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Philanthropy or solidarity? Ethical dilemmas about humanitarianism in crisis-afflicted Greece

That philanthropy perpetuates the conditions that cause inequality is an old argument shared by thinkers such as Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde and Slavoj Žižek. I recorded variations of the same argument in local conversations regarding growing humanitarian concern in austerity-ridden Greece. Local critiques of the efficacy of humanitarianism, which I explore here ethnographically, bring to the fore two parallel possibilities engendered by the ‘humanitarian face’ of solidarity initiatives: first, their empowering potential (where solidarity initiatives enhance local social awareness), and second, the de-politicisation of the crisis (a liability that stems from the effectiveness of humanitarianism in ameliorating only temporarily the superficial consequences of the crisis). These two possibilities – which I treat as simultaneous and interrelated – can help us appreciate the complexity and social embeddedness of humanitarian solidarity in times of austerity.

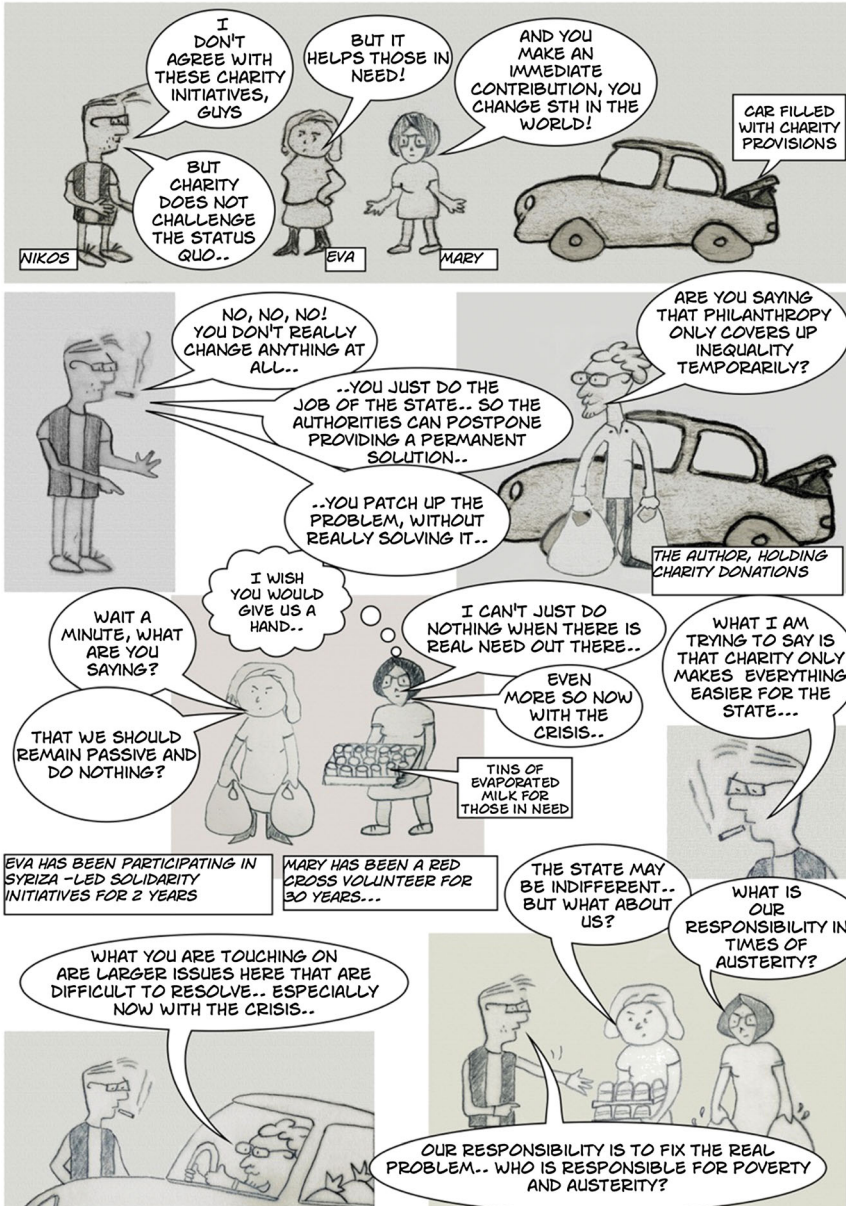
Key words solidarity, Marxist critique of philanthropy, austerity, financial crisis, Greece

Introduction

A revelatory incident attracted my attention to the ethics of humanitarian action in austerity-ridden Greece; it was an ordinary conversation evolving in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, despite the concluding disagreement. The protagonists were people I had known very well for some years, Eva and Mary. They had invited me to participate in a grass-root solidarity initiative. While loading a car with food provisions (to be distributed to families stricken by austerity), Eva’s husband, Nikos, approached us with some critical remarks. His arguments drew attention to how a Marxist-inspired critique of philanthropy may very well apply to humanitarianism more generally, but also to crisis-related solidarity initiatives. Intrigued by Nikos’ comments, I decided to investigate the relationship of solidarity and philanthropy in the narratives of several other citizens in Patras, an urban centre in crisis-afflicted Greece. The resulting conversations, which led to the ethnography I present in this article, address a number of related questions: Is solidarity another, more timely and politically nuanced version of philanthropy? Does it involve a dynamic that can be seen (by the solidarity participants themselves) as empowering? Is such empowerment self-exonerating – a justification for perpetuating a particular status quo?

I immortalised the original discussion that prompted this investigation in the following piece of ‘graphic ethnography’. This visually compelling form of representation is very suitable for situating dilemmas in culturally meaningful contexts. As such, graphic ethnography represents an attempt towards developing a ‘graphic anthropology’ (Ingold 2011). The use of sketches and drawings in the production of anthropological work can challenge the top-down authorial imposition of authenticity

as representative of a prototypical form (Taussig 2011) and may enhance reflexivity (see Theodossopoulos 2016). The resulting view of incompleteness depicts more accurately the fluidity of social reality: most discussions in daily life – and academia – are inconclusive. My interlocutors in Patras provided me with their critical arguments in the context of evolving conversations, throughout which the meaning of solidarity was in dispute. For this reason, I will try to keep – in this article – the debate about the limitations and advantages of solidarity initiatives deliberately open. My use of cartooning as an ethnographic medium attempts to make visible this incompleteness.



In the conversation presented in this piece of graphic ethnography, Nikos is introducing a Marxist critique of philanthropy. He has followed closely many important junctures of the Greek Left, from the Polytechnic School uprising (1973) to the recent victory of Syriza (2015), but his analytical thinking, he acknowledges, was formed in his youth by the Greek Communist party (KKE). The contemporary position of KKE regarding voluntarism embraces the logic of Nikos' argument, namely that philanthropy and volunteering – when these are undertaken by bourgeois initiatives – exonerate state inaction, without challenging the inequalities that perpetuate poverty.¹ The desire to contribute to society, through humanitarian volunteering, is thus manipulated by the dominant classes.² The origins of this set of arguments can be traced back to *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels articulate in a short passage the idea that philanthropy reproduces a capitalist *status quo*: 'philanthropists, humanitarians', says Marx, 'organisers of charity' represent a conservative, bourgeois type of socialism (Marx and Engels 1998 [1848]: 7).

In a subsequent conversation, Nikos clarified that he had not read KKE's official position regarding voluntarism,³ neither was he familiar, as I originally suspected, with Slavoj Žižek's critical position towards charity. The latter is concisely summarised in the animated podcast of a RSA lecture given by Žižek in 2010,⁴ in which he attempts to expose charity as a misleading and exonerating trick in today's 'cultural capitalism' (see also Žižek 2009). Žižek relies on Oscar Wilde to argue that charity is not a solution, but 'an aggravation of the difficulty' (Wilde 2001: 127; Žižek 2010). When you buy a consumerist product, says Žižek, you feel that you have to donate something to charity, buying effectively 'your redemption from being only a consumerist' (Žižek 2010: 2–3). Both Žižek and Nikos argue that they are not, strictly speaking, against charitable activity, but they feel obliged to problematise the misleading ideological parameters of apolitical humanitarianism.

In the vein of Nikos and Žižek, there is an interesting convergence in the thinking of people who criticise traditional conceptions of charity. Another interlocutor from Patras, Iosif, an anarchist and mathematician, helped me identify a similar concurrence of views (*śimptosi apópson*), this time between Oscar Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche. The two authors, who most probably never met each other (Hext 2011), comment on how charity breeds resentment among beneficiaries. Wilde has provocatively argued that the poor are quite right to be ungrateful for charity: 'why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table?' (Wilde 2001: 130). While Nietzsche reminds us that 'if a little charity is not forgotten, it turns into a gnawing worm' (Nietzsche 1978: 89). Such thoughts have led me to consider how the insistence of Greece's European partners to present their packages of financial assistance as 'a generous deal' has further infuriated many Greek citizens who are stricken by austerity. Here, the asymmetrical dimensions of EU redistributive policies are locally interpreted as sign

1 See Κομμουνιστική Επιθεώρηση (2002).

2 KKE supports only those volunteering initiatives introduced in solidarity with the weakest classes.

3 Although he acknowledged that his ideas are indebted to the political training he acquired through the Communist party.

4 <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-animate/2010/08/rsa-animate---first-as-tragedy-then-as-farce/>

of paternalism and symbolic domination (Gkintidis 2014). As such, EU assistance to Greece can be compared with – to use once more Oscar Wilde – ‘a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution’, ‘an aggravation of the difficulty’ (Wilde 2001: 127, 130).⁵

I return here to the main argument I consider in this article, namely whether solidarity initiatives that provide humanitarian help have a socially empowering role, or to what extent the humanitarian face of solidarity contributes to the perpetuation of social inequality. In crisis-afflicted Greece, the emergence of grassroots solidarity initiatives (see Rakopoulos 2014a, 2014b; Rozakou, Cabot, this issue), many of which aim at ameliorating the predicament of austerity-stricken families, makes the Marxist-inspired critique of philanthropy relevant once more. I explore ethnographically the vernacular articulation of this critique, and the emerging counter-arguments, as these are voiced in the narratives of local actors, individuals such as Nikos or Iosif, who communicate a critical stance towards humanitarianism in informal conversational contexts. Their narratives shed light on the ethical subjectivities of locally situated actors who participate in solidarity initiatives and their capacity to formulate their version of ethics in everyday life (Fassin 2011b).

The contextual specificity and fluidity of the local arguments I present in my ethnography seem to blur the semantic boundaries of solidarity (*alilegí*), philanthropy (*philanthropía*) and humanitarianism, which in Greek is used primarily as an adjective (*anthropistikós*=humanitarian).⁶ The overlap between these categories represents a local, informal use, in a period when (a) ‘solidarity’, and the adjective ‘humanitarian’ (*anthropistikós*) have become key terms in the media and in political discourse and (b) the numbers of solidarity participants have dramatically increased, to include individuals without an explicitly articulated solidarity consciousness. In this respect, the semantic confusion of humanitarian aid and solidarity facilitates the expression of original local arguments that attempt to interrogate and self-interrogate one’s involvement in voluntarism (cf. Muehlebach 2012; Cabot 2014), or draw attention to the threat of depoliticising solidarity posed by this involvement. More politically inclined solidararians point to this threat to distinguish themselves from the conservative ideological baggage associated with humanitarianism (cf. Redfield 2012a: 451; see also Rozakou 2016, this issue).

Simultaneously, a certain degree of conceptual imprecision is reproduced by the coexistence of the concepts ‘solidarity’ and ‘humanitarianism’ in the same conversations, often in the same arguments or sentences. Some situated local actors in Patras recognise this imprecision, and deliberately bring the two concepts closer together to underline their critical points, or highlight the view that in some

5 A number of anthropologists of Greece have discussed the suspicion and resistance of Greek actors towards the subtle hierarchies (and sense of obligation) introduced by gift-giving (see among many, Herzfeld 1992; Hirschon 1992, 2000; Gkintidis 2014); Rozakou has further developed this classic anthropological theme to interpret the cultural embeddedness of ideas about voluntarism and humanitarianism in Greece (2012, 2016, this volume).

6 Two particular uses have become common since the outset of austerity: ‘humanitarian aid’ (*anthropistikí voíthia*) and ‘humanitarian crisis’ (*anthropistikí krísi*).

respects solidarity initiatives seem – suspiciously – similar to humanitarianism and philanthropic activity, an ambiguity that is echoed by the concerns of solidarity participants in other parts of Greece (cf. Bakalaki 2008; Rozakou 2016, this issue; Cabot 2014, this issue). In this particular regard, the conceptual imprecision of local, vernacular uses of the terms solidarity, humanitarianism and philanthropy can be seen as an attempt to redress the wider ideological asymmetries between aid providers and recipients (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Fassin 2011a; Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Rozakou 2012; Ticktin 2014), and a sign of a growing desire among peripheralised local actors to unite in solidarity and subvert the globalised neoliberal hegemony (see Theodossopoulos 2010; Kirtsoglou 2010).

As amateur critical theorists, my interlocutors in Patras debate their decision to participate or abstain from solidarity initiatives in terms of a Marxist-inspired dialectic that blurs (rhetorically) but also reinstates the distinction between solidarity and philanthropy. My reference to scholars who have underlined this distinction – for example, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Nietzsche or Slavoj Žižek – is a deliberate authorial trick: it redirects attention to my local interlocutors in Patras, and highlights the convergence of arguments between theoretical scholarship and everyday discourse. What is the point in calling for revolutionary action, Iosif emphatically stressed, if this is made in an elitist, complex and incomprehensible language? I therefore use the critical insights of well-recognised authors, not to legitimise a set of situated views, but to reanimate ethnographically the debate about the complacency of humanitarianism. The views of Wilde, Nietzsche or Žižek become interesting once more to the degree that they echo parallel concerns, or disagreements, among the protagonists of everyday life.

Reflexivity and the local humanitarian context

I had always associated philanthropy with the pastime pursuits of the wealthiest members of a society. And I have been prejudiced, I admit, towards many types of charitable action. In regard to my original prejudice, my fieldwork experience among a number of informal and institutionalised humanitarian initiatives in Patras⁷ encouraged me to re-examine the value of humanitarian aid beyond the semantics of terminological connotations – for example, independently of the articulation of humanitarianism as either ‘philanthropy’ or ‘solidarity’. As I soon realised, passing food, hand-to-hand, induced an emotional, altruistic effect, which I experienced, and shared with other volunteers and aid professionals. Was I becoming a better person? Or I merely deluded myself in believing so? Is this, after all, the secret fascination of bourgeois philanthropy? That is, to mislead the benefactor into feeling unique and important? To exonerate one’s guilt for tolerating inequality? The graphic commentary below, which I posted on my project’s Facebook page during fieldwork, makes visible some of my original dilemmas.⁸

7 This work was conducted in the context of an ESRC project that investigates the local consequences of austerity. During fieldwork I participated as a volunteer in local humanitarian initiatives. My interest in the topic of this article, as I will shortly explain, emerged during the fieldwork process.

8 See <https://www.facebook.com/householdsincrisis?fref=ts>

AT THE FOOD BANK

A FEW DAYS BEFORE EASTER THE MUNICIPAL FOOD BANK OF PATRAS PROVIDED THOSE IN NEED WITH FOOD (IN BLUE PLASTIC BAGS)

I WONDER IF PHILANTHROPY CAN REALLY SOLVE THE PROBLEM IT ATTEMPTS TO ADDRESS. DOES IT REDUCE INEQUALITY.. ?



THIS IS PART OF A REGULAR SYSTEM OF AID PROVIDED TO BENEFICIARIES WHO MEET TRANSPARENT CRITERIA.



THE SOLIDARITY WORKERS AT THE FOOD BANK SAY THAT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BENEFICIARIES IS IMMEDIATE AND PERSONAL...

DESPITE MY INITIAL RESERVATIONS, I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT STH MAGICAL REALLY DOES HAPPEN AT THE MOMENT OF GIVING. SOMETHING THAT IS DIFFICULT TO PUT INTO WORDS...

AND THEREFORE INALIENABLE...

THE GREATER TRAP IS TO BELIEVE THAT GIVING IS SELFLESS...



OOPS...



A VERY THIN LINE SEPARATES THE BENEFICIARIES AND THE EMPLOYEES IN THE FOOD BANK (OR THE VOLUNTEERS WORKING IN SOLIDARITY INITIATIVES): IN CRISIS AFFLICTED GREECE THE GIVERS COULD BE AMONG THOSE 'IN NEED' IN A FEW MONTHS' TIME...

Since 2011, we have seen the emergence of a new anthropological literature on the Greek crisis, a sub-field of scholarly activity that constitutes the broader intellectual context for the production of this article. The anthropology of the Greek crisis has embraced a wide array of crisis-related topics, such as, to mention only a few, xenophobia (Herzfeld 2011), temporality (Knight 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Knight and

Stewart 2016), anti-austerity discourse and resistance (Theodossopoulos 2013, 2014a, 2014b), biopolitics (Athanasίου 2012; Rozakou 2012), spontaneity (Dalakoglou 2012), visual and media representations of the crisis (Kalantzis 2012; Papailias 2012), cultural mismatches (Hirschon 2013), food, protest and solidarity (Sutton 2013; Vournelis 2013; Rakopoulos 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Knight 2015b). This growing body of literature has provided nuanced and contextualised accounts that address a wider interpretative vacuum generated by the crisis.

In respect to the relationship of the author with the production of anthropological knowledge, the anthropology of the Greek crisis – in its short life span – has already made some reflexive contributions. We have seen confident portrayals of the Self-as-author in Michael Herzfeld's (2011) story of mugging (a narrative-trick used to expose xenophobia) and in Neni Panourgia's (2014) self-reflections of interiority (presented as snapshots of the visuality of the crisis). Heath Cabot (2014) has used her own sensory experience as a reflexive window on to the worlds of her crisis-afflicted interlocutors; Daniel Knight (2015b) has made visible, with directness and ethnographic sensitivity, his role as a researcher in the field in times of crisis. Such reflexive interventions have marked anthropology's potential to subvert the top-down model of imposing a singular authorial voice as an interpretative narrative. My use of graphic ethnography, which makes more visible the author's emplacement in the field, attempts to contribute towards increasing ethnographic reflexivity.

It has become evident so far that my personal ideological predilections played a crucial role in shaping the outcome of this investigation. For it was my own struggle with the pros and cons of humanitarianism – which I confided to my fellow citizens in Patras – that encouraged them to unravel their own related dilemmas, including the widely expressed position that solidarity is (or should be) distinguished from humanitarianism, philanthropy and charity. Yet, during the course of fieldwork, it was *them* – my 'interlocutors', as I prefer to call them, to avoid the prescribed term 'respondents' – that took the lead in shaping the outcome of this article. They provided me with sophisticated narratives that addressed my initial concerns about the thin line that separates the ethics of solidarity from the ethics of philanthropy. In all respects, and as I will illustrate through the ethnography that follows, my interlocutors helped me realise that my concerns were also theirs.

The conversations that substantiate the ethnography presented in this article took place in primarily two contexts. The first was an informal 'solidarity structure' (*domí alilegíis*) that emerged spontaneously two years after the introduction of austerity policies. It was founded by a group of women who meet every week to provide families afflicted by austerity with a warm, fresh meal. Here, the provision of a 'warm' meal can be seen as representing a distinctive type of humanitarian provision (*anthropistikí voúthia*), which was contrasted to the distribution of 'dry' food by the municipal authorities and other local humanitarian actors.⁹ The particular 'solidarity structure' (*domí alilegíis*) did not have a formal name or organisation. It was referred to by all participants as 'the initiative (*protovoulía*) of [or solidarity structure (*domí*) of] Aródos', the name of a bar-restaurant, where

9 Here the provision of warm food was more akin to traditional ideas about hospitality, which in Greece play an important role in constituting sociality (see among many, Herzfeld 1987, 1992; Sutton 2001; Papataxiarchis 2006, 2014; Rozakou 2012, this issue; Cabot 2014, this issue).

the solidarians met to distribute food to impoverished beneficiaries every Thursday at noon. 'Aródos' is the pseudonym I use to refer to both the bar-restaurant and the solidarity initiative.

The participants of Aródos went to great lengths to maintain the informal and spontaneous nature of their humanitarian activity, as they saw certain advantages in the flexibility and immediacy of informality (cf. Rakopoulos 2015, this issue; Rozakou 2016). Informality and immediacy (*amesótita*) liberated them, they argued, from the bureaucratic rules that constrained the activities of the municipal authorities and other humanitarian institutions. The Aródos initiative was in a position to offer food to families in need without subjecting the beneficiaries to long waiting periods, or without requesting application forms and official documents. In this manner, the Aródos participants attempted to refigure dominant stereotypes about 'deservingness, victimhood, and vulnerability' (Cabot 2014: 112), providing help where help was needed, in *their* neighbourhood.

The overall experience of the crisis in Patras, as in many other Greek towns, has stimulated a diversification of humanitarian activity. Along with institutionalised sources of humanitarian support – for example, the Church, the municipal social services, and NGOs established before the crisis – I witnessed a small number of spontaneous initiatives organised by ordinary citizens, such as the participants of Aródos. Some of these initiatives emerged in response to the crisis and in solidarity with fellow citizens impoverished by austerity. Spontaneity in this particular context indicates 'a collective action of resistance' (Dalakoglou 2012: 536), as well as a statement of disagreement towards the neoliberal logic of austerity. The majority of Aródos participants are guided by socialist principles and a strong awareness of political involvement, which encourages an ideological identification with the politically nuanced concept of 'solidarity', and an aversion to the middle-class associations of the term 'philanthropy'. Aródos, more specifically, was seen as a primarily Syriza initiative, although not all members were formally associated with the party, and not to the same degree.

The use of the term 'solidarity' by those who contributed to Aródos indicated a re-positioning of the self with respect to pre-existing humanitarian institutions, such as the Church or the Red Cross (cf. Rozakou 2016). As Rakopoulos aptly explains (in this issue), the notion of 'solidarity' provides a conceptual alternative (which is 'other') to more conservative forms of humanitarianism and voluntarism, especially those that have charity connotations. During my fieldwork conversations in Patras, the term 'solidarity' was *accentuated* by humanitarian participants affiliated with the Left, or *interrogated* by those Leftist interlocutors who suspected that the emerging solidarity initiatives did not challenge efficiently the existing inequalities engendered by austerity.

The informal interrogation of 'solidarity' – in everyday life, and as I recorded it during fieldwork – invites me to introduce the second conversational context that has informed this article. Apart from the conversations that occurred spontaneously at Aródos, I discussed my dilemmas regarding the ethics of giving with several interlocutors who were not closely identified with one of the new solidarity initiatives that emerged during the crisis. This additional group of interlocutors included my research participants from previous research projects,¹⁰ men and women from Patras

10 The town of Patras has been my anthropological field site since 1999, following from previous work in Zakynthos in the early 1990s.

who are well aware of my interest in Greek political life and my subjectivity as a Greek academic living and teaching in Britain. I have maintained with them a relationship of long-lasting rapport that encourages disagreement and open debate about timely ethical or political positions. Some of these long-established interlocutors had a previous involvement in humanitarian institutions, such as the Red Cross, while others abstained from voluntarism for ideological reasons (for example, due to their affiliation with KKE). They were interested to know more about my participation in food distribution initiatives, and interrogated my experiences and emerging dilemmas. In the pages that follow, I present their views, as these emerged through unsolicited conversation.

Beyond the Marxist critique of philanthropy: the view from Aródos

As I have already explained, I entered the field with a Marxist view in mind, critically predisposed to the idea of philanthropy. Yet, during my participation in a number of solidarity initiatives, I started questioning my views, evaluating and re-evaluating my experience, sharing my dilemmas with fellow solidarity participants. Some citizens in Patras – especially those not affiliated with the Left – found my dilemmas irrelevant, for it was obvious to them that giving to those in need was better than not giving, and there was no space for further questioning. But there were also several other citizens who were willing to problematise the humanitarian dimension of solidarity initiatives: was the emerging humanitarian ethnos an obstacle or an inspiration in maintaining a political awareness?

Most of the women who contributed to the Aródos initiative had been exposed to an array of different ideological arguments promoted by the Left, and were, at the time of fieldwork, supporters of Syriza. They recognised the critique of volunteerism as a distinctive KKE argument and took the opportunity to differentiate themselves from the standard Communist position, which they described as ‘harsh’, ‘theoretical’ or ‘too cerebral’. Most of them argued that solidarity should be expressed unreservedly, and independently of party initiatives, especially in the present, when Greece is facing ‘a humanitarian crisis’.¹¹ A few among my interlocutors at Aródos, especially those who were previously associated with the Communist party, were interested in re-evaluating the Marxist critique of philanthropy, which inspired them to differentiate solidarity from philanthropy. Solidarity, some argued with sharp ideological precision, is likely to cultivate a certain degree of social consciousness – among volunteers and aid recipients – while philanthropy conveys a passive message.

Georgía, a founding member of the Aródos initiative, who is now a Syriza supporter, but followed KKE in her youth, attempted to interpret the KKE position, and differentiate herself from it:

The Communist party believes that all social responsibility lies with the state. If we provide for the poor, the state ensconces itself (*volévete*). According to this

11 The phrase ‘humanitarian crisis’ (*anthropistikí krísi*) was used by the Syriza government to describe the destructive effects of austerity. It was also used by citizens involved in solidarity activities, primarily by those who were supporters of Syriza.

position, the hungry should become even more hungry, so that they will stand up against inequality and unite in revolution...

At this point Georgía paused, because she realised that a part of her was identifying with the promise of revolution. But another part of her, she admitted, was not happy with this position any more. 'I once applauded this bold political message', she said in a reflexive manner, 'but now I believe that it is an excuse for inaction'. She referred to some of her former socialist fellows (*synagonistés*), who 'are settled with' (*volévonte*) the old Marxist view, and 'do absolutely nothing'. 'This is a time of crisis', Georgía concluded, 'you cannot stay passive and do nothing'. As a mother of two, Georgía feels that she is short of time, but she always find the time, she stressed, to 'participate' (*na symetéhei*).

A similar viewpoint to Georgía was shared by another participant of Aródos and Syriza supporter, Eleni, who is a medical doctor and involved in the activities of the Social Health Clinic and the Social Pharmacy (cf. Cabot 2014, this issue). 'Someone has to take the first step', she said, 'somebody has to make the start and inspire others'. Her experience providing for impoverished citizens in Patras has taught her that volunteering has a mutually motivating effect: 'each volunteer inspires yet another volunteer; you see people joining whom you would not expect to join'. In this gradual manner, solidarity initiatives re-animate people's 'social consciousness' (*koinonikí syneídisi*). 'Ordinary people', 'whose desire to give was previously latent', said Eleni, come and join various crisis-solidarity events. And she pointed at three – stereotypically middle-class – ladies who regularly volunteer to cook meals for the poor: 'through action, they have changed the way they approach politics'.

Tasía, a Syriza sympathiser who joined Aródos three months ago, expanded this argument a step further. At first, she said, people participate in solidarity initiatives and feel that their action has benefited themselves and their neighbours. Then this very action attracts more people, who volunteer to participate. Little by little people organise themselves and learn 'how and what' to demand from the authorities. When the local authorities have some money to direct towards a cause, groups that have cultivated their social consciousness are ready to act in unison and make particular demands. 'These people are more likely to be heard', Tasía underlined, 'because they have practised working together towards a common purpose: today they distribute food to the poor; tomorrow they will unite for another cause.' Tasía added that she is struggling to inspire 'a little bit of social consciousness' (*lígi koinonikí synídisi*) in her teenage daughters, and distract them 'from their mobile phones' and social media, which promote, she argued, 'an individualistic spirit' (*atomikó pnévma*).

The emphasis on the empowering dimension of solidarity, 161–81 by the positions of my interlocutors at Aródos resonated with the emancipatory euphoria of their participatory experience. The practice of cooking and distributing 'warm' food to those afflicted by the crisis was seen by the Aródos participants as indirect resistance to the crisis itself: an opportunity to escape temporarily from the paralysing, disempowering effects of austerity. The sharing of their time and resources was, in this respect, a means to communicate a 'social message', as they said, in a period of unprecedented 'unsocial measures' (taken by the governments before Syriza). The coming together (*i synévresi*) of likeminded solidarians – in

regular cooperation – was described by the women of Aródos as equally important to the humanitarian dimension of their activity.

More conservative voices

The general argument that volunteering generates a greater concern for communal values and objectives was also shared by citizens not affiliated with the political Left. Many referred to ‘the mentality’ (*i nootropía*) of ‘relying on the state for everything’, which has made, they said, the Greeks passive or inactive, and more self-centred than before. Mr Giórgos, an elderly pensioner who lives in a moderately impoverished neighbourhood on the outskirts of Patras, put this idea in perspective:

In the time of my grandfather, the people lived in a neighbourhood. They were coming out of their door to sweep the road, or whiten the wall, their own wall, and the wall of their neighbour, even more so if she was a widow. This mindset (*nootropía*) stretched a bit further: the people did not expect somebody else – the mayor, the prefect – to solve their problems. Today, people sit in the coffeehouses and wait for everything to be done by someone else, the garbage collector, or the local authorities. As a result, we live in bad surroundings, especially nowadays, with the crisis, when the state has run out of money.

Mr Giórgos stressed how he uses his meagre pension to help others, relatives and neighbours. And he raised his voice to accentuate his position: ‘somebody has to set an example’, he said, ‘shall I wait until Monday for the garbage collector to pick up the plastic bag that is stuck in the gutter? I take a stick and I remove it myself. If I only was a bit younger...’

‘Volunteering mobilises’, said another pensioner, Mrs Elisa, who is involved with the Red Cross: ‘some of the volunteers learn useful skills, which may help them find jobs’. She described to me a couple of cases where young Samaritans became inspired to pursue new careers after joining the Red Cross. They became ‘mobilised’ (*kinitopiúthikan*) and ‘sensitised’ (*evesthitopiúthikan*), she added, and by giving over their free time to the service of others ‘they opened their heart and their eyes’. That philanthropic work engenders an inner transformation – one that affects the giver more than the beneficiary – was a point made by numerous Red Cross volunteers in Patras. As Bakalaki notes, ‘philanthropic discourses almost invariably emphasise the transformative effects of altruistic giving on both donors and recipients’ (2008: 83). During fieldwork, I heard so many variations of this idea that I began to suspect that it was a self-perpetuating narrative.

I should admit at this point that the romanticisation of giving, articulated by young, middle-aged and elderly – primarily female – Red Cross volunteers aroused within me a desire to re-identify more closely with the Marxist critique of bourgeois philanthropy. Nonetheless, and for the sake of fairness, I should stress that the Red Cross of Patras is undertaking admirable and wide-reaching volunteering work that stretches from assisting crisis-afflicted citizens to supporting prisoners, mental institutions and children with special needs. On one occasion, I had the privilege of participating and contributing to a volunteer training session that focused on the ethics of giving. After I introduced a number of ideological and existential concerns with

respect to philanthropy, I was led to conclude, encouraged by the trainee volunteers, that my critical approach – however useful as a reflexive mirror – should not become an excuse for inaction. This observation allows us to appreciate that the volunteers of institutionalised and relatively conservative institutions, such as the Red Cross, recognise the empowering dimension of participation and action. This recognition, however, and in sharp contrast with solidarity initiatives affiliated to the Left, is articulated in rather apolitical terms (cf. Rozakou 2016).

Problematising philanthropy in discussions with younger volunteers always resulted in warm and enthusiastic exchanges of perspectives. But when I attempted to adopt a critical approach in conversations with older philanthropists, I felt that my arguments were crushed by the sheer weight of their volunteering record. ‘Theoreticians and intellectuals like you consider us fools’, said Ms Eiríni, an elderly Red Cross volunteer, who has been a Samaritan for many years. Over that time, she has heard all sorts of criticism, including what she described as the ‘Communist argument’. The latter, she explained, attempts to portray volunteers as being exploited by the ‘system’, as well as the very philanthropic institutions to which they contribute their time and monetary donations. During our latest conversation, Ms Eiríni confronted these criticisms with stoic defiance:

They laugh at all voluntary projects, not only the initiatives of the Red Cross: take any example you like: cleaning the beach of rubbish, distributing food to the poor, caring for migrants, or organising blood donations...

Then Ms Eiríni looked at me in a penetrating manner, suspecting that I secretly sympathised with the Marxist critique. ‘What do they want to hide with such arguments?’, she asked rhetorically: ‘I’ll tell you what: their indifference to the common interest, or simply one’s laziness.’ ‘Tell me Dimitri, what do anthropologists do for those in need?’

Additional critical positions

Not surprisingly, considering the Communist’s party official position, its supporters were the most ready of my interlocutors to express reservations about the concept of philanthropy. They also criticised particular humanitarian initiatives that were organised by groups of individuals with an explicit political party affiliation; in most cases, these were Syriza initiatives. Critical arguments, however, were expressed, in all cases, with a reservation: that disapproval for bourgeois volunteerism is not synonymous with insensitivity towards the pain of others. In fact, as Mihális, a committed Communist supporter underlined, ‘it is the pain of others, those who have less than the average citizen’ that motivated him to uphold a critical stance towards most types of voluntarism. Mihális – whose opinions had inspired my writing in the past – felt free to criticise the contemporary crisis-related solidarity initiatives without fear that I may see his critical stance as ‘apathy’ or ‘lack of sensitivity for the pain of others’. ‘We should not lose sight of the real problem’; he added, ‘the real problem is inequality, not poverty’.

That inequality generates poverty, and that humanitarian activity distracts our attention from the nature of inequality, were two powerful arguments that resurfaced

in many informal conversations I had with KKE supporters in Patras. Most of these conversations developed without my intervention or solicitation, but in response to sharing my experience of participation in food distribution initiatives. One day, after returning from Aródos, I met for coffee with Maria, a KKE member, and a regular interlocutor who has acted as a devil's advocate – problematising my ethnographic predilections – for many years. After I described to her my latest volunteering experiences, Maria said: 'the solidarity movements in which you participate, do not confront what you call "the humanitarian crisis": you merely dull the pain of the crisis'.

Maria stressed with her voice the words 'humanitarian crisis' (*anthropistikí krísi*) to identify what she saw as a Syriza-brand of humanitarianism. At the time of fieldwork, the expression *anthropistikí krísi* was commonly used in the media, especially in official announcements by the Syriza government. Here my interlocutor wanted to provoke Makis, a Syriza supporter, who was sitting at the next table, listening to our conversation. Makis attempted to avert disagreement: 'philanthropy mitigates (*amvólínei*) the humanitarian crisis,' he said, 'it does not confront the crisis, it is only an immediate measure'. 'Yes, but philanthropy does not solve the problem', insisted Maria, 'it is like taking a medicine that does not cure, but only relieves the pain'. Makis confirmed that he agrees with Maria, but raised a reservation. When one does not have the power to change the system or introduce 'real solutions', he maintained, one should do what is 'humanly possible'. A partial, imperfect solution, he argued, is better than being indifferent to the pain caused by the crisis. On this point, Makis who was previously a KKE supporter but has now changed his allegiance to Syriza, and Maria, who remains faithful to the Communist party, agreed. There is a certain level of human pain, 'a certain immediacy (*amesótita*)', Makis and Maria concluded, that lies beyond ideological positions, and requires everyone's attention.

A few other citizens in Patras criticised philanthropy and volunteerism on less politically motivated grounds. 'Altruistic claims', argues Bakalaki, can be 'interpreted as signs of noble and sometimes naïve character, but they are also suspected of being hypocritical' (2008: 90). What is hiding behind hypocrisy, said Giannis, a retired mathematician, is 'selfishness' (*idiotélia*). Most actions are inherently selfish, he argued, even saying a flattering word to your fellow citizen. If one searches deeply in a benefactor's motivations, it will be difficult not to discover 'one or another' selfish intention. 'Most people lie to themselves', said Giannis emphatically, 'they idealise their charitable actions as selfless (*anidiotelís*). The more they *try* to do so, the greater their selfishness!' This is in fact why Giannis prefers to abstain from participating in solidarity initiatives. 'There is always a personal motive,' he explained 'whether it be political, or merely comes from a desire to idealise one's actions! I will not flatter myself in acting as if I can alleviate the pain of others.'

Petros, one of my oldest friends-and-interlocutors in Patras argued along similar lines, building on the idea that philanthropy is primarily a method of guilt-management: 'you don't solve the problem by giving someone a piece of bread ... don't have any illusions that you do' Petros said, and added 'you just lie to yourself'. In many respects, Petros' position encapsulated the essence of what both Oscar Wilde and Marx had previously argued, but without reference to these authors, and without a desire to align his views with a particular political party. What such critical positions often attempt to convey is a local awareness of the social characteristics of particular philanthropists, who are often the implicit target of a particular local *criticum*-interlocutor. These implicit targets of criticism are often concrete personalities,

let's says one's middle-class neighbour, who maintains visible consumption patterns that offend, and whose philanthropic activity may seem as a desperate attempt to seek absolution. 'At the end of the day', Petros concluded, '*they* return to their villa with their expensive four-by-four ... tired from an afternoon of philanthropic activity!'

Conclusions

There are two parallel conclusions that stem from the ethnography I presented in this article. The first indicates that participation in solidarity movements in crisis-afflicted Greece contributes to the shaping of a more dynamic social consciousness. This realisation provides a strong positive message that deserves to be disseminated more widely: humanitarian solidarity is more valuable in its role as a means of broadening the political awareness of those who participate in it, than it is as a mechanism for providing help to those in need. Although humanitarian aid is undeniably a limited, temporary and insufficient solution, the act of providing help to those in need engenders the formation of active networks of citizens seeking change. Rakopoulos has provided examples of activist volunteers who 'imagine alternative modes of economic conduct' and see their actions as building up to 'broader change' (2014b: 314; see also 2014a). Similar examples of empowerment through solidarity are offered by additional ethnographic accounts in Greece (see Cabot 2014; Rakopoulos 2015; Rozakou 2016). Local networks of citizens, who become better acquainted and organised through solidarity initiatives, can potentially – but not always – reconstitute themselves as pressure groups or locally embedded political entities.¹²

Although I strongly appreciate the empowering dimension of solidarity initiatives outlined above, I feel obliged to offer a second concluding consideration. For my first optimistic conclusion may encourage a certain degree of – what my most critical interlocutors¹³ call – complacency (*efisihasmós*). The effectiveness of several solidarity movements in addressing some of the most immediate repercussions of austerity at the local level may contribute to redirecting attention away from systemic inequalities. In this respect, humanitarian agents can be seen as maintaining 'a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight' (Agamben 1998: 133). This is a drawback shared by humanitarian activity more generally; its 'unintended consequences' include a proclivity to de-politicise and individualise suffering (Ticktin 2014: 277–83); an over-attentiveness to the suffering subject, that can be seen here as a substitute for anthropology's exotic proclivity to Otherise (Robbins 2013). In a paradoxical manner, humanitarianism's efficacy distorts the root of the problems it attempts to redress. Ticktin (2014), drawing from the anthropological literature, provides us with several telling examples: humanitarian measures against famine may lead to the de-politicisation of famine as a historically embedded experience (see de Waal 1997); humanitarian aid in response to conflict-related emergencies can naturalise (and normalise) violence and war, hiding from view their political dimension (see Fassin and Pandolfi 2010); humanitarianism in non-Western contexts often obscures the inequality between Western and non-Western humanitarian workers (see Fassin 2011a;

12 The majority of my interlocutors who embrace this flexible view tend to support Syriza or are involved in local solidarity initiatives led by Syriza supporters.

13 Who may be supporters of the Communist party, but also supporters of Syriza, anarchists and citizens of a Leftist inclination not affiliated with a particular party.

Redfield 2012b). Similarly, humanitarian hospitality conceals the hierarchical and controlling inclusion of refugees in the social world of host populations (Rozakou 2012).

But let me return to the point from which I started writing this article: the Marxist critique of philanthropy and its relevance for a contemporary context of solidarity activity in crisis-ridden Greece. Undoubtedly, the meaning of solidarity as an empowering and politically nuanced notion is subject to change, and reemployed strategically to meet new challenges and crisis-experiences (cf. Rakopoulos 2014a, 2014b, this issue). But as with most versions of humanitarianism, humanitarian solidarity cannot be completely disavowed from the liabilities of philanthropy, where the latter is conceived as an apolitical vision or a self-exonerating practice. In this respect, the criticisms of Marx, Wilde, Nietzsche and Žižek – as outlined in my introduction – are still timely. They are matched by the critical remarks of my interlocutors in Patras who appeared so interested in debating the ethics of humanitarianism. Humanitarian solidarity looked to some of them like a partial solution, independent of their decision to participate in it or not.

The importance of the local arguments I presented in this article lie in their circularity: there is not one straightforward rule to be followed in all cases of humanitarian solidarity. The two conclusions I have outlined – in an open and deliberately inconclusive manner – seem to coexist simultaneously, without cancelling each other out: humanitarian solidarity in austerity-ridden Greece can be an empowering experience that stimulates the political awareness of those who participate in it. But humanitarian solidarity – when this is conceived as a self-exonerating achievement or a superficial response to the immediacy of suffering – detracts attention from the root of social inequality, and depoliticises the consequences of the crisis. These two parallel and overlapping possibilities can help us depart from an all-or-nothing position with regard to the Marxist critique of philanthropy; they also encourage us to appreciate the complexity, contextual specificity and social embeddedness of humanitarian solidarity initiatives.

In everyday life, the de-politicising effect of humanitarianism does not preclude the politically empowering potential of humanitarian solidarity. The members of Aródos, and other spontaneous solidarity initiatives inspired by austerity, share a socialist ideology that is critically predisposed to the idea of philanthropy, but they are also permeated by a strong desire to act against austerity. They are, in their overwhelming majority, aware that their humanitarian contribution is temporary and ineffective – not a solution to the problem itself – yet they choose to respond to the crisis by volunteering to participate in solidarity initiatives. Through participation they have come to recognise the unexpected benefits of working with fellow citizens towards a common purpose. And through cooperation they feel better connected to their local community; they have learnt – as some say – to count on it (*na stirízonte s'afin*).

The simultaneity of more than one sets of arguments about humanitarian solidarity does not necessarily lead to a paradox, or the rejection of one or another position. On the contrary, simultaneity here engenders complexity, the interweaving of nuance ideological arguments (often with the intention of destabilising austerity). During participation in humanitarian initiatives, local Greek actors often battle with more than one culturally embedded ideal about how to contribute to their fellow citizens. For example, the sociality of hospitality (see Herzfeld 1987, 1992; Papataxiarchis 2006, 2014; Rozakou 2012; Cabot 2014) may be contrasted with the inequality of gift giving (Herzfeld 1992; Hirschon 1992, 2000; Gkintidis 2014). Similarly, humanitarianism may

be recognised as a superficial remedy for social inequality, yet the ethos of offering help to those in need – especially now with the crisis – is so strong that most of my interlocutors in Patras contribute money and/or time and/or labour into caring for others: close or distant family members, neighbours or anonymous citizens stricken by austerity. Seen from this point of view, the ideological objections of some citizens in Patras towards humanitarianism do not serve as a passport for inaction. They do provide, however, a vantage point to engage in a critique of systemic inequalities or particular individuals who are seen as representing selfish motivations, for example a wish to redeem oneself from privilege.

My friend Petros, a committed critic of most local humanitarian initiatives, admitted in a subsequent conversation that he would have liked ‘to participate’ (*na symetéhei*), to feel part of a community in solidarity; but he is haunted by the image of his bourgeois neighbour returning home on his four-by-four, ‘self-exonerated’ (*ikanopiiménos me ton eaftó tou*) ‘after having helped so many people’!

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Dimitrios Theodossopoulos
 School of Anthropology & Conservation
 University of Kent
 Canterbury CT2 7NR
 United Kingdom
 d.theodossopoulos@kent.ac.uk

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Philanthropie ou solidarité? Dilemmes éthiques sur l'humanitaire dans une Grèce touchée de crise

Que la philanthropie perpétue les conditions qui provoquent l'inégalité est un argument de date partagé par des penseurs tels que Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde et Slavoj Žižek. J'ai enregistré des variations de cet argument dans des conversations locales portant sur les questions humanitaire croissante dans une Grèce affectée d'austérité sévère. La critique locale de l'humanitaire met en évidence deux possibilités parallèles: d'une part, leur potentiel d'autonomisation (où les initiatives de solidarité améliorent la conscience sociale locale); et deuxièmement, la dépolitisation de la crise (un passif qui découle de l'amélioration que les conséquences superficielles de la crise). Ces possibilités, que je traite comme simultanés et interdépendants, pointent vers la complexité et l'intégration sociale de la solidarité humanitaire en temps d'austérité.

Mots-clés solidarité, critique marxiste de la philanthropie, l'austérité, la crise financière, la Grèce