The commons in theory and practice: Self-management in contemporary Greece

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Historically, the commons have been a figure of collective ownership that communities have instituted to cater for the well-being of each and every one of their members. Whether material, such as earth, water and air, or immaterial, such as tales, knowledge and skills, the commons have woven a connecting tissue, drawing all individuals together in a web of social cooperation and mutual dependence. In feudal medieval Europe, for instance, despite the great concentration of land ownership, the commons enabled even the poorest members of society to dispose of grazing land for their animals and water for their fields. Contrary to what Hardin contended in his famous “tragedy of the commons”, the commons have been administered by collective means
of control and rationing that secure their preservation (Linebaugh, 2012: 117). Hence, the existence of the commons presupposes, but it also propels, self-institution within a community (Ostrom, 1990: 15-28).

The history of the 20th century is the history of the push and pull between the market and the state, between private and public property, at the expense, usually, of cooperative and communal forms of social existence and production. Despite the generalization of the welfare state and workers’ social rights, public property and private property have proven to be communicating vessels that rely on one another for their reproduction (Bollier and Helfrich, 2012). Even in the most well-meaning socialist regimes, redistribution is inclined upwards and social rights do not compensate for the workers’ reified existence and social isolation.

Following the dismantling of the apparatuses of redistribution by the triumphant neoliberalism in the late 20th century and the intensification of new and old processes of enclosure, a new mode of politics has come to the fore. This dismisses both state and private capitalism, both public and private property, and places a reinvented form of community at the centre of political life. It builds on the experience of commons-based activities that persisted through the 20th century to craft living institutions that piece back together the fragments of collective life in order to pursue needs-based rather than profit-driven economic activity, to foster equity and cooperation through horizontal decision making and to reinstitute the commons as a cardinal node of human life.

In this chapter, we intend to track the obstacles, the resistances and the dangers that such common alternatives have encountered and we seek to shed light on the different paths they chart and the new prospects they open up for workers’ control over production and distribution within an enlarged social economy of solidarity for our times.

The ensuing excursus in the actual “social economy” brings into visibility a variety of partly non-capitalist processes of collective self-activity that have operated alongside and intertwined with a state-dominated market economy involving a multitude of small business, an under-industrialized production and a large service sector (commerce, tourism, finance etc.) (Angelidis, 2007; Milios, 2013). Taking our cues from the constructive critique of ‘capitalo-centrism’ put forward by Gibson-Graham
(2006), we adumbrate here the historical contours of a heterogeneous economy which is not fully captured by any single logic, global force or sovereign structure. Impure mixtures of economic practices, conflicting politics of social cooperation and ethics of solidarity, singular, fragile initiatives of self-management disclose moments of tension, openness and diversity in a hegemonic state-capitalist configuration pushed and pulled by other determinations. The thrust of this analysis is that if we can begin to see alternative activities and dimensions as diffused, viable, and persistent over time, “we may be encouraged here and now to actively build on them to transform our local economies” (Gibson-Graham, 2006: xxiv). “[F]uture possibilities become more viable by virtue of already being seen to exist, albeit only in the light of a differentiating imagination” (ibid: xxxi).

**PART I.**

**COOPS AND PRODUCERS’ CONTROL:**

**A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT**

**a. Cooperativism**

Agriculture and farmers’ cooperatives lie at the heart of productive activity where social collaboration and producers’ self-management asserted and expanded themselves in modern Greek history. Perhaps one of the world’s first industrial-agricultural cooperative was founded at Ampelakia in central Greece in 1780, dealing with the production and export of purple cotton yard (Young, 1984; Nasioulas, 2012: 156). The enactment of the first law on coops in 1915 marked the onset of a large farm cooperative movement, which to this date has been involving between 500,000 to 750,000 farmers at any one time on average (PASEGES, 2013; Young, 1984; Kame nidis, 1996: 138), focusing on the provision of agricultural inputs (machinery, fertilisers, feed grains etc.), the handling of agricultural products (cereals, olive oil, tobacco, fruits and vegetables etc.) and services (training, transportation and advertisement, among others) (Papageorgiou, 2010: 37; Kolumvas, 1991: 96-98).
These types of producers’ association have broadly adhered to the international principles of modern cooperativism: democratic control of individual associations and their higher-level confederations (one person, one vote), production attuned to social needs, local and ecological conditions, mutual aid among producers (Kroustallaki-Beveratou, 1990: 130, 141). A number of them have displayed major economic achievements and social solidarity, while throughout its history the movement has contributed considerably to rural development, the construction of vital infrastructures and the sustenance of small farmers (Papageorgiou, 2010: 38; Klimi, 1991: 110-111; Kroustallaki-Beveratou, 1990: 129). But it remained largely under state tutelage and political patronage since its very beginnings, preventing the rise of an autonomous, self-directed and self-conscious cooperativist movement (Kroustallaki-Beveratou, 1990: 130-133).

In the face of the forceful neoliberal assault of capital, the deep recession engendered by devastating austerity measures, the neoliberal restructuring, privatization and dismantlement of the welfare state, the institutionalized cooperative movement in Greece is seeking now to re-launch itself on new foundations. It is claiming its independence from the state political system and capitalist forces, and it is reaffirming the international principles of cooperativism: democratic self-management on the basis of equality, tight collaboration and confederation of the various associations on local, regional, national and international levels, care for the community and sustainable development (PASEGES, 2011). It remains to be seen if the unparalleled offensive of the neoliberal state and capitalism will challenge farmers to forge autonomous and participatory unions which will resituate themselves within a new broader social economy of solidarity labouring against corporate and state power.

b. Workers’ control

Greek industrial relations have been characterized overall by a scant involvement and participation of workers in the management of industries. Most efforts in this direction have been short-lived and unsuccessful in the end (Koutroukis and Jecchinis, 2008: 31).

Following sporadic experiments in workers’ participation in the late 19th and early
20th centuries that ended with the imposition of the Metaxas’ dictatorship in 1936 (Koutroukis, 1989: 44-47), in 1983 new legislation was enacted promoting workers’ participation in line with the “socialist ideology” of the new PASOK government (Raftis and Stavroulakis, 1991: 294). The results however were miserable, as there was little independent mobilization on the part of employees themselves, and their actual input was overshadowed by the involvement of government agencies, political parties and trade union factions (Koutroukis and Jecchinis, 2008: 35).

Overall, the failure of legislative initiatives and state-driven policies championing workers’ control in the ‘80s and the 90’s should be put down to a set of intertwined factors: the hostile attitudes and manipulative interference of business and trade unions; the culture of managerial authoritarianism in the workplace; government interventionism; the lack of a tradition of employee participation in the running of companies; workers’ demands were more general in their content and exceeded the context of particular workplaces; trade-union activism and participation in the workplace had not been institutionally enshrined for a long time; insufficient understanding, motivation, commitment and training on the part of labour; the party-political polarization of Greek industrial relations. Most importantly, the dismal record of workers’ participation in this period should be traced back to the fact that in Greek industry “participatory arrangements have been introduced solely through legislation, while in the USA and most Western European countries legal provisions were mainly used to validate arrangements already established by custom and practice” (Raftis and Stavroulakis, 1991: 295).

It is worth noting, however, that in a dozen of cases during the same period workers took militant action and were more actively engaged in the management of their industries. We will pause to consider two instances in which workers’ control was pursued through spontaneous initiatives of the workers themselves, in two companies where labour was telling non-unionised (ibid.: 297).

The I. Pantelemidis Company, located in the municipality of Evosmos, in the district of Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, produced wheel rims and enjoyed a near monopoly in this field. When its founder died in 1981, his heirs declined the succession due to the outstanding debts of the company, and the rim factory faced immediate closure. Its 23 employees mobilized to avert this danger and in November 1981 they resolved to
take over the industry assisted by the local municipal authorities and the metalworkers’ trade union. This was a genuine and militant workers’ takeover as no legal framework was available for such an initiative, the company hung in a legal midair and they had to operate informally (ibid.: 307; Koutroukis, 1989: 50-52). Workers entertained close ties with the company and each other, as most of them were in their fifties and sixties and were employed at the factory from the start. Party and trade union politics played no role in their everyday activity and their decision-making.

The General Assembly functioned as the main governing body but, gradually, a Production Coordination Committee, made up of three informally elected and revocable members, took charge of the operations of the factory. Initially, workers were excited at the prospects of their business and achieved impressive results, raising productivity by 100% in the first months, increasing their wages and reducing working hours. Later on, however, there was a drop in efficiency due to reduced enthusiasm and commitment, slack work rhythms, and lack of efficient business planning. Both objective and subjective obstacles, such as continuous bureaucratic impediments, the old age of most workers who were soon to be retired, the absence of relevant background and class and political consciousness, contributed to this unfortunate outcome. Six and a half years after the original takeover, the remaining workers of the factory turned over ownership to the municipality of Evosmos (ibid.).

A similar experience was witnessed in the Koulistanidis Textile Company in the same period, again in the area of Thessaloniki. Heavy indebtedness forced the company to stop payments in February 1980. In October 1980 the remaining 117 employees asked the son of the former owner to assume the post of emergency administrator, while a court-appointed supervisor controlled all daily transactions. At the end of 1983 the burden of debts made closure inevitable, but in the meantime workers ran effectively the company without any authoritative supervision on the shop floor, managing production and carrying out transactions with banks, social security funds and government agencies. Decisions were taken collectively and often unanimously by all workers.

There are many noticeable affinities with the Pantelemidis case which may help to shed light on its successes and failures. The workforce consisted mainly of labourers in their fifties and sixties who had worked together for long. They avoided party and
trade union politics and they refused to form a union on these grounds. They preferred instead to operate autonomously without any formal structure, at a time when there was no legal framework or other established agency to uphold and legalise their self-activity (Raftis and Stavroulakis, 1991: 302).

Despite their final collapse, both instances of workers’ independent action and collective control took place in an unfavourable environment where they had to walk a solitary road without precedent. Their capacity to manage effectively their industries against the odds, lacking any relevant experience, bears witness to the latent potential of labour for self-direction and self-motivation. The ties they had forged over the years by labouring together and the emphasis on their independence from formal party politics and bureaucratic trade unionism underpinned their limited but exceptional achievements. On the other hand, cultural traits bearing on the construction of passive and consumerist subjectivities which are indifferent to workers’ democracy, the absence of a broader labour and social movement nurturing autonomy and solidarity, the lack of a supportive financial, legal and political infrastructure and the non-existence of any network of self-managed industries, communities and social organizations explain their short life and eventual demise.

PART 2.
FRESH STARTS IN AN EMERGING ECONOMY OF SOLIDARITY: SELF-MANAGEMENT, NETWORKS AND THE COMMONS IN RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS OF NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

a. Social dislocation as an effect of neoliberal crisis-governance

From the ‘80’s onwards, key shifts in Greek political culture involved the wide diffusion of utilitarian individualism and the eventual eclipse of collective concerns, projects and commitments. Social self-mobilisation was gradually confined to voting
for a party in the elections and to seeking private benefits through patronage relations and clientele networks (Sevastakis, 2004: 11-22; Sakelaropoulos and Sotiris, 2004: 203-206). In the 90’s and the early 00’s a consensual post-democracy crystallized in Greece in line with similar mutations in liberal democracies across the world. The confluence of the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties on a liberal-modernizing agenda enjoyed the consensus of middle-class individuals. The consumerist, apolitical individualism of a critical mass of the citizenry was the flipside of the shared allegiance of ruling parties to the neoliberal doctrine as the finally found key to an abundant hyper-capitalism (Crouch, 2004: 4, 59-60, 103; Kioupkiolis, 2006).

From 2010 onwards, however, the neoliberal hegemony effected an authoritarian turn away from post-democratic consensus. In the state of exception instituted under the acute sovereign debt crisis and growing budget deficits, the commitment of ruling parties to the same basic coordinates (private market economics, EU, Eurozone) has enforced recession policies and an upward redistribution of wealth, in line with the hegemonic monetarist-neoliberal policies of EU elites and the IMF who dictated the terms of the ‘bailout’. This shook the material ground under the feet of middle and lower classes who had consented to an impoverished democracy in return for a debt-financed affluence.

Between 2010 and 2012, the cluster of structural ‘reforms’ foisted on the Greek economy and society in return for the ‘bailout package’ of the Troika has inflicted harsh material pain on popular majorities, terrorizing and traumatizing them. Statistical indicators can convey a very rough idea about the war-time economic collapse and material devastation visited on Greek society by the austerity program implemented in 2008-2012. The real GDP shrank by -21, 3% in this period, and it is expected to contract further by -4, 2% in 2013. Private consumption decreased by -23, 2%, while unemployment skyrocketed from 7, 7% to 24, 4% in 2012 (IMF, 2013). More than 100 000 private enterprises closed in 2010-2012, while 55 000 are expected to go out of business in 2013, leaving so far 500 000 unemployed and generating a ‘humanitarian crisis’ due to the lack of an adequate social safety net (GSEVEE, 2012, 1013). Full-time employment fell from 67% in 2010 to 56, 5% in early 2012, while there was a 337% rise in the forced change of full-time contracts into flexible forms of labour (Mouriki, 2012: 71-72).
This traumatic shock paved the way for repeated cutbacks in wages, welfare expenses and living standards, for privatizations, the abrogation of numerous social rights (social benefits, protection from unemployment, labour rights), an effective disregard for political liberties and the removal of legal barriers to the unfettered exploitation of labour. Such cataclysmic changes would have been unthinkable without the rhetoric and the politics of terror deployed in an undeclared state of exception (Balourdos, 2011: 165-192; Mouriki and Balourdos eds., 2012).

However, the “fabrication of the indebted man” (Lazzarato, 2011) was perhaps the key development towards the construction of self-disciplined atomised individuals who are willingly malleable under the rule of neoliberal capital. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, at the pivot of this new regime of subjectivity lies a particular morality of guilt for one’s mismanagement and fear of an imminent and cataclysmic state “bankruptcy”, in tandem with a certain entrepreneurial ethos. The indebted subject is forced to take upon itself the costs and the risks of contemporary economic conditions, coping with poverty and the lack of social benefits, managing one’s accumulating debts and assuring one’s employability in the face of job insecurity (ibid.: 28, 41-43, 74, 97). This process intensifies the tendencies of neoliberal governance to fabricate ‘responsible individuals’ who take full charge of their lives without relying on social services, collective bonds and the redistribution of wealth (Rose, 1999).

b. The new social economy, biopolitical labour
and the commons

The emergence of a network of self-organized collectives, which are active in various fields of commerce, exchange, production, social services (health, education, care for the homeless etc.), marked a turning point in the actually existing social economy in Greece, in 2010-2011. This was a response to urgent social needs under the massive economic collapse. But it constituted also a qualitative shift in the historical function of cooperatives and social enterprises, which operated now within the context of a broader resistance movement and placed an enhanced emphasis on autonomous self-organization, social solidarity, networking and opposition to state policies and neo-
liberal capitalism (Lieros, 2012; Varkarolis, 2012; Solidarity4all, 2012). Confronting head-on the hegemonic neoliberal strategy which sets out to reconfigure the body social and to fashion atomized and impoverished modes of subjectivity, they strive to construct bonds of solidarity and to effectively bolster the capacity of individuals for autonomy, self-activity and collective co-operation. They intervene in the same terrain of social life, bodies and affects which is being targeted by neoliberal biopower and they struggle against this power with a view to advancing an emancipatory and solidaristic counter-project.

This is why the wedge driven between a wider not-for profit social economy, which fosters collective goods and social interests, and a solidarity economy, which is more politically oriented and antagonistic to market and state politics, becomes particularly pertinent in crisis-ridden Greece. Broadly construed, the ‘social economy’ can be defined as “commercial and non-commercial activity largely in the hands of third-sector or community organizations which give priority to meeting social (and environmental) needs before profit maximization” (Amin 2009, p. 4). By contrast, the first sector, the “market”, is “profit-oriented, organized around private interests and exclusively sustained by commercial trade; the second sector [is] non-trading and involving planned provision of public services by the state” (ibid.: 6).

The first Greek law on “Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship” (4019/2011) institutes the “Social Cooperative Enterprise”, and pledges to support all economic entities whose statutory purpose is the provision of social services and they are democratically self-managed (Nasioulas, 2012: 165-166). In 2012, 7.197 co-operatives (agricultural, banks, plumbers’, pharmacists’, women’s agrotourist etc.), 11 mutual societies (mutual help funds etc.) and 50.600 associations, foundations, non-profit and voluntary organisations can fall under a general description of the contemporary “social economy” in Greece (ibid.: 152).

To gauge the transformative potential of those endeavours, we should view them against the backdrop of the current transformations in the mode of capital accumulation. As De Angelis (2012) points out, capitalism is now facing an impasse. On the one hand, its very existence is dependent upon the social and cultural reproduction of labour. On the other, maintaining its current rate of growth presupposes now the demise of all redistributive arrangements, the dismantling of the welfare state, health
and education systems, the privatisation of the provision of public goods, etc. By withdrawing from the social reproduction of labour power, capital is pulling the rug from under its feet. This is why “capital needs the commons, or at least specific, domesticated versions of them” (De Angelis, 2012: 185). It needs to accept economic arrangements founded on the principle of social cooperation, rather than profit, so as to cope with the devastation inflicted by the neoliberal advances, to fill the gaps left by the retreating welfare state and to contain generalised discontent and conflict.

However, commons-based economic activity can also produce the exactly opposite effect: It can “create a social basis for alternative ways of articulating social production, independent from capital and its prerogatives” (ibid.). This subversive possibility is inherent in all social economy activities, but it is made effective only when these structures are situated within a wider transformative project that goes beyond economic activity and strives to supplant the dominant capitalist institutions with bottom-up alternatives grounded in equity, justice and solidarity.

From this perspective we can single out the collective economic endeavours that were initiated by the resistance movements from 2008 onwards, grasping them in terms of a distinct “solidarity economy” which seeks to reconstruct social bonds. This economic field is oriented towards direct democracy and mutual aid. It sees itself not as charity or as a substitute for the shrinking welfare state, but as a socio-political attempt at collective self-empowerment. It has an anti-systemic edge, purporting to transform relations of production, exchange and consumption through co-operative, free associational and mutual help institutions and networks. Rooted in neighbourhoods and localities, it struggles against the privatization of the commons and it resists co-optation by market and state forces (Nikolopoulos and Kapogiannis, 2012: 29-31, 35, 108; Lieros, 2012: 46-47).

A solidarity economy construed along these lines is antagonistic to heteronomous state politics, capitalist hierarchies and the reign of profit, as distinct from a social economy which operates as “a third sector” that exists side-by-side and complements the public (state) and private (market) economy (Varkarolis, 2012: 45; Lieros, 2012: 37, 71, 82, 159). According to existing rough estimates and informal records, this solidarity economy in Greece comprises nearly 150 collective initiatives which include: social clinics and pharmacies for the uninsured and the unemployed; social
kitchens and movements for the collection and distribution of food; social grocery stores and circuits for the distribution of consumer goods without middlemen; free share bazaars, time-sharing banks and local exchange trading systems; social evening classes; immigrant support centres; urban art collectives and alternative cultural spaces; legal support groups; work collectives such as coffee shops, courier delivery companies, bookshops, agricultural co-operatives of unemployed women and one occupied factory, the Vio.Me industry (Solidarity4all, 2012).

These economic initiatives make plural, imperfect, grassroots endeavours to advance social self-organization and to intervene in everyday life, unsettling the established hierarchies, norms and values of state rule and profit-driven market economies (Varkarolis, 2012: 39, 45-49). They stage thus struggles for the defence and the expansion of the “commons”, of collective goods and social relations which are located between and beyond the domain of the public (state) and the private (market): ‘the commons of culture, the immediately socialized forms of “cognitive” capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education...but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc; the commons of external nature threatened by pollution and exploitation...; the commons of internal nature (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity)’ (Zizek, 2008: 428-429). The means of production and reproduction of common life (industry, water, education, software etc.) that have been privately appropriated in the past or that are now targeted for new enclosures and appropriations by global capital are arguably the locus of key social antagonisms in our era which are articulated around collective resources and the shared substance of our social being.

The ‘commons’ are used today in a more specific sense that captures mutations in the dominant mode of production and new relations of social self-governance in the management of new and older types of collective goods. The new social economy of solidarity should be grasped today in connection with post-Fordist forms of “immaterial labour” or “biopolitical production” which give rise to expansive webs of communication, diffuse information and knowledge and extend social relations through new technologies across the globe (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 66, 109, 114-115, 208-211, 337-340). “Biopolitical” labour is not confined to the manufacture of material goods in a narrow economic sense but it also transforms and generates knowledge,
affects, images, communication, social relationships and forms of life. Biopolitical production breaks down the barriers that separate the economic field from all other social domains, as it affects and engenders all facets of social life: economic, cultural and political. Consequently, it involves directly the construction of new subjectivities in society that are egalitarian and libertarian at the same time. The collective subject of the “multitude” embodies today a distinctive type of economic, social and political organization, where the common does not arise from the subordination of differences to an overarching particularity; it is rooted in participation and collective decision-making without centralised leadership or representation.

The Indignados and Occupy movements of 2011 can be seen as manifestations of such a multitudinous subject. They contested the rule of both private and public property, pointing to the possibility of a social self-administration of the commons. They turned their backs on centralized direction, closed ideologies and representation by political parties, trying to win back effective self-government. Following in the footsteps of such innovations, social self-rule could be refashioned along federalist lines, which would weld together an extensive variety of interacting forces and assemblies. These would spread horizontally across social fields and they would deliberate with each other without being subsumed under any overarching central authority (Hardt and Negri, 2012: 89-90).

The Greek Aganaktismenoi (Outraged) were likewise a leaderless and self-organized initiative of common citizens. Its organization was fluid and open, it lacked any pre-fixed program or ideology, and it was committed to the collective deliberation of the multitude as the final authority. The Aganaktismenoi conjured up institutions of popular self-rule through regular open assemblies that were held in central squares across Greece. They set about debating new national policies and effective ways to spread the “squares’ movement” in popular urban neighbourhoods, workplaces and other key sites of everyday life, in an attempt to put in place an entire network of alternative power structures (Douzinas, 2011; Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011).

From August 2011, the mobilization gradually petered out, but, as Manuel Castells (2012) said with regard to the Spanish Indignados, “the movement did not disappear; rather it spread out into the social fabric, with neighbourhood assemblies... spreading... alternative economic practices such as consumer co-operatives, ethical banking,
The incipient economy of solidarity in Greece is indeed an offshoot and a continuation of the foregoing movement, informed by its values and aspiring to a new mode of collective self-governance of the commons. By dwelling on a few actual undertakings we will elaborate on the logics, the potential and the prospects of these experimental forays into building new economies of autonomy, equity and solidarity.

c. Pagkaki: a workers’ collective running a coffee shop

The idea to set up a coffee shop operating along the lines of collective ownership, autonomy and solidarity gained ground in late 2008 amidst a group of individuals who had already participated in “Sporos”, a cooperative of fair and solidarity trade in Athens (Pagkaki, 2010). The coffee shop, which is designed as a traditional Greek kafeneio, serving coffee, teas, drinks and snacks, opened in June 2010 in Koukaki, a central district of Athens. It is run by a workers’ collective, which was made up of 10 members in 2012, and it is constituted in the legal form of an “urban co-operative”, the closest to work collective that is allowed for by the Greek law (ibid.; Varkarolis, 2012: 115). From the outset, the intent was to craft and promote the “commons” in their twofold dimension, as collective goods and as a particular type of social relations of community, equality, participation, both inwards and outwards.

First, inwards. The commons were established, to begin with, in the fields of ownership and the distribution of goods within the kafeneio. No member of the collective owns a personal share in the workplace, which belongs to the cooperative and not its current members. This condition is enshrined in the constitution of the enterprise (Pagkaki, 2011). There are no employers and employees, no surplus value extracted from the labour of workers. Everyone is equally remunerated at the same hourly rates for all kinds of labour, and all alternate at the different job posts. All workers are equal members of the collective and its decision-making body, the general assembly, which strives for the highest degree of consensus in its resolutions.

Second, outwards. The work collective is committed to building a space of social communication, of political debate and conviviality accessible to all. It supports like-minded ventures in the economy of solidarity and works for their expansion, it takes
part in wider social struggles and it contributes to the construction of socio-political networks with a view to realizing an equitable autonomous society for all. Its constitution stipulates that any remaining monthly surplus after the payment of wages (at equal hourly rates), running costs and an initial internal loan, will not be distributed to workers but will be used to aid like-minded collective initiatives.

Enacting the commons as social relations anchored in equal freedom, the collective is interested, first, in advancing the “social dimension” of the coffee shop and its social space, through “the creation of an especially accessible-affordable place for meeting and entertainment.” In addition to being a place for socializing, leisure and communication, Pagkaki hosts also information-sharing events and discussions which bear on collective self-organization, its practices and its prospects in our times (ibid.). Moreover, it is engaged in weaving a wider network of autonomous ventures in workers’ self-management, solidarity and co-operation. It stands by grassroots labour unionism which is structured in horizontal and direct-democratic forms. And it strives to function as a collective experiment in producers’ radical self-organization that will furnish a viable example for others to reflect upon, to emulate and to expand (ibid.).

d. Vio.Me.: A self-managed occupied factory

A prominent place among the wealth of experiments in economic self-management should be accorded to the Vio.Me. building materials factory, which is situated at the outskirts of Thessaloniki. This is the first experiment to-date that is the product of an industrial conflict and involves occupation of the means of production by the workers.

Vio.Me. was a subsidiary of Philkeram-Johnson that produced complementary products for the construction industry: adhesives, sealants, mortars, plasters, etc. In May 2011, at the height of the financial crisis, the factory was abandoned by its owners and the workers were left unpaid. In response, they occupied the factory and started legally withholding their labour (Katsoridas, 2013). After several months of unfruitful negotiations, the general assembly of the workers decided to operate the occupied factory under direct democratic workers’ control. They started production on February 12, 2013 under the now emblematic motto ‘If you cannot do it, we can!’ (Initiative of Solidarity with the Struggle of Vio.Me. 2013).
The Vio.Me. project lies at the intersection of traditional labour struggles and the budding movement of solidarity economy. At the heart of this effort lies the Vio.Me. workers’ trade-union, driven by sharp class-consciousness and militancy. In the numerous deliberations leading up to the decision to embark on self-management, the workers of Vio.Me. resolved to dismiss the traditional positions of authority within the union and decided to institute the workers’ assembly as the ultimate instrument of decision-making, regarding both the political decisions required in the struggle and the factory’s production process (Katsoridas, 2013). This arrangement seeks to eliminate inequalities within the workplace, to ensure equal participation, to unleash workers’ creativity and to secure workers’ control over the production process.

Their decision to stray away from the established ritual of protest and negotiation, which has been re-enacted in countless industrial conflicts during the Greek economic recession, triggered a visceral reaction from the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and its affiliated labour unions, which accused the Vio.Me. workers that they aspire to become small capitalists and that they pursue partial and individual solutions. Gradually, through a sequence of ranting criticisms, the KKE evolved into one of the foremost critics and opponents of the struggle of Vio.Me.

In response, the workers of Vio.Me agreed on a series of measures that would prevent their cooperative endeavour from turning into a profit-driven capitalist company. In line with the principles of cooperativism, the workers decided to put a cap on their individual proceeds. They opted instead to direct any surpluses towards the purposes of the wider community and similar struggles and endeavours, consciously discarding thus the profit principle. All workers will have a share, i.e. an enshrined right to voice and vote, in the new cooperative: “There will be no worker who is not a shareholder, and no shareholder who is not a worker,” they affirm (Avramidis et al., 2013). Thus, the occupied means of production are seen as a collectively managed commons rather than as the property of individuals.

The commons are what is considered essential for life, understood not merely in the biological sense. They are the structures which connect individuals to one another, tangible or intangible elements that we all have in common and which make us members of a society, not isolated entities in competition with each other (Fattori, 2011).
On this conception, labour itself is treated as a common good. According to the capitalist mythology underlying wage relationships, labour is the “property” of the worker who enters into a voluntary agreement with the capital owner to exchange labour for money. In contrast, on this new conception, our capacity to create, its individual dimension notwithstanding, is seen as an inherently social activity that is socially realised and socially beneficial, based on collectively produced and learned skills and on collectively managed tools and means of production (Wainwright, 2012). Hence, labour is not handled as a ‘commodity’ to be exchanged in the labour market, but as a plentiful resource that a self-instituted community can tap into so as to secure its subsistence.

The workers of Vio.Me. mobilize thus a commons-based vocabulary that is radically different from both the private property vocabulary deployed by capitalist firms, and the state-run public property vocabulary rehearsed by the KKE and major parties of the left. One could argue, indeed, that the market and the state, with their corresponding forms of property, function as mechanisms that deprive communities of control over their own means of reproduction and subsistence and hand it over to bureaucratic elites, in the case of the state, or to business elites, in the case of the market. Conversely, ‘the decentralized, self-governing systems of co-production […] offer fairer, more direct access to resources […] that expands the distribution of the means of production and decision making far more widely than through the top-down systems of the modern market/state’ (Quilligan, 2012).

The second component of the struggle, the Open Solidarity Initiative to the Struggle of Vio.Me., was established in Thessaloniki (as in many other Greek cities and abroad) immediately after the announcement of the workers’ decision to undertake self-management. The Initiative meets once a week and it is open to participation by any and all. It operates on the same principle of horizontality and it consists of collectives and individuals who are motivated by the principle of social and economic self-management. While it always respects the political decisions taken by the workers’ assembly, the Solidarity Initiative has a key role in organising mobilisations, protests and marches, as well as in coordinating national and international communication, fundraising and solidarity campaigns (Katsoridas, 2013). But, most importantly, it has a pivotal role in ensuring the participation of the wider community in the strug-
gle, extending thus the scope of the project from material to biopolitical production.

We are witnessing thus the crystallization of structures that go beyond simple workers’ control over production and aspire to a wider social control, which encompasses the production of new ideas and values (common ownership, solidarity, cooperation, protection of the environment), new relationships (through a network of decentralized collectives revolving around the issue of self-management), and, above all, new subjectivities. The workers cease to be mere followers of orders, take responsibility for their actions, release their creativity and realize the importance of collectivity and mutual dependence.

e. Micropolis: A social center promoting a multitude of endeavours in collective self-management

The idea behind Micropolis originated in the heat of the December 2008 uprisings, which shook the country and brought new political actors to the forefront. In the second half of the ‘90s, a critical mass of young and not-so young people underwent a growing radicalization. This erupted into violent clashes with the police, an exhilarating feeling of liberation from social norms and an unleashing of social creativity. Social imagination in action transfigured the public space in urban centres (Nasioka, 2012) – for the duration of the uprising at least - initiating numerous occupations of public buildings, parks and squares as well as permanent neighbourhood assemblies, festivals, street art, interventions in malls, theatres, museums and conferences (ibid.).

It was in one of these temporary spatial re-appropriations, in the occupied premises of the Drama School of Thessaloniki, where parts of the antiauthoritarian movement, along with many other collectives and individuals, felt the need for a space which would facilitate a permanent contact of the social movements with society, a space where this atmosphere of radical self-institution that they were breathing during the uprising could become an everyday lived experience.

After a long period of search, they rented a 900 sq. meters neo-classical 3-floor building right in the centre of the city. They put in place a “commons” run by a community that met weekly in a general assembly. This community grouped together
an assortment of collectives and individuals under three basic principles: horizontal decision-making, radical independence from existing institutions (the state, the church, political parties, companies, etc.) and absence of personal economic profit. The “vagueness” of the criteria of inclusion allowed a multitude of collectives that were not “political” in the strictest sense of the term to incorporate themselves in the process. Let us only mention a few of the activities initially sheltered in the building: drama, furniture refurbishment, music rehearsals, wild animal rescue, concerts, a library, talks and movie projections, an assortment of political meetings and many different free classes, from yoga and violin to pottery and sign language. The bar on the first floor was soon established as a cheap and tasteful alternative to Thessaloniki’s hyper-glamorous nightlife. Members of Micropolis offered voluntary work behind the bar as part of their duties to keep the place alive and help pay the rent.

The selection of the name was intentional: This stretch of space was designed to be a miniature (micro) of the city (polis) that the participants envisioned, the locus of extensive prefigurative experimentation (Micropolis Social Space 2009). Micropolis soon became for many people the point of entry to the activity of social movements. Not without conflicts and contradictions, charting its way through endless heated discussions and a perpetual quest for the elusive consensus, this project evolved into a successful experiment in social self-management.

However, the squares movement of 2011 brought forward new issues and actors, and provided an opportunity to enrich and deepen the insights gained by the 2008 uprising. Moreover, voluntary work started taking a toll on the participants, and the crisis started affecting their personal circumstances in ways that drove them away from the project. This brought up a whole new range of issues that had not been addressed by the project thus far, such as access to cheap and nutritious food, defence of the rapidly privatized commons, solidarity and mutual support among the members of the community. There was a prompt realization that the ‘private circumstances’ of each one of the members should not be left a private matter, that the issues of what is produced, who produces it and how it is distributed and consumed should not remain outside the scope of the project.

At first, the question of remuneration sparked a process of intense but creative theoretical debate that seems to have been going on at the same time in a series of
self-managed projects in Greece throughout 2011 (see Varkarolis, 2012: 86). Following a long period of reflection and debate, a new constitutive process was initiated to amend the existing framework in a manner that would enhance equal participation, access of everyone to the labour commons, and collective control over all decisions involved.

The vexing issue around which the discussion revolved at first was access to food. Entrenched agribusiness and trade interests in Greece, in tandem with the dwindling incomes of middle and lower classes and the skyrocketing prices, brought about a situation bordering on humanitarian disaster. The community set about devising a structure that would bring the producers of good food in direct contact with the consumers, cutting out the middlemen and ensuring thus a fair price for both. A new assembly coordinated the creation of a small food dispensary where members of the community, alternating at regular intervals, were remunerated for keeping the shop. A similar structure was launched for running the kitchen. Soon thereafter a furniture workshop, a kindergarten, a bookstore and a print shop started operating along the same lines, transforming the building into a vibrant centre of activity. The constitutive process went on, seeking to craft institutions that would enable a collective control of the economic processes, preventing any asymmetrical influence of any group or individual, but ensuring also worker’s participation in decision-making.

This last point is decisive. Labour as a common good belongs to the community, not to the individual worker. How can we, however, guarantee social/communal control of production without reducing the worker to a “waged labourer” servicing the community?

The answer to this was twofold: Firstly, all interested members alternate regularly at the remunerated posts, so as to diffuse all the necessary skills throughout the community and to avoid the entrenchment of particular individuals in specific positions. Secondly, a series of assemblies with different competencies were instituted. Each new economic unit is administered by its own assembly, where everyday management decisions are taken jointly by remunerated and non-remunerated members alike. A joint assembly of all the economic units coordinates all economic activity and prepares proposals to be submitted to the weekly general assembly, where all members of the community are required (and encouraged) to attend. The general assembly has
the final say over all activities taking place within the bounds of Micropolis. At the same time, a rotational “administrative” assembly attends to the smooth functioning of the social centre (supplies, repairs, etc.). All assemblies are open to members and non-members alike.

The whole economic activity of Micropolis is non-profit, and any small surpluses are directed towards two “funds”: A “mutual” fund that can cover medical expenses, and a “solidarity” fund destined for providing financial aid to political struggles, new social centres and cognate experiments in the solidarity economy.

Beyond the fulfilment of material needs, the thrust of experiments like Micropolis lies in their intervention in biopolitical production and the cultivation of a new culture rooted in the values of solidarity, equity, mutual recognition, participation, collectivity. Indeed the constant reinvention of the community as a collective subject is a fundamental dimension of the project that embodies at the same time a critique to traditional figures of community. “Community has to be intended not as a gated reality, a grouping of people joined by exclusive interests separating them from others,… but rather as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals.” (Federici, 2012: 50).

This communal link helps thus to forge non-alienated subjectivities that can break loose from the work-consume-sleep pattern imposed by capitalist accumulation. This social control, extended over many areas of communal life, is complemented by workers’ control over their own activity and their active participation in decision-making over production, distribution and consumption.

Indeed, in Micropolis, as in many other similar structures that proliferate throughout Greece, various needs of the participants –food, child care, entertainment, learning- can be met collectively in their own terms. This has triggered a motion towards autonomy in the proper sense of the term: autonomy as setting the nomos (rule) that governs our existence.

Autonomy, however, does not imply isolation from the wider social becoming or the creation of “islets of liberty.” Micropolis was conceived as an antagonistic project, and today it is probably even more so, since it overcame its introversion and sectarian attitudes and started nurturing meaningful relationships of mutual support and cooperation with a multitude of militant grassroots projects throughout the country.
Micropolis furnishes today an important node in a wide network of collective endeavours that try to challenge both pillars of the capitalist system—the state and the market—and to gradually displace them through radical democratic alternatives from below.

PART 3.

(IN)CONCLUSIVE THOUGHTS

All the foregoing contemporary experiments in the self-constitution of a new social economy of the commons embody a distinct take on political change and social self-emancipation which is worth contemplating and pursuing as a promising avenue of social transformation in our times.

First, they incarnate a practice of prefiguration whereby the envisaged aim of the process, i.e. the institution of workers’ autonomy, social solidarity and responsibility, is embodied in the very means through which it is pursued.

Second, they opt for a politics of immanent and horizontal change, that is for a grassroots, direct self-mobilization of social agents on a footing of equal participation. Such direct collective self-rule in the spheres of production and circulation kickstarts a politicization of the commons in everyday life that breaks through the divides between the economic, the social and the political and re-connects them in ways that restore to societies their power of effective self-direction, abolishing the rule of separate, formal politics and “free” markets.

Third, they stitch together partiality with pluralism. They do not champion themselves as fully-fledged, total and exclusive pathways to social reconstruction, but just as one among the various roads that need to be travelled so as to reach a new social constellation of greater freedom and equality. Issues of broader political strategy, alliances, involvement with grassroots union militancy and engagement with the formal political system remain wide open and subject to debate.

Fourth, the ventures in question are intrinsically agonistic not only in the sense that they set themselves against the hegemony of the state and private economies or that they are riddled with contradictions and internal fights. They also pose as an ongoing reflection, experimentation and self-questioning over the best practices that
will advance collective emancipation under given conditions.

Last, they have crafted particular responses to the challenge to build an “association of associations” that will topple hierarchical models, bureaucratic domination and state centralism: the network structure and the open assembly. The establishment and spreading out of networks linking the different collectives together is today one of the most common ways in which co-operative ventures in the solidarity economy seek to mutually sustain, assist and empower themselves, to expand and to start building autarkic economic spheres of production and distribution outside the markets and the state.

At the same time, networks tend to be decentralized, voluntary, loose, diffuse and open to newcomers, making room thus not only for enhanced diversity but also for the expression, diffusion and negotiation of conflicts in non-authoritarian manners that respect the equal autonomy of each node. In this context, the open assembly provides a forum of collective deliberation that can enable access and influence to all those concerned without requiring the continuous presence of all, charting a path between closed, bureaucratic, authoritarian representation and a direct democracy that would demand the unremitting commitment of all members of society. Hence, the network structure and the open assembly foster openness, participation, direct involvement and social integration around the “commons” while eschewing the unlikely and dangerous dream of a society that takes charge of its own affairs by incarnating a complete and unified subject, always fully present to itself and devoid of internal divisions.

In this perspective, workers’ control of production and distribution encompasses, but it is not confined to industrial democracy centred on individual factories or even an association thereof. Situated within an inclusive, plural and networked democracy of the commons as adumbrated above, the self-management of labour seeks to extend to the new forms of biopolitical production in the service sector, the administration of natural resources, the production of knowledge, information, social relations and culture in the metropolises and around the world. This movement gestures towards a new type of social holism. An increasing plurality of sites of self-management which govern production units, vital social resources and key collective goods in a direct, autonomous, diverse, open and agonistic manner come together in extensive networks of broader co-ordination and self-regulation. Such networks of open assemblies strive to break down the divides between consumers and producers or workers in particular
enterprises and wider communities of interest. They advance thus social integration in ways that cater to the common good and organize an effective economy of the commons, whereby production and consumption are handled in terms of common ownership of assets and a general concern for sustainable and equitable consumption.

NOTES

1. See for example the comments of PAME, the trade-union affiliated with KKE (PAME Arkadias 2013) and the press release of a local trade union, also affiliated with KKE (Chemical Industry Workers’ Trade Union of Northern Greece 2013)

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