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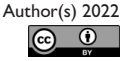

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Radical democracy, the commons and everyday struggles during the Greek crisis

David Howarth[1] **and Konstantinos Roussos**[2]

Abstract

Set against theoretical and strategic debates about theories of radical democracy, left populism and the commons, this article analyses and evaluates everyday struggles in Greek politics after the global financial crisis. It focusses on the cases of Vio.Me – the first workers' recuperated factory in Greece – and the Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko, which is the largest social solidarity health clinic in Greece. Viewed from the perspective of commoning practices, the article identifies the logics that sustain the beliefs, values, infrastructures and institutions developed at an everyday grassroots level, finding traces of an incipient radical democratic ethos and rationality at work. The new initiatives highlight crucial and often neglected organisational, prefiguring and subjective prerequisites for radical democracy, while challenging elements of left populist political strategy. Our evolving perspective also problematises their political limitations and strategic dilemmas as they struggle to constitute a viable hegemonic alternative to neoliberal rationalities and governance.

Keywords

austerity, collective action, commons, co-production, everyday politics, Greece, left populism, protest, radical democracy, self-organisation, social movements, workers' collectives

The project of radical democracy stands at a crossroads. For many, its promises of greater freedom, equality, pluralism and social justice have either failed to form a credible alternative to the dominant models of liberal and neoliberal capitalist democracy, or been transmuted into authoritarian and populist forms, potentially jeopardising liberal values and democratic institutions. Others argue that the democratic imaginary itself has failed to cope with pressing issues in our rapidly changing world, including increasing social inequalities, racism and climate crisis. Yet, in the last decade, a wave of grassroots struggles has shaken the world, including the Indignant and Occupy movements (Syntagma

[1]Department of Government, University of Essex, Colchester, UK
[2]School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

Corresponding author:
David Howarth, Department of Government, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK.
Email: davidh@essex.ac.uk

and Puerta del Sol squares to Zuccotti and Gezi Parks) in 2011–2012, the Black Lives Matter, Ni Una Menos and Indigenous Rights movements, the Gilets Jaunes and the global protests in Chile, Hong Kong, Catalonia, Lebanon and elsewhere in 2019. Such movements have questioned the institutions and practices of representative democracy, as well as its notion of citizenship, while proposing different forms of democratic politics, which emphasise direct participation, horizontality, deliberation, equality and inclusivity (Della Porta, 2020).

Some of these theoretical tensions and practical challenges are crystallised in Greek politics since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, which brought a resurgence of radical thought and practice. After the *Aganaktismenoi* Squares Movement in the summer of 2011, novel forms of democratic collective action and self-organisation emerged, many employing innovative strategies to counter neoliberal austerity (Arampatzi, 2017). In January 2015, the new conjuncture ushered in the electoral victory of SYRIZA; ostensibly a party of the European radical left. Yet, despite SYRIZA's active participation in the popular struggles, and its connections with grassroots networks, the party moved away from its socially active grassroots base and its erstwhile radical credentials, which were grounded on a positive view of the latter's non-traditional, participatory and bottom-up style of politics (Spourdalakis, 2013: 109–112).

In the context of a growing disaffection with existing models of democracy, this article reworks the project of radical democracy by engaging with the logics and practices of commoning. Our aim is to evaluate some of the new practices and organisational forms in Greece since the movements of the squares in relation to the ongoing debates about the character and future possibilities of radical democracy. Tracing out their lived experiences, while extracting and articulating their core values, we endeavour to rehabilitate the project of radical democracy by weakening and reworking its attachment to the logic of left-wing populism, which is a dominant theme in much recent post-Marxist and critical political theory. We argue that this tendency has two problematic effects: first, populism acquires strategic primacy over other forms and logics of radical democracy. Second, it can lead at best to a simple conflation between radical democracy and populism, and at worst to an understanding of populism as *both* the means and the end of the radical democratic imaginary (Laclau, 2010).

Instead, our analysis of the Greek cases shows how the distinctive social logics embodied in such grassroots movements – social co-production, self-organisation, democratic decision-making, distributed leadership, and so on – often exemplifying the practices of commoning, can productively supplement the idea of radical democracy, while concretely prefiguring its accomplishment. Our argument is thus developed through a thick description of two long-established and ongoing grassroots projects in Greece – the recuperated Vio.Me factory and the Metropolitan Community Clinic at Helliniko (MCCH) – which are judged to be 'paradigmatic cases' of the new politics (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The initiatives show how neoliberal austerity governance dismantled basic social rights in labour, health and social care, targeting the embedded labour and social welfare structures and practices (Petmesidou, 2013), while disclosing how such changes are lived and contested in everyday life. We then explore how the ideas associated with the commons function as a productive supplement for the project of radical democracy by expanding its demands and strategico-theoretical orientation. In so doing, the article begins by piercing a selection of current debates about radical democracy, before presenting our theoretical approach and research strategies. We then turn to the problematisation and characterisation of the two Greek cases.

Radical democracy and the dilemmas of political organisation and strategy

Contemporary discussions of democracy disclose a number of competing models – aggregative, agonistic, deliberative and participatory forms to name but a few – each extolling distinctive characteristics and virtues (Cunningham, 2002). Among these conceptions, radical democracy is best defined as a normative political *project*, which brings together a series of contingent demands and identities in order to challenge relations of domination and oppression in the different spaces of modern societies. But, although the agents of radical democracy seek to challenge social injustices and inequalities, while making possible the construction of hegemonic alternatives, their aim is not '*to renounce liberal democratic ideology, but on the contrary to deepen and extend it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy*' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Instead, grounded on a principle of democratic equivalence, they struggle to assemble different demands in line with the values of freedom, equality and solidarity, so that such values and ideals can be progressively iterated across society to subvert and overturn relations of oppression and exploitation, while constructing a new common sense.

More concretely, this radical conception of democracy comprises a contingent and 'unstable equilibrium' of three elements: a universal, though contingent, system of rules and institutions that can govern the operation of the political system in a responsive and accountable way (modes of political representation and delegation, the rule of law, and so on); the construction of popular political agencies that can actively contest relations of domination and oppression in various places in the name of democratic ideals; and the cultivation of a democratic subjectivity, which embodies an ethos of openness and agonistic respect (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Understood in this way, radical democracy is designed to deconstruct the orthodox Marxist model of change, which involves a revolutionary break with a particular mode of production led by a fundamental social class (such as the proletariat) in order to achieve a fully emancipated system (such as communism). Instead, its proponents seek to profit from the gains of the 'democratic revolution' by elaborating and disseminating the core values of democracy into ever-widening domains and institutions, including the state and the economy.

Arguments for radical democracy arise from the demands and lived experiences of 'new social movements' in the fields of gender, race, sexuality and the environment, which emerged in the last 40 years or so, while providing the means to engineer linkages between old and new emancipatory struggles. However, the strategic component of the project, especially evident in the idea of 'left populism', is often restricted to the domain of party politics and change through the existing liberal democratic institutions. Indeed, the growing focus on populism among radical democratic theorists is pitched either at the ontological level – the character of the political – or the strategic imperatives of winning political power by linking different demands together in wider hegemonic projects aiming to achieve state power. At the same time, there is a tendency to reify populist politics at the empirical level, with talk of 'left' and 'right' forms, when populism is principally a relational logic or dimension of politics, which only emerges and persists in different degrees in particular contexts. As we shall argue, populism neither exhausts the concept of politics, as there are other political logics at play, and nor can it be simply conflated with the project of radical democracy. Indeed, in current debates and discourses, the specific values, practices and organisational conditions for the institution and reiteration of radical democracy are often lost or neglected.

Of course, proposals for radical democracy have sparked wider theoretical and strategic debates. Some dispute the radicality of radical democracy, especially the degree to which it poses a root-and-branch challenge to capitalist social relations. Others criticise the fact that its political goals appear to remain within the existing parameters of liberal democratic regimes, while questions are also raised about the role of institutions and organisations in the prefiguring and construction of new social orders. Finally, there are those who query the failure to develop a requisite form of democratic subjectivity that can construct and inhabit a radical democratic order (Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis, 2014).

At the same time, in the early 2000s, the influence of autonomous movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico, the popular mobilisations in Argentina during the 2001 crisis, and the global justice movement against neoliberal globalisation, signalled the need to break with the logic of hegemony in favour of horizontality and the politics of commoning and prefiguration. Recognising that such struggles shared a strong rejection of representative politics and forms of hierarchical power, increasingly dominated by the rising importance of transnational political and corporate agencies, while actively creating new ways of being and self-organising, a number of theorists saw the emergence of a new political imaginary that sought to institute democracy more directly from the bottom-up.

Theorists of the commons argue that these struggles represent relatively autonomous, democratic alternatives to the hegemony of neoliberal rationalities. To this end, practices of commoning are ascribed a twofold dynamic; they involve both the product of labour as well as the means of social (re)production. Consequently, the commons can be productively understood as the re-organisational force for the reappropriation of material (products and services) and immaterial (knowledge and skills) wealth. Through their everyday practices and institutions, commoning foregrounds an active experimentation with images of an alternative sociopolitical paradigm that privileges horizontality and direct democracy rather than representation. As Hardt and Negri maintain (2009: 353), the democratic capacities that people exercise through commoning struggles provide us with new tools to imagine democratic political organisations grounded on cooperation, autonomy and horizontal networking. From this standpoint, affirmations of the commons emerge as a counter-power that resists and potentially transforms the subordination of everyday life to capitalist relations and at an interstitial distance from state apparatuses (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 355).

Some proponents of radical democracy are critical of this perspective on theoretical and strategic grounds, claiming that the celebration of the commons problematically assumes that 'it might provide the main principle of organisation of society' (Mouffe, 2018: 54) without any recourse to political antagonisms and representation. Highlighting the lack of a coherent theorisation of political articulation in such horizontalist accounts, Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues that they fail to address the need of actively forming antagonistic political subjects that question established identities, norms, forms of representation and, in general, the current hegemonic structure that they seek to dismantle. Others, like Žižek (2006), assert that such conceptions simply mirror Marx's essentialist view that capitalism produces its own gravediggers, and question the capacity of horizontal network forms to organise themselves in an instrumental way to bring about broader social change.

Nevertheless, despite these potential limitations, we contend that the logic of commoning can productively supplement the project of radical democracy. Reflecting on this possibility, this article shifts the focus from the role of institutions to the micropolitical practices of the self and of the community. In other words, while maintaining a

commitment to broader macro-transformations, we show that the logic of commoning allows us to provide a more holistic account of radical democratic strategy. As such, the struggle for a radical democratic transformation is not just about electoral politics, but also about everyday practices: how we make a living and what we create together, how we relate to each other, and how we take care of each other.

Today, for SYRIZA (and other parties of the left), this radical challenge of building on the lived experiences and political culture of grassroots struggles has remained unaddressed. Once in office, SYRIZA was confronted with serious obstacles: its isolation within the EU; the lack of leverage in the negotiations with the country's creditors; and its straightjacketing within the institutions and the 'maturing experience' of governance. Hampered by the first two limitations, which were intensified by the implementation of a further set of debt relief measures in 2015, the third obstacle resulted in the party's shift towards a centralised and vertical logic of governance 'as usual', which broke the horizontal equivalential chains that linked together and gripped the different desires and aspirations of the popular mobilisations and grassroots struggles of the period (Prentoulis, 2021). A decade after the square movements, which both catalysed grassroots organising alternatives and provided the conditions for left-wing parties (like SYRIZA and Podemos) to form or participate in governments, thus reinvigorating interest in radical democracy as a strategy of social change, critical political theorists are often trapped between the contending narratives of 'horizontality' and 'verticality'. In order to evaluate and articulate these rival perspectives through our empirical cases, we start with some reflections on our theoretical approach.

The theory and method of ethico-political interpretation

In addressing our objects of research, we draw upon the resources of poststructuralist discourse theory and the logics of critical explanation. We begin with a discussion of the category of discourse and its implications for politics, after which we present our method for the particular cases and the empirical data that we collected and analysed in their study.

Discourse and politics

The category of discourse in our framework is not just about patterns of meaning, texts or symbolic representations, but consists of *articulatory practices* that connect and resignify physical and cultural components into particular worlds of being, doing and thinking (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The articulation of such elements yields relational and incomplete systems of practice, which are always bounded by an outside that is established by the exercise of power and exclusion. Such elements and objects are radically contingent entities, which can be signified and assembled in different ways by competing forces and political projects. Different social 'realities' are thus constructed and emerge within different discursive systems, though such discourses are never complete, because they are marked by other discourses and practices against which they are defined, and which can challenge their meaning.

Social logics

Our approach focuses on the emergence, reproduction and transformation of practices or constellations of practices that we call regimes. As discourses are not just 'talk or text in

context', but concrete social practices that embody certain logics, the logic of a discourse is captured by the rules that govern them, and the ontological conditions that make such rules possible. *Social logics* – the norms and forms of behaviour that make up a practice – can thus be detected by uncovering the rules and objects that condition what can be said or done in a particular setting. Hence, our empirical analysis moves from a gathering and description of the self-interpretations and actions of subjects in different contexts to the discernment of the discursive rules that constitute the social logics that organise the discourses and practices. In pinpointing the unities, regularities and boundaries of pertinent political discourses, our approach also focuses on the construction of antagonisms and the creation of political frontiers that delimit the systems of statements and practices that are investigated.

Ethico-political interpretation: Counter-logics, normative evaluation and critique

Our chief goal is the production and testing of *critical explanations* of problematised social phenomena, where critique gains its foothold through the descriptive and explanatory process. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, our main priority in this interpretation of democratic *counter-logics* is not explanation or critique *sensu stricto*, but the characterisation and normative evaluation of the social practices and grassroots democratic politics in question. That is to say, in describing, assessing and building-upon MCCH and Vio.Me as putative exemplars of new forms of self-organisation in the Greek context, our method is to project our considered ideals into these counter-logics, and then to use the implicit and explicit norms and values of the investigated objects to reflect back upon, interact with and possibly transform our understandings and conceptions of the project of radical democracy itself. Before returning to our empirical cases to test and develop our initial intuitions, we shall say a few words about the empirical foundations of the research.

Fieldwork and the collection of empirical data

Much of the empirical data used in this study was gathered during fieldwork conducted between June and October 2018. The data arose primarily from 23 semi-structured interviews with participants in the two ventures and other members of their solidarity networks; three months of participatory observation (including participation in various organisational processes and observation of everyday arrangements); and document analysis of their publicly available campaigning material and press releases. Interviews were digitally recorded and supported by fieldwork memos with the informed consent of the interviewees. The material from the interviews and text analysis was manually transcribed and processed through repeated readings (Keller, 2012). We then used the logics framework as a heuristic device to delve beneath the texts and self-interpretations of the actors in different empirical contexts to identify the underlying rules of the discourses under investigation, as well as the structures and conditions that made them possible.

Problematising radical alternatives in Greek politics

Various analyses have shown how the GFC of 2008 and the 'remedy' of austerity produced dramatic and adverse changes in Greek society. In the spring of 2010, demonstrations against the first austerity programme brought together thousands of people in the

biggest cities of the country. Almost a year later, on the 25th of May 2011, a multitude of heterogeneous actors occupied the central squares of several urban centres to give life to the Aganaktismenoi movement. Aganaktismenoi stimulated the active engagement of citizens in popular assemblies and different working groups, which created an intensified process of (re)politicisation that opened up the way for an alternative problematisation of austerity as a rationality that reinforces processes of neoliberalisation (Roussos, 2019).

After the evacuation of the squares, the re-territorialisation of struggles in local neighbourhoods engendered an expanding network of bottom-up alternatives – reaching more than 400 groups in 2016 – in different areas of social and economic life (Kousis et al., 2018; Malamidis, 2020). Such alternatives included collective initiatives for basic services' provision (social solidarity clinics and pharmacies, citizens self-help groups); work-related cooperative structures (coffee shops, groceries and other labour cooperatives); educational and cultural networks (self-managed theatres, tutoring and support for students); projects for the direct support of the most vulnerable social strata (collective kitchens, social foodbanks); and local initiatives prefiguring alternative forms of socio-economic organisation (markets without middlemen, neighbourhood assemblies, time banks) (Solidarity for All, 2014).

Scholars have elaborated different definitions in order to characterise such initiatives. A first batch of broad-brushed studies focuses on one central aspect of their social practices, typically emphasising the role of solidarity and self-management (Kokkinidis, 2015; Vaiou and Kalandides, 2016). But, while we agree that such notions do inform the repertoires of the initiatives under study, we do not wish to subsume their richness under a single social logic. From a social movement studies perspective, the new forms have been characterised as alternative forms of resilience (Kousis et al., 2018). For example, researchers involved with the LIVEWHAT project (2016: 30) propose that the direct action organisations, which emerged during the crisis, foster resilience, as they 'aim to provide citizens/people alternative ways of enduring day-to-day difficulties and challenges under hard economic times, which relate to urgent needs'. But again, while we agree that the grassroots initiatives which emerged in crisis-ridden Greece were an immediate response to the dismantling of the welfare state and labour precariousness provoked by the austerity regime, providing alternatives that enabled people to meet their daily needs, we do not accept that the idea of resilience is a satisfactory way to conceptualise the movements.

In our view, the idea of resilience is intimately bound up with a politics of catastrophe, or the neoliberal promotion of risk, and thus incites individuals to learn and become more responsive to systemic crises, 'normalising' in this way the hardships and inequalities that the latter generate to maintain a stable equilibrium (Evans and Reid, 2015). Indeed, in this specific context, by promoting a discourse of adaptability, hegemonic conceptions of resilience in the fields of policy and crisis management obscure the possibility of a radical transformation of dominant structures of exploitation and oppression (Nelson, 2014). So, while those who use the concept of resilience in the study of grassroots networks do not necessarily share this orientation, and though the notion of resilience can be articulated in different ways, we argue that the adoption of resilience to explain the collective action of these grassroots actors obscures their political dimension, thus making it difficult to explore the roles of hegemony, social antagonism and power in their constitution and reproduction.

Against this background, we construct a more complex and inclusive account of the new ventures. We show how their social practices contribute innovative models and

images for the construction of social and political relations, which can furnish us with an alternative vision of organising society. We also claim that the social activity of these grassroots actors is shaped by the construction of equivalences and resonances between multiple networks and democratic struggles, which were designed to preserve or create resources, or to re-appropriate privatised public resources against state and market driven enclosures intensified by the regime of austerity. Such activities are thus informed by a political logic of *being* and *doing* in common, as they constitute discursive articulations whose objective is to overcome the hegemony of neoliberal logics (such as individualisation, commodification, and hierarchy in organising social relations and practices). Hence, we find ourselves closer to accounts that seek to understand these practices as initiatives and struggles to exercise democratic control of 'the commons' (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015; Roussos and Malamidis, 2021; Varvarousis et al., 2020).

Two exemplary cases: MCCH and Vio.Me

Initiated and performed by ordinary women and men, commoning involves collective processes to produce services and goods, which are forged through practices of social co-production, democratic decision-making, and logics of association, and is grounded on equity and care. Thus, in mapping the integral everyday routines and interactions that constitute these incipient social practices, we start by developing a thick description of two of the most emblematic projects: the recuperated Vio.Me factory and MCCH.

Logics and practices of social co-production

The social activities of the formal and informal grassroots initiatives that emerged during the Greek crisis have taken the following two general forms: (a) the provision of services to meet everyday needs in the midst of the dismantling of the welfare state (collective kitchens, tutoring, housing, health and medical provision, and so forth) and (b) alternative economic activities that seek to empower and engage those excluded from the austere restructuring of labour market (networks of exchange, working cooperatives or worker-recuperated companies, producers' collectivities) (Papadaki and Kalogeraki, 2018). Our detailed descriptions of MCCH and Vio.Me allow us to reflect on both aspects of these practices.

Stemming from an initiative of a group of participants in the Aganaktismenoi squares, the MCCH was launched in the autumn of 2011. Until 2015, in a context of widespread exclusion from the Greek national health system, MCCH provided its 'free-for-all' services to more than 41,000 care-seekers (MCCH, 2015). As the data of the clinic demonstrate, the number of visits pre-pandemic fluctuated between 370 and 500 per month (MCCH, 2019). Having 280 volunteers (half of them healthcare professionals, and half of them other volunteers including former care-seekers), MCCH is member of a network of Social Solidarity Clinics (SSCs) with roots in the anti-austerity struggles. As Rakopoulos (2015) demonstrates, the element of 'movementality' in such networks works as an educational technique that informs their political desire to spread the repertoires, discourses and modes of living emanated in the social struggles against austerity:

> All of us, doctors and solidarity citizens of the SSCs, believe that the whole society should fight to safeguard the public good of health. (SSCs-Announcement, 2012)

Due to the size of MCCH, different thematic groups are assigned specific tasks, such as communication, material maintenance and pharmacy organisation (MCCH, 2015). The groups coordinate their activities through the general assembly, where all the participants can equally participate and vote. As one interviewee put it, 'our general assembly of volunteers is the ultimate organ for us where we discuss and take the decisions all together' (Int.1, MCCH). The self-management of the clinic provided the means to secure its free-for-all and independent character. One of the first decisions, which vibrantly exemplifies MCCH's vision against profit-driven logics, which treat medical and pharmaceutical services as commodities, was the rejection of funding from political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), market agents and the state (MCCH, 2015). Moreover, the equal cooperation of all the volunteers in the life of the clinic has facilitated the co-creation of new knowledge and practices of healthcare organisation and provision. In this respect, with equality and cooperation as the focus, MCCH's social activity – the free-for-all provision of primary healthcare services without discriminations – comes to incorporate elements of community management and sharing in healthcare provision. Against the neoliberal curtailing and commodification of services, the practices of MCCH and the other SSCs means that healthcare is socially co-produced as a common good.

As a subordinate enterprise of Philkeram-Johnson S.A., the factory of Vio.Me was established in Thessaloniki in 1982 to produce chemical products for the manufacturing sector. In May 2011, in the midst of the crisis, the parent company went bankrupt. Abandoning Vio.Me premises, the former owners left the 65 workers unpaid, facing unemployment and an uncertain future. In February 2013, Vio.Me's workers, supported by an Open Solidarity Initiative, which was formed to promote their struggle and advance their demands (VIOME-OSI, 2013), declared that they would restart the production under workers' control:

> We undertake the operation of the factory in terms of complete self-management and workers' control of both its production and management structures. (VIOME-WU, 2013)

Vio.Me is one of the first self-managed, large production units in the last few years in Europe, and the first in Greece (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015), currently employing 24 workers. Since their first steps, the workers established a model of rotating roles in the production line and equal pay for all the members of the cooperative. In the words of one interviewee:

> since the beginning, the assembly decided that all the workers will have the same share. We all earn the same salary and work the same hours - eight hours - in which we include the time for our assembly and also our break. (Int.1, Vio.Me)

Moreover, the members of the cooperative have been committed to the principle that each of their salaries cannot surpass the double of the minimum wage in the Greek private sector: 'we always redirect any surplus to the society that has supported us, or creating new jobs in the factory and bolster other struggles and projects' (Int.2, Vio.Me). Vio.Me organises its co-production activities on principles of reciprocity, knowledge and skills sharing, and collective ownership of the recuperated means of production. In this way, labour emerges as a common asset in a twofold way: as a collectively produced resource essential for the life of the community, and as a socially produced value, a condensation

of collective thought and collective action (Fattori, 2011), which is reinvested back to the broader society.

MCCH and Vio.Me are part of a series of everyday struggles, in which people shape their daily lives collectively on the basis of their shared needs. Manifested in the participants' self-interpretations and MCCH and Vio.Me's official discourses, their social activity is founded upon a problem- and action-centred social logic that we name an 'economy of care'. MCCH and Vio.Me's practices of co-production thus crystallise the norms of cooperation and the values and ideas of community sharing, while also problematising the dominant regime of (individual) private property rights, profit expropriation and competitiveness, which function as the dominant drives of social and economic life. In this sense, the human potential to create – and the outcomes of such actions – are not conceived in terms of individual-centred 'human capital' to be exploited in the free market, but as a social activity that is socially realised and socially beneficial, nurtured on collectively produced and learned skills, and developed through collectively managed tools and means of production (Kioupkiolis and Karyotis, 2015: 317).

Organising and decision-making practices

The spread of anti-austerity struggles and prefigurative repertoires at the local level also carried important implications for the organising practices of new commoning ventures. One interviewee put it in the following terms: 'the philosophy of our organisation, or its basic principle if you will, is horizontal - in the sense of direct democracy and self-organisation as we know it from the squares' (Int.1, MCCH). The most illustrative practice here is the General Assembly (GA). For both projects, this forum is given the ultimate responsibility for determining the operational processes and political actions in each organisation, thus ensuring the equal participation of its members in decision-making and the control of work-related tasks and flows.

The GA is an open space for deliberation, where the participants share their ideas on collective interests, each with an equal vote to make collective decisions: 'we aim to take decisions with a unanimous vote. It takes a lot of discussion but it is important, and the equality among us starts from that and expands to all the other relations' (Int.3, Vio.Me). Importantly, within the setting of the GA, the disagreements that may and do arise, are addressed as an opportunity for further collective reflection. As one interviewee put it, 'naturally there are different opinions and conflicts, but we are continuously learning to listen to each other and make compromises that in a way can satisfy everyone' (Int.2, MCCH). In this sense, the individual aspirations and ideas of participants are realised not in antagonistic and mutually exclusive terms, but rather in a reciprocal way. The result is that such organising practices are seen to foreground and cultivate an ethos of cooperation and equality in practice, which unfolds as an ongoing exercise for the participants to become open to different ideas, while learning to work together:

> it functions as a school; and you start from the nursery school understanding that this world is not only about you, and then you slowly learn to respect the others and engage with our differences in a meaningful way. (Int.4, Vio.Me)

The participation of individual activists as equals in defining the rules, goal setting and task allocation also *prefigures* an alternative mode of social organisation, whose explicit aim is to supersede the dominant hierarchical taxonomies between those who are entitled to take decisions and those who merely execute, or between those who know and those

who do not. As one of the workers in Vio.Me put it, 'nobody is born knowing, you learn by doing and participating. Whoever enters here (in the GA) is equal, newer or older it is the same. One vote each, all equal!' (Int.5, Vio.Me). Hence, the lived experience of collective administration and equal participation in decision-making fosters an ethical dimension to work that hinges upon the principles of equity, trust and mutual awareness. 'There is no hierarchy', said one participant, 'we are a collectivity in which we all decide, act and take the responsibility together' (Int.3, MCCH).

Occupying a nodal position within the life of commoning projects like MCCH and Vio.Me, the GA thus comes to symbolise the main social practice of governance. Often characterised at the 'heart of the project', self-governance exemplifies a horizontal and consensual logic of decision-making, emphasising the values of equality, reciprocity, and collective responsibility in order to meet joint problems and achieve common interests. At the same time, such ventures are (re)produced according to certain rules and norms that enable the logics of self-governance to keep ticking over: direct participation; one vote for all the participants; an equal role in expressing their ideas; negotiated outcomes and engagement with the different opinions; mutual awareness; and the investment in and recognition of the GA as the ultimate instrument of decision-making and organisation. Through the self-interpretations of our interviewees, we can now see how the notion of self-governance operates as a social logic, which involves a set of practices and rules based on the creation of more open and participatory spaces, both in decision-making and in everyday relationships, thus breaking with the neoliberal logics of expertise, central authority and individualism in the workplace and community.

Practices of (mutual) association and collective political solidarity

Self-governance fosters direct engagement and inclusive participation in the organising and decision-making practices of both projects. But for practices of self-governance to flourish, there is the precondition of a shared social life and an underlying social vision, which can be extended to include broader parts of the society. A third aspect of our analysis focuses on the practices and discourses of association and relatedness that are enacted by such projects within the context of the Greek crisis. We have noted that the politicisation of the crisis, which had been staged and cultivated within the anti-austerity protest cycle of 2009–2012, led to the diffusion of a number of grassroots projects, which responded to the multifaceted exclusionary effects of austerity (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2016). Such activities were based on experiences of shared predicaments:

> The SSC and Pharmacies [. . .] provide voluntary and completely free primary health and pharmaceutical care services to uninsured, financially deprived and unemployed people, Greeks and immigrants without any discrimination. They are solidarity structures that have been set up to counter austerity policies and the humanitarian crisis, and are fighting for a free and universal public health system. (SSCs and Pharmacies, 2015)

As illustrated in this press release, which was signed by MCCH and 15 other clinics across Greece, the main aim of the SSCs is to tackle the exclusionary effects of austerity in public healthcare provision. In this way, the access to health services is framed as a shared human need and the clinic's services are common for everyone regardless of ethnic origins, race, class or gender.

In a similar fashion, Vio.Me also prioritises the association of equal struggles against austerity:

> For the struggle to be victorious it cannot stay with Vio.Me, it should spread to all the factories and businesses that are closing. (VIOME-OSI, 2013)

Indeed, in their public discourse, both MCCH and Vio.Me call for the active participation in protest events against austerity governance and initiatives in support of other networks or individuals. They also emphasise common challenges and take actions that foster the interconnectedness of struggles to overcome them. Such practices of association address social and structural aspects of labour and healthcare through the production of a lateral relationality, which is directed against the austerity driven reforms that seek to individuate workplaces, welfare provision and persons:

> we reclaim healthcare provision for all; it's not charity ('philanthropia') that you come from outside or above and you say take this or that and that's it. It is solidarity, we are all together in this, we are experiencing the same problems so we act all together. (Int.2, MCCH)

Similarly, 'the opening of Vio.Me gates to the society' (interview notes in Vio.Me) postulates that individual needs cannot be isolated from the needs of the other and the whole of society. Instead,

> there is a continuous connection with the society; as we have received material and moral support to keep fighting, now with all our powers we contribute back and not in terms of charity but by considering how the society as a whole can move one step forward so as to create better living conditions for everyone. (Int.2, Vio.Me)

It is noteworthy that our analysis of the participants' self-interpretations also enables us to discern a political dimension in these practices of association, which is articulated against social norms of charity and social exclusion. Regarding the first, the term charity is used to describe a set of institutional or bureaucratic activities organised by the state, big corporations, NGOs and the church, which seek to alleviate the effects of austerity governance in a top-down relationship, thus tending to objectify and normalise austerity effects by silencing their political origins. Moving to the second, as Vaiou and Kalandides (2016) argue, austerity politics created a space of multiple exclusions in the labour market, public services, public goods, housing, and so forth, as it reconstituted the public sphere in line with the neoliberal values of self-reliance and atomisation. In contrast, we argue that Vio.Me and MCCH's practices of association signify a call for a more active social engagement with bottom-up practices of direct self-help and support.

The practices and discourses of association that are enacted by Vio.Me and MCCH construct society as the epicentre of relationships of care and mutual aid. We have shown how they constitute a matrix of relationships with others, where they are grounded on the bridging of interests, struggles and needs of all people in a horizontal way. Our claim here is that these processes of relatedness rest upon the ideas and norms of reciprocity, inclusion and mutuality of interests, positioning solidarity at the core of their everyday practices (Rakopoulos, 2016). Solidarity thus engenders protean forms of agency that intimate and implant an alternative vision of citizenship, thereby making possible the countering of neoliberal logics of individualisation, commodification and self-reliance. From this perspective, the logic of solidarity constitutes an integral political component of commoning projects, which informs the relationships between participants, other grassroots networks and, most importantly, with all those who have been marginalised or deprived of the possibility of participating in the social body because of austerity.

An ethico-political interpretation: Rethinking and enriching radical democracy

If anything, the challenges faced by proponents of radical democracy today are much more daunting than those of the past. Yet, as our two cases show, there are glimmers of hope in the emergence of new projects and identities at the local level, which have in turn spawned links with other groups and communities within and between states. How can these alternatives be interpreted and evaluated in the light of democratic theory and practice?

Radical democracy l'avenir

At first glance, the language of radical democracy offers a useful means to characterise organisations such as MCCH and Vio.Me, as their demands represent an extension and articulation of the core values of democracy – equality, autonomy and solidarity – into new sets of social relations and practices. Such forces also endeavour to link themselves to other struggles, either to construct broader political coalitions or to display solidarity with similar initiatives and projects. Equally, they challenge embedded relations of domination and oppression in different social sites, while promoting more diverse modes of production, care, and so forth. They thus contribute to the construction of a new egalitarian and libertarian common sense, which is organised around a democratic principle of equivalence. New subjects and identities are manufactured in their antagonistic confrontations in particular social spaces, while such forms are integral in promoting a democratic ethos and affect.

Demands for socialised forms of production and healthcare are thus perspicuously represented as part of the project for radical democracy and the restructuring of the contours of the ruling historical bloc. But if we consider such forms in the light of the commons, then notable remainders and supplements are exposed. First, the language of the commons reveals concealed elements in the new struggles and forms of organisations, especially their *prefiguring* of novel ways of being and doing. As their members regularly stress, organisations are not just the strategic blocks for the creation of a wider hegemonic project, but the actual embodiment of new rules and modes of social interaction. So rather than just serving as the instruments for the construction of a new hegemonic order by winning political power through elections and campaigning, they endeavour to *transform* oppressive neoliberal structures and rationalities in the present. Indeed, one concrete manifestation of this logic of prefiguration is evident in the elaboration of deeper and thicker webs of democratic practice and political association, as the new enterprises and organisations encourage greater levels of participation in actual decision-making and implementation.

The logic of commoning: A productive supplement

At the same time, the theoretical gaze of the commons directs our attention to the complex dynamics of local contexts, thus adding to an exclusive – and often exclusionary – concern with the national, regional and global levels of analysis. As we have charted in our two empirical cases, this focus on the micro-politics of particular social struggles and activities, as well as the molecular changes in social relations that they engender, brings out the intensities of each specific struggle and its peculiar spatio-temporal contexts. What is more, and which is very evident in the cases of MCCH and Vio.Me, this

dimension highlights the affective bonds and reciprocal enjoyments that are generated in the creation and reproduction of these operations. Such sensibilities in turn foster a vibrant radical democratic 'ethos of receptive generosity that is capacious, hospitable, and engaging with respect to extant and emerging difference' among its members, and the communities that they are designed to serve (Coles, 2016).

Bound up with these new types of resonance and social interaction are questions of leadership, as well as the logics of social organisation, political representation and multiplicity (Hardt and Negri, 2019). These are pressing and often neglected issues in the discussion of hegemony and radical democracy, sometimes denigrated because of their alleged 'impressionist and sociologistic descriptivism' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). The question of organisation is not a primary concern in Laclau and Mouffe's approach; it is either neglected as a relevant independent factor, or the authors rely unwittingly on traditional political parties to pursue radical democratic or populist strategies. But the careful assembling of durable, flexible and protean organisational machines, which can mutate in new circumstances, while sometimes engaging in wider political activities, is an essential ingredient in building a resilient and transformed social order.

Questions about leadership and leadership style also arise here, as different models come into play. The hierarchical and executive types of leadership associated with the dominant rationalities of our time have been challenged by more radical movements. Proponents of populism have tended to extol the essential importance of charismatic leaders with which supporters can identify, whereas other radical theorists have called for a return to Leninist forms of leadership, which are embodied in a vanguard party. As our characterisation suggests, self-organising assemblages like MCCH and Vio.Me have elaborated more decentralised and distributed styles of political leadership, which run counter to these paradigms (Connolly, 2017).' Seen against this backdrop, our cases function as paradigm cases that offer new visions and collective social imaginaries for emancipatory politics. Such models can be replicated and augmented in other contexts, and though they retain their own relative autonomy, they add novel twists to the struggle for a radical and plural democracy.

Limits and challenges

By supplementing the project of radical democracy with the perspective of the commons, we can disclose novel aspects of our objects of investigation, while enlarging the radical democratic horizon itself. Yet, in to-ing and fro-ing between the two theoretical gazes in order to interpret our cases, we also disclose certain limits and challenges in the forms and practices themselves. Indeed, while a full consideration of these important issues is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to articulate them for future problematisations and research projects.

A pressing issue facing local endeavours and experiments to challenge and rework social relations in particular sites is their scale and scalability. Although they can and do clearly function as models that can be copied in particular national contexts, and across national boundaries, questions remain about their ability to replace the large-scale enterprises and systems whose rationalities they seek to undermine and transform. Issues and questions of specificity also arise in this regard. Can the counter-logics that arise in particular parts of the economy or the public sector, say a particular branch of manufacturing or in the provision of health care, also and easily be extended to other, adjacent domains? As an immediate means of transforming the dominant structures of national and global

power structures, the short answer here might well be negative. Yet, our analysis of the empirical material also suggests that for the very participants themselves such issues represent political challenges to be reflected upon and overcome, and not limits to their politics.

Related to this concern is the restriction of such ventures to local contexts and social sites (Russell, 2019). While this new 'localism' is a potential strength of the new forms of social and economic experimentation, it also raises questions about the possibilities of articulating and disseminating a national interim vision, which can bring about significant social change. This challenge also focuses attention on their overall political strategies and tactics in relation to the role of state power and national struggles for hegemony, as well as the construction of an alternative and sustainable historical bloc. Without uncritically presuming a certain hierarchy of scales, such considerations problematise the connection of these sites of struggle to local and national political parties and social movements. Indeed, even erstwhile proponents of a reinvigorated and transformed commons have begun to argue against purer forms of autonomy and self-organisation, calling for greater intersectionality between demands in different sectors, so that a spiralling movement can be set in motion (Hardt and Negri, 2019). Calls for hegemony – the creation of 'a people' through a series of equivalential linkages – can potentially be connected to the struggles of the multitude, a politics of 'post-hegemony' and the production of a new commonwealth, though this still leaves unresolved the types of organisation and leadership that are both strategically effective and radically democratic.

Conclusion

The future of radical democracy is precariously balanced. New struggles and subjectivities have sprung up in diverse contexts, promising democratic renewal and the potentialities of freer, more egalitarian and more ecologically sustainable societies. Such novel experiments in production, association and community can be understood as *exemplars* of innovative modes of co-production, co-creation and participatory decision-making, prefiguring a radical democratic and egalitarian imaginary, and an ethos of receptive generosity. Because of their local scale and scalability, questions have been raised about their generalisability and long-term sustainability. Nevertheless, while this article accepts that modern politics operates at multiple levels and scales, and that representative and electoral dispositions at the national level are important ways to secure meaningful participation in democratic decision-making, we argue that a hegemonic strategy that only recognises this dimension can easily lead to a type of politics that is inextricably bound to the established forms, institutions and legal dispositions of (neo-)liberal democracy.

So, in a global conjuncture where neoliberal hegemony is maintained through the marginalisation of subordinate social groups, and the technocratisation and disempowerment of democratic institutions (Bruff, 2014), everyday life can become a prime locus for the emergence and enactment of counter-hegemonic radical democratic struggle. By invoking the supplementary role of commoning practices, we thus develop the idea that a radical democratic hegemony cannot be a simple party-state formula, but should be accompanied by mass action and participation in civil society, which can counter incipient bureaucratic logics that can be co-opted by the state. We thus encourage the languages of the commons to flow into the project of radical democracy, allowing us to view the new forms of commoning as 'spaces of heterogeneity' that enable the construction of democratic subjectivities (Howarth, 2006). Such open and dynamic spaces of interaction

foster an active sense of togetherness and interdependence between subjects, as issues for reflection, negotiation and social action are performed in equal and reciprocal relations with all others. Indeed, the construction and multiplication of such spaces can alter the very terrain that neoliberalism has established, while intensifying the possibilities for and conditions of *game-transformative practices* and a generative politics (Coles, 2016). Following such lines of flight, we have demonstrated how MCCH and Vio.Me point to the creation of new commoning and radical democratic resonances that foster the development of a radically democratic habitus, and which can in turn trigger a spiraling logic of democratisation throughout society.

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ORCID iDs

David Howarth https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6448-0379

Konstantinos Roussos https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6602-9824

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