



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

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Abstract:	That philanthropy perpetuates the conditions that cause inequality is an old argument shared by thinkers such as Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde and Slavoj Zizek. I recorded variations of this argument in local conversation regarding a growing humanitarian concern in austerity-ridden Greece. The local critique of humanitarianism brings forward two parallel possibilities: first, their empowering potential (where solidarity initiatives enhance local social awareness), and second, the de-politicisation of the crisis (a liability that stems from ameliorating only the superficial consequences of the crisis). These possibilities—which I treat as simultaneous and interrelated—point towards the ambiguity of humanitarian solidarity in times of austerity.

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11 **Philanthropy or solidarity? Ethical dilemmas about**
12 **humanitarianism in crisis afflicted Greece**
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16 *Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, University of Kent*
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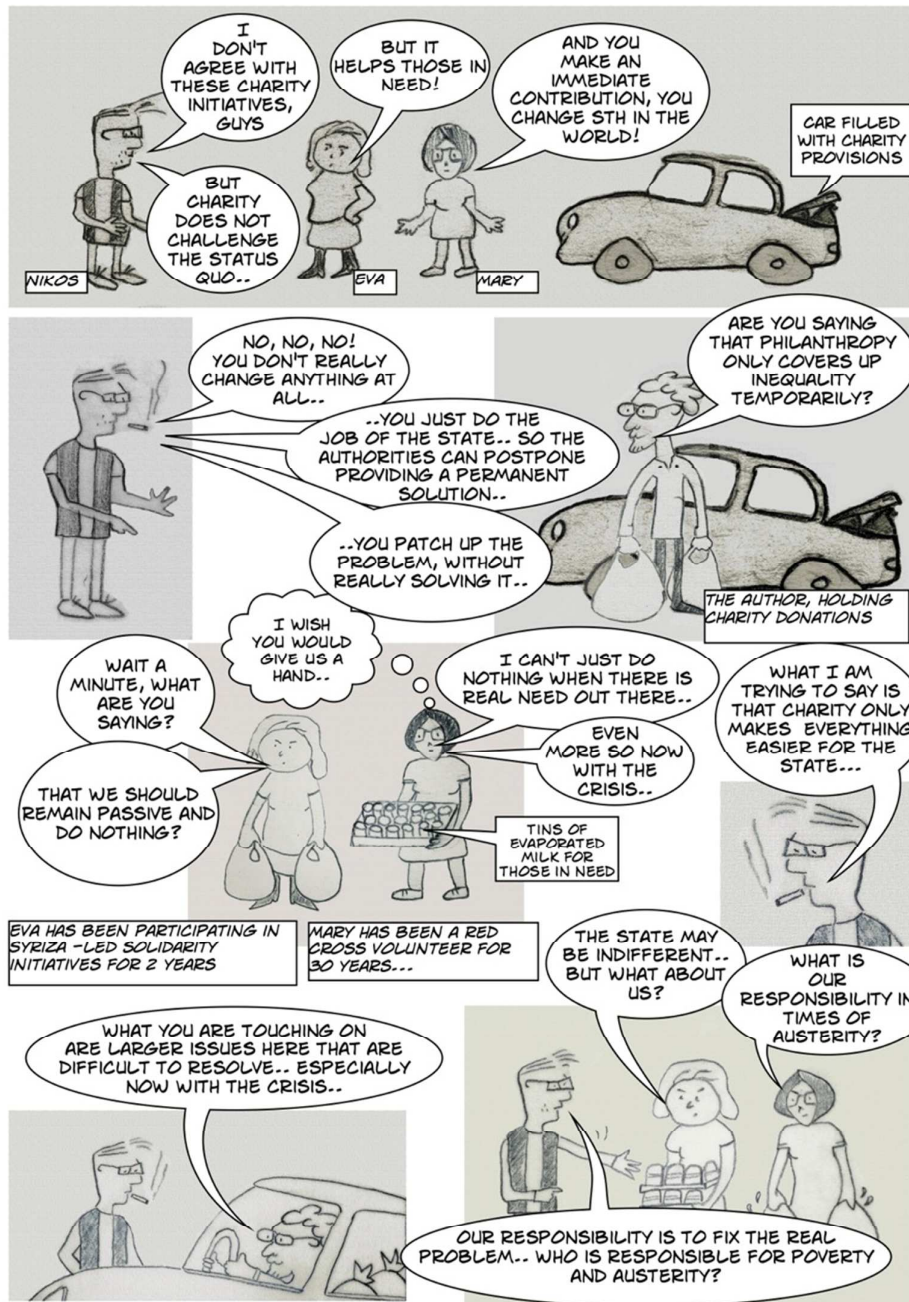
27 That philanthropy perpetuates the conditions that cause inequality is an old argument
28 shared by thinkers such as Karl Marx, Oscar Wilde and Slavoj Zizek. I recorded
29 variations of the same argument in local conversations regarding a growing
30 humanitarian concern in austerity-ridden Greece. The local critique of the efficacy of
31 humanitarianism, which I explore here ethnographically, brings forward two parallel
32 possibilities engendered by the 'humanitarian face' of solidarity initiatives: first, their
33 empowering potential (where solidarity initiatives enhance local social awareness),
34 and second, the de-politicisation of the crisis (a liability that stems from the
35 effectiveness of humanitarianism in ameliorating only temporarily the superficial
36 consequences of the crisis). These two possibilities—which I treat as simultaneous
37 and interrelated—can help us appreciate the ambiguity of humanitarian solidarity in
38 times of austerity.
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46 **Key words:** Solidarity, Marxist critique of philanthropy, austerity, financial crisis, Greece.
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50 The revelatory incident that attracted my attention to the ethics of humanitarian action
51 in austerity-ridden Greece was an ordinary conversation. It evolved in a relaxed and
52 friendly atmosphere, despite the concluding disagreement. The protagonists were
53 people I had known very well for some years, Eva and Mary. They had invited me to
54 participate in a grass-root solidarity initiative. While loading a car with food
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3 provisions (to be distributed to families stricken by austerity) Eva's husband, Nikos,
4 approached us with some critical remarks. His arguments draw attention to how a
5 Marxist-inspired critique of philanthropy may very well apply to humanitarianism
6 more generally, but also to crisis-related solidarity initiatives. Intrigued by Nikos'
7 comments, I decided to investigate the relationship of solidarity and philanthropy in
8 the narratives of several other citizens in Patras, an urban centre in crisis-afflicted
9 Greece. The resulting conversations, which lead to the ethnography I present in this
10 article, address a number of related questions: Is solidarity another, more timely and
11 politically nuanced version of philanthropy? Does it involve a dynamic that can be
12 seen (by the solidarity participants themselves) as empowering? Is such
13 empowerment self-exonerating—a justification for perpetuating a particular status
14 quo?
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24 I immortalised the original discussion that prompted this investigation in [the](#)
25 [following piece of 'graphic ethnography.'](#) This visually compelling form of
26 representation is very suitable for situating dilemmas in culturally meaningful
27 contexts. As such, [graphic](#) ethnography represents an attempt towards developing a
28 'graphic anthropology' (Ingold 2011). The use of sketches and drawings in the
29 production of anthropological work can challenge the top-down authorial imposition
30 of authenticity as representative of a prototypical form (Taussig 2011) and may
31 enhance reflexivity (see Theodossopoulos 2016). The resulting view of
32 incompleteness depicts more accurately the fluidity of social reality: most discussions
33 in daily life—and academia—are inconclusive. My interlocutors in Patras provided
34 me with their critical arguments in the context of evolving conversations, throughout
35 which the meaning of solidarity was in dispute. For this reason, I will try to keep—in
36 this article—the debate about the limitations and advantages of solidarity [initiatives](#)
37 deliberately open. My use of cartooning as an ethnographic medium attempts to make
38 visible this incompleteness.
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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 to the current victory of SYRIZA, 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—

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3 exonerate state inaction, without challenging the inequalities that perpetuate poverty.¹
4 The desire to contribute to society, through humanitarian volunteering, is thus
5 manipulated by the dominant classes.² The origins of this set of arguments can be
6 traced back to *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx and Engels articulates in a
7 short passage the idea that philanthropy reproduces a capitalist *status quo*:
8 ‘philanthropists, humanitarians’, says Marx, ‘organisers of charity’ represent a
9 conservative, bourgeois type of socialism (Marx 1998: 7).
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15 In a subsequent conversation, Nikos clarified that he had not read KKE’s
16 official position regarding voluntarism,³ neither was he familiar, as I originally
17 suspected, with Slavoj Žižek’s critical position towards charity. The latter is concisely
18 summarised in the animated podcast of a RSA lecture given by Žižek in 2010,⁴ in
19 which he attempts to expose charity as a misleading and exonerating trick in today’s
20 ‘cultural capitalism’ (see also, Žižek 2009). Žižek relies on Oscar Wilde to argue that
21 charity is not a solution, but ‘an aggravation of the difficulty’ (Wilde 2001: 127;
22 Žižek 2010). When you buy a consumerist product, says Žižek, you feel that you have
23 to donate something for charity, buying effectively ‘your redemption from being only
24 a consumerist’ (Žižek 2010: 2-3). Both Žižek and Nikos argue that they are not,
25 strictly speaking, against charitable activity, but they feel obliged to problematise the
26 misleading ideological parameters of apolitical humanitarianism.
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36 In the vein of Nikos and Žižek, there is an interesting convergence in the
37 thinking of people who criticise traditional conceptions of charity. Another
38 interlocutor from Patras, Iosif, an anarchist and mathematician, helped me identify a
39 similar concurrence of views (*śimptosi apópseon*), this time between Oscar Wilde and
40 Friedrich Nietzsche. The two authors, who most probably never met each other (Hext
41 2011), comment on how charity breeds resentment among beneficiaries. Wilde has
42 provocatively argued that the poor are quite right to be ungrateful for charity: ‘why
43 should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table?’ (Wilde
44 2001: 130). While Nietzsche reminds us that ‘if a little charity is not forgotten, it turns
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52 ¹ See, Κομμουνιστική Επιθεώρηση 2002.

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

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

57 ⁴ <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-animate/2010/08/rsa-animate---first-as-tragedy-then-as-farce-/>
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3 into a gnawing worm' (Nietzsche 1978: 89). Such thoughts have led me consider that
4 the insistence of Greece's European partners to present their packets of financial
5 assistance as 'a generous deal' has further infuriated so many Greek citizens who are
6 stricken by austerity. Here, the asymmetrical dimensions of EU redistributive policies
7 are locally interpreted as sign of paternalism and symbolic domination (Gkintidis
8 2014). As such, EU assistance to Greece can be compared with—to use once more
9 Oscar Wilde—'a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution', 'an aggravation
10 of the difficulty' (Wilde 2001: 127, 130).⁵

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

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39 The contextual specificity and fluidity of the local arguments I present in my
40 ethnography seem to blur the semantic boundaries of solidarity (*alilegíi*), philanthropy
41 (*philanthropía*), and humanitarianism, which in Greek is used primarily as an
42 adjective (*anthropistikós*=humanitarian).⁶ The overlap between these categories
43 represents a local, informal use, in a period when (a) 'solidarity', and the adjective
44 'humanitarian' (*anthropistikós*) have become key terms in the media and in political
45 discourse, and (b) the numbers of solidarity participants have dramatically increased,
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52 ⁵ A number of anthropologists of Greece have discussed the suspicion and resistance of Greek
53 actors towards the subtle hierarchies (and sense of obligation) introduced by gift-giving (see
54 among many, Herzfeld 1992; Hirschon 1992, 2000; Gkintidis 2014); Rosakou has further
55 developed this classic anthropological theme to interpret the cultural embedded-ness of ideas
56 about voluntarism and humanitarianism in Greece (2012, 2016, this volume).

57 ⁶ Two particular uses have become common since the outset of austerity: 'humanitarian aid'
58 (*anthropistikí voíthia*) and 'humanitarian crisis' (*anthropistikí krisi*).

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3 to include individuals without an explicitly articulated solidarity consciousness. In
4 this respect, the semantic confusion of humanitarian aid and solidarity facilitates the
5 expression of original local arguments [that attempt to interrogate and self-interrogate](#)
6 [one's involvement in voluntarism \(cf. Muehlebach 2012, Cabot 2014\), or](#) draw
7 attention to the threat of depoliticising solidarity [posed by this involvement](#). More
8 politically inclined solidarians point to this threat [to](#) distinguish themselves from the
9 conservative ideological baggage associated with humanitarianism (cf. Redfield
10 2012a: 451; see also Rozakou [2016](#), this issue).

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17 [Simultaneously](#), a certain degree of [conceptual](#) imprecision is reproduced by
18 the coexistence of the concepts 'solidarity' and 'humanitarianism' in the same
19 conversations, often in the same arguments or sentences. Some situated local actors in
20 Patras recognise this imprecision, and deliberately bring the two concepts closer
21 together to underline their critical points, or highlight the view that in some respects
22 solidarity initiatives seems—suspiciously—similar to humanitarianism and
23 philanthropic activity; an ambiguity that is echoed by the concerns of solidarity
24 participants in other parts of Greece (cf. [Bakalaki 2008](#); Rozakou [2016](#), [this issue](#);
25 Cabot [2013](#), this issue). In this particular regard, the conceptual imprecision of local,
26 vernacular uses of the terms solidarity, humanitarianism and philanthropy can be seen
27 as an attempt to redress the wider ideological asymmetries between aid providers and
28 aid recipients (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Fassin 2011a, Bronstein and Redfield 2011;
29 Rozakou 2012; Ticktin 2014), and a sign of a growing desire among peripheralised
30 local actors to unite in solidarity and subvert the globalised neoliberal hegemony (see
31 Theodossopoulos 2011; Kirtsoglou 2011).

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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 re-instates the distinction between solidarity
and philanthropy. My reference to scholars who have underlined this distinction—for
example, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Nietzsche or Slavoj Zizek—is an 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

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3 reanimate ethnographically the debate about the complacency of humanitarianism.
4 The views of Wilde, Nietzsche or Zizek become interesting once more to the degree
5 that they echo parallel concerns, or disagreements, among the protagonists of
6 everyday life.
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14 Reflexivity and the local humanitarian context

16 I had always associated philanthropy with the pastime pursuits of the wealthiest
17 members of a society. And I have been prejudiced, I admit, towards many types of
18 charitable action. In regard to my original prejudice, my fieldwork experience among
19 a number of informal and institutionalised humanitarian initiatives in Patras⁷
20 encouraged me to enthusiasm emanating from those participat in the distribution of
21 material aid e.g. food, clothes, medicine put to shame my initial reservations
22 regarding the political implications of humanitarianism. Through participation in
23 several food distribution initiatives, I was forced to abandon, at least temporarily, my
24 armchair perspective and re-examine the value of humanitarian aid beyond the
25 semantics of terminological connotations—for example, independently of the
26 articulation of humanitarianism as either ‘philanthropy’ or ‘solidarity’. As I soon
27 realised, offering food, hand-to-hand, induced an emotional, altruistic effect, which I
28 experienced, and shared with other volunteers and aid professionals. Was I becoming
29 a better person? Or I merely deluded myself in believing so? Is this, after all, the
30 secret fascination of bourgeois philanthropy? That is, to mislead the benefactor into
31 feeling unique and important? To exonerate one’s guilt for tolerating inequality? The
32 graphic commentary below, which I posted on my project’s Facebook page during
33 fieldwork, makes visible some of my original dilemmas.⁸
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51 ⁷ This work was conducted in the context of an ESRC project, which investigates the local
52 consequences of austerity. I originally volunteered to participate in humanitarian initiatives to
53 get closer access to austerity-stricken families. My interest in the topic of this article, as I will
54 shortly explain, emerged during the fieldwork process.
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57 ⁸ See, <https://www.facebook.com/householdsincrisis?fref=ts>
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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; Stewart & Knight 2016), anti-austerity discourse and resistance (Theodossopoulos 2013, 2014a,

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3 2014b), biopolitics (Athanasίου 2012; Rozakou 2012), spontaneity (Dalakoglou
4 2012), visual and media representations of the crisis (Kalantzis 2012, Papailias 2012),
5 cultural mismatches (Hirschon 2013). food, protest and solidarity (Sutton 2013;
6 Vournelis 2013; Rakopoulos 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Knight 2015b). This growing body
7 of literature has provided nuanced and contextualised accounts that address a wider
8 interpretative vacuum generated by the crisis.
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13 In respect to the relationship of the author with the production of
14 anthropological knowledge, the anthropology of the Greek crisis—in its short life
15 span—has already made some reflexive contributions. We have seen confident
16 portrayals of the Self-as-author in Michael Herzfeld's (2011) story of mugging (a
17 narrative-trick used to expose xenophobia) and in Neni Panourgia's (2014) self
18 reflections of interiority (presented as snapshots of the visibility of the crisis). Heath
19 Cabot (2014) has used her own sensory experience as a reflexive window to the
20 worlds of her crisis-afflicted interlocutors; Daniel Knight (2015) has made visible,
21 with directness and ethnographic sensitivity, his role as a researcher in the field in
22 times of crisis. Such reflexive interventions have marked anthropology's potential to
23 subvert the top-down model of imposing a singular authorial voice as an interpretative
24 narrative. My use of graphic ethnography, which makes more visible the author's
25 emplacement in the field, attempts to contribute towards increasing ethnographic
26 reflexivity.
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38 It has become evident so far that my personal ideological predilections played
39 a crucial role in shaping the outcome of this investigation. For it was my own struggle
40 with the pros and cons of humanitarianism—which I confided to my fellow citizens in
41 Patras—that encouraged them to unravel their own related dilemmas, including the
42 widely expressed position that solidarity is (or should be) distinguished from
43 humanitarianism, philanthropy, and charity. Yet, during the course of fieldwork, it
44 was them—my 'interlocutors', or 'the Patrinoi' (the citizens of Patras) as I prefer to
45 call them, to avoid the prescribed term 'respondents'—that took the lead in shaping
46 the outcome of this article. They provided me with sophisticated narratives that
47 addressed my initial concerns about the thin line that separates the ethics of solidarity
48 from the ethics of philanthropy. In all respects, and as I will illustrate through the
49 ethnography that follows, my interlocutors helped me realise that my concerns were
50 also theirs.
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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 voíthia*), 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’ (*protovoullía*) of [or solidarity ‘structure’ (*domí*) of] Aródos’, the name of a bar-restaurant, where 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.

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The participants of Aródos went at great length 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; Rosakou 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 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.

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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

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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; Rosakou 2012, this issue; Cabot 2014, this issue).

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3 with fellow citizens impoverished by austerity. Spontaneity in this particular context
4 indicates 'a collective action of resistance' (Dalakoglou 2012: 536), as well as a
5 statement of disagreement towards the neoliberal logic of austerity. The majority of
6 Aródos participants are guided by socialist principles and a strong awareness of
7 political involvement, which encourages an ideological identification with the
8 politically nuanced concept of 'solidarity', and an aversion to the middle-class
9 associations of the term 'philanthropy'. Aródos, more specifically, was seen as a
10 primarily SYRIZA initiative, although not all members were formally associated with
11 the party, and not to the same degree.
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19 The use of the term 'solidarity' by those who contributed to Aródos indicated
20 a re-positioning of the self with respect to pre-existing humanitarian institutions, such
21 as the Church or the Red Cross (cf. Rosakou 2016). As Rakopoulos aptly explains (in
22 this issue) the notion of 'solidarity' provides a conceptual alternative (which is
23 'other') to more conservative forms of humanitarianism and voluntarism, especially
24 those that have charity connotations. During my fieldwork conversations in Patras, the
25 term 'solidarity' was *accentuated* by humanitarian participants affiliated with the left,
26 or *interrogated* by those leftist interlocutors who suspected that the emerging
27 solidarity initiatives did not challenge efficiently the existing inequalities engendered
28 by austerity.
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36 The informal interrogation of 'solidarity'—in everyday life, and as I recorded
37 it during fieldwork—invites me to introduce the second conversational context that
38 has informed this article. Apart from the conversations that occurred spontaneously at
39 Aródos, I discussed my dilemmas regarding the ethics of giving with several
40 interlocutors who were not closely identified with one of the new solidarity initiatives
41 that emerged during the crisis. This additional group of interlocutors were my
42 research participants from previous research projects,¹⁰ men and women from Patras
43 who are well aware of my interest in Greek political life and my subjectivity as a
44 Greek academic living and teaching in Britain. I have maintained with them a
45 relationship of long-lasting rapport that encourages disagreement and open debate
46 about timely ethical or political positions. Some of these long-established
47 interlocutors had a previous involvement in humanitarian institutions, such as the Red
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57 ¹⁰ The town of Patras has been my anthropological field site since 1999, following from
58 previous work in Zakynthos in the early 1990s.
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3 Cross, while others abstained from voluntarism for ideological reasons (for example,
4 due to their affiliation with KKE). They were interested to know more about my
5 participation in food distribution initiatives, and interrogated my experiences and
6 emerging dilemmas. In the pages that follow, I present their views, as these emerged
7 through unsolicited conversation.
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14 **Beyond the Marxist critique of philanthropy: the view from Aródos**

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18 As I have already explained, I entered the field with a Marxist view in mind, critically
19 predisposed to the idea of philanthropy. Yet, during my participation in a number of
20 solidarity initiatives, I started questioning my views, evaluating and re-evaluating my
21 experience, sharing my dilemmas with fellow solidarity participants. Some citizens in
22 Patras—especially those not affiliated with the left—found my dilemmas irrelevant,
23 for it was obvious to them that giving to those in need was better than not giving, and
24 there was no space for further questioning. But there were also several other citizens
25 who were willing to problematise the humanitarian dimension of solidarity initiatives:
26 was the emerging humanitarian ethnos an obstacle or an inspiration in maintaining a
27 political awareness?
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35 Most of the women who contributed to the Aródos initiative had been exposed
36 to an array of different ideological arguments promoted by the Left, and were, at the
37 time of fieldwork, supporters of SYRIZA. They recognised the critique of
38 volunteerism as a distinctive KKE argument and took the opportunity to differentiate
39 themselves from the standard communist position, which they described as ‘harsh’,
40 ‘theoretical’ or ‘too cerebral’. Most of them argued that solidarity should be expressed
41 unreservedly, and independently of party initiatives, especially in the present, when
42 Greece is facing ‘a humanitarian crisis’.¹¹ A few among my interlocutors at Aródos,
43 especially those who were previously associated with the communist party, were
44 interested to re-evaluate the Marxist critique of philanthropy, which inspired them to
45 differentiate solidarity from philanthropy. Solidarity, some argued with sharp
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56 ¹¹ The phrase ‘humanitarian crisis’ (*anthropistikí krísi*) was used by the SYRIZA government
57 to describe the destructive effects of austerity. It was also used by citizens involved in
58 solidarity activities, primarily by those who were supporters of SYRIZA.
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3 ideological precision, is likely to cultivate a certain degree of social consciousness—
4 among volunteers and aid recipients—while philanthropy conveys a passive message.
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7 Georgía, a founding member of the Aródos initiative, who is now a Syriza
8 supporter, but followed KKE in her youth, attempted to interpret the KKE position,
9 and differentiate herself from it:
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12 ‘The communist party believes that all social responsibility lies with the state.
13 If we provide for the poor, the state ensconces itself (*volévete*). According to
14 this position, the hungry should become even more hungry, so that they will
15 stand up against inequality and unite in revolution...’
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19 At this point Georgía paused, because she realised that a part of her was identifying
20 with the promise of revolution. But another part of her, she admitted, was not happy
21 with this position any more. ‘I once applauded this bold political message’, she said in
22 a reflexive manner, ‘but now I believe that it is an excuse for inaction’. She referred
23 to some of her former socialist fellows (*synagonistés*), who ‘are settled with’
24 (*volévonte*) with the old Marxist view, and ‘do absolutely nothing.’ ‘This is a time of
25 crisis’, Georgía concluded, ‘you cannot stay passive and do nothing’. As a mother of
26 two, Georgía feels that she in shortage of time, but she always find the time, she
27 stressed, to ‘participate’ (*na symetéhei*).
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31 A similar viewpoint to Georgía was shared by another participant of Aródos
32 and Syriza supporter, Eléni, who is a medical doctor and involved in the activities of
33 the Social Health Clinic and the Social Pharmacy (cf. Cabot 2013, this issue).
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36 ‘Someone has to take the first step’, she said, ‘somebody has to make the start and
37 inspire the others’. Her experience providing for impoverished citizens in Patras has
38 taught her that volunteering has a mutually motivating effect: ‘each volunteer inspires
39 yet another volunteer; you see people joining whom you would not expect to join’. In
40 this gradual manner, solidarity initiatives re-animate peoples’ ‘social consciousness’
41 (*koinoniki syneídisi*). ‘Ordinary people’, ‘whose desire to give was previously latent’,
42 said Eleni, come and join various crisis-solidarity events. And she pointed at three—
43 stereotypically middle class—ladies who regularly volunteer to cook meals for the
44 poor: ‘through action, they have changed the way they approach politics.’
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56 Tasia, a SYRIZA sympathiser who joined Aródos three months ago, expanded
57 this argument one step further. At first, she said, people participate in solidarity
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3 initiatives and feel that their action has benefited themselves and their neighbours.
4 Then this very action attracts more people, for example the benefited neighbours.
5 Little by little people organise themselves and learn ‘how and what’ to demand from
6 the authorities. When the local authorities have some money to direct towards a cause,
7 groups that have cultivated their social consciousness are ready to act in unison and
8 make particular demands. ‘These people are more likely to be heard’, Tasía
9 underlined, ‘because they have practised working together towards a common
10 purpose: today they distribute food to the poor; tomorrow they will unite for another
11 cause..’ Tasía added that she is struggling to inspire ‘a little bit of social
12 consciousness’ (*lígi koinonikí synídisi*) to her teenage daughters, and distract them
13 ‘from their mobile phones’ and the social media, which promote, she argued, ‘an
14 individualistic spirit’ (*atomikó pnévma*).

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24 The emphasis on the empowering dimension of solidarity emanated by the
25 positions of my interlocutors at Aródos resonated with the emancipatory euphoria of
26 their participatory experience. The practice of cooking and distributing ‘warm’ food
27 to those afflicted by the crisis was seen by the Aródos participants as indirect
28 resistance to the crisis itself: an opportunity to escape temporarily from the
29 paralysing, disempowering effects of austerity. The sharing of their time and
30 resources was, in this respect, a means to communicate a ‘social message’, as they
31 said, in a period of unprecedented ‘unsocial measures’ (taken by the governments
32 before SYRIZA). The coming together (*i synévresi*) of likeminded solidarians—in
33 regular co-operation—was described by the women of Aródos as equally important to
34 the humanitarian dimension of their activity.

35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 More conservative voices

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46 The general argument that volunteering generates a greater concern for communal
47 values and objectives was also shared by citizens not affiliated with the political left.
48 Many referred to ‘the mentality’ (*i nootropía*) of ‘relying on the state for everything’,
49 which has made, they said, the Greeks passive or inactive, and more self-centred than
50 before. Mr Giórgos, an elderly pensioner who lives in a moderately impoverished
51 neighbourhood on the outskirts of Patras, put this idea in perspective:
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3 In the time of my grandfather, the people lived in a neighbourhood. They were
4 coming out of their door to sweep the road, or whiten the wall, their own wall, and
5 the wall of their neighbour, even more so if she was a widow. This mindset
6 (*nootropía*) stretched a bit further: ~~one day you gather your olives, another day you~~
7 ~~gather your neighbour's.~~ The people did not expect somebody else—the mayor, the
8 prefect—to solve their problems. Today, people sit in the coffeehouses and wait for
9 everything to be done by someone else, the garbage collector, or the local authorities.
10 As a result, we live in bad surroundings, especially nowadays, with the crisis, when
11 the state has run out of money.
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17 Mr Giórgos stressed how he uses his meagre pension to help others, relatives and
18 neighbours. And he raised his voice to accentuate his position: ‘somebody has to give
19 the example’, he said, ‘shall I wait until Monday for the garbage collector to pick up
20 the plastic bag that is stuck in the gutter? I take a stick and I remove it myself. If I
21 only was a bit younger...’
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26 ‘Volunteering mobilises’, said another pensioner, Mrs Elisa, who is involved
27 with the Red Cross: ‘some of the volunteers learn useful skills, which may help them
28 find jobs.’ She described to me a couple of cases where young Samaritans became
29 inspired to pursue new careers after joining the Red Cross. They became ‘mobilised’
30 (*kinitopiúthikan*) and ‘sensitised’ (*evesthitiopiúthikan*), she added, and by giving over
31 their free time to the service of others ‘they opened their heart and their eyes’. That
32 philanthropic work engenders an inner transformation—one that affects the giver,
33 more than the beneficiary—was a point made by numerous Red Cross volunteers in
34 Patras. As Bakalaki notes ‘philanthropic discourses almost invariably emphasise the
35 transformative effects of altruistic giving on both donors and recipients’ (2008: 83).
36 During fieldwork, I heard so many variations of this idea that I began to suspect that it
37 was a self-perpetuating narrative.
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46 I should admit at this point that the romanticisation of giving, articulated by
47 young, middle aged and elderly—primarily female—Red Cross volunteers aroused
48 within me a desire to re-identify more closely with the Marxist critique of bourgeois
49 philanthropy. Nonetheless, and for the sake of fairness, I should stress that the Red
50 Cross of Patras is undertaking admirable and wide-reaching volunteering work that
51 stretches from assisting crisis-afflicted citizens to supporting prisoners, mental
52 institutions and children with special needs. On one occasion, I had the privilege of
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3 participating and contributing to a volunteer training session that focused on the ethics
4 of giving. After I introduced a number of ideological and existential concerns with
5 respect to philanthropy, I was led to conclude, encouraged by the trainee volunteers,
6 that my critical approach—however useful as a reflexive mirror—should not become
7 an excuse for inaction. This observation allows us to appreciate that the volunteers of
8 institutionalised and relatively conservative institutions, such as the Red Cross,
9 recognise the empowering dimension of participation and action. This recognition,
10 however, and in sharp contrast with solidarity initiatives affiliated to the left, is
11 articulated in rather apolitical terms (cf. Rosakou 2016).
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19 Problematising philanthropy in discussions with younger volunteers always
20 resulted in warm and enthusiastic exchanges of perspectives. But when I attempted to
21 adopt a critical approach in conversations with older philanthropists, I felt that my
22 arguments were crushed by the sheer weight of their volunteering record.
23 ‘Theoreticians and intellectuals like you consider us fools’, said Ms Eiríni, an elderly
24 Red Cross volunteer, who has been a Samaritan for many years. During all that time,
25 she has heard all sorts of criticism, including what she described as the ‘communist
26 argument’. The latter, she explained, attempts to portray volunteers as being exploited
27 by the ‘system’, as well as the very philanthropic institutions to which they contribute
28 their time and monetary donations. During our latest conversation, Ms Erini
29 confronted these criticisms with stoic defiance:
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37 ‘They laugh at all voluntary projects, not only the initiatives of the Red Cross: take
38 any example you like: cleaning the beach from the rubbish, distributing food to the
39 poor, caring for migrants, or organising blood donations...’
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42 Then Ms. Eríni looked at me in a penetrating manner, suspecting that I secretly
43 sympathised with the Marxist critique. ‘What do they want to hide with such
44 arguments?’, she asked rhetorically: ‘I’ll tell you what: their indifference to the
45 common interest, or simply one’s laziness..’ ‘Tell me Dimitri, what anthropologists
46 do for those in need?’
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51 52 53 **Additional critical positions**

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

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24 That inequality generates poverty, and that humanitarian activity distracts our
25 attention from the nature of inequality, were two powerful arguments which
26 resurfaced in many informal conversations I had with KKE supporters in Patras. Most
27 of these conversations developed without my intervention or solicitation, but in
28 response to sharing my experience of participation in food distribution initiatives. One
29 day, after returning from Aródos, I met for coffee with Maria, a KKE member, and a
30 regular interlocutor who has acted as a devil’s advocate—problematizing my
31 ethnographic predilections—for many years. After I described to her my latest
32 volunteering experiences Maria said: ‘the solidarity movements to which you
33 participate, do not confront what you call ‘the humanitarian crisis’: you merely dull
34 the pain of the crisis.’

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43 Maria stressed with her voice the words ‘humanitarian crisis’ (*anthropistiki*
44 *krisi*) to identify what she saw as a SYRIZA-brand of humanitarianism. At the time of
45 fieldwork, the expression *anthropistiki krisi* was commonly used in the media,
46 especially in official announcement by the SYRIZA government. Here my
47 interlocutor wanted to provoke Makis, a SYRIZA supporter, who was sitting at the
48 next table, listening to our conversation. Makis attempted to avert disagreement:
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‘philanthropy mitigates (*amvlínei*) 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

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3 reservation. When one does not have the power to change the system or introduce
4 'real solutions', he maintained, one should do what is 'humanly possible'. A partial,
5 imperfect solution, he argued, is better than being indifferent to the pain caused by the
6 crisis. On this point, Makis who was previously a KKE supporter but has now
7 changed his allegiance to SYRIZA, and Maria, who remains faithful to the communist
8 party, agreed. There is a certain level of human pain, 'a certain immediacy
9 (*amesótita*)' Makis and Maria concluded, that lies beyond ideological positions, and
10 requires everyone's attention.
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17 A few other citizens in Patras criticised philanthropy and volunteerism on less
18 politically motivated grounds. 'Altruistic claims', argues Bakalaki, can be 'interpreted
19 as signs of noble and sometimes naïve character, but they are also suspected of being
20 hypocritical' (2008: 90). What is hiding behind hypocrisy, said Giannis, a retired
21 mathematician, is 'selfishness' (*idiotélia*). Most actions are inherently selfish, he
22 argued, even saying a flattering word to your fellow citizen. If one searches deeply in
23 a benefactor's motivations, it will be difficult not to discover 'one or another' selfish
24 intention. 'Most people lie to themselves', said Giannis emphatically, 'they idealise
25 their charitable actions as selfless (*anidiotelis*). The more they *try* to do so, the greater
26 their selfishness!' This is in fact why Giannis prefers to abstain from participating in
27 solidarity initiatives. 'There is always a personal motive,' he explained 'whether it be
28 political, or merely comes from a desire to idealise one's actions! I will not flatter
29 myself in acting as if I can alleviate the pain of others.'
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39 Petros, one of my oldest friends-*and*-interlocutors in Patras argued along
40 similar lines, building upon the idea that philanthropy is primarily a method of guilt-
41 management: 'you don't solve the problem by giving someone a piece of bread...
42 don't have any illusions that you do...' Petros said, and added '... you just lie to
43 yourself'. In many respects, Petros' position encapsulated the essence of what both
44 Oscar Wilde and Marx had previously argued, but without reference to these authors,
45 and without a desire to align his views with a particular political party. What such
46 critical positions often attempt to convey is a local awareness of the social
47 characteristics of particular philanthropists, who are often the implicit target of a
48 particular local critic-*cum*-interlocutor. These implicit targets of criticism are often
49 concrete personalities, let's say one's middle-class neighbour, who maintains visible
50 consumption patterns that offend, and whose philanthropic activity may seem as a
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3 desperate attempt to seek absolution. ‘At the end of the day’, Petros concluded, ‘*they*
4 return to their villa with their expensive four-by-four... tired from an afternoon of
5 philanthropic activity!’
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10 11 12 **Concluding thoughts**

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15 Time to wrap up these ideas. What have we learnt from this short passage into the
16 exciting world of local Greek views of philanthropy and solidarity? I should first
17 point towards an indirect lesson, a message that can be easily taken for granted, for
18 the simple reason that the citizens who shared their views with me feel obliged to
19 underplay—out of modesty—their contribution to humanitarian initiatives.
20 Independently of their position regarding philanthropic activity and volunteerism,
21 most of my interlocutors in Patras contribute money and/or time and/or labour into
22 caring for others—close or distant family members, neighbours, anonymous
23 citizens—who are stricken by the crisis. Seen from this point of view, the ideological
24 objections of some citizens in Patras Patrinoi towards humanitarianism do not serve
25 as a passport for total inaction. They do provide, however, an excuse or justification
26 for not participating in particular initiatives, which are led by particular political
27 parties, or fellow citizens closely associated with those parties, or individuals who are
28 seen as representing selfish motivations, for example a wish to redeem oneself from
29 privilege.
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41 The ethos of offering help to those in need—especially now with the crisis—is
42 so strong that some critically predisposed citizens question if, and to what degree,
43 humanitarian solidarity serves as a substitute for transparent, social provision by the
44 state. Some among my interlocutors pursue this critical trajectory to the extreme, and
45 reject humanitarianism as a superficial remedy for social inequality. Some other
46 citizensPatrinoi acknowledge this problem, but choose to participate in volunteering
47 humanitarian acts nevertheless. Through participation they have come to recognise
48 the unexpected benefits of working with fellow-citizens towards a common purpose.
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60 And through cooperation they feel better connected to their local community; they
61 have learnt—as some say—how to count on it (*na stirizonte s’aftin*).

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3 All this leads us to the first conclusion that presents itself from this
4 ethnography: participation in solidarity movements in crisis-afflicted Greece
5 contributes to the shaping of a more dynamic social consciousness. This realisation
6 provides a strong positive message which deserves to be disseminated more widely:
7 humanitarian solidarity is more valuable in its role as a means of broadening the
8 political awareness of those who participate in it, than it is as a mechanism for
9 providing help to those in need. Although humanitarian aid is undeniably a limited,
10 temporary, and insufficient solution, the act of providing help to those in need
11 engenders the formation of active networks of citizens seeking change. Rakopoulos
12 has provided examples of activist volunteers who ‘imagine alternative modes of
13 economic conduct’ and see their actions as building up to ‘broader change’ (2014b:
14 314; see also 2014a). Similar examples of empowerment through solidarity are
15 offered by additional ethnographic accounts (see [Cabot 2014](#), [Rakopoulos 2015](#),
16 [Rosakou 2016](#)). Local networks of citizens, who become better acquainted and
17 organised through solidarity [initiatives](#), can potentially—but not always—reconstitute
18 themselves as pressure groups or locally embedded political entities.¹²
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30 Although I strongly appreciate the empowering dimension of solidarity
31 initiatives outlined above, I feel obliged to offer a second concluding consideration.
32 For my first optimistic conclusion may encourage a certain degree of—what my most
33 critical interlocutors¹³ call—complacency (*efisiasmós*). The effectiveness of several
34 solidarity movements in addressing some of the most immediate repercussions of
35 austerity at the local level may contribute in redirecting attention away from systemic
36 inequalities. In this respect, humanitarian agents can be seen as maintaining ‘a secret
37 solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight’ (Agamben 1998: 133). This is a
38 drawback shared by humanitarian activity more generally; its ‘unintended
39 consequences’ include a proclivity to de-politicise and individualise suffering (Ticktin
40 2014: 277-83); an over-attentiveness to the suffering subject, that [can be](#) seen here as
41 a substitute for anthropology’s exotic proclivity to Otherise (Robbins 2013). In a
42 paradoxical manner, humanitarianism’s efficacy distorts the root of the problems it
43 attempts to redress. Ticktin (2014), drawing from the anthropological literature,
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55 ¹² The majority of my interlocutors who embrace this flexible view tend to support SYRIZA
56 or are involved in local solidarity initiatives led by SYRIZA supporters.

57 ¹³ Who may be supporters of the communist party, but also supporters of SYRIZA, anarchists,
58 and [citizens](#) of a leftist inclination not affiliated with a particular party.
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3 provides us with several telling examples: humanitarian measures against famine may
4 lead to the de-politicisation of famine as a historically embedded experience (see de
5 Waal 1997); humanitarian aid in response to conflict related emergencies, can
6 naturalise (and normalise) violence and war, hiding from view their political
7 dimension (see Fassin and Pandolfi 2010); humanitarianism in non-Western contexts
8 often obscures the inequality between Western and non-Western humanitarian
9 workers (see Fassin 2011a, Redfield 2012). Similarly, humanitarian hospitality
10 conceals the hierarchical and controlling inclusion of refugees in the social world of
11 host populations (Rozakou 2012).
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19 But let me return to the point from which I started writing this article. It was
20 the transformational aspect of my participation in food distribution initiatives that
21 enticed me to engage with the Marxist critique of philanthropy and reassess its
22 relevance for a contemporary context of solidarity activity in crisis-ridden Greece.
23 Undoubtedly, as I soon realised, the meaning of solidarity, as an empowering and
24 politically nuanced notion is subject to change, and reemployed strategically to meet
25 new challenges and crisis-experiences (cf. Rakopoulos 2014a, 2014b). But as with
26 most versions of humanitarianism, humanitarian solidarity cannot be completely
27 disavowed from the liabilities of philanthropy, where the latter is conceived as an
28 apolitical vision or a self-exonerating practice. In this respect, the criticisms of Marx,
29 Wilde, Nietzsche and Zizek—as outlined in my introduction—are still timely. They
30 are matched by the critical remarks of my interlocutors in Patras who appeared so
31 interested in debating the ethics of humanitarianism. Humanitarian solidarity looked
32 to some of them like a partial solution, independent of their decision to participate in
33 it or not.
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44 The importance of the local arguments I presented in this article lie in their
45 circularity: there is not one straightforward rule to be followed in all cases of
46 humanitarian solidarity. The two conclusions I have outlined—in an open and
47 deliberately inconclusive manner—seem to coexist simultaneously, without
48 cancelling each other out: humanitarian solidarity in austerity-ridden Greece can be an
49 empowering experience, that stimulates the political awareness of those who
50 participate in it. But humanitarian solidarity—when this is conceived as a self-
51 exonerating achievement or a superficial response to the immediacy of suffering—
52 detracts attention from the root of social inequality, and depoliticises the
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3 consequences of the crisis. These two parallel and overlapping conclusions can help
4 us depart from an all-or-nothing position with regard to the Marxist critique of
5 philanthropy; they also encourage us to appreciate the complexity, contextual
6 specificity, and social embeddedness of humanitarian solidarity initiatives.
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10 My friend Petros, a committed critic of most local humanitarian initiatives,
11 admitted in a subsequent conversation that he would have liked ‘to participate’ (*na*
12 *symetéhei*), to feel part of a community in solidarity; but he is haunted by the image of
13 his bourgeois neighbour returning home on his four-by-four, ‘self-exonerated’
14 (*ikanopiiménos me ton eaftó tou*) ‘after having helped so many people’!
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27 the research time to conduct this research, and the citizens of Patras who shared with
28 me their dilemmas regarding the ethnics of giving.
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