

## Abstract

*Title:* Administering Solidarity: Grassroots Welfare in Post-Debt Crisis Greece

*Purpose* – This paper examines what happens as the state relinquishes welfare provision to volunteers. Attending to the ethnographic reality of such practices, to the collection, storage, allocation and distribution of assistance, it explores how the impetus to address poverty is transformed through the process of administering it.

*Design/methodology/approach* – Research was based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork, volunteering in a solidarity organization in Athens.

*Findings* – Administering solidarity, volunteers were confronted with practical, logistic problems. Attempting to resolve these, they resorted to technical, administrative devices. Yet through these efforts, the volunteers systematized not only their activities, but also their view of rights themselves. Solidarity ethics were subtly transformed into values of fairness, efficiency, and impartiality. As a result, the help they offered became impersonal and material, omitting the political dimensions of their work.

*Originality/value* – This paper applies insights from ethnographies of humanitarian organization that emphasize the material, embodied qualities of moral labour. Doing so, it illustrates how seemingly benign practices, such as administration, have fundamentally ethical qualities.

*Keywords:* Solidarity, Administration, Greece, Welfare, Grassroots, Austerity

*Article Type:* Research paper

## Introduction

*“Because we care, our work is better than what the state does, we try harder”.*

With this statement my interlocutor, Eleni, subtly related care and work, posing volunteering as not merely practical but elevated by its ethical dimension. In this article, I will trace the interplay between these two domains, the moral and mundane, relating the motivation which drives voluntary work to its material outcome. In so doing, this work explores how the desire to address inequality translates into action and the subjectivities which arise between volunteers and beneficiaries<sup>1</sup> through such endeavours. Specifically, it handles the apparent contradiction that as time passed, the work of volunteers became more indifferent as they pursued formal strategies for administering solidarity and the radical, emotional message of solidarity politics faded amid practical concerns. But why has it been necessary for volunteers to take responsibility for welfare in the first place? How has welfare become an act of care?

In the wake of the 2010 Greek debt-crisis and subsequent austerity measures, the pressures of a contracting economy propelled a wave of solidarity initiatives throughout Greece, as they attempted to fill the gaps left by a paralysed state. The organization at which I volunteered, the ‘Δίκτυο Αλληλεγγύης – Solidarity Network’, was part of this grassroots movement, formed in 2012 by a small group of individuals in response to needs in the community. Since then, it has grown to become one of the largest of such organizations, with more than 40 volunteers supporting some hundreds of families in the neighbourhood. Located in one of Athens’s suburbs, the *diktyo* is run by a group of volunteers mostly of retirement age. Among their number are former accountants, journalists, small business owners, teachers and other former professionals but only a few are currently employed.

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<sup>1</sup> Ωφελούμενοι, a term which was sometimes used by volunteers to refer to those making use of the *diktyo*. From the verb ωφελούμαι, ‘to benefit (from), gain advantage’.

Around the neighbourhood posters for the Greek communist cover bus stops and anti-austerity graffiti decorates the walls of building, both visible testimony to the area's left leaning politics. Public assemblies have been common and until recently an office for the ruling leftist party Syriza was located only a short walk from the *diktyo* itself. Both these sentiments, professional and political, orientated the work which happened there. Referring to themselves explicitly as volunteers, εθελοντές, the group offers help to those officially resident in the municipality, and therefore, holders of Greek citizenship. In this they differ from other solidarity workers who sometimes refer to themselves as 'solidarians' (Rozakou 2017, p. 99) but also because their main focus is to help locals as opposed to refugees.

Effectively operating like a food bank, the group gathers food, as well as clothes and other household items<sup>2</sup>, distributing them to those on low income. Expecting to find an overtly political space prior to my fieldwork, instead I found volunteers preoccupied with questions of organization, management and administration. As a relatively young British student starting fieldwork and not fluent in Greek my attention was naturally drawn to the material setting, to what the volunteers did as opposed to what they said. Moved to address inequality, they were confronted with logistical problems concerning how solidarity should be organized. Rather than ask what solidarity is, I will therefore ask what it is that solidarity does. What kind of moral subjects emerged in the process of giving and how were they rooted in methods of distributing donations? How was the moral impetus to address poverty transformed through the process of administering it?

### **Objects of Intervention**

As Rozakou puts it, "care lies at the core of the biopolitical management of life" (2012: 573). For this reason, some sensitivity is required when addressing this topic, to unpick how care, need and poverty have been constructed as political objects. Ethnographies of humanitarianism draw attention to the fundamental ambiguity provoked by ethical labour and how it gives rise to unexpected moral subjects. In her work with refugees in the French asylum system, Ticktin (2006) details what happens when rights are replaced by a politics of compassion. For refugees, bureaucratic contradictions of the asylum process made political rights effectively inaccessible. Instead, they sought to remain by appealing to clauses which guaranteed their right to receive medical care. To invoke these clauses refugees were obliged to demonstrate their suffering as illness became a performative act. Similar tendencies were present in Haiti following the distribution of US aid to people subjected to political violence. As aid workers documented evidence of political abuse, 'trauma portfolios' emerged as commodities in a political economy of compassion (Caple James 2012, p.52). Chouliaraki (2013), meanwhile, has pointed out how this politics of compassion engages disparate actors as media increasingly shape our lives. The presentation and consumption of suffering has become widespread, penetrating a broad range of discourses. Robbins (2013) has even gone so far as to suggest these ideas are equally present in the academy, arguing that a 'suffering' other has replaced the 'exotic' other in anthropology.

Suffering and compassion, then, diffuse our modes of political expression and consequently our ability to understand rights and agency. Malkki (1996) underlines this in her ethnography, arguing that the humanitarian treatment of refugees ultimately worked to 'dehistoricize' them, eliding the personal and political dimensions of their lives. Here we find echoes of Ferguson's idea of 'anti-politics' (Ferguson 1990) where development practices and discourses gloss over the inequalities which both underpin and result from their work. Humanitarianism, like development, belongs to a domain outside of politics: human rights are not political ones. Yet as care becomes ostensibly devoid of political content, ethnographies of humanitarianism show how aid is administered in increasingly material

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<sup>2</sup> Volunteers collect food outside supermarkets and sometimes receive donations from the municipality and private donors. Food is also bought with money earned at fundraising event. Clothes are donated by people living in the local area.

terms that privilege the body as the site of intervention (Fassin 2009). So it was that in Haiti people demonstrated trauma through photographs and refugees in France submitted themselves to medical examinations in pursuit of rights. Care becomes a matter of meeting 'bare' needs (Agamben 1998), reducing the sphere of political action to a muted physical field.

In each of these cases, governments underpinned these humanitarian interventions, either funding their operation directly through welfare systems or indirectly through donations. But how can the state apprehend and interact with people who are, in fact, stateless? Rozakou (2017b) has outlined the anxieties provoked by this contradiction among government administrators as they developed an 'irregular' bureaucracy in the treatment of refugees on the Greek island, Lesbos. Rather than undermining state authority, she argues such irregularities were essential to it. In this, Rozakou recalls Agamben's *homo sacer* (1998). Sovereign power, he suggests, is founded in the power to define a state of legal exception. Yet those who are outside of law are still beholden to it. At Lesbos, idealized bureaucracy and its supposed failure actually formed the site of a political contest in which the fate of refugees was negotiated. Yet if in this case, the ambiguity of bureaucracy was used to obscure the ultimate inclusion of refugees, in other cases it has been used to perpetuate uncertainty. Cabot's (2014) work on asylum seekers in Athens shows how legal protections were eventually transformed into bureaucratic barriers. Technical and administrative devices designed to ensure their legal rights instead kept applicants in a 'legal limbo'. Documents thus displaced asylum seekers rights as they were literally inscribed on cards and papers, much as refugees' rights were inscribed on their bodies.

In this moral complex of humanitarian labour, power rests with those able to best define the needs of others (Brković 2017). Accordingly, the lens of ethnographers has broadened to encompass not only those who experience humanitarian interventions, but also those who administer them. New questions have also been provoked by the spread of 'self-help' discourses which emphasize the role of the individual as the key referent in social and political agency. At Médecins San Frontières, Ticktin (2014) describes how aid workers have increasingly turned away from radical philosophies found in political movements of 1960s and 1970s. Instead, they, "embraced the belief that it was only possible to address individual suffering" (Ticktin 2014, p. 276). As welfare has become increasingly outsourced to NGOs, volunteers themselves have therefore come under greater scrutiny (Bornstein 2012, Griffiths 2015, Malkki 2015, Parreñas 2012, Rozakou 2016, Song 2009). Part of this emerging literature, '*The Moral Neoliberal*' (Muehlebach 2012) reflects upon the development of 'ethical citizenship' in northern Italy, as volunteers were recruited by the state as providers of welfare. What arises from this discussion, is the idea that voluntarism and neoliberalism are not antithetical but actually mutually constitutive. Moral sentiments, then, are politically loaded and mobilised for political agendas (Fassin 2011) or co-opted by public and private interests to defuse social justice movements and other forms of radical protest (Bornstein 2009, p. 628).

Latent in this discussion of humanitarian interventions is a background of medicines, clothes, and food<sup>3</sup>: the material practices through which political agency are mediated. As such, "the ways in which charitable donations are collected, sorted, and distributed offers a window on the workings of a specific charity and the charity complex in general" (Rice 2007, p. 17). Yet relatively few have treated the 'infrastructure of humanitarianism' (Donovan 2015) directly, although the materiality of aid is often a recurrent concern (Bornstein 2004, Malkki 1996, Redfield 2005). In her ethnography of Lutheran aid practices, Halvorson (2012) has, in contrast, addressed the role of objects in humanitarian endeavours explicitly. She describes how the standardization of bandages made by Lutheran Christians as donations, subtly realigned the meaning of aid for those involved. Originally, handmade bandages embodied

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<sup>3</sup> Douzina-Bakalaki (2017) and Serntedakis (2017) have addressed the role of food in solidarity specifically.

the personal sympathies of their makers. Yet as the agencies which collected and distributed them adopted professionalizing discourses these irregularities were reframed as naïve and outmoded. The ability to produce bandages of a consistent quality became an index of care: religious devotion was expressed through utility. Attempts to update aid practices translated into how bandages were made and assessed, thereby reconfiguring the moral economy of Christian humanitarianism according to a bureaucratic ethos.

## Solidarity

In Greece, humanitarian projects are now inalienable from the question of solidarity (Rozakou 2017). But is the solidarity movement truly radical, or is it equally the product of neoliberal agendas whereby welfare is devolved to individual responsibility? If anything, it is this ambiguity (Green & Laviolette 2016) which defines what Rakopoulos refers to as the 'bundle of solidarity' as a 'bridge' concept (Rakopoulos 2016). Like neoliberalism, solidarity is complex because it refashions existing modes of engagement (Cabot 2016, Herzfeld 2016, Mamoulaki 2017). In this respect, it might also be called 'two-faced' (Cabot 2016): it both emerges from, and continues to be forged by, the conditions of economic austerity. Volunteers have thus treated their political engagement hesitantly (Rozakou 2016b) but have been equally compelled to disregard these reservations out of necessity. Fear that solidarity will slip into philanthropy is even reflected at the theoretical level, with some questioning whether the idea of solidarity should be unravelled entirely (Papataxiarchis 2016). Yet as Theodossopoulos points out, "in everyday life, the de-politicising effect of humanitarianism does not preclude the politically empowering potential of humanitarian solidarity" (2016, p. 181). Solidarity thus seems to be a dilemma founded in dilemmas.

Yet the question of solidarity is not new to the social sciences but actually a classic one. Writing amid the changes which followed industrialization and social revolution, Durkheim attempted to theorize what bound people together in 'modern society'. With increasing division of labour, he argued that people were no longer tied to one another through local similarities but instead through mutual independencies premised upon differences, what he called organic and mechanical solidarity respectively (Lukes 2013). Such ideas would later prove crucial to Weber's writings on rationalization although here the stress was not so much on solidarity as on the life of institutions, the routines which characterized them and how they engendered specific forms of power (Weber 2015). Both, however, shared anxieties about modernity as they perceived it. For Durkheim, *anomie* was an ill of the modern world as solidarity was eroded: "alienation was the opposite of solidarity" (Miller 2012, p. 3). For Weber, greater specialization gave rise to an increasingly restrictive social order in which the possibility for personal freedom was curtailed (Weber 2013, p. 73). Mauss too responded to a similar feeling that something essential had been lost in the transition to modernity. He mobilized ethnographic examples to discover the 'secrets' of "wisdom and solidarity" they contained (Mauss 1990, p. 83). Nor were these merely analytical endeavours but actually concerns intimately connected with each writer's personal beliefs and politics. Mauss was an active socialist (Graeber 2001, p. 156) and despite the strict division he maintained between his political and academic writing (Hart 2014, p. 35) his conclusions in *The Gift* can only be understood in terms of his private interest in cooperatives and socialist politics. Weber too drew on his own experiences in politics when writing on charisma, power and formalization in his essay *'Politics as Vocation'* (Weber 2015b). Durkheim's very emphasis on the social was itself a retort to the interest-driven individualism and 'sordid commercialism' (Miller 2012, p. 4-5) that for him constituted a modern crisis (Miller 2012, p. xviii). Solidarity was thus the answer to a fragmented world upset by individualistic economic interests.

More than a century later these same anxieties characterize the solidarity movement in Greece which positions itself as an antidote to a social order unravelling in the face of impersonal, economic forces. While the interpolation between archaic/feeling/organic and modern/rational/mechanical has been long been debunked in social theory, the poles themselves remain resonant ethnographically. If Muhlebach (2012) cautions us that these

moral and mundane domains actually exist in dialogue, Rakopoulos (2015) asks us to look beyond such distinctions by reframing attention along an axis of formality and informality. Interlocutors from his research in the solidarity movement actively resisted formalization (2015, p. 94-95) arguing informality was essential to their form of political articulation. In this respect, Rakopoulos actively contests Weber, arguing that in this case informality was superior: informal action was both more flexible and effective than its formal cousin because it drew on community links which the latter ignored (2015, p. 85). Weber might have countered that only formal responses to the crisis would ultimately survive. Rakopoulos himself queries this: “whether Thessaloniki’s informal markets can be sustained indefinitely or whether they too will eventually be forced to make concessions to bureaucracy becomes the question” (2015, p. 97). It is to this question which I now turn.

### **Administering Solidarity**

If the central aim of the movement has been to advance social justice, what this means in practice for volunteers is sorting through donations, folding piles of clothes, managing food stores, preparing food parcels, organizing their allocation, and, by consequence, creating, checking and rechecking records. If ethical sentiments are sorted through objects how are these material practices implicated in the production of solidarity? What is its ‘moral infrastructure’ and what subjectivities are inscribed through its administration? Radical action, in fact, was constituted materially, through acts of collection, storage and distribution. At weekly assemblies, time was mostly devoted to discussing the logistics of these activities: arranging when a shipment of fruit arrive, discussing how could it be unloaded and how long would it keep, working out how exactly it should be given away. Such concerns illustrate the difficulties volunteers faced; not only must they engage in the compassionate labour of attracting donations, once secured, the task of storing and dispensing them was considerable. On a daily basis, the volunteers distribute shopping bags filled with food to between twenty and thirty people. At the same time, more than a hundred people might arrive to take unsold bread collected from local bakeries. Various other people stop by with questions, problems, or donations of clothes. Yet the scale of the volunteers’ efforts can be most clearly seen at the single, large distribution of food they organize at the beginning of each summer.

In Athens, where summer temperatures can easily rise above 35 degrees Celsius, the *diktyo* closes<sup>4</sup> between mid-July and September as work becomes near impossible. In lieu of regular, weekly donations the volunteers organize a single distribution prior to this closure. Located in the basement of an apartment building the *diktyo* itself is not large enough to accommodate the hundreds of people who will arrive. Instead, the event takes place at a multipurpose community space on the outskirts of the neighbourhood. On the day, the volunteers arrive early to set-up, giving each other lifts to the relatively secluded spot. A winding road leads up the small hill where the building is perched, overlooking a sports facility dotted with trees. Beyond, the city can be seen stretching away into the distance, filling the view with dappled grey as sunlight hits the sea of concrete.

Inside, the volunteers are busy arranging a series of desks. Each will be staffed by a single volunteer and is marked with a large sheet of paper displaying a number. Households with one member will be directed to desk 1, those with two members to desk 2, and so on. A separate desk is set to one side; those problems which invariably arise will be resolved separately here. The beneficiaries have been told that the distribution will begin shortly after noon but the volunteers arrive much earlier. In truth, there is little to arrange but the reason for their early arrival soon becomes clear. By 10am, people are already gathering outside. As they arrive, myself and another volunteer begin handing out tickets. Numbers in series of ten will be called, allowing those with the associated tickets to enter the building. My fellow volunteer tries to encourage the people waiting to form a queue and, reluctantly, they

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<sup>4</sup> Δίκτυο – *diktyo*: translates to ‘network, net’, in this case with the implication of support.

comply. Others, however, remain chatting in small groups or sitting in shady spots out of the sun. More people appear and head straight for the entrance but are directed to the back of the loosely formed line. A few leave their places not having realized they must first take a ticket. People are calling and shouting, some edging forward as a sense of anticipation builds. Gradually, the queue dissolves until people are crowded around the entrance. All that stops them from entering is the presence of myself and the other volunteer.

By 11.30am there are dozens of people waiting and the volunteers decide to begin. The first series of numbers is called and those with tickets rush forward pushing their way through the throng. Some are pulling hand-trolleys which catch people's legs or become entangled with other trolleys. Small arguments break out as people struggle to come and go, and the continual arrival of new people further compounds the confusion. Once inside, the feeling is orderly, quiet, and cool. A volunteer directs incomers to the appropriate desks. Their cases are checked and, if everything is in order, they are issued with a small card. A little further down from the building two vans have arrived filled with supplies. Here, the cards people have received can be exchanged for large bags of food along with portions of fruit and frozen chicken. In the heat of the day, unpacking and handing out the bags is difficult and it is only around 4pm that the distribution ends. Yet there are still things to be done. Inside, the paperwork must be packed up, desks and chairs rearranged and the space cleaned. Rubbish must be cleared away outside and leftover boxes of frozen chickens carried to freezers inside the building. Next, the remaining sacks of food have to be transported to the *diktyo*, unloaded, and stored. By the time the work is finished, it is nearly 6 in the afternoon and most of the volunteers have been working with little or no break. Overall, however, they declare the day a success and after a few congratulatory shots of *tsipouro*<sup>5</sup> they start to head home. They are pleased with how effectively the day was organized. It was much better than last year, they say.

In relating this account, my purpose is to demonstrate how the desire to realize solidarity cultivated an orderly, logistic ethos among volunteers. Limited means compelled them to think strategically about their work. For a small group with many past retirement age, the task of collecting and distributing food to hundreds of families was considerable. As a result, from initial values of equality and solidarity other values such as efficiency and utility emerged. Volunteers demonstrated their commitment to the *diktyo* by arriving early, working hard, and proving themselves capable by solving problems on their own initiative. Administration, the ability to organize, was a valued skill and only those perceived as most competent undertook this role, managing records as they gave away food. Order and the ability to organize were thus the central concerns for volunteers.

### Ordering Fairness

If, for the volunteers, the ethical problem of poverty created a drive to pursue order, this concern was not a value shared equally by beneficiaries. Rather, the same tensions which played out at the pre-summer distribution were present during the day-to-day running of the *diktyo*. On a typical morning, the volunteers arrive around half an hour early to open the building and begin preparations. Already people are gathering outside, standing on the street and the steps leading to the entrance sometimes blocking the doorway entirely. They do so in anticipation of the arrival of bread donated by bakeries in the neighbourhood. A few try to enter before it is officially open, for which they are rebuked and told to leave by the volunteers. Excuses are given, some claiming they didn't know the time. Others argue that surely it does not matter if they wait inside, '*παιράζει* – it matters!', one of the volunteers insists. Once the door is opened officially, those waiting outside rush in, striving to be served first. As a volunteer, my role was to hand out bread, usually giving two loaves to each person. Invariably, some people would ask for more, occasionally even going so far as to

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<sup>5</sup> A distilled spirit popular in Greece.

take it themselves from the table on which it was placed if not otherwise prevented. For the first half hour, we must work quickly to keep up with the many people arriving.

As the day progresses, the pace of work with the bread slows but other beneficiaries appear steadily to collect plastic shopping bags filled with food. The bags contain non-perishable goods such as pasta, rice, flour, and packets of chopped tomatoes, sometimes also accompanied by fruit, meat, and oil. Along with the shopping bag they receive a card which states their next collection day. On that day, they can return and exchange the card for their next shopping bag of food. The volunteers use these cards to spread out their workload and keep track of their distributions. Yet respect for this ticketing system was not universal. People regularly arrived without their cards, stating these had been lost, misplaced, or simply forgotten. Others came on the wrong day, either too early or too late, to the exasperation and complaints of the volunteers. Amidst this activity other people mill around, waiting to collect either bread, food bags or clothes. A woman peeks through the door which leads into the back space where the clothes and food are stored. A volunteer appears and the woman tells her she is looking for shoes in her size. Only volunteers can enter the back and the woman is redirected to two tables at the side of the room. Here, clothes have been set out under a sign stating they can be taken between the hours of 11am and 2pm. Between so many people coming and going, a few begin rummaging through the piles of clothes although it is not yet 11. An angry volunteer berates them, 'έχουμε κανόνες εδώ – we have rules here', she cries.

What to make of this conflict between beneficiaries and volunteers in this place of solidarity? How to interpret this clash of attitudes? Volunteers, compelled by questions of distribution, were constantly forced to consider how much to give to each person. Fairness therefore framed their acts as they portioned out the *diktyo*'s resources. Yet questions of fairness also informed my own preconceptions as a researcher. Being culturally lost, so to speak, I was surprised that beneficiaries often treated the *diktyo* as little more than a fight for resources. In this, their behaviour reflects cultural habits of interaction with the Greek state, an implacable entity which must be variously feared, cajoled, and massaged to elicit any response<sup>6</sup>. Similar scenes to that at the *diktyo* can be observed across the country on weekday mornings as people attempt to access state services. Anticipating both a long wait and administrative hurdles, people arrive early and as the day progresses increasingly appeal to government employees to help them progress their affairs. More deeply, these habits feed into a cultural imaginary of the state as provider. Despite this expectation, actual welfare provision had tended to be partial, both in terms of coverage and how identity and personal connections have defined access (Petmesidou 2017). By their commitment to impartial treatment, the volunteers framed themselves against this perceived background of welfare habits but as is evident, realizing these values was often a fraught process. Rules became the battleground for these conflicting visions of the *diktyo* as volunteers tried to systematize their vision of solidarity.

### **Allocating Value**

Addressing inequality, volunteers were confronted with a complex set of logistic problems. At the same time, preserving collective resources and enforcing methods of distribution led them to foster a rationalized culture of order and rules. Logistics and rules converged in the systems of accounting that volunteers fashioned to track donations. To receive food bags, people were told to visit on a Wednesday evening 'για να εγγραφούν – to sign-up' to the *diktyo*. With them, they should bring proof of address, tax statements and an unemployment card, with which their entitlement could be assessed. Records were generated with the

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<sup>6</sup> Herzfeld (1993) has treated these interactions extensively in his work on bureaucratic indifference. Campbell (1964) also famously described the ambiguity of such patron relations as local government representatives mediated the application of state laws in northern Greece. For a historical account of the Greek state, see 'History's Spoiled Children' (Kostis 2018).

personal details of each beneficiary: name, address, family, ethnicity, income, donation entitlement and collection history. As people's circumstances changes so too records must be adjusted. Documentation thus underpinned donations, creating considerable amounts of work as files were produced for each beneficiary. Keeping accurate track of information accorded administrators particular importance among the volunteers. Being neither socially or linguistically fluent, as a volunteer I was allocated relatively minor roles usually assisting others in their work. Handing out bread, moving supplies, folding clothes, and cleaning, were jobs anyone could undertake. Managing other volunteers, beneficiaries or handling financial accounts, in contrast, were considered essential and difficult jobs. The importance of administration was also evident at the weekly meetings held to co-ordinate activities and resolve pertinent issues. Volunteers sat in a loose circle in keeping with the non-hierarchical, egalitarian orientation of the group. Despite this, those volunteers with key administrative roles tended to cluster together sitting around the desk where sign-ups took place and food bags were handed out. In a sense, this desk was the heart of the *diktyo* and conferred authority to those who worked at it.

Just as it ascribed worth to people and different kinds of work, administration was also used to define the value of things. Not all items collected by volunteers were regarded equally. Clothes were abundant, donated frequently by people in the neighbourhood. Set out on tables, no volunteer monitored them, so beneficiaries were able to take as many as they liked. Bread was accounted for only roughly. With a quick glance, the volunteers would estimate how much they had been given each day and thereby how much they were able to give to each person. Food bags, meanwhile, were accounted for carefully, their allocation to beneficiaries scrutinised and portioned relative to income. Donations of goods such as chicken, meat, cheese, olives and fruit were also managed thoroughly, sometimes allocated using a separate system of records to ensure all beneficiaries received an equitable share. But most painstakingly accounted of all was oil. At the end of each day, the two volunteers responsible for giving out food bags compared accounts to check everything was in order. They also checked how many bottles of oil had been given away relative to these records. On one occasion, the figures did not add up and the volunteers proceeded to check and recheck the records. Increasingly frustrated by the disparity, one of them began counting the empty spaces in the boxes in which the oil was kept trying to determine how many had been taken out that day. Still the accounts would not tally. Next, they resorted to counting how many bottles had been given out across the whole week, telephoning other volunteers to confirm these amounts. In the end, after half an hour of checking, counting and calculating, the problem was finally resolved.

At the time I was perplexed by such care and concern for a missing bottle of oil which could be easily replaced. Price was certainly an issue but only because it meant that oil was scarce. Where clothes and bread were relatively abundant, oil was more difficult to replace and must be bought with money gathered at fundraising events. More important was the fact that the missing bottle represented a threat to the reputation of the volunteers as capable workers and, to an extent, the system of accounting itself. Behind this was also a latent concern that someone, either volunteer or beneficiary, had taken the oil. It was not only that the accounts did not add up, but the fact that a bottle was missing which provoked such a strong reaction among the volunteers. In this place of solidarity, rights to collective resources were ambiguous and it would be easy for someone to take a bottle unnoticed<sup>7</sup>. Like rules, accounting worked as an index of trust, bounding access to resources. Accounting techniques were therefore applied more carefully to those items deemed of greater value. Yet in a literal sense it was the act of counting itself which delineated what was valuable and what was not, just like the ability to administrate distinguished valuable from non-valuable work and less capable volunteers from more capable ones. In this manner, administration

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<sup>7</sup> This was a real concern: the problem of food disappearing was occasionally raised at weekly meetings with the result that those who worked in the back were subsequently obliged to show other volunteers the contents of their bags when leaving each day.



was used to set boundaries not only between people and things but also between *kinds* of people.

## Bounding Help

Confronting inequality the practical demands of solidarity entailed complex logistic operations which compelled volunteers towards particular kinds of value: order, efficiency and rules. Administration emerged as the dominant trope, used to bound the relationships between people and things. In the final part of this article, I consider how approaching solidarity in this way ultimately shaped the kind of help volunteers were able to offer.

One morning, a man entered the *diktyo*, approaching the main desk at which two volunteers sat working. He inquired casually if they could offer him any help. Leaving their work, they began explaining the process whereby he could be signed-up. As they were talking, he interrupted them and began relating the details of his personal situation. He had moved from Albania three years earlier and was unfamiliar with how things worked in Greece. His plea was personal and emotional as he started to recount the events of his life that had led him to ask for their help. But the volunteers stopped him: “*don’t tell us, it’s not our business, you need to go to KEP<sup>8</sup> and tell them*”. They informed him he must first be issued with an unemployment card at KEP and bring this, along with tax statements and proof of address on a Wednesday evening. Again, he tried to describe his circumstances but the volunteers only reiterated what they had already told him and sent him away. What stands out in this encounter is how the man’s narrative was abstracted through administrative procedures. In a very real sense, his pleas and attempts to elicit compassion were of ‘no account’. Help at the *diktyo* was not, officially, offered on a subjective basis but as an impartial right. ‘Solidarity for all’ goes the slogan that so often accompanies publicity in the solidarity movement. Yet in this setting, fairness and impartiality actually worked to depersonalize the man’s claim to solidarity. For the volunteers, help became a bureaucratic problem to be resolved. As solidarity was translated into an organizational structure, with equal rights secured through a set of rules, the meaning of these rights became subtly altered.

For Albanians, the largest non-ethnic Greek population living in Greece, discrimination is not unheard of. A minority of beneficiaries openly objected that volunteers helped Albanian residents, implying solidarity was a privilege to be shared among ethnic Greeks only. That such complaints were dismissed by the volunteers, who insisted the *diktyo* was open to all people irrespective of background, was actually a departure from the institutionalized discrimination non-ethnic Greeks have often experienced in Greece. Sitting behind the desk with the volunteers as this scene unfolded I was confused by their apparent indifference. Although the man’s right to help was guaranteed by the volunteers’ systematic, impartial approach, his ability to access that help ultimately depended upon how well he was able to conform with the procedures they had set out. Already at a disadvantage as a foreigner unfamiliar with state practices, his difficulty was further compounded by speaking Greek as a second language. Nor did it appear that he was fluent in the ‘administrative’ language used by the volunteers.

Administration, in fact, formed an implicit barrier to help. Documents were the most obvious manifestation of this. Proof of address was necessary because only those living within the limits of the neighbourhood were entitled to support. Help was thus mediated by a further criterion, in this case a municipal boundary set by the state which shaped who could and who could not access the *diktyo*. Necessarily, the homeless and undocumented were excluded absolutely by this requirement. People living outside the limits of the neighbourhood were directed to similar solidarity groups operating elsewhere. Although it was rationalized that people could be equally helped at other organizations, in reality these

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<sup>8</sup> ‘KEP: ‘Κέντρο Εξυπηρέτησης Πολιτών – Citizens Service Centre’. A government administrative agency with a wide domain of functions but essentially the bureaucratic interface between the Greek state and citizens.

were often considerably smaller and less well equipped, if they operated at all. Meanwhile, requirements for tax statements and unemployment cards also excluded the undocumented living unofficially in the neighbourhood. As an impartial approach to administering solidarity expanded rights for some, it also implicitly bounded the kind of help on offer behind technical barriers, excluding others. Documents became the medium of arbitration for who was entitled to help and who was not.

### **The Limits of Solidarity**

If documents, desks, and files formed a boundary defining the limits at the *diktyo*, impartial rules also allowed the volunteers to set limits to caring. As a volunteer, my chief task was handing out bread. Each morning, sacks of bread were unloaded by another volunteer onto a central table. Laying them out, she would quickly take stock of how much bread we had received. In a firm tone, she would call to me the number of loaves we would give to each person. 'Two!', she told me. 'Two!', I replied. As people pressed around the table, we worked hurriedly to attend to them. While some would take the bread without comment, many would ask for more: 'βάλε άλλο ένα γιατί είμαστε έξι στο σπίτι – give (us) another one because we are six people at home'. If I refused, repeating that we were giving two loaves that day, the responses varied. Some tried to reason with me, others attempted flattery and a few criticized me outright: 'δεν είσαι καλό παιδί – you're not a good guy'. On occasion, one or two might try to take the bread themselves, provoking angry reprimands from my fellow volunteer: 'μην το πιάνετε εσείς – don't touch it yourself!'. In rare cases, people would lose their temper entirely, refusing to take any bread whatsoever, rather than take what was offered. In the course of the day, if any bread was left over we might give away more loaves to each person. On other days, however, there was none left for people late to arrive. Therein lay the problem: it was impossible to know how many people would arrive or how much bread they needed.

Such work is draining not only physically but emotionally: to be intimidated, pleaded with, even shoved, to be surrounded by constant demands for more. How best to make decisions in these circumstances: does this person deserve more bread, on what basis, are they speaking honestly, how do you refuse someone in need? As an ethnographer-volunteer, experiencing the stresses of these moral dilemmas first-hand led me to understand the feelings this work aroused in the other volunteers. Whereas at first, I tried to be accommodating, giving more bread than I technically should. Yet as time passed, finding it impossible to satisfy the requests of people asking for more, I was increasingly strict. If initially I tried to understand what motivated people to ask for more and accommodate them, over time it was easier to think less and simply focus on getting the work done. Like the other volunteers I became more detached, relying on impartial rules in response to demands which were impossible to meet. As with administrative techniques, these abstract rules thus became a barrier used to insulate volunteers from emotional demands and draw the limits of care. As a result, not everyone received the 'right' amount of bread. The volunteers rationalized this as fairness; despite the constraint better that everyone receive the same amount. In a way, this problem with bread expressed the fundamental contradiction which defined work at the *diktyo*: solidarity for all was impossible given their limited means. In response, the volunteers were compelled to offer an impersonal, audited form of help that they determined as the best choice in impossible circumstances.

If volunteers relied on procedures and administration to order their activities, doing so constrained them in other ways. From time to time, this led volunteers to overlook their own rules which they rigidly enforced in other circumstances. Such an obvious inconsistency was reflected in my own experience of handing out bread. It was often difficult to refuse heartfelt requests from people asking for bread to feed their families. Similarly, specific requests beneficiaries made for clothes were refused and they were only permitted to take items set out each day. However, one day a woman with two small children arrived at the *diktyo*, asking if the volunteers had any shoes in her children's size. This situation elicited a strong

response from the volunteers, a few of them going into the stores to search for something suitable. Breaking rules, then, was sometimes an act of compassion made in moving circumstances. In other cases, rules were overlooked simply to accommodate beneficiaries. One morning, an elderly woman and her mother were waiting outside. Both used walking sticks and clearly had difficulty walking. Even though it was before opening time, a volunteer invited them in to wait inside on a couch adjacent to the door. Where rules were unreasonable they could be overlooked. Yet doing so came with consequences. Immediately after the two women sat down another woman entered asking if she too could wait inside, but this request was refused. After working so hard to bound the space of the *diktyo*, the volunteers were reluctant to set a precedent by allowing other people to wait inside.

Similar tensions were evident at the single, pre-summer distribution. In the event, the day on which this happened had been a hot one and one woman arrived feeling dehydrated and faint. Making an exception, the volunteers allowed her to sit inside but the other people waiting complained this was unfair. A few argued that, for various reasons, they too should be allowed to wait inside. Bending the rules was thus a tricky affair lest the volunteers be accused of favouritism. In other cases, rules were broken for more practical reasons. Dealing with a particularly difficult man who was shouting and making a fuss, one of the volunteers tried to placate him by offering him a shopping bag filled with food, even though he was not signed-up to the *diktyo*. The volunteer dealing with him, Eleni, was an elderly woman and although she appeared cool and collected at the time, afterwards she was shaking visibly as another volunteer attempted to console her<sup>9</sup>. Open conflicts like these were stressful for the volunteers, as I well understood after repeated arguments when handing out bread. In this case, the man had come repeatedly without the correct documentation and although other volunteers grumbled he would just come back next month, Eleni gave him a bag anyway to smooth over the situation. Meanwhile, cards were often forgotten when collecting food bags and while the volunteers commented loudly about this, they rarely refused to help anyone. On the one hand, this showed flexibility on their part to accommodate beneficiaries. On the other, it was often simpler to overlook a problem in order to get things done. Rules were therefore disregarded, both to help others and to help volunteers manage their work.

If bending rules was sometimes necessary to keep things running efficiently the end result was to empower volunteers. Although they bent the rules to help others they also broke them to set the limits of care and defuse confrontations. In a situation where volunteers were able to overlook rules and beneficiaries could not, it was the former group who were able to define the conditions of solidarity. As arbiters of welfare, volunteers acted as gatekeepers to the resources collected with the goodwill of the community. Control of those resources, and the moral responsibility for allocating them, was a tension which defined the relationship between volunteers and beneficiaries. Yet as the language of solidarity was translated into administrative structures to distribute and police resources a kind of bureaucratic power accrued to volunteers. By phrasing problems in practical, technical terms, volunteers glossed over this dynamic as they implicitly prescribed who did, and did not, have access to resources, as they defined the limits of solidarity.

### **Material Care**

Tracing the course of these ideas, I have attempted to dwell on the how the desire to address inequality was transformed through the process of administering it. Here it is not my concern to assess the quality of these devices or pass moral judgements about the 'success' or 'failure' of volunteers' efforts. Nor is it intended as a reflection upon the solidarity movement as whole which encompasses diverse forms of action and organization. Rather, I have sought to examine the unfolding of a particularly rationalistic approach to solidarity, the

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<sup>9</sup> Shortly after this event Eleni stopped volunteering at the *diktyo*, claiming she was now too old to do this kind of work.

ethics with supported it, and some of the ambiguities it provoked. Faced with the task of distribution, volunteers sought efficiency in their work. Scant resources and the moral questions elicited by the act of giving led them to adopt an impartial approach, which was also a retort to subjective forms of welfare. Yet through these endeavors, the volunteers systematized not only their activities but also their view of rights themselves. To safeguard these, as well as the collective resources of the *diktyo*, they turned to abstract rules to enforce order. A disinterested, impersonal kind of help thereby emerged, as it became mediated through administrative devices. Administration, more than a set of practical tools, implicitly delineated status and value, setting boundaries to care as it determined who was entitled to help and who was not. More than mere apparatus, power relations were inscribed through administrative practices that were essentially ethical, as they implicitly structured who was entitled to what and why.

Returning to Weber, the attention he devoted to bureaucracy was an attempt to explain how organization compels specific forms of power. In particular, how charismatic power becomes institutionalized and transmitted through the process he called routinization (Weber 1978, p. 1121). Whether the political momentum of the solidarity movement will remain informal and charismatic or give way to formal institutions is precisely the question posed by the ethnographic account presented here. Unlike Rakopoulos' interlocutors and other 'solidarians' who actively resisted formalization, the political sentiments of volunteers in this ethnographic setting receded amid everyday practicalities. In Weber's vocabulary, charismatic authority gave way to institutional authority. What this ethnography offers is greater detail about how power is naturalized by the fact of administration, and more specifically, how it is rooted in the control and distribution of objects. States, to an extent, are always administrative regimes: part of their power lines in this apparent banality. When refugees are dehistoricized and treated in terms of their bodies as legal, bureaucratic objects this is an ultimate form of anti-politics. Yet Herzfeld also reminds us that bureaucratic issues often hinge upon who is included (1993, p. 22-34), either for refugees seeking recognition from alien states or for citizens petitioning an indifferent one. It is not coincidental that the mediation of these questions is often material: passports and documents, bandages and aid supplies, and critically, food. Questions of distribution are therefore also questions of inclusion, be that in terms welfare payments, aid provisions or donations of food. In Greece, where the boundaries between philanthropy, humanitarianism and solidarity are increasingly blurred (Theodossopoulos 2016, p. 170, Douzina-Bakalaki 2017, p. 5), this ethnography details the depoliticizing qualities of solidarity when operating according to a distinctly material conception of care.

Elsewhere in his writing Weber noted that:

"the position of every "democratic" movement that aims at the minimization of *Herrschaft* "domination" has a certain ambivalence [towards democracy itself] because the notion of "equality before the law" and the desire for legal guarantees against arbitrariness demands a *formally* rational and "dispassionate objectivity", in contrast to past patrimonialism" (2015, p. 103).

This insight expresses the essential paradox of work at the *diktyo*: equal rights were impartial but also at once a form of entitlement. Solidarity for all was really solidarity for some due to constraints on what volunteers could offer. Solidarity did not re-personalize a social fabric unraveled by neoliberal forces but instead created distance between volunteers and beneficiaries as the former strived for impartiality. Nor was this a radical space; political discussion was muted in favour of practical concerns. Despite their efforts to guard against patronage and the danger that solidarity would slip into philanthropy the volunteers remained powerful agents, allocating resources and defining help. Perhaps the greatest contradiction

is that should their determination to address inequality be successful their work as volunteers may no longer be necessary. Since the period of my fieldwork, the municipality has launched its own solidarity structures which will operate around those voluntary organizations already in place. Is this solidarity or governmentality, have volunteers radicalized the state or has the state de-politicized the volunteers? Whether my interlocutors had any reservations about such questions, however, these were lost amidst the constant bustle and demands of their work. If anything, I believe them to be satisfied with their efforts. As they might say: 'καλά πήγαμε – we did well'.

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