

More than self-help and organization:

From Solidarity for All to a Strategy of Consolidating Material Power

Reflections on the Greek experience

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«People’s participation in creating, implementing and controlling public policy is the necessary way to achieve the protagonism that ensures its (the people’s) full development, both individual and collective.»

Thus reads the Article 62 of the Bolivarian constitution. In addition, as Harnecker (2015, p.70) reminds us, the «Article 70 points to other ways that allow people to develop their “capacities and abilities” such as “self-management, cooperatives of all kinds... and other forms of association that are guided by the values of mutual cooperation and solidarity”.»

The social solidarity movement that appeared in Greece since late 2011, can be conceived as one of the basic ingredients in such process of constituting popular protagonism central to the process of political and social change. It emerged out of the experience of the squares’ occupations and people’s assemblies (summer 2011), as the specific form this anti-Troika grassroots movement took when the results of austerity piled up, and as means to maintain the ability of a society to carry on its political struggle. In this light its, spontaneous or conscious, incomplete or more successful, attempts to build self-organised structures in various fields - from providing basic needs to economic experiments of self-managed coops and

unmediated trade networks - can be regarded as processes to construct political power from below. As vehicles and creators of this popular protagonism, that stormed and altered the historical and political terrain in Greece. Here lies the importance of its paradigm and not as a substitute to the disabled (welfare) state or government(s) to provide for all. This latter model, what Cameron calls «the big society», forms the neoliberal strategy to replace the «welfare system» by the «civil society», a role that the solidarity structures from their outset, and rightly so, oppose.

Yet, what does this position mean after the 3rd memorandum; when the current government, that emerged as part of the struggles against the Troika regime and the memoranda, is obliged to imply the same neoliberal fiscal and structural changes, which result in prolonged austerity and further reduction of the productive capability of the country? What is the role of the solidarity movement when the crisis of social reproduction has become a permanent feature and the «end of the need to exist» (as many solidarity structures declared hoping for a rather quick restoration of the state funded public services) moves further away to a foggy horizon? What does it mean to «carry on our (solidarity) job»? Can, even, the fight against the results of austerity under changed political conditions, be «business as usual»? How does the solidarity structures avoid to reduce their role, into being mere tools to counter the humanitarian cost of the memoranda continuation, sacrificing their more inspiring and paradigmatic potential as bearers of hope and change? Can the fight for survival substitutes this of resistance and change?

Those are some of the basic challenges reality has put to the solidarity movement, since last August. The shattering of the unifying vision and narrative that the discourse of Hope and the perspective of break with neoliberal TINA (There Is No Alternative) offered, has affected the morals, puzzled and brought to a (temporal) deadlock the political aims of the solidarity movement. For while it carries loyally with its solidarity work, its refraining from uttering its position in the new environment is also obvious, risking to reduce its function to mere basic needs support mechanism. Something that it always stood up against. But, one should not

forget that the politics of the solidarity movement were never expressed in the, rather rhetorical, way of party politics. It rather took the form of reshaping priorities in order to respond to practical needs and challenges of a developing political struggle, and to be able to carry its solidarity actions as means to maintain the resilience of the people to resist and fight back. This interweaving of the political and social levels of contestation, integrated the anti-Troika anti-austerity struggle with the everyday, the personal, the local, while it acted as a means to enhance and enlarge the social basis of the struggle for political power. Moreover, it fostered different paradigms, based on popular participation and self-management, to emerge in each of the field it has been active, with the potential to inform larger policies and structural changes.

Thus, despite the pressure for (material and human) resources in order to meet people's basic needs piles up, not the least due to low morals, the crucial challenge the movement is facing now is: how it could regain its political confidence and autonomy? In other words, what it will take to re-establish the discourse of Hope? This is the decisive, strategically, dimension; a demanding one indeed. One that may invoke a reshuffling of its priorities, dominated now almost solely by meeting the most urgent everyday needs. Is it possible for the solidarity movement to respond? As experience has shown, people mobilise and participate when they feel that they become part of significant social moments and events, attached usually to positive ideas and emotions. In contrast low morals, expressed currently with the discourse of survival, cause the mobilising capacity to plunge. The recent experience of the refugee solidarity movement confirms this, as well as its immense political relevance as the main outlet of popular protagonism. It has shown that solidarity (as concept and practice) still maintains its mobilising ability¹ and that the self-organised solidarity movement has formed, with its precedence, the culture, experience and structures to accommodate, even by stretching its

¹ A survey made last January, at the height of the so called «refugee crisis», by the non-profit research centre «diaNEOsis» and the research company Public Issue, found that a staggering 58% of the Greek population, that is 5 million people, said that it has practically took part in the refugee solidarity by donating, with 4% saying that they have volunteered (about 45,000 people). Another interesting finding of the survey was that 21% held accountable the EU, for the “refugee crisis”, another 21% the war in the middle east, and 19% the West and the Great Powers. Despite the variety of reasons, those numbers add also a dimension of resistance to the dominant powers in such solidarity action, and identification with the downtrodden of the world.

capacities, such as mass popular will. Something that makes even more important how this movement imagines itself and what aims it sets to itself, in the current conjuncture.

When you are at the crossroads, pave a new path!

What does it take then to restore, or rather to recreate, a common narrative that could converge the still existing potential, in a way that maximizes both its operational capacities and political power? For the political culture of the solidarity movement this has never been a matter of producing an ideological or programmatic manifesto agreed by various solidarity structures. It rather means to develop, based on its own experience and practices, those of its features that enhance, and scale up, its own dual operation: as space of establishing participatory democracy and as incubator of self-managed structures and transformative policies and politics.

The growing split of «the organic relations between State or political society and “civil society”» as Gramsci² puts it, is the ground which determines the political role of the solidarity movement. In fact the grassroots solidarity movement is a result of the break of this «historical unity».³ But it also constitutes the «formations that the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited or partial character; those (formations)... which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; (and) those... which assert the integral autonomy...» (ibid. p.52) of the subaltern groups. Moreover, Gramsci argues that «the subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a “State”». The aforementioned importance that the solidarity movement has shown to the centrality of attaining political power, indicates that neither reduce itself in a simple humanitarian role, of counter-balancing the effects of austerity (as NGOs, church, etc. do), nor,

² Antonio Gramsci, 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, “History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria”, p.52, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

³ The last electoral results in Greece, September 2015, recorded the continuation of this trend with an unprecedented for national elections 43.4% rate of abstention. While the number of the registered voters went down by 109,159 persons, the number of those that did not go to vote grew by 764,061 citizens – almost double the number of the third party.

in forming ideal alternatives, or, T.A.Z.s, yet within a generalized system of injustice and inequality.

On the contrary it understands the process of consolidating power as the necessary condition to exercise hegemony and induce change, by aiming to build social majorities and become the main stream. Such approach and practice fuses the issue of asserting popular sovereignty with that of building popular power, political and material. Regarding the former, the solidarity movement, the self-managed cooperatives and countless other grassroots popular initiatives (from cultural collectives to school parents' associations, etc.) could form, or imagined as, a unique ecosystem with the potential to constitute a multifarious "public sphere from (those) below". A public sphere distinct, yet not detached from the dominant political sphere. On the contrary it may articulate a different strategy to consolidate power beyond the state power, that is the ability of the people to build a sovereign power, as a precondition of their capability to undermine and change state power and the correlations of power it entails. A process not of change of those in power but of the character of power itself.

Marta Harnecker, drawing from the Latin American experience, argues: «our governments inherit a state apparatus whose characteristics work well in a capitalist system *but are not suitable for a journey toward a humanist and solidarity-infused society, a society that not only places human beings at the centre of their own development, but also makes them the leading actors in the process of change*». And she continues: «It is necessary that the foundations of the new political system are built up by... *creating adequate spaces for popular participation, preparing the people to exercise power at all levels, from the most simple to the most complex. By doing that, they promote the creation of a new state from below, or a non-state that will replace the old state*». (2015, p.105, Italics mine.)

Hence, central to this «public sphere from below» is its functioning as generator and disseminator of practices and sites of popular participation, self-management and emancipation. The role of the network of the solidarity structures is central and instrumental in

this perspective, and a rather demanding one. Despite the immediate everyday pressures, the solidarity movement should lift its political functioning on two levels. First in developing even more the practice of mutuality between people and structures alike. Despite the effort it may need, this can also produce results in achieving economies of scale, while enhancing the culture of participation and the social fabric of mobilised communities. The second level relates to the need to articulate policies emanating from its own practices. That is to put in the agenda and the public domain its own transformative policies.

So far, e.g. the solidarity clinics or the without middlemen movement, have expressed demands reclaiming universal health care, or, affordable food prices. Yet, both have produced practices e.g. the medicine re-use or the unmediated distro-networks, with deeper transformative value and on which different policies could be designed. Policies, based on popular participation, that could affect structurally the public health care system, or, the dominant trade market-networks and agricultural policies. Briefly, the medicine re-use campaign cultivates clearly the practice and notion of medicines as common good, rather than a public one. Something that implies a different set of health policies as it alters the relationship not only of the user and the health provider, but also parts of the function of the public health care system. On a similar manner the without middlemen movement, or the self-managed coops, put practically in the agenda the issue of food sovereignty and a different kind of restructuring of the productive capacity of the country. The utterance of such policies not only entail a move away from the constraints (and realism) of the bailouts, but mainly produce a different imagination and social vision, which corresponds to the needs of the people and assures their participation in materialising this paradigm. In that sense the horizontal organizing model of the solidarity structures complemented by processes to transform them into spaces of production of (popular) policies, can be constitutive of the agencies and institutions of a «public sphere from below».

However, the generalisation of such policies and practices assumes political power (as will, force and economic sustain-ability), in order to confront established interests, structures and habits. And here the political will needs the material structures to support it and to transform a

will into power and a policy into reality. In that respect seeing the solidarity movement as a process to build power based on popular protagonism, two issues arise. Firstly, the expansion from the field of distribution (that is from that of social reproduction) to this of production. This process includes a move from loose networks of cooperation to integrated ecosystem(s) of solidarity and cooperative economy, antagonistic with the capitalist free market and its state. Many solidarity structures regard the development of production units (and possibly job positions) as a tool to increase their self-sustainability and also to reduce the numbers of people rely on their support. In a larger field, the advance of what it is called «third sector» - between the private and state economies - accelerates in Greece as result of the structural reforms of the economy and long term unemployment. In that respect it constitutes a new field of social antagonism strongly related with the development (and hegemony) of a different mode of production, circulation and consumption. On that field grassroots solidarity structures, selfmanaged cooperatives and commoners etc. could be key agents on/for an integrated (from production to reproduction) eco(nomic)system. One that does not abide only to the national constrains but develops, at the same time, crossnational synergies and networks.

Such process implies the development of technologies and infrastructures that correspond to the imperatives and collective practices of this ecosystem and thus they produce the materialities that substitute it as an ecosystem. The technological available tools and the recent interest of ICT activists and academics alike, compose an important input for the development of integrated to the system technologies that:

- a. Embody the collective practices used on the ground and thus the(ir) resulted applications can disseminate the social relationships and organising forms attached to it.
- b. Multiply the organisational and productive capacities and efficiency, by combining and maximising the potential of people, collectives, skills, knowledge, resources involved. In that respect they allow also for scaling up without sacrificing the horizontal and participatory organisational logic of the grassroots practices.
- c. Facilitate the transition from solidarity structures to material infrastructures, that entails in an increase of the material power and sustainability of those involved and of the entire ecosystem against external to it pressures. Such development entails, also and significantly, in the production of a

common collective interest, and not merely ideas, as the unifying and mobilising force.

Developing and bringing together a “public sphere from below” and an “integrated economic ecology” of solidarity structures, selfmanaged cooperatives and practices of commons, could articulate the necessary process for reimagining a unifying narrative, while advancing practically the political and material power of such ecosystem. One that could make feasible, and thus real(istic), the choice of conflict with neoliberalism and its post-democratic superstructures, and allow us to imagine and invent a possible post-capitalist world.

Marta Harnecker, 2015, *A World to Build: New Paths toward Twenty-First Century Socialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press

Antonio Gramsci, 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, “History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria”, London: Lawrence and Wishart.