

Of Athens, crises, and other medicines

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I am writing this short piece from Kini, a small village on the island of Syros. Sparse houses painted in white are the only touch of color in this otherwise monochrome rocky and dry landscape. The owner of my flat welcomed me and my friend and said that we should not worry about the fires: there is nothing to be burned here in Syros. As of today (August 11, 2021), Greece has been plagued with incredibly high temperatures and wildfires for days. As often happened during my fieldwork in Athens between 2015 and 2017, when the economic crisis was at its heights, today's wildfires are addressed with some bitter irony: there's indeed nothing to be burned in Syros and anywhere else in Greece, as there was nothing left "to eat" back then. The wildfires would extinguish themselves as the economic crisis would eventually exhaust itself: the former out of no land to burn and the latter out of no money left to "be eaten" (Knight 2015).

Yet wildfires are a source of concerns, fear, and everyday talk these days: acres of land and forest in Attica, Peloponnese, North Greece, and on the island of Evia have already burned. Unfortunately, wildfires are nothing new in Greece; they happen every summer (see Cabot 2018). However, what is new is how they are now talked about: wildfires are the ultimate manifestation of the climate crisis. Back then, before climate change became a hot topic in mainstream media, these fires were often described as arson attacks. In public opinion as well as in many politicians' discourses, wildfires were just the consequence of the faulty yet very widespread habit of burning lands to make them suitable for construction or to cash in on insurance.

The climate crisis has suddenly become the ultimate explanation for today's uncontrollable wildfires; responsibilities are now placed on this other crisis, global and unpredictable, so elusive to become a political and narrative trope, self-explanatory and all-encompassing (Roitman 2013). Of course, there seems to be no need for the government to take responsibility for the current environmental catastrophe: wildfires are consequential to global climate change and not to local land speculation and nonexistent environmental politics. It does not seem to matter that, in a decade of economic austerity, millions of euros have been invested in enforcing the police while funds for firefighters have dramatically been cut off. In this rather bleak August, how-

ever, solidarity initiatives again spark some hope as they have again proved crucial to mitigate the socioeconomic havoc provoked by the wildfires: grassroots and spontaneous organizations have helped rescue people in remote areas and provided them with food, water, and blankets when the wildfires do not spare anyone's house. Voluntary brigades of firefighters have been striving to extinguish the wildfires—or at least reduce their lethal impact on both humans and nonhumans. Once again, people have had to come together and self-organize to support and help each other to save what is left to be saved in a moment when despair has taken a toll on people's hopes for the future and the state just proves its absent presence. Indeed, it seems that the state has implicitly outsourced the care of the environment to individuals and collective initiatives, as it outsourced the care for the people to grassroots solidarity initiatives in the years of the economic crisis.

The social clinic of solidarity (KIA, the acronym for *Koinonoiko Iatreio Allileggiis*) that the short graphic piece describes is one among the many other structures of solidarity that have sprung up since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis, in Athens as well as across the rest of the country. While many Greek solidarity initiatives waxed and waned over the past decade of economic austerity, some social clinics of solidarity have become constitutive of the newly reconfigured social welfare landscape: since 2010, they have functioned as an actual shadow health-care system.

The ongoing reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and the grassroots voluntary sector in times of crisis has often been analyzed in dialectical terms, highlighting how contemporary capitalistic crises have ultimately opened up margins to novel modes of resistance. A vast anthropological literature on the 2008 economic crisis and Greece, more specifically, has flourished over the past ten years, addressing complexities, ruptures, and continuities of the many initiatives of solidarity that spread across the country in the meantime (among others, Cabot 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016; Rakopoulos 2013; Rozakou 2016; Theodossopoulos 2020). While the same structural limitations and inequalities of 2008–2017 seem to persist, if not widen, we might optimistically consider that people have learned how to

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cope with and navigate the aftermath of the crises: in Greece, as elsewhere, people have managed their livelihoods and pooled resources in ever-changing and unstable environmental and socioeconomic circumstances.

Insightful parallels can also be drawn when looking at how different modes of grassroots and spontaneous mobilizations have responded to crises and emergencies beyond Europe. For instance, Luci Cavallero and Veronica Gago (2021) offer compelling insights into how Argentinian women have organized themselves to navigate the long-lasting effects of the economic crisis and the cycle of indebtedness that has resulted from it. They have done so by capitalizing on locally situated and traditionally gendered understandings of care and solidarity: sharing food and cooking together are powerful, mundane actions that help reconstitute socialities in the public sphere while contesting the patriarchal order that dictates gendered cycles of indebtedness and violence. Grassroots solidarity responses to natural disasters have similarly sprung up, for instance, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and after Hurricane María, which was followed by earthquake swarms, in Puerto Rico. People's mobilization and self-organization are indeed telling of the resilience of those communities increasingly threatened by calamities and, at the same time and more importantly, of the incapacity of the state to promptly respond to and meet people's demands and needs, especially in times of crisis.

However, it is not my intention to either romanticize such grassroots movements or to epitomize them as contemporary modes of resistance. Rather, I hold solidarity initiatives as diagnostics of the state: grassroots and fluid organizations that surface the extents of the crises in both their multifaced, contextual and historical manifestations and culturally situated responses to them. Or, to say it with Insa Koch and Deborah James (2020), the increased socioeconomic relevance that philanthropic and solidarity initiatives have gained in austerity-ridden Europe reveals today's state of the welfare state as well as its changing nature and role within the newly reconfigured state-market-voluntary-sector relations.

All in all, in Greece the 2008 economic crisis, and the nearly decade of austerity that followed, has created the ideal conditions for other crises to explode and make these crises profitable. Even though the

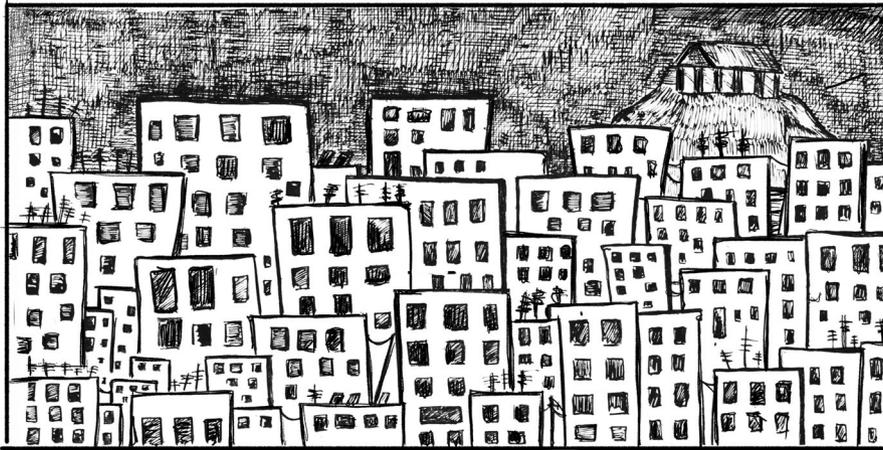
memory of this summer's wildfires might be short-lived, their lived experiences might instead prove to be of different temporality and intensity, and

will likely function as a powerful reminder of how yet another crisis has changed, impacted, and shaped people's daily experience, perception, and relationship with their surroundings. The environment and natural resources too will possibly become another asset that private enterprises will profit from, conforming to what Naomi Klein (2007) has described as the prominent feature of disaster capitalism—that is, the capacity of neoliberal governments to both create and respond to disasters in ways that favor the free market and promote for-profit corporate solutions. These solutions are based on the neoliberal assumption that the private sector is less vulnerable to corruption and mismanagement and therefore better at safeguarding natural resources. It is indeed an easy prediction to make that residual forms of environmental protection and conservation will become concerns of individual citizens and nonprofit voluntary and grassroots organizations.

As for today, I would say that what we are witnessing in Greece is the ultimate backlash of the past economic crisis, which in fact never ended, despite Greece being declared as out of the crisis in January 2017. The long-term effects of austerity have definitely exceeded the trajectories of the economic crisis per se, and its nefarious consequences are still tangible and manifest in the persisting inequalities, social and environmental, that people experience daily. As austerity keeps on killing, solidarity seemingly continues to be the people's weapon against the "necropolitics" (Mbembe 2019) that the Greek state has long embraced and pursued.

The short graphic piece that follows is an ethnographic snapshot of the everyday work of solidarity. It draws from my long-term fieldwork across multiple Athenian social clinics of solidarity (KIA), offering insights into the multiple dimensions of care: sharing medications is more than an attempt to fix ill health. Rather, the circulation of pharmaceuticals at the grassroots level signals how they can become social objects of care capable of forming and reinforcing social bonds at the intersection of increasingly impoverished households, the ever-expanding grassroots voluntary sector, and the already shrunken welfare state.

WHEN I MOVED TO ATHENS IN JULY 2015,
GREECE HAD BEEN IN CRISIS FOR SEVEN YEARS ALREADY.



ANTI-AUSTERITY DEMOS SHOOK THE STREETS NIGHT AND DAY



BUT PEOPLE DID NOT ONLY PROTEST, THEY ALSO SELF-ORGANISED.



①

I WAS VERY INTERESTED IN GRASSROOTS PRACTICES OF CARE AND I WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE KIAs. A FRIEND MANAGED TO PUT ME IN TOUCH WITH MARTHA, THE ORGANISER OF ONE OF THE BIGGEST KIAs IN ATHENS.



2

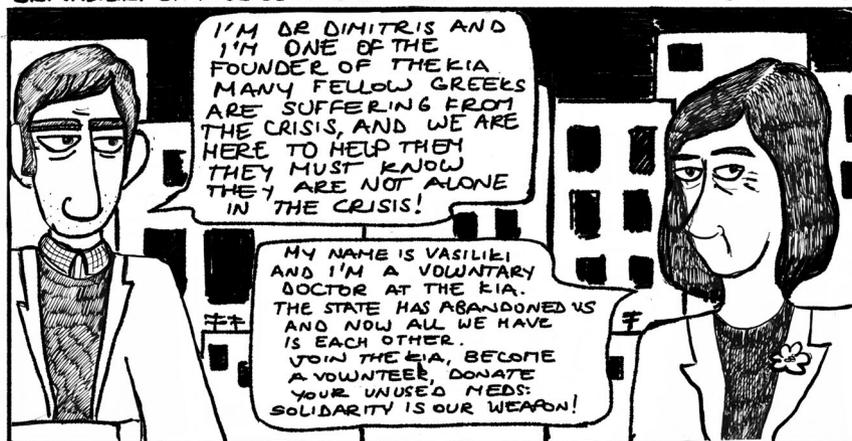
A COUPLE OF WEEKS AFTER OUR MEETING, MARTHA AGREED TO LET ME DO FIELDWORK AT THE KIA SHE HAD ORGANISED. THERE I ALSO VOLUNTEERED IN THE SOCIAL PHARMACY.



MY FELLOW VOLUNTEERS TOLD ME ABOUT THE BIRTH OF THE SOCIAL CLINIC

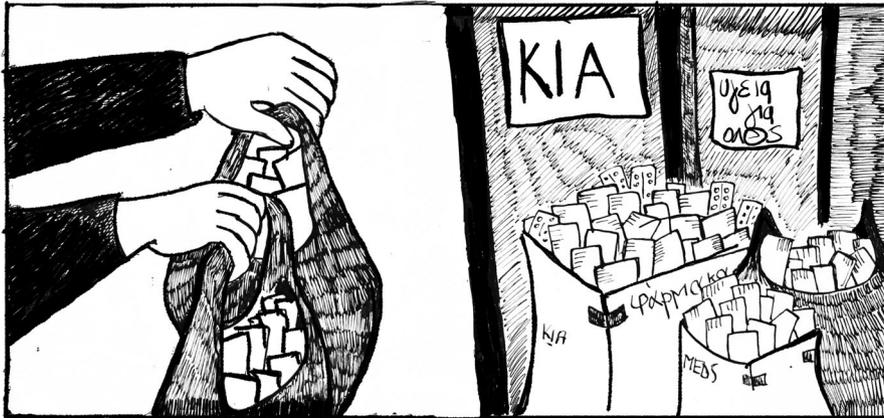


WITH THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM ON THE VERGE OF COLLAPSING AND ALMOST 3 MILLION PEOPLE WITH NO ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE, MARTHA, DR DIMITRIS AND DR. VASILIKI STARTED SETTING UP THEIR KIA. IT WAS NOVEMBER 2011.

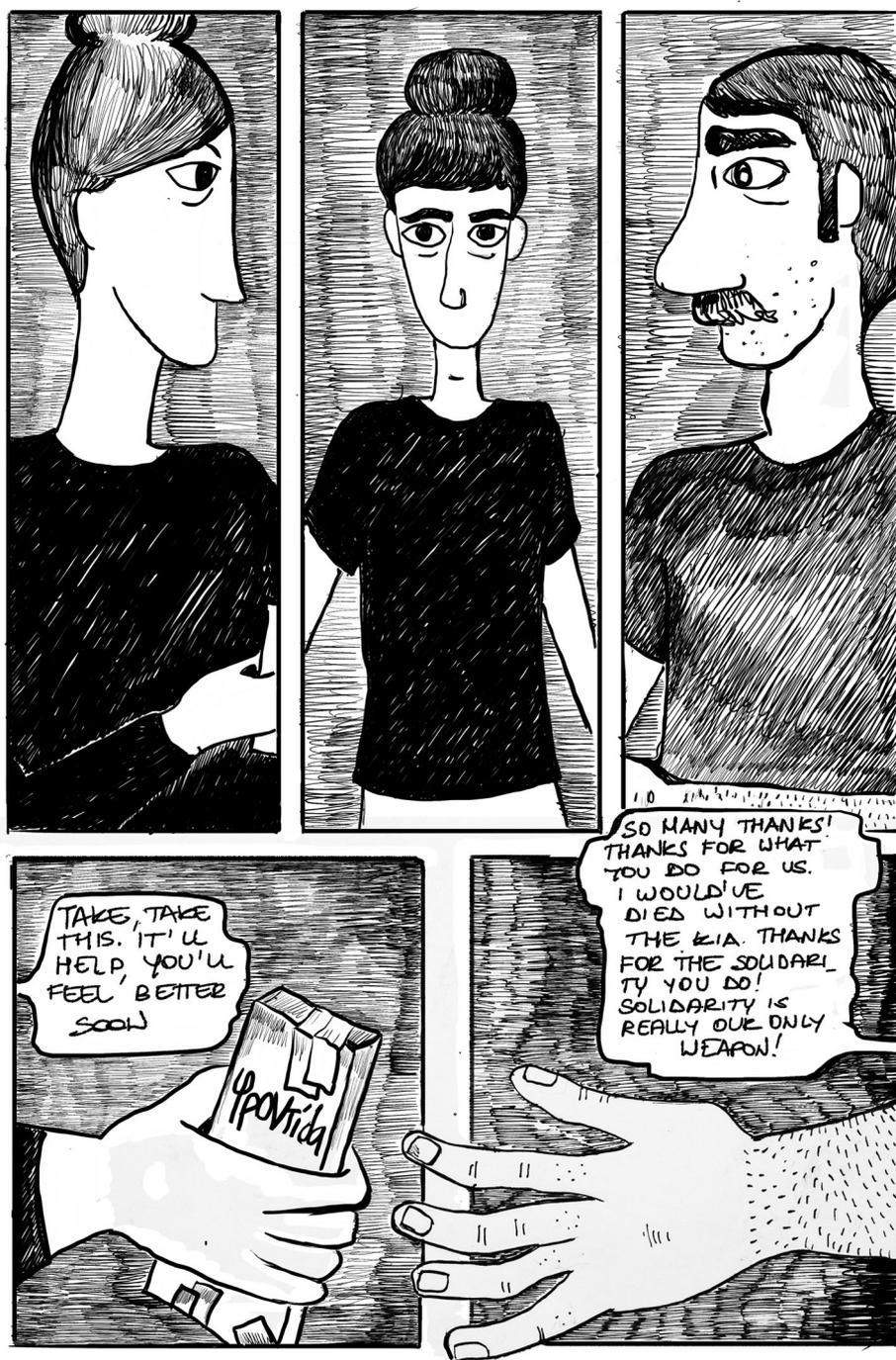


3

PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE NEIGHBOURHOOD STARTED DONATING THEIR UNUSED MEDICATIONS TO THE KIA. IN NO TIME, THE KIA HAD SET UP A VERY EFFICIENT SELF-ORGANISED SOCIAL PHARMACY.



4



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