

CELINE CANTAT

# The politics of refugee solidarity in Greece: Bordered identities and political mobilization



## ABOUT THE PROJECT

This paper was prepared in the framework of the project “**Migration Solidarity and Acts of Citizenship Along the Balkan Route**” (MIGSOL, <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/migsol>). MIGSOL is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship funded by the European Union under the Horizon 2020 Program (Grant Agreement n° 751866), running from August 2017 through July 2019. The research investigates how refugees and refugee solidarity groups along the “Balkan route” relate to and enact European citizenship. While the project of European citizenship is an unprecedented political development, it has institutionally been modelled upon and reproduces national conceptualizations of citizenship, rights and identity. The research undertakes a comparative analysis of discourses and practices of refugees and pro-refugee volunteers in both EU and non-EU sites (Greece, Hungary, and Serbia), and of the way in which they challenge concepts and institutions of European citizenship derived from national models of membership. It will pay particular attention to the relationship between “movement” and the constitution of new European political subjectivities.

This paper sets out to think through some of the conceptual and theoretical issues around migrant solidarity and anti-racist initiatives in 2017 Greece. Rather than a conventional literature review, this paper starts from testimonies and debates gathered through fieldwork research, and uses particular embodied events to discuss and assess the relevance, limitations and tensions in the existing scholarship on migration, solidarity and migrants’ activism.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Céline Cantat** is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellow at the Center for Policy Studies, Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. She holds a PhD in Refugee Studies from the University of East London, United Kingdom. Céline’s research focuses are primarily concerned with migrant activism and pro-migrant solidarities in European contexts.

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CENTER FOR POLICY STUDIES  
CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY  
Nádor utca 9, 1051 Budapest, Hungary  
<http://cps.ceu.edu>, [cps@ceu.edu](mailto:cps@ceu.edu)

THE POLITICS OF REFUGEE SOLIDARITY IN GREECE:  
BORDERED IDENTITIES AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Céline Cantat

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## ***Introduction***

This paper sets out to think through some of the conceptual and theoretical issues around migrant solidarity and anti-racist initiatives in 2017 Greece. Rather than a conventional literature review, this paper starts from testimonies and debates gathered through fieldwork research, and uses particular embodied events to discuss and assess the relevance, limitations and tensions in the existing scholarship on migration, solidarity and migrants' activism.

As explained in this first section, this approach is animated by a desire to re-embed studies of borders and border experiences in their situated contexts. This follows a recent call by critical border studies scholar Paolo Novak (2017) to bring scholarly enquiries "back to borders". While over the last couple of decades, there have been important critical scholarly contributions to the fields of border and migration studies, there has been a tendency across the literature to start with pre-defined understandings of what borders are and how they function.

In contrast, I propose to root this literature review in the particular situated context that it refers to. I use discussions and testimonies by migrants and solidarians collected in the field as an analytical thread in order to guide my selection of scholarly literature. In other words, rather than initiating a dialogue between different strands of literature based on existing debates, I attempt to present conceptual and theoretical insights on the basis of fieldwork observations, and to think through the current functioning of borders in Greece, and the struggles unfolding in order to resist bordering effects, from a situated, embodied perspective.

The four following sections thus reflect on the key debates and tensions that I encountered during my fieldwork with anti-racist and migrant solidarity initiatives in Greece. First, I discuss the idea that Greece now presents itself as a "double frontier" for migrants, due to the recent restriction of migrants' mobilities from the Greek islands to the mainland. I analyse how these new spatialities structure the experience of migrants and their allies. Second, I explore debates concerned with the meaning and nature of solidarity, and how these have recently evolved in the face of the double crisis experienced by Greece. I reflect in particular on the way solidarians negotiate between the political and humanitarian aspects of solidarity. Third, I propose the notion of "kinetic politics", to examine the ways in which solidarians and migrants in Greece work towards the broadening of the boundaries of the political through a recognition of the role played by movement in experiencing and defining politics. Finally, I mobilise strands of critical literature concerned with migration, rights and citizenship to investigate some of the debates among solidarians and migrants in Greece regarding the framing of claims and the choice of political strategies.

Before turning to the first section, it must be highlighted that this paper adopts a broad definition of borders. In line with insights from critical border studies (see Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2007 on borderscapes; Squire 2011 on borderzones; Cooper and Rumford 2011 on borderwork), I reflect on borders as a set of social and spatial criteria and devices that, on the one hand, function towards the definition of a 'here' and a 'there' (an 'us' and a 'them') yet, on the other hand, do not operate as impenetrable walls but rather as sites where various social forces and interactions unfold and confront each other. This focus on the pervasiveness of borders allows us to examine the way in which borders are deployed and operate through space, both at and away from what is conventionally understood as the geographical borders of the nation-state. It encourages us to assess the effects of a set of institutions and mechanisms that have 'bordering effects' on the experiences of those identified as

migrants and those acting in solidarity with them, and to account for the differential ways in which different subjects are exposed to, and resist, borders. It also calls for paying careful attention to the way in which the spatialities created through, at, and against borders are both constituted by and constitute the social and political relations under study.

### ***Moving “back to borders”***

In a recent paper entitled “Back to Borders”, Novak (2017) proposes some interesting comments on the fragmentation of the field of scholarly enquiry concerned with the meaning and functions of borders and migration in the contemporary era. He reviews three strands of critical academia interrogating borders and migration, namely constructivist, postcolonial and Marxist approaches, and sets out to assess their “compatibilities and cleavages” (2017: 849). Novak investigates the way in which these three strands of critical scholarship approach the two interrelated questions of “what is a border?” and “who is a migrant?”. What Novak argues, is that each starts from a different epistemological and political project, which leads them to put forward different explanations of the articulation between the social and the spatial.

The question of the articulation between the social and spatial as manifested in border may seem circular, and perhaps unsolvable. Borders are socio-spatial devices: they “function as social signifiers that distinguish, differentiate, and classify people and things in relation to their location in space” (Sack 1986 cited in Novak 2017: 850) – a space that they themselves define. In other words, borders are “self-confirming”: their representation is a precondition for their definition, and for the definition of the socio-spatial identities that they both produce and rely on (Balibar 2002, Novak 2017). The seemingly circular questions that emerge, as put by Novak (2017: 850) thus are “do borders define spatial coordinates that capture social identities?” or rather “do (particular sets of) social coordinates explain where borders spatially lie?”

What Novak shows is that these three strands of critical border scholarship approach the epistemological quandary around the articulation of the social and the spatial from an analytical trajectory that grants precedence to particular (pre-defined) social forces over spatial coordinates. The fact that the social and spatial are inseparable and mutually constituted has long been accepted and researched by critical scholarship (Gupta and Ferguson 1990). As Novak argues, “what *is* a border is precisely defined by those forces, practices and relations” (851 – author’s emphasis). But the analytical differences between critical strands of scholarship lay in the question of identifying “which of these forces and relations, more than others, shape this process” (*ibid*). According to Novak, constructivist, postcolonial and Marxist approaches all start with a different response to this question. He argues that they first “define the social forces, practices and relations that ... define what a border is, and, second, find in borders and migration a spatial confirmation of such (pre- defined) ontology of the social” (2017: 849). This, Novak claims, amounts to answering the question of “what is a border?” and “who is a migrant?” “*away from* the border itself” (*ibid*) and through a social-to-spatial analytical trajectory.

In contrast, Novak calls for analytical trajectories that do not define borders “through a pre-defined (however complex) ontology of the social” but rather investigate “borders’ spatial manifestation as a way of discovering how the social is configured in place-specific and embodied settings” (*ibid*). This is what he calls going “back to the borders”. This allows assessing actual social hierarchies as they are manifested and function in place-specific and embodied sites, rather than focusing on epistemological

hierarchies. Importantly, according to Novak (2017: 858), “this perspective ... investigates where the border lies and for whom, as a way of investigating why it does so”. It thus sees the socio-spatial coordinates expressed in borders are structured, yet “fluid and selectively enabling“ (859). In some ways, Novak’s call amounts to bringing back more careful and open-minded ethnographies to the field of critical border and migration studies, yet to do so with the ability to rigorously connect and think together systemic, global (social) processes to (spatial) local sites and situations.

Novak makes another important point (of particular relevance to this study) regarding the political implications of these positions. All three strands of scholarship are characterised by a deep concern with the inequality produced by and at the border, and with how border controls participate in the (re)production of racism, capitalism, and patriarchy. Yet, Novak shows how the analytical cleavages across these different approaches translate into deeply different understandings of what progressive border politics involve. For example, scholarly work that attributes precedence to the ways in which borders operate towards the production of sovereignty and territorial integrity, call for border politics different from those supported by scholars who understand borders primarily in relation to capitalist forces of exploitation. Their understanding of the identities produced by and contesting borders differ greatly. Novak repertoires different approaches, which all see the politics of the border/migrant relationship (confrontation) in profoundly different terms. For some, borders are “animated, resisted or transgressed by ‘borderlanders’” (Reeves 2014; Johnson and Jones 2014 - in Novak 2017). Yet other see borders as being destabilised by the struggles of migrant living labour (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013 - in Novak), or alternatively, as being progressively “undone by migrant justice activist networks” (Walia 2012 - in Novak).

In turn, definition of progressive border politics greatly varies. Indeed, the field of scholarly enquiry concerned more specifically with what may be called border politics or pro-migrant mobilisation has also been characterised by polarisation and fragmentation. Similarly, strands of scholarship that start from broadly converging concerns regarding how to develop progressive understanding of migrants’ struggles and political positions against the injustice produced through/by borders, end up positioning themselves as mutually exclusive. This is perhaps best illustrated in the debate opposing Critical Citizenship Studies (CCS) and the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) literature, to which this paper returns later.

In this paper, I think through some of the conceptual questions that arise in the context of refugee solidarity and anti-racist initiatives in 2017 Greece and set out to do so through what Novak would call a spatial-to-social trajectory. Rather than initiating a dialogue between different strands of literature based on existing debates, I attempt to present conceptual and theoretical insights on the basis of observations gathered during ethnographic fieldwork conducted with activist migrants and solidarians in Athens, Greece, between late September and late November 2017. I use a particular “event”, a two-day meeting of the National Coordination of Antiracist, Antifascist and Solidarity (to Refugees/Migrants) Initiatives that took place in Athens in December 2017, as a roadmap through which to navigate and explore some key conceptual puzzles that structure and interrogate solidarity ventures with and by migrants in Greece.

## *The double frontier: The Greek island and the never-ending crisis*

On a Sunday morning of December 2017, in Exarchia, the resolutely leftist and anarchist Athenian neighbourhood famous across Europe as a zone of relative political autonomy and a home to many left leaning groups,<sup>1</sup> participants in a two-day meeting of the National Coordination of Antiracist, Antifascist and Solidarity (to Refugees/Migrants) Initiatives are trying to agree on a coordinated day of action. Together with around ten other non-Greek speaking participants, I am sitting in a corner of the room, next to a voluntary translator oscillating between animated interventions into the debate and variably conciliatory translation of other participants' points.

The National Coordination started in the late 1990s through groups of antiracist activists made up of both Greek citizens and migrants: it has been holding annual meetings for close to 20 years. This year's meeting is attended by over 30 solidarity groups from all over Greece (mainland and islands). These groups are either branches of long standing political organisations that focus their activities on migrants/refugees, or more recent initiatives that were set up over the last 2 to 5 years to respond to the quickly deteriorating situation of migrants and refugees in the country. While a majority of the groups broadly subscribe to left wing and/or autonomist politics, some of the most recently formed migrant solidarity collectives do not necessarily have strong political affiliations. They act out of concern and outrage regarding the local situations they face. Group members participating in the meeting include a few people who experienced migratory journeys to Greece and a large majority of "solidarians".<sup>2</sup> They have come from all around Greece to partake in the meeting, which first day consisted in an overview of border devices and refugees' conditions in various parts of the country. That morning was dedicated to the situation on the Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, recently turned into a series of so-called "hotspots". Hotspots are detention centres where people arriving to Greece in the aim of claiming asylum are detained in order to be "filtered".<sup>3</sup> While a small majority of people will be deemed as legitimate asylum seekers in Greece, and released from the island, the majority of people will be sent back to Turkey - considered since the signing of (in)famous EU-Turkey deal in Spring 2016 a "safe third country".

The situation in the islands of the Aegean Sea had also been the topic of a separate panel entitled "The Double Frontier", held at City Plaza<sup>4</sup> the day before the national coordination meeting took off. The panel consisted in haunting descriptions of the appalling conditions in the hotspots camps and of the innumerable difficulties met by people acting in solidarity with migrants. The title pointed to the multiplication of borders within the Greek space. Migrants arriving onto the islands have already crossed the national territorial border of the country, yet they are kept at another border – one that for particular categories of people now separates these islands from the mainland. This is a not a new phenomenon. In 2006, Balibar and Mezzadra were already referring to a "Europe of borders" while a

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting portray of politics in Exarchia and their historical background can be found here: [https://www.academia.edu/20101601/Free\\_Space\\_We\\_are\\_walking\\_into\\_Exarchia\\_](https://www.academia.edu/20101601/Free_Space_We_are_walking_into_Exarchia_)

<sup>2</sup> In the Greek context, "solidarians" is the label used by people who act in solidarity (in this case with migrants) on the ground of strong political and ideological commitments usually associated with self-organization and 'horizontality'. They often contrast their stance with that of "volunteers", seen as defending a narrower agenda, focused on "helping" and devoid of political ambition.

<sup>3</sup> Hotspots operate as filtering devices insofar as they immobilise people for the time required for the Greek and European authorities to pre-decide whether or not they should be granted to right to file an asylum claim.

<sup>4</sup> City Plaza is a self-organised housing project for migrants that accommodates 400 people in a squatted hotel in the center of Athens. City Plaza was started in 2016 by a group of solidarians and migrants, and it is now one of the best known such initiatives in Greece and Europe.



few years later Balibar spoke of “Europe as borderland” (2009) to describe the constant production, reproduction and shifting of borders that have come with the project of a “united” Europe under the auspice of the European Union. In a 2010 paper looking at the Pagani reception centre on Lesbos,

Alberti also demonstrated the ways in which the island functioned as a site of selective management of migrants’ mobility within the framework of a European border regime premised on processes of ‘differentiated inclusion’ (Mezzadra 2006). In particular, she investigated how gendered identities were produced and used as a criterion to decide whether and which migrants would be allowed to continue their journeys to mainland Greece. In her own words, she explored how “gender constructions can serve as means to differently designate groups of migrants as unauthorized or illegal and are indeed employed by states and international agencies to better control migrants’ mobility” (Alberti 2010, see also Andrijasevic 2008).

The situation portrayed by speakers in the “The Double Frontier” panel spoke to strikingly similar dynamics. Today also, selected migrants identified on the basis of “vulnerability” may be allowed to leave the hotspots. As noted by Alberti, the focus on vulnerability is deeply problematic. Indeed, it links the access to certain rights not to political subjectivities but rather to one’s position as a victim. The way in which migration and asylum regimes produce particular regimes of vulnerability and deservingness has indeed been an important stream of research (Malkki 1996, Chauvin et Garcés-Masareñas 2014), evidencing mechanisms of disciplining and control increasingly premised on the suppression of migrants’ political agency. Nowadays however, gender in itself does not constitute a sufficient feature to assert one’s vulnerability and leave the Aegean islands. In order to qualify for these ‘exceptional acts of concession and benevolence” (Alberti 2010) migrants increasingly have to demonstrate extreme forms of suffering, such as advanced illnesses or intensive mental distress. Ultimately, the power to separate between those who ‘deserve’ to be released and those who don’t, and to distribute exceptional treatment along pre-defined criteria, operates as a further device of control and differentiation that contributes to the fragmented system of mobility management of the EU.

The situation described by the panel also highlighted the difficulty of conducting solidarity work in a climate marked by the constant deterioration of the situation of the islands. S. who represents a local group from Samos had started his talk with a joke: “I can spot who among us is coming from the island, because we all look equally exhausted”. Exhaustion and fatigue were recurrent terms. A. from a solidarity group on the island Chios explained:

It is not that we are not progressing enough. It is that we are going backward. Since the signing of the (EU-Turkey) deal the situation is getting worse and worse. People are stuck, with growing needs, we have to spend all our energy on trying to meet basic humanitarian demands and have no time for political work. We are losing the people of the island – Chios has a conservative history and people were never supportive of the refugees but they use to tolerate them, to think ‘ok they will leave, they are not responsible for their situation and they are not planning to stay’. So it was ok... But by now things are terrible. The creation of the hotspot has made a situation that is unliveable and people can’t stand it anymore. I am not unfair to the people when I say they are quite racist. But I have to be fair and to say no one could stand this situation

One of his comrades added:

By now, it is not just refugees who are at risk of being attacked. The solidarians on Chios are as well. This has been going on for a while. And everyone knows us on the island. Everyone knows who works with refugees and it is sure we will never get a job anymore in Chios. I don't mind, I believe in what I do, but yes, these are the consequences we face.

This is not unique to Chios. In Lesbos, an island with a left-leaning history whose population is mostly made up of the descendants of Anatolian refugees of 1922 (see Gingeras 2009), feelings towards refugees are also changing. Lesbos had originally attracted the attention of the national and European public for its hospitality towards refugees. At the beginning of the so-called refugee crisis, a series of poignant scenes of solidarity enacted by local residents captured public attention: from the fishermen organising ad hoc rescue missions to save sinking dinghies trying to cross the Aegean Sea to the “three grannies of Skala Sykamnias” immortalised while feeding a refugee baby by a Greek photographer, the people of Lesbos crystallised in popular imagination as a beacon of hope in a Europe otherwise quickly giving in to xenophobic sentiments. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras declared that the Lesbos grannies were “the image of the Europe we want”. By now, according to members of one of the local solidarity group present at the national coordination meeting, “the political struggle for refugees is about to be lost. Conditions are atrocious and the locals have lost patience and sympathy”.

In his poignant ethnographic testimony of the situation in Skala Sykamnias<sup>5</sup>, his *chorio* (in Greek: the village, where one has their family roots), Papataxiarchis (2016a, 2016b) describes a multi-layered theatre of engagement involving a broad range of social actors: refugees, of course, but also the numerous “solidarians”, “volunteers”, professional humanitarians, who have travelled from eastward to the frontline of the “refugee crisis” in the aims of –alternatively- struggling with migrants, assisting them, or fulfilling humanitarian missions. As for local people, according to Papataxiarchis, they are now in their great majority “staying on the sidelines” (2016a: 9). Lost in the crowds that recently reached their village, the local community is “broken”, torn apart by their homes becoming a “zone of political liminality”, a “humanitarian frontier” that buffers the EU from the “disorderly” world on the other side that so haunts European imagination.

At the National Coordination meeting, testimonies from across the islands similarly described the way in which the temporal and spatial stranding of large numbers of people in such appalling and liminal conditions works toward the breaking down of social ties, which ultimately affects all those involved. It is essential to realise that the context within which solidarity initiatives unfold in Greece is one of extreme pressure and desperation. The islands, while each having their particularities, are increasingly cohering into a separate space, isolated from the mainland, which shapes both the experience of people stranded in camp and the social space available for solidarity actions to take place. The spaces of the hotspots have become productive of new social dynamics that delineate and shape the experience of

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<sup>5</sup> Skala Sykamnias is a small village of around 140 permanent inhabitants, on the northern coast of the island of Lesbos. It is often referred to as “the informal gate into Europe”, an expression I frequently heard in reference to Lampedusa during previous fieldwork. Skala has been the point of entry onto the island of Europe of several hundreds thousands refugees since 2015. People arriving in Skala will usually spend some hours there before being transferred to the Moria “hotspot and identification centre”. Moria camp has been described as “ill equipped” and “overcrowded” (UNHCR: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-greece/overcrowded-greek-refugee-camps-ill-prepared-for-winter-unhcr-idUSKBN1CB19F>), “appalling” and contributing to people’s “immense suffering” (Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/23/greece-dire-refugee-conditions-islands>). The situation in Moria is so dire that several people have been reported to self-harm or attempt suicide (sometimes successfully) and that, over the winter 2016, people have frozen to death.

migrants who pass through the island and those in solidarity with them. The testimonies offered on that day are particularly striking illustrations of how the social and spatial experiences of borders are mutually constituted. They powerfully exemplify how our understanding of social forces, relations and practices become complexified when we “go back to the borders”, and assess the embodied and place-specific manifestation of borders.

### ***Solidarity: Exercising politics or providing assistance?***

The meeting continued as a succession of depressing vignettes depicting the bleak situations facing migrants and solidarians across the country, before moving on to thinking through coordinated actions and joint strategies. Migrant solidarity movements in Greece remain numerous, and no less than 30 different groups were represented in the National Coordination meeting. Yet, migration solidarity mobilisations are currently unfolding in a broader climate of social depression and demobilisation. This came in large parts as a result from the 2015 “capitulation” of Syriza.

The advent of the 2008 Eurozone crisis and its catastrophic effects on the Greek economy and society had seen the emergence of a rebellious cycle initiated with the huge anti-austerity movement of May 2010, which intensified over the following years and peaked in episodes of massive mobilisation (Kouvelakis 2011; Gaitanou 2016). This powerful movement found an expression in partisan politics with a deep reorganisation of the Greek electoral Left most clearly exemplified with the rise of Syriza. Created in 2004, Syriza rose between 2009 and 2015 from a minority party gathering under 5% of the votes to being the first party of the country, reaching 36,4% and being elected to government. Yes the deception was soon to come, as Syriza quickly revoked its promises and more particularly its anti-memorandum stance, which had been a crucial platform for its election.<sup>6</sup>

The key point of rupture followed the referendum of 5 July 2015, when over 60% of the Greek electorate voted “No” to the new memorandum agreement proposed by the Troika (see Kouvelakis 2015). In spite of this historical expression of popular defiance, Syriza (in a governing coalition with a newly formed party of the Right, ANEL) signed the memorandum only a week later, thus fully giving in to the demands of the Troika and its austerity agenda. According to Gaitanou (2016: 267), following this defeat, “movement practices and structures have faded into the background, and their scope is essentially restrained to the provision of material assistance to those who most need it, moving away from the search of a different paradigm of exercising politics”.

This tension between “exercising politics” and “providing material assistance” was indeed at the heart of heated debates at the National Coordination meeting. Underlying these discussions is a long-term activist and academic debate opposing “politics” to “humanitarianism” and “charity” to “solidarity”. As scholarly work and activist voices (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2011; Malkki 1996, 2015) have long observed, charity and humanitarianism as modes of intervention, with the aim of providing limited relief and temporary support, tend to have had de-politicising effects. As in the previous example of the need to perform “vulnerability” in order to leave the island of Lesbos, humanitarian modalities

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<sup>6</sup> The memorandums (or so-called bailout packages) are a series of three economic adjustment programs for Greece pushed by the “Troika” (the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank) that provoked huge popular resistance primarily because they were associated with “austerity packages” with devastating effects for the Greek people.

place people in liminal places where demonstrating victimhood constitute the criteria upon which the decision of extending aid is based.

In the Greek context, this debate has also crystallised around the issue of “giving”. As pointed by Rozakou (2012), the provision of material aid and the practice of gift-giving have long been met with suspicion in Greek society at large.<sup>7</sup> In contemporary movements of the left and anarchist type, giving was also deemed “a threat to the formation of egalitarian relationships” (Rozakou 2016: 186).<sup>8</sup> This reading of can be traced back to Marxist analysis of charity work. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx (1848/1998: 7) already spoke of “philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organizers of charity” as working towards the improvement and stabilisation of bourgeois society. Yet, Rozakou (2016) argues that what she labels the “gift-taboo” has largely collapsed over the last few years, under the weight of the current social and economic predicament of Greek society. In 2015, donations of material assistance destined for refugees were massive. Goods abounded from all over the country as well as from abroad, at times leading to situations where local activists in sites such as Lesbos called for a halt due to their lack of capacity to distribute the aid.

In this sense, the multiple crises experienced by and in Greece over the last 10 years have led to a reconfiguration of solidarity practices and socialities (see Social Anthropology Special Issue on “Rethinking Solidarity” 2016). The re-alignment of giving as a central aspect of new forms of solidarity, for instance, is not restricted to migration-related activities. Rather it can be found across an array of initiatives that have been broadly inscribed in the Greek “social movement” emerging from the crisis. As noted by Papataxiarchis (2016c) giving has spread to all aspects of social life, “in the form of services (free medical care, direct access to agricultural producers), food, clothes, land or jobs offered to those who suffered from austerity, the poor, the homeless or the unemployed”. Cabot (2016) explores the emergence of social clinics where medication and prescription are offered for free to those who have fallen out of national healthcare schemes or who, whilst still nominally part of national welfare systems, cannot afford the treatment they require. She shows how the line between giver and receiver is blurred in times of crisis, when one person volunteering one day may request help the next day. Yet, the shift towards gift-giving continues raising tension (see Rakopoulos 2016a and the notion of “equalitarian tension”) and renewed concerns about the (re)production of hierarchies and potentially of clientelism.

In the meeting of the National Coordination, one participant in particular deplored this evolution. The emphasis on providing material aid was problematic in his eyes. According to him, and in line with Marxist inspired analysis giving was inevitably hierarchical, productive of relations of power, and working towards the stabilisation rather than the subversion of the dominant social order. To an extent, the shift towards material assistance can be read as signalling the entry of a typically charitable figure, that of the “vulnerable and needy refugee”, (Fassin 2007), into the Greek solidarity scene (Rozakou 2016). The question of whether alternative, politicised socialities can be created in front of this representation retains some relevance: can more horizontal and political forms of solidarity be

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<sup>7</sup> See previous anthropological work on giving in traditional Greek society including Herzfeld 1987 and Du Boulay 1991.

<sup>8</sup> As pointed out by Rozakou, defiance towards the gift was also present in institutionalised volunteer practices, mirroring a broader shift from “charity”, a bourgeois activity in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Greece, to “humanitarian aid” in line with particular visions of European modernity and dominant notions of “self reliance” under conditions of global neoliberalism. In humanitarian and development work, material giving was marginalised in favour of “empowerment” (see Stirrat and Henkel 1997, Bornstein and Redfield 2010).

developed in a space that has become entangled with charitable work premised on an image of refugeeness as victimhood and destitution? However, other participants in the meeting did not spend much time pondering over this question. During a break, M. one of the representatives of an Athens-based solidarity initiative explained:

I think we have moved on from that – for now anyway. For at least two reasons: first, there are immediate and fixable inequalities that we cannot stop ignoring in the name of equality. It starts to make no sense! If people don't have food, don't have a roof, it makes no sense to deny them a sandwich, because donating it would create inequalities? It makes no sense. Letting people to starve is not conducive to more equality. And yes, second, I mean it is the same. Giving is not always bad. It depends on the context basically. So if the context changes, also our tactics and their meaning, they will change.

In spite of her awareness of the dynamics previously described, M. felt that solidarians had been placed in front of a situated historical imperative, that of providing support in a situation where it had become a matter of life and death. Giving and material aid took on a different significance in the face of such urgency. In other words, M. and her comrades have de-essentialised gift-giving, and asserted that the meaning of giving is contingent on particular situations and can be infused with different politics in different circumstances. While recognising the difficulty of producing equal relationships out of situation premised on certain people giving and other receiving, M. also acknowledged the pre-existing material conditions that made equality a long-term project. In order to work towards that project, certain minimum conditions must be met. As she poignantly expressed, you do not build equality by letting people starve. This shows the ways in which people navigate particular circumstances in order to formulate their own version of ethics in everyday, embodied situations (Fassin 2011).

The point that remained more contentious for M. lay somewhere else. She was concerned with how much “solidarians exhaust themselves yet will never solve the problem, and this should not be our goal because this is the job of the state”. M. has been involved in City Plaza since its opening in March 2016, and she spends several days a week in the “best hotel in Europe”, which, she explains, absorbs most of her activist energy and time. She went on to add: “Look, City Plaza for example: it is good, but it is 400 people. There are 60 000 migrants in need in the country. We should not be seen as replacing the state”. For M. the issue is not giving per se, but rather that forms of solidarity premised on material aid place solidarians in an ambiguous relationship to the state, and to the notion that the state is responsible for providing services to all. While solidarians at the National Coordination meeting had in their majority accepted that giving was now part of solidarity practices, they remain uneasy with the idea that they may be covering up for the withdrawal of the state from crucial functions. The key question of the solidarity movement, in turn, becomes whether situated practices can transcend these tensions and contradictions, and contribute to the reformulation of a broader political project in Greece. The fluid and evolving character of solidarity practices in the Greek context is also an important illustration of the way in which progressive politics need embracing the situated conditions that they face, and elaborate practical solutions and positions in the face of the materiality of social relations. The next section further explores this process.

## ***Kinetic politics: movement and political subjectivities***

For some solidararians, the refugee solidarity spaces that have emerged across the country, and particularly those set in urban settings, are indeed sites from which new practices and meanings of the political may develop. In the politically difficult post-2015 moment, the emergence of these mobilisations is seen as signalling a possible renewal of left wing practices and discourses, which centre solidarity around the political exclusion and economic exploitation experienced by migrants and refugees. A group of activists involved in City Plaza spoke of a “new era of solidarity” – the era of migrant solidarity. Yet, they explained, this solidarity in formation is premised not on the upholding of the distinction between migrants and those in solidarity with them, but rather on the recognition of the commonalities in the predicament facing both migrants and locals, as well as on attempts at developing alternative socialities and social identities – with political implications. In this respect, solidarity initiatives are deemed paradigms of novel and alternative ways of struggling together, as exemplified in the oft-used slogan “we live together, we fight together”. While these initiatives have emerged in response to the concrete and pressing (material) needs of migrants, they have the potential to transcend their situatedness and localities. Spaces of common life and struggle aim at addressing material demands while seeking and producing new visions of participation and self-organisation. Ultimately, it is the very concept of what constitutes the political and its scope/boundaries that may emerge changed from these ventures.

Some boundaries and distinctions may be transcended in spaces of joint life and struggles. Politically, of course, a fight bringing together citizens and non-citizens operates as a challenge to the nationalised, territorialised understanding of political identities associated with the nation-state (Mc Nevin 2009; Nyers 2010; Rygiel 2011; Cantat 2016). But what also becomes of importance is the gradual formation of a movement with the potentiality of transcending the distinction between the social and the political. This approach can also, perhaps, help us move beyond the ‘gift-dilemma’. In Gaitanou’s study of the Greek social movement of 2010-11 (2016), the author explores the relation between the socioeconomic and the political level in relation to processes of political subjectivity formation. Noting that certain accounts of the movement have led to an underestimation of either the political factor or the economic factor, she argues for a redefinition of the political that accounts for the need of a “higher type of unity” between socioeconomic relations and political ideals of democracy (179-80). She shows how activists and participants in the movement of the square in 2010-11 Greece managed, at times, to reinvent the articulation between socioeconomic claims and political demands. This did not mean that protests had an explicit class connotation but, though frustration was targeted at politicians, there also existed “a deeper comprehension of politicians expressing specific interests over others, in terms of class interests” (181). Gaitanou concludes by pointing to the way in which structure of solidarity have deliberately included both the need for a concrete response to people’s needs and alternative visions of participation and self-organisation. This, she argues, has led to “a dialectical transcendence of the distinction between the social and the political” (182).

It is thus perhaps more interesting to think of the current refugee solidarity movement in terms of its attempts to transcend the distinction between socioeconomic and political action. For some present, the potentiality for the emergence of meaningful joint struggles requires the definition of common interests between migrants and solidararians grounded not only in politics in the narrow sense previously mentioned, but rather in politics as bringing together the materiality of socioeconomic demands and democratic ideals. M. intervened to say:

The refugees of today, are the proletariat of tomorrow. We have to continue our struggles with them, it is the same struggle. Just to give you a fact to think about: all the refugee youth are not allowed in normal high schools, they are sent directly to the factory or to vocational training. The struggle has a short term, to support people in need. It also has a long term, to build a new class movement with the refugees.

The need to understand and develop these (class) commonalities, presumably highlighted by solidararians from a stronger Marxist political tradition, was also identified in terms of shared concern regarding social reproduction.<sup>9</sup> While migration follows infinite rationales, that the pressures of the contemporary capitalist global system has encouraged migratory movement and pushed people especially from the global south into global migration circuits in search of a better life has been well researched (Marfleet 2006). To this predicament, various forms and intensities of physical violence also operate to force into displacement ever-larger numbers of people. The pressure over Greek society resulting from the financial crisis has also led to extreme pauperisation where large parts of the population have found themselves unable to sustain their social reproduction. In this context, the point put forward by activists who insist on the politically transformative potential of space of common life and struggle concerns the need to organise common struggles at the intersections of the material conditions shared by “migrants” and “locals”, and in fact beyond the identities of “migrants” or “locals”. This can be seen in many ways as a call for an internationalist position, one that grants precedence to class consciousness over other factors – status or nationality in this case. Sites of elaboration of common social and political struggles among citizens and non-citizens can thus be seen as an experimental space with the potentiality of leading to the formation of alternative subjectivities and communities (Cantat 2016).

Yet under circumstances of forced displacement, addressing the materialities of situations and using them as a basis from which to build common struggles, also requires a rethinking of the political within which a new centrality is granted to the notion and experience of movement. In particular, these alternative spaces may creatively explore the potential of bringing together the two meanings of movement: movement understood in its political sense (as a gathering of political actors / forces) and movement exercised kinetically (as a motion, a displacement from a given point to another, often unknown, point) (Mitropoulos & Neilson 2006). Both meanings of movement indeed carry the prospective of change, and are animated by a transformative motion that tends toward an undefined destination. In turn, this is also a call for looking at these sites created through and by (political and kinetic) movement as socio-spatial formations in motion, retaining an experimental edge where practices, tactics, subjectivities but also tensions, hierarchies and power relations are produced, contested and reshuffled. This also speaks to a trend of activism and scholarship that has focused on re-politicising mobility (see below). In the above-mentioned portrayal of Skala, Papataxiarchis reflects precisely on the “strong sense of openness” (2016b: 9) that has emerged from the passage of people through the site and the breaking of its boundaries through movement. In a subtle assessment of the transformative effect of movement, he notes that Skala has become perhaps “a broken place, but also a place of freedom”.

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<sup>9</sup> The notion of ‘commons’ has also been frequently mobilised in migrant and joint struggles (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos 2014, Stierl 2016, Zaman 2017). While not a term with much currency in the Greek debate, the notion points to similar processes of ‘sharing’ (commonalising) and discovering new, political ways of thinking about distribution and materialities (see also Closs Stephens and Squire 2012).

## ***Expanding citizenship or cultivating autonomy? Trans-border migrant struggles and the Greek social movement***

However, the appropriation of the fissures opened up by movement and their translation into political projects and demands is not a straightforward task. That Sunday morning in Exarchia, debates emerged that speak to the difficulty of articulating these two meanings of movement in practice. When time arose to agree on a common call for action, and a common date, conflicting political imaginaries came to clash. On the one hand, a number of solidararians believed that the coordinated action should speak to the atrocities of the border regime at large, focusing on the recent news of migrants traded as slave in Libya and pointing to the political responsibility of the EU and its member states in the tragedy. Others, while agreeing that a denunciation of the Libyan catastrophe was needed, were of the view that the action should focus on the internal situation in Greece, connecting the conditions of migrants to the devastating effects of the combined crises on the social and economic fabric of the country.

Proponents of the first position saw their activism as part of what may be deemed a trans-border movement around migrant rights and freedom of movement (Stierl 2012; Cantat, 2015a, 2016; Ataç et al 2015, Ataç et al 2016). The prime adversaries identified by those holding this position were the EU states and institution putting forward “murderous border controls”. Those supporting the latter stance inscribed their actions more firmly within the Greek political and solidarity scene that has formed over the crisis years in order to sustain the organisation of alternative modalities of socioeconomic survival. For them, solidarity struggles with/for migrants were connected to broader anti-capitalist struggles. They identified capitalist relations on a global and local scale as the main cause for both people’s displacement and their current destitution. It would be exaggerated to argue that these two positions stood in sharp opposition. Participants in the refugee solidarity movement put forward nuanced arguments that point rather to their inter-connectedness. The question that emerges is perhaps more precisely related to deciding which of these social processes should be given prominence in the analysis. In relation to introductory remarks around Novak’s call to go “back to borders”, it is thus interesting to see that even “on the ground” there may arise difficulties regarding how to formulate political positionings that give meaning to a particular situation. I will come back however to how these tensions can get transcended below. For now, it is worth noting that this debate seems to speak to an incompleteness of the transcendence between the political and socioeconomic demands put forward by the movement.

A sub-category of this debate concerned the issue of whether to orient certain right claims towards the state (and the EU), or whether to cultivate self-organisation, autonomy, and the facilitation of people’s journey outside of official frameworks. Interestingly, these discussions echo intense debates in critical academic circles concerned with migrants’ struggles and political subjectivities. Two key bodies of scholarship have consistently engaged with these questions: critical citizenship studies (CCS) and the autonomy of migration literature (AoM). Novak’s comment on how different epistemological starting points create cleavages in the scholarship is extremely relevant here. Indeed, while “both corpus of research share a strong normative concern with reimagining political life from the margins, particularly in relation to those inhabiting mobile and precarious lives” (Moulin and Thomaz 2016), they are routinely presented as antagonistic. This hostility is based on their different appreciation of the significance of certain social processes and relations, leading to seemingly opposing political positions. AoM in particular has developed a strong theoretical aversion to the concept of “citizenship”, seen as always reproducing forms of exclusion – as will be seen later in the paper. It



thus considers CCS calls for what it sees as migrants' "inclusion strategies" within existing frames perpetuating inequalities as always already defeated. CCS, on the other hand, is prompt to define as "acts of citizenship" as wide variety and range of practices enacted by migrants, sometimes with little concern for their actual and embodied meaning and intentionality. Again, these positions seem to be developed mostly "away" from the bordered social identities and resistance practices they attempt to analyse.

The starting point of CCS is a critique of formal models of citizenship that associates and restricts rights to legal status and to membership of a territorial state. CCS examines how political struggles and actions, particularly when "enacted" by those marginalised in formal citizenship regimes, re-make and enlarge the boundaries of citizenship. A central concept of CCS is the notion of "acts of citizenship" defined as "acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle" (Isin 2008: 39).

Citizenship is seen as a dynamic and contested field of struggles (Isin, Nyers and Turner 2009) within which the political agency of those usually considered as politically voiceless and marginalised becomes central (Ataç et al. 2016; Turner 2016; Tyler and Marciniak 2012; Nyers and Rygiel 2012). Of particular importance, CCS sees the enactment of citizenship through acts of citizenship as a subject-making process, one that "enables political subjectivity" (Isin, Nyers, and Turner 2009: 1). Struggles enacted from the margin of existing citizenship regimes may open "new spaces of citizenship that potentially enable ... new ways of being political" (Nyers and Rygiel 2012: 9).

AoM literature emerged primarily as a critique of what it sees as static and mechanical approaches to migration, particularly those that frame migration in terms of "pull-and-push" factors, to highlight the "autonomous" and uncontrollable dimension of migratory movements (Mezzadra, 2011; Andrijasevic et al. 2005; Bojadžijev and Karakayalı 2010; Tazzioli 2014; De Genova 2017). AoM literature argues that mobility always precedes and exceeds the border and immigration regimes that try to control it. For AoM scholars, citizenship is perceived as always in some relationship with sovereignty and territoriality, and is thus considered as necessary exclusionary. Citizenship is seen primarily as a political device, an instrument of control and regulation, and is in turn inadequate for developing inclusive political communities (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013: 179-85). There have thus been calls within AoM to destabilise citizenship-oriented approaches in migration studies and to develop new "conceptual nomenclatures" (Mezzadra 2015: 134) that move beyond citizenship. For Mezzadra (2015), the insistence on working politically through the concept of citizenship always bears the risk of concealing "the burden of its historical burden".

While this position has been welcomed for emphasising the subjectivities involved in migration movement, this focus on agency has also been criticised for underestimating the violence migrants are subjected to as they attempt to cross borders or settle in particular places (Sharma 2009, Scheel 2013). A strong critique indeed concerns AoM's failure to situate migrants' experiences and struggles in the context of changing and ever-more perilous borders. In turn, AoM can be seen as both homogenising and romanticising the experience of mobility due to the high level of abstraction through which it functions. This abstraction has meant that AoM struggles to recognise migrants' experiences and struggles as "embodied, relational, and situated within and across various contexts, identities, and contested histories" (Nyers 2015: 27). This is particular problematic for a strand of literature that draws its origins in a call for replacing migrants' agency at the centre of scholarly inquiry into

migratory experience. Another consequence of this abstraction and the form it takes, is a relative blindness to embodied socioeconomic (capitalist) relations and the way in which they act upon and shape the experience of migrants. While nominally concerned with the role of capitalism in the formation of borders and border regimes, AoM however seems to do away with the fact that capitalism, rather than an abstracted process, manifests in particular relations that define the social context in which migrants decide to leave from, travel to and through, and settle in various sites.

N. who is active in the refugee solidarity movement in Greece put forward a situated and embodied argument that calls into question the strict theoretical separation between these two strands of scholarship. N. has been involved in a number of pro-migrant groups in different European countries and he notes that:

For me it is the same struggle but it expresses itself differently depending on the context. In France, with the *sans-papiers* we fight for rights. They have settled there, they want to access their rights. In Greece, we fight with migrants to let them travel and to open the borders. It is not different struggles, it is the same struggle, but what the people need and want it changes with where they are.

N.'s comments also echo Novak's plea to start from relational assessment of embodied situations in order to determine political positions that respond to localised conditions while also speaking to broader movements. The way in which a broader struggle can be fought differently in particular localities is also something I identified through previous research with pro-migrant groups in other EU contexts (Cantat 2015a). Differentiated tactics may also be used in relation to the different statuses and positions inhabited by or prescribed to people. As in other pro-migrant initiatives, different actions may be performed depending on the risk it may entail for those performing them. This is reminiscent of the No Borders strategy of accounting for whom is "deportable" or facing particular risk at a given time and space in order to determine which activist can play with role within a given direct action. This also means that, over time and space, one person will be able to engage in a variety of political acts and that these possibilities will be shaped by a variety of factors.

Social movement theory (SMT), with its concept of opportunity structure, has perhaps paid more attention to the way in which situated experiences came to shape the possibility and modalities of political participation. Over the last two decades, scholars of social movements have in fact started exploring migrant mobilisation. There have been a number of studies looking at the political context of migration as an "opportunities structure" and at how contextual elements impact upon migrant actors (see Cinalli 2016; Bloemraad 2006; Cinalli and Guigni 2011). For example, attention has been paid to the effect of reforms in favour of political engagement of migrants (Jones-Correa 1998), of policies on multiculturalism (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994) and of the promotion of cultural pluralism and group rights on migrants' political capacity (Cinalli and Giugni 2011; Koopmans et al. 2005). But this understanding of opportunities and constraints as exogenous to social movement actors is in reality limited to study migrants' and pro-migrant mobilisation in particular those looking at expanding the realm of the political through contentious or "unauthorised" acts, such as holding protests in the absence of legal status or passing borders irregularly. This points to SMT's difficulty in accounting for the interactions between different spaces, scales and meanings of political action and their role in producing political subjectivities "in action" (Ataç et al. 2016; Cantat 2015a). In turn, SMT proves limited to investigate the fluid and dynamic politics through which agency and struggles are constructed, enacted and negotiated, and the way people constitute themselves as political through movements, remains only marginally addressed by SMT (Ataç et al. 2015; Schwenken 2013).

Therefore, paying careful attention to the way in which migrants and solidarians deploy political strategies in embodied ways that are shaped and in turn shape the situated material conditions within which they operate seems more relevant than to define pre-established frames of analysis that give precedence to either a call for autonomy or a struggle for (narrowly defined) citizenship.

## *Conclusion*

Greece's recent experience of what has been called a "migration crisis", only a few years after the socioeconomic devastation and political unrest provoked by the debt crisis, has led to the broadening, strengthening, reorganisation but also overstretch of the country's anti-racist and pro-migrant movement. Numerous groups have emerged in particular localities across the country's mainland and Aegean islands in order to respond to the catastrophic situation created by the EU and national border policies, in particular the EU-Turkey deal. The rapid expansion of the refugee solidarity field has had fragmentation effects – which is unsurprising in a country where the left political spectrum is marked by polarisation and divisions. Yet, there have also been important attempts to work together. The National Coordination on the basis of which this paper is built held its 19<sup>th</sup> meeting this year, and brought together a range of groups with different histories and sometimes diverging politics in an effort to coordinate activities and support each other.

In order to investigate the meaning(s), structure, representations and limitations of such solidarity initiatives in 2017 Greece, I opted in this literature review for an unconventional approach grounded in embedded situations and observations. Rather than starting from the literature, and engaging with scholarly debates in the abstract, I attempted to re-embed academic discussions in one particular context, and to selectively mobilise trends of scholarship based on the insights they could offer on the specific situation under study.

This attempt to examine bordered situations, and the identity they produce and which resist them, begins with a spatial analysis that does not presume a hierarchy of social forces. Rather, in line with Novak's call to go "back to borders", it pays careful attention to the way social dynamics manifest and order themselves in a given situated space. While this is in many respects a call for ethnographies and anthropological enquiry, what was at stake here was the possibility to start from spatialities while opening meaningful conversations with conceptual insights from critical migration and border studies, and in particular the important scholarly contributions that help thinking through the global meaning of borders and border controls.

If one conclusion should be drawn from this study, it is perhaps that contemporary progressive politics around migration and borders constitute a fluid and changing field, which is shaped by the experience of movement both spatially and politically. What is at stake is the ability of migrants and solidarians to expand the boundaries of the political through the recognition of the dual significance of movement. This broad understanding of politics as kinetics can serve as the basis through which a broad, cross-border pro-migrant movement is articulated, in a way that brings together locally embodied and spatially located solidarity groups and movements whose strategies and forms are shaped by situated circumstances.

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