization of solidarity work in practice.

To close, I will leave you with two relatively raw impressions or stories, gleaned from my ongoing fieldwork, featuring two solidarity workers. The accounts are imminently rich—in no way can I do justice to them here. These two persons, and their approaches to and interpretations of their work, render me silent, without easy access to interpretive, critical, or political analysis.

March 2015

Nia has taught me to understand the pleasures of organizing medicines into shoe boxes. The pharmacy has no heat or electricity, and so it is dark and cold. But Nia—a retired school-teacher who is 78 years old—is there at 8 am every day, sweeping, mopping, and setting up the tables and chairs in the small waiting area of the entryway (the pharmacy is in an apartment on the first floor of a building) so that it looks professional and τακτοποιημένη (in order and put-together). Whenever she catches me chatting too much (or, as she says laughingly, playing the anthropologist), she reprimands me, only half teasingly: Εδώ δουλεύουμε—“Here we work.”

One day she takes me aside. She has printed out and then cut small pieces of paper where she has typed the active ingredients of medicines, which she has learned over her two years of hard work at the pharmacy (even though she, like most of the other volunteers, is not a pharmacist). She has a carefully construed method: she shows me how to tape them on the sides of old empty shoeboxes, all of which have been used in other configurations of the pharmacy’s backroom αποθήκη (storage area). We then sort through garbage bags full of donated left-over medicines and place them in the boxes, rearranging them repeatedly to make more space. We chat—but not too much. After working diligently and pleasantly together, she urges me to go over and try one of the κουλούρια (ring-cookies) that she has brought.

June 2015

I have finally gotten up the courage to ask Kostis for a more formal interview. It has been six months that we have known each other, and we chat frequently at the pharmacy, most often jokingly—although sometimes he gets serious. He has worked at the pharmacy for two years, and he is there every day. He often tells me he is bored: βαρεμένος. He told me the very first day I met him that he did not have much hope for the future. He has been unemployed for a few years now. But he

is one of the more pleasant of my co-solidarity workers, with a keen and well-placed, quiet humor. People who come to the pharmacy for their medicines actively seek him out. One of his friends calls him ο μοναχός (the monk)—he is so quiet and polite.

We meet in Thessio on a Saturday afternoon for coffee, and he shifts uncomfortably in his chair, explaining that he has never been able to sit still, even as a kid. When I ask him why he works at the pharmacy, he lifts his chin and answers with a shrug Ξέρω γω; (how do I know?).” I point out that he is there every day, that the people who come there really seem to like him. He thinks for a moment and responds: Να περνάω την ώρα μου (to pass my time).” He then adds that he tries to serve (να εξυπηρετώ), and he likes to offer (να προσφέρω).

Kostis is deeply cynical of politics. This government, he explains, is just like any other. He repeats a line from an old Rembetiko song, “Οι ομολογίες” (The bonds), by Kostas Karipis: Ντούρου ντούρου ντούρου στην Πλατεία Κουμουντούρου [sic]. This song describes the 1930 devaluation of bonds granted by the Greek government to refugees from Asia Minor. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s57zAau5vbk>). But here Kostis references members of the SYRIZA party (among them the Prefect of Attika, Rena Dourou) talking nonsense—“dourou dourou”—in their offices at Koumoundourou Square in central Athens—thus invoking earlier histories of financial crisis and government betrayal.

He laughs and I laugh. He writes the phrase in my notebook. He tells me he doesn’t believe in revolutions—he gestures to the sky and laughs at the many revolutionaries της φούσκας (of the bubble)—who never really do anything.

To work, even when one is bored. To show up every day, even when it is dark and cold. To organize, with care and even pleasure, donated boxes of medicines into discarded shoeboxes.

To pass one’s time. To offer.

I wonder if that might be what solidarity is.

REFERENCES CITED

- Biehl, Joao. 2005. *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Bourgois, Philippe I., and Jeff Schonberg. 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. California Series in Public Anthropology Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cabot, Heath. 2014. *On the Doorstep of Europe : Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*. 1st edition. The Ethnography of Political Violence Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Crapanzano, Vincent. 1980. *Tubami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farmer, Paul. 2005. *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Fassin, Didier. 2007. *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of Aids in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ferguson, James. 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development," Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1975. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. London: Hutchinson.
- Linger, Daniel Touro. 2001. *No One Home : Brazilian Selves Remade in Japan*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer. 1999. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rakopoulos, Theodoros. 2014. "Resonance of Solidarity: Meanings of a Local Concept in Anti-Austerity Greece." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 32: 313–337.
- Ticktin, Miriam. 2006. "Where Ethics and Politics Meet: The Violence of Humanitarianism in France." *American Ethnologist* 33: 33–49.
- _____. 2011. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Solidarity links

<http://www.analyzegreece.gr/topics/solidarity-resistance/item/356-austerity-vs-the-people-s-health-how-greeks-built-an-alternative-health-system>

<http://popaganda.gr/mia-pixida-dikti-tin-allilengii/>

<http://www.newspile.gr/54728/2015-01/ston-burwna-uparxei-ena-wdeio-pou-didaskei-mousiki-kai-allileggi.html>

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/2a18r29513t7ccl/Democracy%20Rising%20Panel.MP3?dl=0>