

Local Utopia as Unobtrusive Resistance: The Greek Village Micro-Economy

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In late 2008 Athenian youths, triggered by extreme police violence, took to the streets with collective and intensive protests against the growing poverty, unemployment, and political corruption in Greece. The subsequent, regular protests in urban Greece speak not only to the rejection of Greek governance but also to the political and economic promise of the Euro-zone falsely promoted as a boon for its periphery. The oft-reiterated headline “Athens is burning” is varyingly used by left and right media reporting on Greece and its population’s fierce dissent.

Yet Greece is not Athens. While half the nation’s population lives in urban centers such as Athens, Thessaloniki, and Patra, the other lives in small agricultural villages often mixed with low-key tourism. It is these small independent and diverse communities, or “meta-industrial populations” (Salleh), in which local agriculture literally feeds the immediate population and its tourists, offering a modest blueprint for a convivial economy. In this Symposium Ariel Salleh highlights the foundations of real ecological sustainability in the work of peasants, women, and Indigenous communities versus the commodification of a green economy. In Greece and its villages, it is not only the historical practices of environmental sustainability – a hallmark of island populations – that is to be showcased, but also an economic culture oriented towards sharing, generosity, and negotiation that is characteristic of many non-core communities.

Analyses of the Greek economy are inconclusive; conservative commentators focus on political clientelism, a bloated state sector, migration and the informal economy. Considerably shaped by multi-rooted negative and ethnically-biased stereotypes of Greeks, European politicians, economists, and reporters of all stripes blame Greece’s crisis on its fiscal irresponsibility (e.g., Kulish and Ewing 2012). Most recently this has been negated by a shift in Greece’s public finances, rarely achieved by a national economy, which includes a 6.5 percent reduction in the budget deficit between 2009 and 2011 (Malkoutzis 2012: 12). Worst are purely racist descriptions of Greeks being categorically corrupt and lazy, confirming, as Rose Brewer argues in this Symposium, that there is “an ideological structure in place which is intertwined with global capital.” Left-oriented analyses, such as those presented in the Greek documentary *Debtocracy*, emphasize the increased wage rates in peripheral EU nations and the decline in the German one, exempting economic elite from taxation, and extravagant government military purchases in connection with European and U.S. corporations. Such is the comprador tradition (that Brewer readily critiques) among Greek politicians that provoked so many to turn away from the traditional parties and give the majority of votes to left parties in both elections this year (although this did not result in their victory).

Greece’s agora, however, belongs to the small shopkeepers, *taverna* and *cafenion* owners, agricultural cooperatives, micro-entrepreneurs, and artisans. While criticism and public

challenges to political elite and corporate capital stand, the growth of small-scale and autonomous economic units and their methods of trade and exchange globally and in Greece signify an alternative momentum of social transformation. Greece has a much higher rate of micro-enterprises than the rest of Europe, and firms with less than 10 employees account for well over 50 percent of employment (European Commission 2010). Many of the structural adjustment demands of the “troika” (IMF, European Commission, European Central Bank) on Greece have strained these small autonomous economic entities that still are proving to be a lifeline for local communities.

Alternative Economics

Academic debates and discussions around the possibilities of an alternative economy are recent, or rather have reemerged (Hess 2009). Historically, individuals and communities in the global South have developed through independent action solutions to the ecological destruction, poverty, and unemployment wrought since colonialism. These efforts have significantly increased, and were first conceived as traditional or “backward” and anathema to development (Geertz 1963), and later as part of the informal sector (Portes 1983). Over the last several decades of neoliberalism these same activities are considered emblems of entrepreneurship.

The astounding growth of alternative economics in the last decade is also distinctly informed by popular rejections of work and careers that are regulated and organized for capitalist production, hierarchical, and punitive. Formal jobs, often in urban environments, require such a commitment of time, mind, and physical presence that many who enter into one aspect of alternative economics or another are choosing to do so for the sake of having some personal control in their everyday lives. Actors in both the global South and North are acting, in Harvey’s (2000: 235) phrasing, as “insurgent architects” who attempt “to shape their own beingness,” not condemning themselves to work paths set out by pre-existing structures and values.

The recent social movement and research around alternative economic practices referred to as the social economy, community economics, third sector, non-profit, or solidarity economy capture a variety of nuances on labor and exchange they seek to highlight. There is no consensus on the types of economic activities that should be included as outside of capitalism, but the emphasis in the real utopia project has been on the social economy or third sector that includes bigger cooperatives, larger non-profit organizations and associations, and a focus on institutional design.

Micro-enterprises and small businesses, on the other hand, are a contested terrain. Even though they can support local community development, maintain fair labor practices, and support autonomy, by some accounts they are problematically susceptible to the profit motive of capitalism. Yet by virtue of scale and intention, small and micro- enterprises operate outside capitalist principles of mass production and consumption and centralized bureaucratic control, offering environmental viability, autonomy, and creative expression in one’s work. In particular, groups marginalized by gender, sexuality, migrant status, race, and ethnicity have relied on micro-businesses for economic wellbeing and community survival.

“Small is beautiful,” the idiom made famous by E. F. Schumacher’s (1973) book of the same title, reflects a popular perspective during the early seventies, a social moment in which socialism, large and bureaucratic, had been considered the central progressive alternative to capitalism by critical sociologists. Schumacher and others, however, were concerned more with

the ecological damage and dullness of the large-scale production and consumerism they witnessed expanding (Carson 1962; Illich 1973; Schumacher 1973; Lovelock 1979). In essence, it was the size and scale of production and their destructive capacities toward material and mind that triggered the calls for small-scale businesses, markets, communes, collectives, and conviviality worldwide in the 1970s as alternatives to ever-expanding capitalism. Although predominantly rejected as a development strategy, the possibility of small independent enterprises had garnered previous sociological attention. For instance, Portes and Stepick (1993) explain:

In a 1946 report to the US Senate, C. Wright Mills raised a related issue namely whether cities suffered when their economies became dominated by outside interests. Mills denounced footloose corporate capitalism [...] Mills proposed to the Congress a program to revitalize local business on the theory that community-based enterprises were more egalitarian and more responsive to local welfare. Critics called Mill's position retrograde. (5)

In conceiving of utopias and alternatives, Erik Olin Wright (2009: 166) and others overlook or dismiss the location of the trader, artisans, micro-entrepreneurs in both the formal and informal sector, self-employed workers, the subsistence economy, or small-scale alternative entities not driven by profit and maximization as an anti-systemic force of social change. Yet these entities have existed for quite some time throughout the world, creating situations for sociality and political expression. While increases of micro- and small-scale units of trade and production, especially farmers in local food movements and urban artisans, are given some leverage in recent frames of alternative economics, they have for decades been conceptualized by social scientists in a variety of ways depending upon when and where they were located (proto-capitalists, traditional sector, petty production, informal economy, micro-enterprises) but hardly as a force of resistance.

Conviviality and Resistance

To locate small shops, farms, and artisanal enterprises in a framework of resistance to capitalism and social inequality, it is worth resuscitating Ivan Illich's (1973) position for "tools that guarantee the right to work with independent efficiency" that is in advance of but consistent with the current growth of alternative economic studies. In *Tools of Conviviality*, Illich (1973) builds an argument against industrialization or large-scale production in which workers are no longer directly in control of their labor or "tools" such as technology, production facilities, or systems of decision-making. For conviviality to occur there must be "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse among persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned responses of persons to the demands made upon them by others" (Illich 1973: 11).

The organic expansion of the urban informal sector everywhere, in the global South and North, adds to the argumentation such as Illich's (1973) and Schumacher's (1973) and to the more recent work on social and solidarity economy and community economics (Gibson-Graham 2003; Allard and Matthaei 2008). Despite the oppressive condition in which they may sometimes come to fruition, small, autonomous units of production can lend themselves to creating

opportunities for convivial work. Especially important is the socio-cultural landscape in many regions of the global South (Simone 2004; Osirim 2009) that historically have prioritized community and solidarity over economic gain. In Greece, a “crypto-colony” (Herzfeld 2002) with its own history of *filoxenia*, or the hospitality and generosity extended to strangers, and *kerasma*, the practice of gift giving, are distinctly embedded in economic exchanges among smaller enterprises and with clients and customers which leads to building community, sharing economic costs, and encouraging the survival of independent economic entities – practices highly inconsistent with neoliberalism.

Broadening perspectives of social activism, the new movements and conceptualizations around post-capitalist economics breathe viability to Susan George’s (2002) claim that “there are thousands of alternatives” to capitalism. James C. Scott (1985) was early to challenge the distinction between “real” versus “token” resistance, but it continues to characterize the sociological literature. Resistance was narrowly defined as efforts that were organized and systematic, principled, motivated by a revolutionary consciousness, and with intentions to negate the basis of domination itself (Scott 1985). Feminist scholars also challenged traditional characterization of protest and resistance to exploitive work, drawing attention to how gender shapes opportunities for political action and expression (Antrobus 2004). Unorganized or individual actions have been described as opportunistic and self-indulgent and considered to accommodate the system and to demonstrate no revolutionary consciousness. Micro-enterprise and artisanal activities and small scale farming generally have not been considered within the scope of capitalist resistance.

Quarreling against the dismissal of autonomous action, Scott (1985) stressed the misunderstanding of the political and social struggles of those marginally located. He argued that independent acts of self-preservation that do not adhere to the dominant ideology (repeatedly conducted by many) signify resistance. Revisiting his conceptualization of resistance, especially in application to the practice of social, solidarity, or community economics, is a crucial step toward a framework of how small convivial enterprises may offer a real counterpoint to global capitalism. Consider that the artisanal producers in medieval Europe built a post-feudal model of conviviality and solidarity by seeking independence and autonomy through their lateral associations. For example, Wallerstein (1983) suggests:

Had Europe continued on the path along which it was going it is difficult to believe that the patterns of medieval feudal Europe with its highly structured system of orders could have been reconsolidated. Far more probable is that the European feudal social structure would have evolved towards a system of relatively equal small-scale producers, further flattening out the aristocracies and decentralizing the political structures. (41-42)

Drawing on Greece as example and case, the goal is to highlight not only the survival and sustainability capacities of the micro-economies found in Greek villages, but also the resistive stance of this “meta-industrial” population toward capitalist profiteering or the ethos of corporate globalization. The convivial orientations of many engaged in local and small-scale artisanal, trade, or agricultural enterprises inform Greek public protests of the EU’s neo-liberal foundation. By taking heed of the current flourishing of alternative economic strategies in Greece and across the globe as resonant of the 1450s, when “small farmers were demonstrating great efficiency as producers” (Wallerstein 1983) and egalitarian systems of trade were developed, a “utopistic” perspective towards these activities could help further assess their contemporary capabilities for

surviving and challenging global capitalism (Wallerstein 1998). In light of recent corporate projects of centralized global control, to which Salleh and Brewer refer, revisiting micro-economies, their expansion, and what they offer as a form of activism, especially in crisis zones like Greece, might facilitate their retention, rather than leaving them to be squashed by the “upper strata” as they were by the 1650s.

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