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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRO-REFUGEE ACTIVISM IN GREECE

The imaginary grounds of a real dynamic ¹

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore selective activism in order to seize the reasons lying beneath activist commitment to a cause instead of another requiring defense, concomitant and similar to the one ultimately chosen. The attempt to understand how activists' decision-making process and subsequent activity are structured is grounded on a field research conducted among pro-refugee activists in Athens from 2015 to 2017. The findings of the research show that the emergence and expansion from 2015 onwards of many different pro-refugee activist initiatives are largely influenced by imaginary constructs that are related to three superimposed but distinct levels of imaginary identification games. This case study reveals that pro-refugee activism is certainly fuelled by political facts, but at the same time it is detached both from reality and politics, since it reflects the way in which they are combined with imaginary universes predominant in activist circles, which have little or no political relevance.

Key words: activism, Greece, imaginary, refugee crisis, squats.

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1. Introduction

From the 1960s onwards, when it started attracting scholars' attention, collective action has been the subject of numerous analyses which have covered several facets of the issue, ranging from the rationales and forms of activism to the repertoires of contention (Olson, 1965; Hirschman, 1970; Oberschall, 1973; Tilly, 1984) and the emergence of unconventional forms of activism (Velasquez, LaRose, 2015). A great deal of these studies have focused on the motives of activists, revealing their plurality over time.

At the social and political level, these have mainly been linked to the dynamism of political organizations, associations or collectives, to the emergence of new issues, or to collective awareness of problems posed by previous issues (*Revue française de science politique*, 2001; *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 2012). Other studies have shown that activism can also be an integral part of political power games by highlighting how activists may use the causes they defend as a means to reinforce their power and legitimacy within a given political field (Cappiali, 2017).

At the personal level, the motives of activists were first associated with (un)expected personal rewards be they material or symbolic², the exposing of which shattered the idea of disinterested activism (Gaxie, 1977). Revisited again later in terms of external and internal rewards, this approach revealed a dense network of interest-driven interactions that sustained commitment to collective action towards others, thereby calling into question the notion of political altruism (Passy, 2001). Other studies have associated personal motives with elements of the activists' identity that are linked to their profiles (Duncan, 2002; Fielding, McDonald and Louis, 2008; Pérez, Williams, 2014) or their trajectories in terms of activist careers (Fillieule, 2005). Finally, following a trend that integrates emotional categories into the possible motives of activists (Jasper, 1998; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2000, 2001), some scholars have focused on the role of affections, feelings, and emotions as factors in explaining the emergence, persistence, and decline of social movements and other forms of contentious politics (Rosenberger, Winkler, 2014: 166) without denying the rationality and reasoning ability within social movements (Gould, 2009: 18).

Despite their diversity, in their vast majority such analyses of the personal motives of activists converge on two points. On the one hand, they assume that these motives always refer to reality, whether perceived rationally or emotionally, thus excluding the possible role played by the imaginary in a given decision-making process. In closely

² These range from the creation of jobs to esteem, admiration and prestige within a given group, notwithstanding the building of more or less powerful social networks and the comforting aspect of a wide range of social practices resulting from belonging to a group (sharing of joys, defeats, risks, challenges, etc.).

attaching political behaviour to reality, international academia has been slow to admit that the impact of the imaginary goes well beyond nationalism (Anderson, 1983) and social construction of threat processes to even include social movements (Haiven, Khasnabish, 2014). On the other hand, these studies shed light on the reasons that are shaping activists' decision to defend a given cause. However, by focusing on the inclusive aspects of this decision, they tend to overlook its exclusive dimensions. Why do activists who decide to commit themselves to a cause exclude from their potential field of action other causes requiring defense, concomitant and similar to the one ultimately chosen? The reasons for this other part of the decision remain unclear, as if they were deprived of heuristic interest.

The idea that analysis of activists' motivations should go beyond the study of actual facts and factors in determining one's commitment to a cause—in order to also consider the imaginary constructs and factors determining this commitment's selective nature—leads to a series of new questions. According to what criteria do we decide to choose one cause over another similar one, which might dominate the political field just as much in a given period of time? Where does the (un)avowed consensus behind this two-sided decision come from? Is this decision-making process the convergence of judgments based on reality or could it also be determined by the imaginary?

Contrary to selective activism, which remains unexplored, the influence of the imaginary on political behaviour is at the heart of studies for the role it plays in politics (Castoriadis, 1975; Anderson, 1983; De Cock, Rehn and Berry, 2013; Giust-Desprairies, Faure, 2015) and, in particular, in social movements (Haiven, Khasnabish, 2014). As relevant case studies are still scarce, the insights that will be provided here ought to allow us to better understand how activists' decision-making process and subsequent activity are structured, thus complementing the existing literature on this subject. These insights will result from an analysis of current pro-refugee activism in Greece³. The analysis will not focus on the initial social mobilization, which began spontaneously at the beginning of the summer of 2015 and involved a significant part of civil society. It will focus instead on an apparent paradox lying beneath a social movement composed essentially of anti-authoritarian and far-left activists⁴, which emerged on the Aegean Sea islands and grew

³ Though people in question are asylum seekers, political and media discourses initially designated them as refugees and established accordingly the expressions refugee crisis, pro-refugee activism and refugee accommodation squats. The same confusion is to be found in the discourses of activists, who always refer to refugees. Consequently, I will keep the term refugee for these cases, while referring to asylum seekers in the rest of the paper.

⁴ Although there were also anarchists in these milieus, overall, their participation rate was low. Except where it is necessary to specify, these circles will be called activist.

considerably in Athens: if pro-refugee activism reflects an outpouring of compassion toward displaced and vagrant people, left destitute as victims of conflicts attributed to capitalist imperialism, why has there not been a similar commitment to the new poor and homeless Greeks⁵ who have also found themselves vagrant and violently destitute due to the functioning of the same capitalist system? How can we explain the fact that the extreme suffering of a part of the Greek population, brutally impoverished since 2010, in the wake of the country's financial crisis, has not caused significant concern among these same activist collectives that were massively mobilized from 2015 onwards in order to alleviate the suffering of asylum seekers?

The answers to the questions raised by this pro-refugee activism stem from my immersion, since 2012, in activist circles in Athens. This long-standing familiarity with the modes and repertoire of contention of these milieus has enabled me to follow closely this form of activism from its inception in the summer of 2015. From October 2015 to June 2016, I conducted informal discussions with activists who spent time on the Aegean Sea islands to support arriving asylum seekers. From October 2015 to June 2017, I conducted informal discussions with fifteen Greek activists involved in four refugee accommodation squats: Notara 26, City Plaza, 5th Lyceum, Hotel Oniro. Occasionally I frequented these spaces (October 2015-December 2016) and attended three assemblies held at Notara 26 (October-December 2015) and three assemblies held at City Plaza (April-June 2016). Squats were managed horizontally, so that activists operated within non-hierarchical groups and usually did not have task-related profiles. To guarantee anonymity, I will not mention any characteristics of my interlocutors, such as age, gender, work, education level or initials. In order to highlight the origins of this pro-refugee activism, I will first present some data on the financial and refugee crises, on the one hand, and the reaction of these activists to both crises on the other. Then, I will try to shed some light on the issue by analyzing the arguments put forward by the activists in question, from which I will quote extracts deemed representative in this respect, following my field notes recorded immediately after leaving the site.

2. Parallel humanitarian crises

In the 2010s, Greeks had to cope with two major humanitarian crises. The first was generated by the successive austerity policies imposed by the country's international

⁵ Since 2013, there has been a social movement throughout the country to prevent the homes of over-indebted people being auctioned. It was so effective that it forced the government to hold electronic auctions of foreclosed property. However, these activists do not come from the activist circles studied here.

creditors. The second was triggered by the massive arrival, between the summer of 2015 and spring 2016, of more than one million asylum seekers who were trying to reach Europe by crossing the Aegean Sea in order to escape armed conflicts mainly in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (UNHCR, 2016). Both crises were broadly covered by mainstream media that broadcasted for long periods of time reports full of emotionally charged images.

2.1. The financial crisis

As the measures imposed by the first Memorandum, signed in 2010, primarily targeted the public sector, the real impact of the financial crisis on the population was only felt from 2012 onwards, in the aftermath of the signing of the second Memorandum. The implementation of the austerity policies imposed by the latter have, among other things, led to significant wage cuts in the private sector, as well as a sharp decline in retirement pensions, thus generating a brutal pauperization of the lower social strata (Matsaganis, Leventi, 2014; The Independent, 2017) that brought into question multiple human rights violations (Nivard, 2012, 2013; Miné, 2015).

Successive cuts in wages and pensions went hand in hand with sharp increases in taxes, coupled with the inability of the welfare state, weakened by the recession, to meet the needs of the new poor. Hence, the latter quickly found themselves deprived of any resources and fell into extreme poverty (BBC News, 2015). Their destitution became cruelly visible, particularly in Athens, where the sidewalks were filled with thousands of homeless people⁶, while soup kitchens started to proliferate, having been urgently set up by the Church, the Athens municipal government and various collectives (Sotiropoulos, Bourikos, 2014).

Following the bankruptcy of hundreds of thousands of companies, at the end of 2013 the unemployment rate stood at 27.5%, reaching 61% for those aged 15-24 (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2013). Although it has since declined⁷, the new austerity measures imposed after the signing of the third Memorandum in 2015 have exacerbated the impoverishment of the most vulnerable segments of society. With the rapid expansion of poverty, at the beginning of 2015 35.7% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2016a).

2.2. The refugee crisis

⁶ In 2017, there were about 9,000 homeless people in Athens (I Efimerida ton Sintakton, 2017). According to the findings of a research conducted in several towns, the majority of homeless are of Greek origin (CNN Greece, 2018).

⁷ In December 2016, it stood at 23.1% (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2016b).

According to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, of the 856,723 asylum seekers who crossed the Aegean Sea into Greece in 2015 726,620 arrived during the last five months of the year (UNHCR, 2016). Considering that in 2014 Greece had received 34,442 asylum seekers/migrants by sea, arrivals increased by 2,362% from one year to the next (Union of Hellenic Coast Guard Officers, 2016). In the first quarter of 2016, Greece received a further 151,453 more asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2016). Since the closure of the so-called Balkan Route, that is, a migratory path used to get from Greece through the Balkans and on to Northern Europe, and the signing of the EU-Turkey deal regarding asylum seekers and migrants⁸ on March 8th and 18th, in 2016, respectively, the number of arrivals declined significantly (Heck, Hess, 2017; Lehner, 2019).

Despite the short distance between the Greek islands and the Turkish coast, the crossing of the Aegean Sea is dangerous: 272 people died in 2015, while the Greek Coast Guard, Greek fishermen and Greek and foreign volunteers rescued more than 100,000 people in distress⁹. Once they arrived in Greece and recovered from the emotional effects of such a crossing, asylum seekers flocked to Athens, where they stayed temporarily in very harsh conditions before continuing their journey, even on foot, to other EU countries.

Following the closure of the so-called Balkan Route and the signing of the EU-Turkey deal that forced asylum seekers to stay in Greece, 10-15,000 asylum seekers were marooned in appalling conditions in Idomeni, a border crossing point between Greece and Northern Macedonia, *de facto* transformed into a huge makeshift camp for several months due to the fact that asylum seekers, in turmoil, refused to acknowledge the *fait accompli* (Fronista, Papadopoulou, 2019). As the government established reception centers throughout the country, 45-50,000 asylum seekers who found themselves stranded in Greece, as well as those who continued to arrive into the country, were gradually transferred there, so that, by the end of 2016, almost all were housed in reception centers jointly managed by the Ministry of Defense, the Hellenic Ministry of Migration Policy, and certain NGOs under the supervision of UNHCR. Although Greece has received a

⁸ It mainly provided that all migrants and asylum seekers arriving irregularly to the Greek islands would be returned to Turkey. In exchange, EU Member States would take one Syrian refugee from Turkey for every Syrian returned from the islands, and Turkey would receive financial aid from the EU to improve its reception facilities for Syrian refugees.

⁹ In 2015, the Greek Coast Guard carried out 2,931 search and rescue operations, rescuing 103,372 people. As the other search and rescue operations were informal, the total number of people rescued remains unknown (Union of Hellenic Coast Guard Officers, 2016).

financial assistance package from the EU amounting to around 1.5 billion Euros, living conditions in some reception centers and hotspots on the Aegean Sea islands remain appalling to this day (Deutsche Welle, 2019), regularly denounced by many Greek and foreign human rights organizations (Amnesty International, 2016, 2017), and casting doubt on the transparency of management of these EU funds (The Guardian, 2017b).

3. Parallel social movements?

3.1. Anti-poverty activism

Images of the homeless, of people scavenging for food in garbage bins, or of malnourished schoolchildren fainting in class deeply shocked Greek society, which believed at that time that it had definitively turned the page on extreme poverty. As the authorities were slow to efficiently manage the social crisis, part of this mission was initially entrusted to the Church and civil society. Many collectives have therefore begun to distribute meals to the new poor on a daily basis. Yet, within the activist milieus studied here, with the exception of one collective¹⁰, setting up and operating soup kitchens has proved to be ephemeral or circumstantial.

The distance with new poor is also evident when considering housing the homeless. The exponential increase in the number of the new poor and the shock caused by the first deaths of homeless people in the winter of 2012 following exposure to the cold, led some of the homeless to squat an abandoned café owned by the Athens City Hall on February 1st, 2012. Their immediate expulsion by riot police units and the complaint lodged by the Mayor of Athens caused general outrage, to the extent that the squatters were not prosecuted, but likewise, their attempt was not repeated. With the subsequent passivity of the homeless being highly predictable, due to their increasing social and psychological disorganization following their long-term exposure to harsh street conditions, we might have expected that collectives of activists, used to this type of operation, would have taken the initiative to squat some buildings in order to transform them into housing facilities for the homeless. At the very least, we could have expected them to be inspired by similar initiatives taken by foreign anarchists (Vice, 2016; The Guardian, 2017a). However, to date, these collectives have remained inactive.

¹⁰ Established in 2008, the food collective El Chef has been distributing meals to poor and homeless people. However, since the summer of 2015 the collective changed its focus to asylum seekers (Al Jazeera, 2015).

Also striking is the absence of politicization of the new impoverished by these same activists. It is indisputable that these hundreds of thousands of people violently pushed to the margins of society illustrate to the highest degree the inhumanity inherent in the capitalist system, so often denounced by activists. However, the latter have never considered organizing protests in support of this new section of society or encouraging them to take part, for symbolic purposes, in protests organized by them for other reasons. The lack of sustainable initiatives that could put people in regular contact with each other has also made it impossible to mentor the new impoverished in order to enable them to become political subjects.

3.2. Pro-refugee activism

The massive arrival of asylum seekers between the summer of 2015 and spring 2016 triggered a vast social movement which, having sprung in the almost complete absence of relevant public policies (Tsoukala, 2015), involved tens of thousands of people. This is far from surprising because, as Donatella Della Porta has rightly pointed out (2018: 3-6), refugee crises exemplify critical junctures likely to challenge existing institutions, deemed to be unfit to address emergency, thereby stirring social movements. While initially this social movement took place mostly at the points of arrival, namely the Aegean Sea islands, in the form of sea rescue, hospitality, and distribution of food and clothing, it quickly spread throughout the country, following the trajectory of the asylum seekers who crossed Greece to reach other EU countries, and constantly adapting to changing political contexts (Evangelinidis, 2016; Oikonomakis, 2018).

In seeking to meet the vital needs of asylum seekers in transit in Greece, activists began, in the summer of 2015, to set up food, supply and clothing distributions in Athens and on the Aegean Sea islands. However, the scarcity of resources deployed with respect to the scale of the humanitarian crisis was so underwhelming that new collectives had to be created in order to face the emergency. All these collectives were mobilized in parallel with volunteers and many Greek and foreign NGOs, which then began to operate on the Aegean Sea islands (Skleparis, Armakolas, 2016).

In September 2015, Notara 26, the first housing squat for refugees was established in Athens (Caravane solidaire, 2016). From March 2016 onwards, when asylum seekers were obliged to remain in Greece, such squats became widespread. In the summer of 2018, there were about fifteen squats in Athens, housing nearly 1,500 asylum seekers. They were run by Greek and foreign activists, the participation rates of the latter varying significantly from one case to the next. Initially, these squats were intended to fill the

gap in public reception facilities¹¹, but their objective was quickly changed to allow as many asylum seekers as possible to escape the appalling living conditions that characterize many reception centers to date. It seems paradoxical that, given the ideological profile of anti-authoritarian activists, squatters replaced state authorities insofar as they assumed, in a sustainable and decent manner (Vice, 2017), the daily management of a considerable volume of asylum seekers.

On the protest front, managing the refugee crisis immediately went to the heart of the activists' political agenda. While protests organized around the migration issue before the summer of 2015 were attracting very few participants¹², the massive arrival of asylum seekers triggered a real protest dynamic. Activists organized or participated in numerous protests denouncing capitalist imperialism as the root-cause of the conflicts in the Middle East, calling for the opening of borders and effective protection of asylum seekers, and criticizing relevant policies pursued both by the EU and Greek authorities. Some of the asylum seekers housed in squats began to participate in these protests, even joining their hosts' blocs in protests that largely focused on exclusively Greek issues. The concern to raise awareness for the refugee crisis also prompted activists to organize debates, documentary screenings and photo exhibitions in spaces run by collectives akin to them. Outside Athens, apart from occasional participation in protests on the Aegean Sea islands, activists have twice travelled to the north of the country¹³ to protest against the continued existence of the border wall along the Greek-Turkish land border.

4. Conscious decisions?

4.1. The activist discourse on solidarity

When I tried to understand why activists had not been involved in the management of this new poverty crisis, my questions caused them embarrassment in many respects. To the eyes of activists under 30 years old, these questions provoked indignation because they were considered ideologically inappropriate and, as such, it was evident that they did not deserve an answer. Older activists were most often visibly embarrassed.

¹¹ The first reception center opened in Athens on August 19th, 2015, but it would take the government a long time to open enough centers throughout the country to accommodate all asylum seekers.

¹² For example, a protest organized on January 30th, 2014, to denounce the deaths of twelve migrants during the crossing of the Aegean Sea attracted about 80 participants.

¹³ On October 31st, 2015 and on January 23rd, 2016. Such a protest also took place on May 9th, 2015, shortly before the refugee crisis broke out.

Eloquent silences, shrugged shoulders and fleeting glances would quickly put an end to the conversation.

Some activists, however, attributed this differentiation to the essential distinction they make between charity and solidarity. In their view, caring for the new poor would be a matter of charity, an untenable expression of relationships of domination between human beings that was contradictory to their anti-authoritarian principles, while caring for the asylum seekers was a matter of solidarity, a value held in high esteem in their milieus. According to my interlocutors:

It is not charity. It is solidarity because we do not establish any power relations with refugees. We do not put ourselves in a position of superiority. We operate on the basis of equality and self-management. (Notara 26, October 12, 2015)

It is not just about offering them food. We are reaching out to them in order to fight together for a better future, to protect all refugees from racist European policies. That is the difference between solidarity and charity, we are politicized, our action has political origins and goals. (City Plaza, May 26, 2016)

According to one of the initiators of the food collective El Chef (Al Jazeera, 2015), “the process and structure are designed in line with ‘anti-authoritarian’ principles”, since asylum seekers participate in all stages of the process, in collaboration with volunteers. It is clear then that “this is not humanitarian work or philanthropy – it is about solidarity”. Similar comments have also been made by squat activists, who believed that asylum seekers’ involvement in the preparation of their meals and the maintenance of their rooms showed that they did not receive charitable support. As one activist told me:

We are not a charitable organization, refugees cook, clean and take care of our space on an equal footing with solidarities. (City Plaza, June 15, 2016)

In the same vein, some of my interlocutors have also referred to the participation of asylum seekers in Greek protests. They presented it as an illustration of the reciprocity underlying any relationship of solidarity, thus overlooking the fact that this participation, which was highly publicized in social networks, could probably arouse positive emotions likely to win sympathizers to the cause¹⁴ but was not entirely part of the asylum seekers’ initiative since they were strongly incited to do so and were taken en masse to the protests in question. For example, on May 8th, 2016, the activists who had squatted City Plaza seventeen days earlier participated in a demonstration against the dismantling of the social security system by including in their block a group of asylum seekers who they

¹⁴ The way protesters make strategic use of reactive and moral emotions to mobilize supporters and spread protests has been thoroughly analyzed by Rosenberg and Winkler (2014).

were hosting. They were all marching under the slogan, “We fight together, we will live together” (News.gr, 2016).

These discourses dissociating solidarity from charity reflected the need for activists to legitimize their commitment by integrating it into an unambiguous ideological framework. Omnipresent at all levels of communication¹⁵, solidarity, the flagship word of this movement, constituted the ideal that united and motivated activists, fostering their sense of belonging to the movement and reinforcing their identity as confirmation of their adherence to values that are specific to the Left, or even to anarchism. Their identity was further strengthened by the fact that, since the summer of 2015, mainstream media described the pro-refugee movement as “solidarity” and started making wide use of the adjective solidary as a noun, which up until then had only been used in this way by activists. Henceforth, these activists were being designated and self-designated as “the solidarities”. In other countries, these “solidarities” would have been described as volunteers. In Greece, as the term “solidary” was de facto appropriated by activists, the term volunteer came to be reserved for people helping asylum seekers outside any activist background. Once established as a key element of identity, the concept of solidarity was dominant in all *communiqués* and proudly displayed on protest banners, while adding prestige to all donations, monetary or in-kind, sent from abroad.

Constant evocation of solidarity ended up consolidating the idea that this social movement constituted a form of political altruism, that is, a politically-oriented collective action that was sublimated due to its entire devotion to the benefit of others (Passy, 2001: 6-7). Yet, even if we were able to overlook the fact that disinterested activism has been shattered ever since the 1970s (Gaxie, 1977; Passy, Giugni, 2001), it is obvious that this perception of solidarity reflects a deep conceptual confusion. Although solidarity remains a difficult concept to define (Doreian, Fararo, 2016), it is relatively easy to distinguish it from charity. Since charity manifests itself in unilateral offers, often made on an *ad hoc* basis and excluding the possibility of any lasting relationship between the two parties, it is clear that all distributions of meals, supplies and clothing to asylum seekers were charitable. If we take into consideration the fact that charity keeps the beneficiary in a state of passivity, thus generating relationships of domination, it is obvious that activists’ efforts to establish equal relationships between themselves and the asylum seekers aimed to differentiate their action from charitable acts by restoring the beneficiaries’

¹⁵ The reception facilities created by activists on the Aegean Sea islands were called “solidarity facilities” (<http://www.inexarchia.gr/story/think/i-pragmatiki-zoi-ton-prosfygon-stin-mytilini>); one of the squats is called Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Space City Plaza (<https://www.facebook.com/sol2refugeesen>), while another is called Self-Managed Initiative of Solidarity for Refugees and Migrants (<http://solidarity-refugees.espivblogs.net>).

dignity. However, their desire to help people in distress cannot amount to solidarity in the truest sense of the word because of the lack of reciprocity and bilateral support in case of mutual need, which lie at the heart of solidarity. The participation of asylum seekers in the performance of tasks covering their own needs cannot stand as proof of solidarity since all actions of both parties aimed at the same beneficiary, the asylum seeker. If there was any reciprocity, it was dissociated from reality and projected toward an indefinite future, marked by a probable inversion of current roles. Therefore, in the absence of any actual reciprocity, the solidarity in question was only an imaginary one.

Situated at the heart of the construction of the activist identity, this imaginary solidarity was so powerful that it ended up masking reality and producing biased interpretations of it. Thus, insistence on the absence of any power relationships in squats skipped over the fact that, although these relationships were certainly mitigated, they were far from absent, since all kinds of services provided to asylum seekers resulted exclusively from the initiative and efforts of activists. In some respects, this overtly paternalistic attitude confirms recent Italian studies which, in analyzing the management of immigrant populations by left-wing and far-left activists, have highlighted the predominance of relations of subordination (Cappiali, 2016, 2017). At the same time, Greek activists differed from their Italian counterparts in that, far from being drawn into political racialization processes (Cappiali, 2017: 971)¹⁶ by inferiorizing asylum seekers, they sought to emancipate them by involving them on an equal footing in the management of their squats and by supporting in various ways their self-organization and self-determination. According to one activist:

There is a lot of groundwork that has to be done patiently because, on the one hand, refugees are often apathetic due to post-traumatic stress disorder and, on the other hand, they are not used to participating in horizontal decision-making processes. The task is even more difficult for women who, for cultural reasons, accumulate various levels of subordination and have an infinitely longer way to go until the beginning of their emancipation. (Notara 26, November 11, 2016)

In any case, given that the target populations are essentially different, in that immigrants in Italy constitute a permanently settled population, while a large proportion of asylum seekers in Greece are in transit, it is not possible for us to draw reliable conclusions on the possible transient nature of prevailing emancipatory behaviours. It should be noted, however, that in certain occasions asylum seekers-oriented behaviours were

¹⁶ According to Teresa Cappiali (2017: 971), political racialization refers to “a process whereby left-wing actors, in order to legitimize their work on immigration, have partially included immigrants in the political sphere by creating, for instance, channels of participation and promoting their representation, but in a relationship of ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ subordination”.

far from being clear-cut as they expressed overlapping contradictory intentions. Bias are therefore to be found within asylum seekers' participation in Greek protests because, grounded as it was on the latter's alleged spontaneity, it spoke more to the activists' need to create an appearance of reciprocity in order to confirm the solidarity of their own mobilization. The asylum seekers were therefore, in a way, instrumentalized by their hosts willing to gain visibility and strengthen legitimacy in the political arena. Similarly, describing donations received from abroad as "international solidarity"¹⁷ seems to satisfy the need to believe, and to make people believe, in the existence of an international solidarity movement, without explaining how, for example, an international convoy of twenty-six vans, filled with food, clothing, toys and medicine for asylum seekers housed in squats, unanimously described as a convoy of solidarity (S.N., 2017), differed from numerous humanitarian actions of the same kind.

It is noteworthy that, in their need to stress politicization of their action, activists' discourses opposed solidarity to charity without ever referring to humanitarianism. In so doing, they overlooked the fact that, as Sinatti's work on humanitarian aid has shown (2019: 146), when civil society initiatives of humanitarian support focus on the human dignity of beneficiaries, they become consciously political not only because they denounce relevant institutional gaps but also, and foremost, because they are engaged in a politics of life that aspires to enact an alternative social order.

4.2. The influence of the imaginary

The fact that pro-refugee activism was fuelled by the imaginary of solidarity is not surprising in itself. Broadly speaking, the footprint made on activism by what lies beneath the threshold of consciousness was highlighted in the 1970s by Daniel Gaxie, who drew our attention to the fact that

"[b]y preventing their members from acknowledging the interests behind their disinterest, the feeling of defending a cause conceals the exchange mechanisms upon which the existence of mass political parties is based. [...] It is because they participate in the life of their organization without being able to admit to others or to themselves the rewards they receive that activists experience their membership and action as a disinterested form of activism" (1977: 151).

Following the pioneering work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1975), which shed light on the importance of the imaginary to the institution of any society, and of Benedict Anderson

¹⁷ See, for example, the call for foreign funds and donations from the squat City Plaza: "Support the City Plaza Refugee Accommodation and Solidarity Center in Athens, Greece", June 13, 2016 (<http://solidarity2refugees.gr/support-city-plaza-refugee-accommodation-solidarity-center-athens-greece>).

(1983), showing the influence of the imagination on the sense of belonging to a reference group, the academic community has recently begun to admit that the imaginary can also serve as a source of inspiration and, by extension, as a driving force for political action. As Florence Giust-Desprairies and Cédric Faure have rightly pointed out (2015: 229), “the contemporary political imaginary is informed by central meanings to forge a hard core, from which political and social arrangements are organized”. Their approach crosses paths with the work of Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish who, also following Castoriadis’ line of thought, have taken up the theme of the imaginary in politics in order to show, among other things, how radical imagination acts as a major driving force behind social movements seen as “alternative modes and spaces of social reproduction, experimental zones where imagination of who and what is valuable might reject convention and be built from the ground up” (2014: 25). Imaginary constructs are thus bridging time and space gaps in order to enable present action that is likely to impact on the future. By “drawing on the past, telling different stories about how the world came to be the way it is, and remembering the power and importance of past struggles and the way their spirits live on in the present” (Haiven, Khasnabish, 2014: 3), radical imagination not only allows us to imagine the world as it should be, but it also inspires action and new forms of solidarity so that the imagined future may become real. Thus, the imaginary becomes an integral part of any social movement that, as John Holloway put it (2011: 59-60), in seeking to occupy cracks in capitalism, could uncover a world that does not yet exist.

Nonetheless, the dominant place held here by the imaginary of solidarity does not suffice in itself to explain pro-refugee activism, since it only influences the construction of the activist identity, leaving undefined the process of identification with the Other which underlies commitment of this kind. The influence of the imaginary on the construction of the activist identity, in combination with the absence of any other argument, led me to suppose that the decision to get involved in only one of the two humanitarian crises affecting Greek society was based on *non-dits*, thus pointing to other imaginary constructs at work. Hence, I engaged a second round of discussions to see whether pro-refugee activism was further influenced by the imaginary. Considering that the current efficiency of any imaginary constructs could only result from their long-standing presence in the mental schemas that determine activist actions, I broadened my field of research to include other themes in social movements within these circles to see if, and to what extent, their activism had already been marked by imaginary identification games.

- Imaginary resemblance/dissemblance

To mention one example, imaginary identification games seem to emerge from present anti-fascist activism, which includes the activist circles studied here, anarchist circles, as well as other collectives. The fascist-led anti-migrant pogrom that took place in Athens, on May 12th, 2011, and caused among others the death of a Bangladeshi migrant, Alim Abdul Manan, did not stir any significant anti-fascist reactions. In 2012, the entry of far-right Golden Dawn party into the Greek Parliament implied rise in violent attacks against immigrants and left-wing activists. These attacks were strongly denounced by political parties, human rights organizations and various activist circles but they did not lead to significant durable anti-fascist protests. For instance, the attempted murder of four Egyptian fishermen on June 12th, 2012, triggered only one local protest, while the murder of a Pakistani worker on January 17th, 2013, gave rise to only one demonstration (Greek Reporter, 2013). Similarly, the attempted murders of nine communist trade unionists on September 12th, 2013, resulted in one protest organized by the Greek Communist Party. In fact, it was not until September 18th, 2013, in the wake of the assassination of the Greek anti-fascist hip-hop artist, Pavlos Fyssas (The Guardian, 2013), that the anti-fascist movement began to grow. It should be noted that the same selective interest was observed during the lengthy trial that examined all cases related to the criminal activities of Golden Dawn members¹⁸. While the judges were considering the Fyssas case, the part of the courtroom which was reserved for the public who supported the victims was full. But as soon as the judges moved onto other cases, the anti-fascist interest began to decline. Each of the other cases was followed only by a public with a particular interest in the issue: the case of the attacks against Egyptian fishermen was essentially followed by a single collective; the case of the attacks against communist trade unionists was followed by communists; the cases of attempted murders against members of two anarchist and anti-authoritarian collectives were respectively followed by the members of each collective concerned, and so on. After 2017, some of the trial hearings were held before an audience that consisted mainly of Golden Dawn members. This caused distress for the prosecution witnesses, who were left alone to face verbal aggressions from the public supporting Golden Dawn, with little or no control of the Court. Equally selective were all relevant commemorative rituals with Fyssas' murder giving rise to a six day long festival in 2019 whereas murdered migrants are hardly, if at all, commemorated. The identification of anti-fascists with Pavlos Fyssas is obvious, since the victim – Greek, young hip-hop artist writing anti-fascist songs highly appreciated in activist circles – was in several respects an accurate reflection of them. Conversely, their identification with the other victims of Golden Dawn seems to be hindered by cultural

¹⁸ The trial, which began on April 20th, 2015, is expected to end in 2020.

and political factors. Latent racism towards migrants thus mirrors explicit political distance separating communists from anarchist and anti-authoritarian milieus.

All proportions guarded, the discourses of my interlocutors seem to indicate that imaginary identification games were also at work in pro-refugee activism, and conversely, in the absence of anti-poverty activism. Asylum seekers' absolute distress has undoubtedly triggered various reactive and moral emotions among activists¹⁹ that, as has been observed in other similar contexts (Rosenberg, Winkler, 2014: 175), ranged from hope to indignation, consternation, and concern. As one activist told me:

At the beginning, I was under the shock, we had no time to think, refugees kept on coming, in total despair, and we had to cope with it. It was exhausting but I was happy to provide them with what they needed to pursue their journey so that they could rebuild their lives. I was upset by our apathetic authorities but I was also confident in our collective capacity to efficiently assist them. Later on, when I saw them being trapped here, I felt anger along with shame. (Notara 26, December 10, 2016)

However, this spontaneous outpouring of compassion cannot be dissociated from the collective memories of a society marked by the arrival of nearly one and a half million Greek refugees, forced to leave Turkey between 1922 and 1924. Far from being repressed, the imaginary bond between the country's past and present history has been placed at the core of current pro-refugee activism. Volunteers and activists have often asserted that it would be impossible for them not to come to the aid of today's asylum seekers when they themselves are descendants, real or imaginary, of refugees (France 24, 2016). According to one of my interlocutors:

Our grandparents arrived here persecuted by the Turks, uprooted, as frightened and naked as these people. We are a country of refugees. How can we pretend not to feel the suffering of these people? (Notara 26, December 12, 2016)

While awakening painful memories, this identification was not worrying because it stemmed from a past historical context that, in all probability, was unlikely to occur again. Yet, it was precisely this reassuring feeling that was absent from any potential relationship between activists and the new poor. Homeless people, emblematic figures of the violent impoverishment of Greek society, not only embody a current collective suffering but, above all, project the image of a perilous future. While it is reasonable for Greeks to think of themselves as safe from a kind of conflict that could force them to leave their country, no one can claim to be safe from increasing impoverishment. From

¹⁹ According to Rosenberg and Winkler (2014: 167), "[r]eactive emotions are short-term responses to new information or events, like anger over a political decision or fear as a result of police brutality. Moral emotions are connected to cognitive understandings and moral awareness, such as outrage over human rights abuses".

this point of view, the homeless cease to be an Other in distress, who should be safely supported through a deployment of these affective reactions that have been observed by Rosenberg and Winkler (2014) in situations where people in distress and their advocates are united by social ties based on their proximity in daily life. In the Greek case, homeless people are turned into an Other/same, threatening to such an extent that it becomes impossible to come to their aid. The unspoken fear, aroused by what could be a possible future situation for activists themselves, would break any possible identification with the homeless, transforming them into a dystopic figure, simultaneously visible and invisible because it is unbearable. This perception of reality was confirmed to me by the activists themselves, one of whom told me:

It is true that I have never thought of assisting the homeless. Just at the thought of it, my heart tightens, I don't know, the image of helplessness, of hopelessness, it cuts my feet off. (Notara 26, April 5, 2017)

Another one specified:

While the tragedy of refugees filled me with strength, a feeling that pushed me toward them, the tragedy of poor and homeless paralyzed me. At first, I looked at homeless people in awe, thinking that anyone could have been in their place. Now, when I see them in the street, I look at them without seeing them. (5th Lyceum, June 2, 2017)

- The heroic imaginary

Discourses held by my interlocutors also brought to light another element likely to facilitate identification with asylum seekers. This was related to the fact that the image of asylum seekers was part of a heroic imaginary, traditionally predominant in activist circles. Inherently linked to the revolutionary ideal, examples of heroism that inspired the activists' mental universe came from both historical figures and freedom fighters. The pantheon of heroes consisted of various personalities, ranging from Che Guevara to Subcomandante Marcos, and from Aris Velouchiotis, prominent military leader of the major left-wing resistance organization under the Nazi occupation, to Dimitris Koufodinas, emblematic figure of the armed organization 17 November. As for international liberation movements, the main reference models were the Kurds, Palestinians and Zapatistas. Fascination with these reference models was expressed in several ways: organization or participation in relevant events, publication of press releases, countless references on social media, purchase of everyday objects evoking personalities or heroic popular battles, etc. This imaginary, which was marked by a utopian worldview specific to the Revolutionary Left (Löwy, 1988), was fuelled by the drama of fights and the tragedy

of continuous defeats, but it always remained focused on the fighters' desperate heroism, in anticipation of the ultimate victory which can only occur in an indefinite future.

Such a powerful combination of dramatic, tragic and heroic elements was also found in the asylum seekers' journey. Their exposure to the atrocities of war, the loss of loved ones, their uprooting and the overcoming of oneself in taking risks, whether in conflict zones or during the crossing of land or the Aegean Sea, combined most of the above-mentioned elements. Hence, there was a striking similarity between asylum seekers and the fighters who populated the activists' imaginary. One of my interlocutors confirmed such an influence on his commitment, while denying at the same time its imaginary nature:

Yes, indeed, my inspiration comes from the legendary universe of the Revolutionary Left. But it's not imaginary, it's real. It's what sustains me, what drives me to do things, so it's real. [...] You know, fighting for the other implies sacrifices, which are not especially heroic. So, these sacrifices should be made for the people who deserve it because of their courage, their resistance. [...] Refugees are among these people, I want to fight alongside them. (City Plaza, May 15, 2017)

To this must be added the emotional burden caused by activists' regular contact with people who, despite everything, hoped to rebuild their lives from scratch, but who were suffering deeply because of their appalling living conditions and, above all, because of the excessive delays in examining asylum applications (UNHCR, 2017). Psychologists involved in monitoring the psychological condition of asylum seekers stress that, apart from post-traumatic disorders, their long-lasting position in society, with an indefinite status that deprives them of any possibility of making plans for their lives, deeply destabilizes their already fragile psychological balance (I Kathimerini, 2016). In reproducing emotions also observed in other activist contexts (Rosenberg, Winkler, 2014), one of my interlocutors, whose pain gave rise to anger, told me:

For the first few days, I thought I could not receive them with dignity. I was suffering so much when I first saw them wandering around the city, arriving here only to leave the day after, toward the unknown. They looked like migratory birds. And then, as time went by, I became angry seeing them stuck here, trapped by our bureaucracy and the hypocrisy of other countries. (Notara 26, December 20, 2016)

However, the very same factors that made activists' identification with asylum seekers possible prevented their identification with the new poor. Although extreme poverty is causing dramatic, even tragic situations, there is nothing heroic about the marginalization of the new poor, and especially the homeless. In their brutal social downgrading, there is no element of overcoming oneself that could sublimate their ultimate defeat.

These victims of the financial crisis are sinking silently into social limbo, unable to resist the fate reserved for them by society.

How could I identify myself with people who are being pushed to the margins of society without reacting? I want to fight for the future, so I will help and support those who are fighting. It makes sense, doesn't it?, said one of my interlocutors (City Plaza, June 12, 2017),

while another wondered:

Should I also fight for history's defeated? For those who have given up? I don't know, I have to think about it. (City Plaza, May 15, 2017)

This lack of heroic element went hand in hand with the lack of visibility concerning the process of impoverishment. As poverty does not occur suddenly, it creates a state of growing suffering, confined to the private sphere and devoid of the brilliance of major turning points. There are no key events likely to trigger protest, there are no specific places to denounce – such as the asylum seekers reception centers, hotspots on the Aegean Sea islands or the wall erected along the Greek-Turkish land border. There is only a vague, almost intangible state, at the opposite ends of these issues likely to attract the attention of activists.

This hardly heroic defeat was all the more unbearable as it cruelly illustrated the defeat of the entire Greek society. Caught up in the gears of an apparently endless financial crisis, at least in the medium term, it is sinking into depression²⁰. Shared by both the new poor and the activists, this collective defeat seems to erect insurmountable barriers to the politicization of its victims. Protest advocacy for the new poor and vulnerable would require activists to take some distance from the effects of the financial crisis – a distance that has in fact been removed since the potential organizers of the protest are themselves among the defeated. Yet, the factors that hindered the politicization of the new poor were absent in the case of asylum seekers. Armed with the ideological power of their pacifist and humanist convictions, activists could politicize the refugee crisis all the more easily because the people to be defended were the victims of distant wars, hardly threatening the *status quo* of the activists themselves. As one of my interlocutors put it bitterly:

Protesting for refugees makes sense, so that these people can rebuild their lives with dignity, so that arms dealers stop fueling wars. [...] Protest against austerity policies is something that we have done, but it no longer makes sense. We were crushed by the cops, we were crushed by the creditors' demands, we were crushed by treason, the

²⁰ According to numerous health experts and studies, the imposition of austerity measures has led to widespread depression and a 40% increase in suicides from 2010 to 2015 (The New York Times, 2019).

policy swing of the so-called left government. In fact, we are in the same dead end as the new poor, you know. (Hotel Oniro, December 17, 2016)

Conclusion

Current pro-refugee activism in Greece initially attracted my attention because of the implicit decision of activists to turn a blind eye to the poverty crisis. I tried then to explore the determining factors of the decision to abandon one cause in favor of another, apparently similar one. Based on my immersion in certain Athenian activist circles, which allowed me to grasp several aspects of this social movement and to collect activist discourses, I realized that solidarity, as a focal point of activists' identity and as a basis for the ideological legitimization of their commitment, was more part of their imaginary rather than reality. Parting from this observation, I sought to see if their decision-making process was also influenced by other imaginary identification games.

The discourses held by my interlocutors, correlated with facts that were assembled and juxtaposed according to a necessarily subjective analytical approach, allowed me to determine three superimposed but distinct levels of imaginary identification games. The first level prioritizes the construction of an activist identity by appealing to the imaginary of solidarity. In taking the status of "solidaries", activists embody a value held in high esteem by their milieu, a value that reflects a moral vision of collective action. The second level, which aims to define the Other as a subject to identify with, rests upon imaginary resemblance/dissemblance mechanisms. The descendants of Greek refugees can assist today's asylum seekers without risk, but are paralyzed by the new poor and homeless, who may foreshadow the bleak future of the activists themselves. Finally, the third level establishes the emotional context that gives the necessary impetus to act by stirring the imaginary of heroism. On the one hand, activists tend to invest themselves in situations that combine heroic elements and, conversely, to turn their attention away from situations of simple defeat, deprived of any sublimation. On the other hand, the shakeup of the Greek social order in the wake of the financial crisis dissuades them from dedicating themselves to supporting the new poor, symbols of a common defeat, also shared by the activists, but has no effect on their ability to help refugees, victims of other wars, that have no effect upon activists' lives.

This combination of imaginary identification games, which I believe lies at the origin of the two-sided decision of these activist circles, highlights the complexity of the determining factors of their choosing a cause to defend, thus revealing a two-sided functioning of the imaginary that acts as both driving force and inhibitor. These findings further

raise the question of the relationship between activism, politics and reality. The Greek case shows that pro-refugee activism is certainly fuelled by political facts, but at the same time it is detached both from reality and politics, since it reflects the way in which they are combined with imaginary universes predominant in activist circles, which have little or no political relevance. Its subsequent entry into the domestic political field through the management and politicization of the refugee crisis²¹ is also real, but this only illustrates the incessant oscillation between reality and the imaginary that determines the decision-making process of these activists.

In switching focus from rational/emotional and interested/altruistic to imaginary/real personal motivations of activists, the Greek case study addresses an array of issues seen as part of an emerging literature that questions the links between politics and reality itself. In highlighting the two-sided functioning of the imaginary with regard to selective activism, the findings call for further research on contentious politics to explore how relevant decision-making processes are structured. At the same time, the findings of this case study confirm those of previous research on the impact of the imaginary on politics, thus opening up new lines of approach that could go beyond contentious politics to explore political decision-making in general.

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²¹ The question of the malleability of the subjects to be politically mentored, and the potential benefit that activists could derive from it by using this symbolic capital within the political field, refer to other theoretical issues, which cannot be addressed here. We will limit ourselves to highlighting that asylum seekers are in many respects easier to manage in everyday life and, where appropriate, more politically flexible than the new poor, and particularly the homeless, who often escape any control.

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