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SPECIAL ISSUE/EDITORIAL

SOCIO-POLITICAL RESPONSES DURING RECESSIONARY TIMES IN GREECE

An Introduction¹

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ABSTRACT: In the context of the recent global financial crisis – the most severe crisis since the Great Depression – Greece has been heavily affected in almost all aspects of the economic, social, political and institutional spheres. The implemented draconian austerity measures under the bailout mechanisms have led to devastating effects on the lives of citizens that have triggered a plethora of collective initiatives. The main rationale of the Special Issue is to capture the various facets of socio-political responses that have emerged from the aftermath of the Greek financial crisis. The Special Issue relies on original data produced in the context of two EU-funded projects, namely LIVEWHAT and TransSOL, and includes six papers applying qualitative and quantitative methods, providing a rich set of fresh and systematic data on understanding the collective efforts of Greek citizens during recessionary times.

KEYWORDS: Alternative action organisations, crisis, degrowth, gender, Greece, resilience, social and solidarity economy, solidarity economy, trade unions

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1. The effects and responses of the Greek crisis

The recent global financial crisis has been the most acute economic event since the Great Depression, threatening the prosperity and economic security of many developed countries, including European ones. Greece has been at the epicentre of the crisis and faced the deepest recession in its modern history. Since early 2009, the country has entered a prolonged and sustained economic downturn, captured in the declining trends of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and escalating general government gross debt (as a percentage of GDP) (Featherstone 2011; Matsaganis 2013). In order to deal with the economic turmoil, and avert a potential default, the Greek governments agreed on bailout programs² under the close supervision of the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)³. In return, a series of austerity measures and structural reforms were implemented, including severe curtailing of public spending in health, education and social security budgets, steep reductions in salaries and pensions, closures and mergers of public organisations, sharp increases in taxes (e.g., VAT and property taxes) as well as unfavourable labour market reforms.

The Greek debt crisis has been linked to a plethora of adverse socio-economic consequences. As a corollary of the implemented measures that dismantled the labour market, the unemployment rate skyrocketed whereas, poverty and deprivation threatened broader segments of the population (Balourdos 2014; Matsaganis and Leventi 2014; OECD 2014; Papatheodorou 2015). Moreover, the severe public spending cuts in health and social security, as well as other social benefits, have further contributed to more Greeks being unable to access primary services (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2012; Petmesidou and Guillén 2015).

The multifaceted effects of the Greek debt crisis are echoed, among others, in the increasing trends in suicide rates (Economou, Madianos, Theleritis, Peppou, and Stefanis 2011), in cases of depression (Economou, Madianos, Peppou, Patelakis, and Stefanis 2013), in xenophobic trends and incidents of racist violence (Kalogeraki 2014; Racist Violence Recording Network 2014), in far-right, neo-fascist extremism (Georgiadou 2013), in homeless and 'neo-homeless'⁴ (Theodorikakou, Alamanou, and Katsadoros 2013; Arapoglou and Gounis 2015), as well as in emigration flows (Kalogeraki

² The so-called 'Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policies'.

³ EC, ECB and IMF are collectively known as 'Troika'.

⁴ 'Neo-homeless' is a term used to describe a new generation of homeless people who before the crisis used to have a satisfactory standard of living.

2017), including skilled labour ('brain drain') towards more prosperous countries (Lambrianidis 2011; Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014).

During a period of major transformations in almost all aspects of the social, economic, political and institutional spheres, Greek society creates foci of resistance to respond to the adverse outcomes of the crisis. Such collective initiatives involve new and traditional forms of political mobilisation, such as the *Indignados Movement* and the massive protests against Troika Memoranda and austerity policies (Rüdiger and Karyotis 2013; Kousis 2014; Kanellopoulos and Kousis, 2018; Serdedakis and Koufidi 2018). Moreover, the recessionary conditions have led to major transformations in collective responses by citizens, in how to meet their everyday needs and address life strategy concerns in order to tolerate, absorb, cope with and adjust to the socio-economic threats posed by neoliberal policies. Some scholars refer to such collective responses as *grassroots economic activism* (D'Alisa, Forno, and Maurano 2015), other scholars as *direct actions* (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) and others as *alternative forms of resilience* (Kousis and Paschou 2017). Despite the different terms used, all these notions refer, in some way, to alternatives to the mainstream, economic and non-economic practices that aim to remedy the effects of the crisis and provide social and economic sustainability for the entire society and, specifically, for socio-economically vulnerable groups. Recent studies show that, increasingly, Greek society is adopting such collective practices, including, among others, citizens' self-help groups, solidarity networks, credit unions, ethical banks, time banks, social and solidarity economy initiatives, in order to collectively endure the negative effects of the recent recession (Petropoulou 2013; Loukidou 2014; Sotiropoulos, 2014; Rakopoulos, 2015; Vathakou, 2015; Simiti, 2017; Kousis, Kalogeraki, Papadaki, Loukakis, and Velonaki 2018). However, responses to economic hardships do not take place only at the collective level, but also at the individual. Citizens adopt resilient activities, including practices in their everyday living and working conditions, as coping mechanisms used to withstand, adapt to, and recover from the adversities of the economic crisis (Harrison 2012).

2. Special Issue rationale and presentation of papers

The main rationale of the Special Issue is to capture facets of Greek citizens' socio-political responses that have emerged from the aftermath of the economic crisis. The Special Issue includes six papers applying quantitative and qualitative methods to explore different aspects of socio-political responses to the outcomes of the Greek crisis. Such a multi-method approach, provides a rich set of fresh and systematic data, offer-

ing fruitful insights on understanding the collective efforts of Greek citizens during hard economic times.

All contributions rely on original data produced in the context of two EU-funded projects, namely LIVEWHAT and TransSOL. The former⁵ is conducted across nine European countries⁶, i.e., France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. The LIVEWHAT project aims to provide evidence-based knowledge about citizens' resilience in times of economic crises, allowing for more effective policy responses to the negative consequences of such crises. The second EU-funded project, TransSOL⁷, is conducted across eight European countries⁸, namely Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The TransSOL project aims to provide an exhaustive analysis of the individual forms and conditioning factors enhancing transnational solidarity in Europe.

The Special Issue is addressed to researchers and scholars, interested in the socio-political responses of Greek citizens during hard economic times. The contributions enhance our understanding of specific forms of collective actions and specific individual practices, aiming to remedy and cope with the effects of the crisis, their required resources and challenges faced, as well as their potential sustainability and future development. Moreover, the plurality in the data used, derived from the two EU-funded projects, LIVEWHAT and TransSOL, shed light on the richness of methodological approaches and techniques that can be used to disentangle citizens' socio-economic responses during recessionary times.

⁵ The LIVEWHAT (Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences) project was funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme (Grant Agreement No. 613237). More information about the project can be found at: <http://www.livewhat.unige.ch>

⁶ The LIVEWHAT consortium is coordinated by the University of Geneva (Marco Giugni), and is formed, additionally, by the European University Institute (Lorenzo Bosi), the University of Uppsala (Katrin Uba), the University of Sheffield (Maria Grasso), the CEVIPOF-Sciences Po Paris (Manlio Cinalli), the University of Siegen (Christian Lahusen), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Eva Anduiza), the University of Crete (Maria Kousis), and the University of Warsaw (Maria Theiss).

⁷ The TransSOL (European paths to transnational solidarity at times of crisis: Conditions, forms, role models and policy responses) project was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement No. 649435. More information about the project can be found at: <http://transsol.eu/>

⁸ The TransSOL consortium is coordinated by the University of Siegen (Christian Lahusen), and is formed, additionally, by the Glasgow Caledonian University (Simone Baglioni), European Alternatives e.V. Berlin (Daphne Büllsbach), the Sciences Po Paris (Manlio Cinalli), the University of Florence (Carlo Fusaro), the University of Geneva (Marco Giugni), the University of Sheffield (Maria Grasso), the University of Crete (Maria Kousis), the University of Siegen (Christian Lahusen), European Alternatives Ltd. LBG UK (Lorenzo Marsili), the University of Warsaw (Maria Theiss), and the University of Copenhagen (Hans-Jörg Trezn).

In the first paper, Angelos Loukakis, using quantitative data from the LIVEWHAT project, derived from an innovative methodological approach labelled Alternative Action Organisations Analysis, sheds light on the political aspect of the Greek Alternative Action Organisations (AAOs), which primarily aim to provide solidarity activities to vulnerable socio-economic groups. The findings unveil AAOs' responses during hard economic times, emphasizing distinct features between 'political AAOs' (i.e., AAOs engaged in protest, awareness-raising and lobbying activities) and 'non-political' ones (i.e., AAOs engaged exclusively in solidarity actions). About two thirds of the AAOs under study are 'political', highlighting their dual role as solidarity providers and as political actors. 'Political AAOs' are portrayed as primarily informal or protest groups and NGOs, mainly functioning at the national level and being founded prior to the recent economic crisis. Moreover, 'political AAOs' are more likely to have a higher degree of formality, apply direct democratic forms of decision-making, as well as emphasise aims, associated with social change and the promotion of collective identities and community empowerment. The paper provides a significant contribution to our knowledge, with respect to the role of the AAOs as actors in the political arena during the Greek economic crisis.

In the second paper, Marina Papadaki and Stefania Kalogeraki, also using data derived from the Alternative Action Organisations Analysis of the LIVEWHAT project, provide some indicative nationwide findings about the Greek Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) sector, in the context of the recent crisis. The authors highlight the interrelations of the recent SSE expansion as a response to the recessionary conditions in the country. Most of the SSE organisations under study have been founded after the beginning of the crisis, while among their most widespread activities is covering the urgent needs of different type of beneficiaries, which primarily comprise vulnerable socio-economic groups. The Greek SSE sector besides operating as a coping strategy to remedy the effects of the crisis, also acts as a tool of promoting social change, empowerment, democratic governance and alternative practices. Despite the methodological limitations of the study, the preliminary findings enrich the scarce, quantitative, empirical evidence of the Greek SSE sector by portraying its main attributes and shedding light on its twofold role, i.e., as means to respond to the effects of the crisis, but also as tools of collective empowerment and social transformation, during hard economic times.

In the third paper, Eugenia Petropoulou, presents the results of the case study analysis of a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative, namely *Nontropo* (pseudonym used) that buys food and other products directly from producers, who are selected in accordance with ethical and solidarity principles. The author relies on data gathered dur-

ing the LIVEWHAT project through a face-to-face interview with a key representative of the specific Social and Solidarity Economy initiative. The findings underpin that whilst such initiatives are incapable of replacing the current capitalist system they can provide an alternative field of sustainable consumption patterns that utilise local-traditional resources in order to empower local communities in austerity-ridden Greece. The author underscores that in the case of *Nonthropo*, the enhancement of solidarity is one of the most fundamental motivations behind sustainable food consumption. Moreover, whilst, the localised practices of *Nonthropo*, in addition to the fair, eco-friendly and small-scale provision of food and other services can become limiting factors to financial security, at the same time, act as a safety net towards the current recession. The paper provides some critical pieces of empirical evidence on how a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative initiative by integrating its values, beliefs and practices into the local context promotes an alternative and sustainable model of development at times of crisis.

In the fourth paper, Yiannis Zaimakis, drawing upon in-depth interviews with key informants of grassroots alternative organisations, mainly derived from the framework of the LIVEWHAT project, sheds light on the political imperatives and ideological positions surrounding solidarity economy initiatives. Based on seven striking exemplars of politically-oriented, solidarity economy collectives in crisis-ridden Greece and using critical discourse analysis, the author unveils activists' voices articulating a heterotopian vision of an alternative economic model that moves beyond the market and the state, and calls into question the neoliberal market logic. Activists, behind their solidarity economy actions, unearth a radical political imaginary that is characterised by romantic humanism, egalitarian goals and an ethos of collectivism. Whilst such an imaginary involves a better world, which significantly departs from the prevalent capitalist imaginary, solidarity economy initiatives, as critical responses to the recent crisis, are in reality constrained due to their limited impact on society, low sustainability capability, limited life-spans and internal ideological conflicts. The paper provides a significant contribution in the specific field of research, by illuminating the motives, worldviews and value-systems that lay behind solidarity economy initiatives during hard economic times in Greece.

In the fifth paper, Christina Karakioulafis and Kostas Kanellopoulos use in-depth interviews with Greek grassroots trade unionists and labour activists, in the framework of the TransSQL project, to explore strategies towards contingent workers and the unemployed. The authors underline the fact that despite the acute increase in employment precarity and unemployment during the economic crisis, the general stance of the Greek 'official' and more 'institutionalised' trade unions towards contingent workers and the unemployed has been strongly contested, whereas grassroots rank-and-file

unions have had a more active role. Focusing on the latter, the in-depth interviews unveil a working class-oriented identity, discourse and framework of action, as well as a conception of class solidarity, adopting inclusive strategies towards contingent workers and the unemployed. Despite the critical role of grassroots rank-and-file unions, the authors underpin the fact that their impact is limited, primarily due to the lack of infrastructural and material resources that could considerably contribute to the inclusion of precarious and unemployed workers to the system of interest representation. The paper provides crucial insights on Greek union responses in the context of the recent crisis, by highlighting the malfunctions of the official trade unions, as well as the challenges faced by grassroots rank-and-file unions to effectively treat the increased unemployment as well as the precarisation of employment conditions.

In the last paper of the Special Issue, Yota Papageorgiou and Vasiliki Petousi, using individual online survey data from the LIVEWHAT project, shed light on the effects of the crisis – primarily on employment and working conditions – on Greek men and women, as well as on their responses to withstand hardships and bounce back. The authors underscore that, whilst both men and women have been severely affected from the recent recessionary conditions, among women, it is those in the lower occupational categories who have withstood more severe losses in employment and working conditions. Moreover, the findings underpin the fact that, in response to the crisis, men and women, albeit in different ways, adjust, accommodate and resist hardships through personal (such as reduction in consumption) and collective actions (such as membership in organisations and active engagement in political actions) of resilience. The paper makes a significant contribution to our knowledge in the specific field of research by stressing the key inclusion of gender considerations as an integral part of any study that aims to provide a thorough understanding of the detrimental consequences of the crisis on citizens' working and living conditions, as well as their resilient responses to accommodate and resist adversity.

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