



Life Goes On. Banalities and Sociabilities of Crisis Greece

written by Heath Cabot
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"Grecia, prove di un'economia di guerra". (Corriere della Sera, June 30, 2015)
"The Real Story Behind Greece's Debt Crisis," MSNBC with Chris Hayes (6/30, 2015)
"The decision to call a referendum in midstream only heightened uncertainty. It was a transparent effort to evade responsibility. It was the action of leaders more interested in retaining office than in minimizing the cost to the country of the crisis." ([Barry Eichengreen](#), June 28, 2015,)"



“By contrast, a no vote would at least open the possibility that Greece, with its strong democratic tradition, might grasp its destiny in its own hands. Greeks might gain the opportunity to shape a future that, though perhaps not as prosperous as the past, is far more hopeful than the unconscionable torture of the present. I know how I would vote.” (Joseph Stieglitz, *The Guardian*, June 29, 2015)

The day before yesterday, July 1, 2015, I walked alongside others on their morning commutes, as shops were opening for business; the central market was well into its morning operations, and people were headed out to buy meat, fish, and vegetables. I was en route to one of the “social-solidarity clinics/pharmacies” where I have been conducting ethnographic research since this past January (2015). Working entirely on voluntarism, these clinics/pharmacies – some of them operating since 2011 – are grassroots, largely neighborhood-level initiatives, and can be found in multiple areas of Athens and throughout the provinces; one of the largest and oldest operates in Thessaloniki, founded initially to respond, in part, to the needs of migrants after the powerful hunger strike conducted by “the 300” in 2010. Now Greeks make up most of the visitors to these clinics, where volunteers, or solidarity workers, collect and redistribute leftover pharmaceuticals from families, schools, and even other pharmacies, and provide both preventative and urgent care to uninsured and unemployed people.

Many of those who proffer (offer) their time and their labor at these clinics also, themselves, face challenges of unemployment and poverty and thus make use of the very services that they offer. Hence, the meaning of solidarity: a lateral, anti-hierarchical ideology and practice of community-based support which has taken root here in Greece. Through “solidarity structures,” the population has mobilized, at local levels, and across a variety of arenas, to respond to urgent needs that are the product of austerity, when the state is no longer equipped with the material or financial resources to meet these needs: food, housing, medical care.



Yesterday morning, having spent much of the night reading dramatic and conflicting news stories (in the national and international press), I was anxious for the country that I love and the friends and acquaintances who have shared their time, insights, advice, and experiences with me since I began doing research here in 2004 – during the “good years” of the Olympic Games and the, then relatively recent, accession to the Euro-zone. But the morning routines – and passersby’s greetings of kalimera (“good morning”) – reminded me how, as people keep telling me, life goes on. I passed through a park



where people were taking in the morning sunshine, and where others were still asleep, having encamped there over the past few months or years. Families of cats congregated, as usual, around the shopping cart of one woman who has set up home there, as she distributed their morning meals. It seems that the activities of the cat caretakers, who leave heaping bowls of cat food for neighborhood felines, have even intensified over the past few days. While walking with my cat-loving dog to check the local ATM situation the night before last, I had a conversation with one woman who was busy setting out a late-night snack for “her” group of cats. The ATMs had not been restocked, but she was not concerned; she didn’t have money in the bank anyway.

At the clinic there was talk of politics, of course – agreements and disagreements, moments of robust indignation. But there was also talk of how, well, things must also go on as usual. My co-solidarity workers underscored how 60 euros a day,



the cap placed on bank withdrawals to prevent draining the banks' "coffers," was more than enough for a week - not a day. In the meantime, they have too many things to do, too many other obligations, to obsess or panic. What will happen will happen, and things will go on. By no means do such comments indicate resignation or political laziness. These are active, critical, smart people: most at the clinic will vote "no" in the referendum, and many have protested. But the "state of emergency" hailed in the international press seemed almost absurd as the city continued its daily work and sociabilities. Later, I finally withdrew my own fifty euros in a rather sociable line right around the corner from the clinic, as people patiently awaited their turn. Meanwhile, my visiting in-laws from Italy laughed at how the *Corriere della Sera* described Greece's "economy of war" as we walked through the central market amid the overwhelming scents of fish and fresh meat.

Of course, people here are worried, afraid - especially at the uncertainty. As one young man told me the other day: my parents and grandparents have gone through very difficult times, but this is something entirely new for me - I have no idea what will happen. But there is also a powerful sense of resilience that stands in marked contrast to the climate of frustration and disappointment that I found here following the initial onset of "the crisis" in 2010/ 2011. One thing people who live in Greece have learned or perhaps remembered during these past few years of austerity is that they can respond and go on - at least in most cases. I say "people who live in Greece," because migrants, children born to migrant parents, and other "non-Greeks" nonetheless participate here and make their lives here, and their futures are also being shaped by the unfolding situation. As many point out to me, Greece has been through many bad times: the devastation of the Second World War and the Civil War, then the years of the Junta (events that were sparked largely by foreign intervention and speculation in Greece by external powers, primarily England, the US, and Germany).

As I have spoken with people about the meaning of solidarity, they have recounted to me memories of past moments of overwhelming need, whether in Greece or elsewhere, and how - again - life went on. A new friend told me how,



during her years in a (then) communist-bloc country, she learned how people can survive literally on nothing – and they can live well and do good work. Another told me of his childhood village in Crete, where people worked together to cultivate and store grains and vegetables in the difficult years of the fifties. Another spoke of her childhood in Albania, and how people looked out for each other in conditions incomparably more difficult to what people in Greece currently face. Certainly there is always a bit of nostalgia in such accounts of the past as it connects to this particular present, but these histories are also invoked as a reminder of how things have been much worse – and life has gone on.

There is even the frequently-expressed sentiment that this return to poverty and uncertainty, to questions of basic human and community need, has actually made people and “the society” better, that people are less estranged from each other, that they care more and participate more in their communities. As one man told me, solidarity “arose from the need.”

Another sentiment that has come to the fore under austerity (and certainly people in Greece learned this long ago) is not to trust anyone except maybe themselves, their families, or their communities. This includes not just Europe, but the press especially – and the government. But one thing that Syriza brought during the elections in January was a sense of hope, at least among many people with whom I have spoken, that this just might be a government that works for its people, not for the oligarchs, the Eurogroup, or themselves. This feeling of course was never universal and is deeply under question now, but we must also remember that during these past few months of negotiations, the resolve of the current government – increasingly characterized as reckless in the press – was not to bargain with the lives of its people. Make no mistake — austerity is real: people I know are living without electricity, on whatever few euros they can scrounge, continually facing potential homelessness, health problems, hunger, and powerful depression and anxiety. Many have told me that if it were not for current solidarity initiatives they would not have survived. Most of my friends here cannot pay their bills, and that is simply a given. I am indignant at how the interests of



capital, pseudo-colonialism, and yes, corruption of all kinds (not only in Greece) have placed these particular persons in these kinds of situations. But I also see and admire deeply at how people not only go on with their lives but work hard (often without pay), discuss, get angry, joke, question, and somehow also, most often, manage not only to live but live well, in conversation and in contact with each other.

One of the stereotypes that often comes under international scrutiny as an exemplar of the (so-called) “laziness” of Greeks is the café culture: the hours people spend drinking coffee, chatting and passing time together.



The café is in fact a center of social engagement and debate, where friendships and networks are formed, and politics and business are conducted. People not only discuss and critique important issues but pass time together and, as such, make difficult moments bearable. As a dear friend explained, even at the worst moments here in Greece, at the very least you can always go out and have a coffee, talk, and share the situation with others. Or as someone told me the other day, she was at café with friends when they heard about the referendum – so they



ordered another beer and stayed up all night talking. At the clinics, some people have told me that they no longer have the money to go for coffee – or they go for coffee just once a month. This does not mean that they cannot afford their morning Starbucks – this is, instead, a form of deep social isolation, where people can no longer engage meaningfully in the public sphere and participate actively in the ongoing, everyday, intimate democracy that people in Greece practice so well. This is crucial for understanding the importance of the referendum vote this Sunday. There has been a powerful discourse in the international press suggesting that Alexis Tsipras’s move to call for a referendum was a way to avoid taking responsibility, a last-minute last-ditch effort to save face by shoving this responsibility onto the people. Perhaps this would be the case in a country where people do not want to engage in politics.

But this is a country where even the local café is a center of robust democratic activity, where people demand their right to participate, and they take this participation seriously.

Most of those I speak with here emphasize the importance of not trusting any news sources, remaining patient, and getting on with things, most often in a quiet dignified manner. People are not in a panic – at least not now, not yet. This is a powerful and sobering antidote to the images of catastrophe and “downward spirals” that the international media perpetuate (which also buoy up the logic of “there is no alternative” so entwined with neo-liberalism). The international press seems to be full of opinions about what is going on and what Greece and Greeks should be doing. In contrast, my friends here remind me that none of us know what is “really” going on, and certainly none of us know what is going to happen. The likes of Donald Trump have weighed in on Greece; on the other side of the spectrum, we also have the important contributions of people like Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz. But what is common across all of these interventions is that everyone seems to feel that they have the right, the knowledge, to say what Greeks should do – or how “they would vote” (as in [Stiglitz’s powerful](#) piece in the *Guardian*).



I have no idea – and frankly, I cannot and I should not “weigh in.” My friends here are mostly in the “no” camp regarding the referendum, but questions of family, class background, and social networks also play a huge role in shaping how people approach such important decisions. I have done research in Greece for over ten years now, I speak the language, I consider Greece my elective home; but I do not work here, I am not paid here, I do not make my life here. My biggest financial concern right now, besides not having easy access to cash, is how my last Fulbright check will be deposited – whether here in Greece or in the US. I am deeply tired of people telling Greece and those who live here what to do. As others have pointed out, this is fundamentally a question of sovereignty and democratic process, and what Athena Athanasiou has described in [her recent article](#) as “the right to democrat dissent”. I trust that those who live here will do the best they can under perhaps impossible circumstances, which is the most anyone can expect; that life will go on; that people will live – and somehow — manage to live well.

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