

COMPLICATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS: VOLUNTEERING IN ATHENS

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Abstract. This paper presents a brief ethnographic portrait of a solidarity group in Athens. It attempts to explore some of the difficulties and contradictions of the solidarity movement and the moral labour in which volunteers engage.

Introduction

In a drama unfolding over nearly a decade, the Greek debt crisis shows no signs of abating. Repeated meetings, negotiations, elections, referendums and agreements occupy the headlines until these tensions fade, only to flare up again months or years later. But what is the reality beyond these headlines, what of the small, everyday dramas that are equally part of this story? These were the questions I posed to myself two years ago, viewing events from afar prior to my fieldwork in Athens. At the time, some early studies of the emerging solidarity movement were being published, and with only one full monograph (Knight 2015) to date, more ethnography was needed. Furthermore, as it emerged more than five years ago, what is the reality of the solidarity movement after so much time has passed? Is it possible to approach ‘the crisis’ more critically, to look beyond the immediate reforms of austerity to see how these policies are reshaping life in Greece indirectly, as they engender new organizational forms which try to resist them? Attempting to shed light on these questions, I will sketch a brief portrait of the ‘Δίκτυο Αλληλεγγύης Βύρωνα or the Byronas Solidarity Network’, based on a year and half of fieldwork conducted there working as a volunteer.

The Δίκτυο

The δίκτυο was formed in August 2012 by a group of volunteers in response to a perceived need in the community following the onset of the Greek debt crisis. Literally meaning ‘net’ or ‘network’, it is, indeed, part of larger network of other δίκτυα common not only in Athens but across Greece, as well as a broader solidarity movement encompassing a variety of informal and formal groups. The δίκτυο exclusively helps those residing within the municipality of Byronas, principally in the form of food provisions, but also by providing clothes and, more rarely, other household items. The food is collected by volunteers outside supermarkets, bought with funds they have raised or received from other solidarity groups and donors.

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Byronas itself is a suburb in central-east Athens with a population of some 60,000 people. Originally settled by refugees during the Asia Minor crisis, it has since been transformed into a solidly upper working-class/lower middle-class neighbourhood that resembles many of the other central suburbs in Athens, but still maintains a strong sense of character and collective identity according to its residents.

Located in the basement of a residential apartment building not far from Pangrati, the space has been leased to the volunteers for free by the owner. The δίκτυο is open weekdays in the morning and the morning only. On a typical day as I arrive, a few older gentlemen are settled on the steps of a neighbouring building, chatting amongst themselves. As I pass they greet me: ‘Καλημέρα – Good morning!’ ‘Καλημέρα’, I reply, stepping down the white marble steps to enter the δίκτυο. Going inside, I greet the other volunteers: ‘Καλημέρα’. They call back with replies of ‘Καλώς τον – Welcome’, ‘Για σου, τι κάνεις – Hi, how are you?’, ‘Καλημέρα’. These greetings are important and will punctuate the day as people are coming and going. Officially the δίκτυο opens at ten, but before this time the volunteers are already waiting, gossiping and smoking. They chat about personal matters, make jokes and exchange stories, about an inherited Anatolian carpet that will not fit anywhere, but also important happenings in the δίκτυο: things did not go well the day before – it was ‘χάος – chaos’, and the issue needs to be raised at the weekly general meeting. They talk of how much money was raised at the last bazaar or how the bi-weekly collection of food at the local supermarkets went. In this way, through gossip and chit-chat, key information is circulated among the members. Although in a basement, the δίκτυο is fronted by large glass windows and doors so that it is always bright inside, and some of the walls are painted cheerfully in orange. Looking outside, more people are gathering, and they too appear to be gossiping, but we cannot hear what they say.

Sometime before ten, one of the volunteers will arrive in a car, with the boot and back seat filled with sacks of thick brown paper stuffed with bread. It is the unsold bread from yesterday collected from bakeries in the neighbourhood. A movement in the people above indicates the car has arrived, as some of them rush to help bring the sacks down into the δίκτυο – whether to be helpful or because they hope to take some bread before ten, it is not clear. A couple of the volunteers inside are helping them, and there is some scuffling as they put down the sacks: ‘όχι εκεί, εδώ – not there, here’ someone shouts. By now there is a small crowd outside, and they fill the steps leading down to the δίκτυο. One of the volunteers arriving, who will work ‘in the back’ preparing food parcels, struggles to push past them.

Someone asks, ‘Θα ανοίγουμε την πόρτα; – shall we open the door?’, but another person replies, ‘όχι, όλοι θα μπουν, πρέπει να μάθουν – no, they will all come in, they have to learn’. Another volunteer and I begin putting the bread on a table, she behind taking the bread from the sacks, and me in front trying to sort it broadly into kinds. At ten, a third volunteer opens the door and admits around five or six people at a time, until the crowd grows smaller. In each wave, the people come quickly and stand all around me so that I must decide whom to give bread to first. My fellow volunteers tell me to give them one or two loaves depending on how much bread we have. This is the challenge – the amount of bread changes, nor do we know how many people will come or when. Not all the people are happy: ‘είμαστε πέντε άτομα – we are five people’, one of them tells me when I offer two loaves. Another: ‘είστε κλειστοί αύριο, τι θα κάνουμε – you are closed tomorrow, what will we do?’. ‘Δεν έχει ψωμί – there isn’t (a lot of) bread’, my partner tells them. ‘Έχει ψωμί – there is bread’, they say, and I try to explain that other people will come later in the day, and we must try to save bread for all of them. Some accept it, others go away angry. Some even try to take the bread themselves, and my partner says to them loudly, ‘μην το πιάνετε εσείς – don’t touch it yourself!’ But if they ask enough, we will often give them more – it is hard to say no. Joking about it with the other volunteers, I tell them it is hard for me to be strict, and they tell me that I must be.

On another set of tables, piles of clothes are laid out. Some of the people who took bread wander over and start looking through them. This provokes cries from some of the volunteers, ‘παιδιά, μετά της ένδεκα θα ανοίγουμε τα ρούχα’ – guys, after eleven we will open the clothes’, but the people ignore these remarks. One of the volunteers gets up to shoo them away, asking them, ‘ξέρετε ελληνικά; – do you know Greek?’ – a reprimand that aligns civility with a particular kind of Greekness. As many of them are, in fact, not Greek, there is some tension in this statement. The volunteers continue to insist that everybody waits until eleven to take clothes, and some of them sit on a couch, while others stand around and chat. As the time draws near, although it is not eleven yet, the tide turns, and the people start looking through the clothes in a flurry of activity. In a little while, the volunteers are commenting on what a mess the clothes are now in, strewn all over the place: it was ‘χαμός – a frenzy’, someone mutters. In response, a few people begin folding the clothes until everything is back in order. As they leave, they call back that they have tidied the clothes, and the volunteers thank them enthusiastically.

While some are taking bread and clothes, others come intermittently to another set of tables piled with large folders labelled alphabetically. They contain the names and records of those

in the neighbourhood 'signed up' to the δίκτυο. On a large poster behind the desk, it states in bold letters that the δίκτυο helps around 750 families in Byronas. Unlike the bread and clothes, which anyone is free to take, in order to sign up people must first bring tax statements and unemployment cards issued by the Greek state. Then every few weeks, depending on the size of the household, they can come to collect a shopping bag filled with pasta, rice, flour, canned milk, conserved tomatoes, sometimes also lentils or a bag of sugar, and occasionally accompanied by a bottle of oil or other foods like chicken or fruits, when the δίκτυο can acquire them. Mostly this is a smooth process but sometimes there are problems. One person has an out-of-date statement. Another has forgotten the card which helps the volunteers keep track of his collections. One volunteer berates him, as it's the second time in a row; another jokes that he is 'άτακτος – mischievous'. He apologizes, laughing and smiling, and tells them people won't forget the good they do here, but the volunteer who chastised him looks sceptical.

Other people come to sign up, but if they are not from the neighbourhood they are directed to other δίκτυα, otherwise they are asked to return to go through the sign-up process on a Wednesday evening. A volunteer is explaining this process and is quick to correct an implication about the δίκτυο: 'δεν δουλεύουμε εδώ, είμαστε εθελοντές – we don't work here, we are volunteers'. It echoes things that have been said before, 'είμαστε εθελοντές, όχι δημόσιοι υπάλληλοι – we're volunteers, not public employees'. Inevitably disputes arise: a man is shouting and banging his hand on the table, 'δεν είσαστε αλληλέγγυοι – you are not in solidarity'. He is Greek, he says; how can they refuse to help him but can still help foreigners? The volunteer dealing with him tries to keep her patience, but it is difficult. However, this is the exception: most of the people coming to collect their food parcels come and go saying little more than casual greetings. One man wants to exchange the flour in his bag for lentils. He is told no, there are rules, but in the end he is still given the lentils regardless. Sometimes they are interrupted by people from the neighbourhood who have come to leave donations of clothes. A volunteer springs up to take the bags and puts them in the back: 'ευχαριστούμε πάρα πολύ – we thank you very much!' he says. A woman who was looking through the clothes on the table follows him to the door leading into the back. Starting to peer in, she is promptly stopped by the returning volunteer – she is only allowed to take clothes from the tables. Afterwards the door is kept closed, but later, when a mother comes looking for shoes for her child, someone goes into the back trying to find some. Meanwhile, one of the volunteers might stop by to collect a food parcel because some are also signed up to the δίκτυο themselves, just as they also sometimes take bread and clothes.

As it draws closer to closing time, there is little to left to do. A volunteer who has come to clean the δίκτυο is usually mopping the floor. Others who were preparing food parcels and sorting clothes in the back have already left, and most of the bread is gone. The volunteers sit and chat, and, from time to time, someone who is not on their shift might stop by. Sometimes they share a warmed savoury pastry with a few shots of *tsipouro*, especially if a former volunteer has come or there is a reason to celebrate. Just after one, a person comes in to take their food parcel. The volunteers remind her that the δίκτυο closes at one, but still serve her anyway.

Reflections

In this portrait, I have tried to give a sense of the daily rhythm of work at the δίκτυο. But what kind of work is it if volunteers themselves dispute this term? More properly, they would call it an ‘offering’ of their time and energy. On their website, they describe themselves as finding solutions ‘εκεί όπου αδυνατεί το κράτος – where the state is unable’. Yet it is a paradox that a left-wing government, which grew in tandem with grassroots movements like the δίκτυο, is implementing austerity policies to actively reduce state welfare. In this context, the volunteers struggle to support the community around them through their considerable efforts. However, simultaneously, one might say that they also seek to impose discipline as they order the social space around them. While state welfare, development and charitable work² have all been critiqued in the anthropological literature, the contradictions of the solidarity movement in Greece are only just being explored.³ But in truth, power collects in all organisational forms – advantaging some and disadvantaging others. To pose a question, could it be that solidarity is, in part, an expression of governmentality, in that austerity policy has provoked an independent, self-organizing citizen ready to substitute for state welfare? Certainly, volunteers must not only order the people and space around them, but also learn to reorder themselves. Building character, resistance and firmness, ‘να μιλήσω όμορφα – to speak properly’, are essential elements of good volunteering at the δίκτυο. To arrive on time, to be reliable, not to shout but remain calm amid pressure are ways to show respect to those around you. Aside from themselves, this disciplining extends to those around them, as volunteers encourage people to come and go in an orderly fashion. They cannot enter the δίκτυο before ten, they must form a line to take bread and take what they are given, come on

² For examples, see Bornstein (2012), Dubois (2014), Ferguson (1990) and Han (2012).

³ See Cabot (2016), Douzina-Bakalaki (2017), Papataxiarchis (2016), Rozakou (2016) and Theodosopoulos (2016).

a set day to take their food parcel, can only take clothes at designated times, must not make a mess and must respect the δίκτυο as a space. The volunteers work quickly because, as I was told, they are so few. Yet this is also an opportunity to demonstrate one's effectiveness, to take responsibility for problems as they arise. In this way, in the act of offering, the volunteers become efficient, disciplined and self-organizing. Here the 'good' work of the δίκτυο sits in contrast to the ineffective, lazy and corrupt public sphere. However, the irony that they have become substitute workers for the state is not lost upon them.

Concurrently, the kind of power accruing there is rooted in ethical acts, in the kind of moral labour that volunteers pursue, as they might say, with their 'hearts' or 'spirits'. Appealing to a notion of service, volunteers emphasised the act of giving without taking back, or more precisely, without expecting anything in return. In reality, the volunteers do take from the δίκτυο in the self-worth they gain from undertaking meaningful work, but also being able to pick freely from among the donations of clothes, or taking extra and better kinds of bread. Sweets and pastries are often reserved for them, especially as an expression of gratitude for those working 'μέσα – inside'. At the same time, you should know how much to give and how much to take. One volunteer, who would come but offer nothing to the δίκτυο, was silently ridiculed with knowing looks and glances. The actions of another who took bread when little remained were discussed afterwards. Despite this, volunteering cannot be quantified so simply. All volunteers are entitled to extras, even those, such as myself, who are able to make only relatively limited contributions. Rather, it is the willingness, the offer you make of yourself as a volunteer, which matters.

Who is free to make this offer, however? Of the core members, the majority are retired, giving them the means to occupy themselves at the δίκτυο, unlike those in work, who generally play a smaller role. Otherwise, the volunteers are likely to be unemployed. As someone described to me, he became a volunteer precisely because he was ashamed to take food without offering anything in return. Shame was thus subverted through voluntary work and transformed into 'αξιοπρέπεια – dignity', a buzzword in the solidarity movement, and written on many of the δίκτυο's signs and posters. While the members would insist that there is no shame in taking food, what to make of the greater respect accorded to those who do offer something back? The contradiction is telling: this respect can only be realized in relation to others who are dependent on the work of the δίκτυο, on the distinction between those who offer something back and those who do not. Thus, despite the aesthetic of solidarity, a hierarchy emerges premised on the ability to offer, as unemployed and retired volunteers transform their free time into moral authority in the community.

Conclusions

I would argue that, at this intersection between austerity policy and volunteering, new expressions of authority are emerging founded in the moral ownership of welfare. But I have also tried to show how these ethical acts are mired in, and derive from, morally ambiguous situations. Muehlebach (2007) has suggested that although the ethical may widely be perceived as a counterpoint to neoliberal attitudes, it never entirely escapes them. At the δίκτυο, this can be seen in the desire to do ‘good work’. Yet in doing so volunteers engender new, morally fraught interdependencies, just as they unintentionally participate in the neoliberal values they oppose. In sum, the members of the δίκτυο have become custodians for the welfare of others, and in this responsibility they actively struggle with the systems of patronage and hierarchy against which they define themselves. Apart from the state but also supporting it, insisting on rules but also bending them, to be a volunteer but also a recipient, to harden your heart but also to offer it – these are the contradictions of volunteering at the δίκτυο.

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