

Original Research Reports

The Neoliberal Myth of Austerity: Debt and Solidarity in the Forefront of Public Space

Andreas Vavvos^a, Sofia Triliva^{*b}

[a] Department of Sociology, University of Crete, Rethymno, Crete, Greece. [b] Department of Psychology, University of Crete, Rethymno, Crete, Greece.

Abstract

A multitude of crises have ravaged Greece during the past six years. The ensuing austerity policies, imposed as antidotes, appear to have impacted people's lives gravely. The collapse of a failing social and political system led to the establishment of social solidarity initiatives. One of these initiatives is the Somateio Allilovoithias Ofeileton Rethymnou (SAOR-Network for the Mutual Assistance of Rethymno's Debtors). SAOR offers comradeship by activating citizens to build collective strength and to resist foreclosures actively. In this paper, we present the results of a qualitative study focusing on the lives of the people who are members of the network and are involved in deterring foreclosures. Eleven interviews and a focus group discussion provided by coalition members were analyzed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Three superordinate themes were identified: 1) Living on the precipice: Shocked, hoodwinked and debt-ridden; 2) Mutual anger against the 'betrayers' and the need for resistance; and 3) The national bankruptcy and unending deliberations regarding country's and the coalition's fate. These themes comprise a story entitled: The neoliberal myth of austerity: Indebted personhood in a bankrupt nation. Indebted citizens described the emotional collapse, the alienation, the feelings of solidarity they experienced and their anger toward politicians.

Keywords: neoliberalism, austerity, debt, crisis, anti-foreclosure coalition

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*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Crete, Gallos Campus, 74100, Rethymno, Crete, Greece. E-mail: triliva@uoc.gr



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In the aftermath of the post-war displacement of Keynesianism, the neoliberal model of governance supported by diverse schools of economic thought, such as the ordoliberalists and the Chicago school of economics, was imposed through violent and brutal experiments in the Global South during the 1970's (Brown, 2015). The core ideological axioms of this doctrine of political economy are that 'unemployment is a choice,' 'privatizations are good for everyone,' 'free market economics is an integral part of human nature,' 'individuals are selfish and antagonistic' etc. (Gane, 2015; Read, 2009). The most influential definition of neoliberalism, according to Flew (2014), comes from the Marxist political economy, as the dominant ideology of global capitalism or as an assemblage of fallacious views implemented to preserve class power.

Foucault's conceptualization of neoliberal governmentality is also a groundbreaking approach in the field, stressing that neoliberal economic policies have mostly materialized by operating on desires, affectivity, and subjectivities. Hence, neoliberalism has been constituted as an 'ideological' standard through which human nature and the relationship a person has with his/her self and the social world can be examined and understood (Lazzarato, 2015; Read, 2009). The implementation of neoliberal policies would have been unthinkable without the production of a 'guilty', 'responsibilised', 'flexible', 'financially capable', 'precarious' and 'individualised' subjectivity (Kioupiolis, 2014; Mylonas & Kompatsiaris, 2013; Walker, Burton, Akhurst, & Değirmencioğlu, 2015).

Wendy Brown (2015) has reworked these Foucauldian conceptualizations, illustrating that sacrifice and not interest, constitute the core principle of the neoliberal homo economicus. The amplification of the languages of austerity, which constitute a focal point in the solidification and reinforcement of the neoliberal logic, has been grounded, according to Brown, in the 'shared sacrifice' of the citizens for the sake of the promised and future macroeconomic and national progress. Furthermore, Peck, Theodore, and Brenner (2010) have critically pinpointed that the contemporary financial crisis, metaphorically described as the "Berlin wall" of neoliberalism, might indicate the entrance of neoliberalism in its 'zombie phase'. To the contrary, Aalbers (2013, p. 1085) underlines that the neoliberal ideological axioms have not been widely questioned and concludes that "what we have witnessed in the last couple of years is not the dismantling of neoliberalism but, by and large, the furthering of neoliberalism". These diverse understandings of the concept originate from its dynamic, discrepant, heterogeneous and adaptive nature. Flew (2014) and McGuigan (2014) point out that it constitutes nowadays a ubiquitous and catch-all term, widely and uncritically used to explain a myriad of economic conditions.

Debt, being at the centre of this political debate, is functioning as the main neoliberal hegemonising and disciplining tool, in its various forms: debt safety-nets and student loans (Lazzarato, 2015), household and national debts (Houle, 2014; Papamichail & Mizamidis, 2015), mortgage bubbles, etc. Ensuring the subjective conditions (construction of 'bad conscience' and production of feelings of shame and guilt) and establishing a neoliberal financial melancholia and debt-related distress and depression (Davies, Montgomerie, & Wallin, 2015), debt is now auto-positioned in the centre of people's lives. This diffusion of the figure of the indebted person (entrepreneur of himself/herself and master of his/her existence) in the public space shows that everybody is a debtor, guilty and responsible in the eyes of Capital, the Universal Creditor (Lazzarato, 2012, 2015).

The modern economic crisis which started in the USA in 2007 and expanded in many European countries by 2008 has been the primary vehicle of this neoliberal reform. The austerity regimes that have been implemented in the so-called PIIGS economies and in other European countries by the European Central Bank, the European Stability Mechanism, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and governments in order to deal with the severe crisis include draconian cuts in wages and pensions, shrinkage in social protection, reduction of government spending for public health, and widespread privatisations. Austerity has been considered a perilous policy inasmuch as it misrepresents a veiled banking crisis as a sovereign debt crisis (Blyth, 2015) and besides this, Stuckler and Basu (2013, p. 140) have concluded that austerity is "a socially constructed myth", which castigates "the most vulnerable, rather than those who caused this recession."

In Greece, the country which has suffered most from draconian austerity policies, unemployment reached 28% in November 2013, wages and pensions were reduced by 20 to 50% from 2009 to 2012, while country's debt-to-GDP ratio rose from 106% in 2007 to 170% in 2012 (Blyth, 2015; Markantonatou, 2015). According to Public Issue's data for 2012, four in 10 households (41%) have taken out a bank loan, while it is estimated that approximately

18,000 properties are going to be sold at auction in 2018 (Hope, 2017; Public Issue, 2013). Maria Giannacopoulos (2015) has critically depicted these transformations in Greek society as being a part of an ongoing global, economic and colonial project which undermines the national sovereignty of the country. At the same time, according to Kioupkiolis (2014), they indicate a shift from post-democracy to an oligarchic regime of post-political biopower, making Greece the ideal paradigm of Agamben's (2005) concept of the state of exception and Lazzarato's (2012) construction of indebted personhood.

The auspicious implementation of these brutal austerity measures has also led to a decline of the general health of the population. Rises in suicidality (Economou, Madianos, Theleritis, Peppou, & Stefanis, 2011) and in depression episodes (Madianos, Economou, Alexiou, & Stefanis, 2011) are only some parts of what has been dubbed a 'creeping health disaster' (Levett, 2014), 'a modern Greek tragedy' (Antonakakis & Collins, 2014) and 'a social drama' (Dafermos, 2013). As Dafermos (2013) states, Greece looks like the mythical and tragic hero Prometheus, whose liver was being slowly consumed by an eagle.

Nevertheless, this collapse of the failing euroatlantic social and political system has compelled people facing mounting debt, foreclosures and evictions to contest the financialization and commodification of indebtedness. Anti-debt collectivities such as Rolling Jubilee and Strike Debt and anti-eviction movements like Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) in Barcelona and Bündnis Zwangsäumung Verhindern (BZV) in Berlin have taken direct action addressing crucial issues regarding debt and housing through grassroots activism. The arsenal of their praxis includes occupying banks and empty houses, physically averting notaries and other court officials from completing the legal processes involved in foreclosures, providing legal advice to people affected by evictions and indebtedness etc. (Caffentzis, 2016; Ordóñez, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2015; Suarez, 2017). In austerity-stricken Greece, thousands of informal initiatives have also expressed anti-austerity sentiments by writing ironic slogans, establishing solidarity economy, and food distribution cooperatives (Knight, 2015; Rakopoulos, 2014).

One such network is SAOR, an anti-foreclosure network founded in 2012 to offer psychological, legal and financial support to debtors and defend their rights. SAOR's members have disrupted and prevented more than 1000 planned court foreclosure proceedings during the past six years, while from 2017, they had to deal with the launch of the online auction platform, a prerequisite of the third bail-out programme, which was followed by vehement clashes between the police and members of the 'stop' foreclosures movement. In this research endeavour, we studied the lives of some of the over 400 people who are members of the network in an attempt to consider how they grasp their lifeworld concerning socially shared and personal meanings in the interface of austerity regimes, overwhelming debt, and political action.

Methods

The present study focuses on how austerity has impacted members of SAOR everyday lives as they confront economic crisis, overwhelming debt and contemplate and participate in political action. Eleven interviews and one focus group discussion provide the qualitative data, through which the indebted citizens' voices and meaning-making are analysed. The subjective experiences and understandings were highlighted mainly in the interviews, while the focus group discussion gave the participants the opportunity to compare and discuss their experiences and opinions in a dialogical manner.

Participants

Seventeen members of the coalition participated in the present study. Through snowball sampling of the SAOR members, the researchers came in contact with participants and informed them about the study's nature and purpose. Participants provided informed consent after the study's aims, benefits, and procedures were explained to them. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Department of Psychology, University of Crete. [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#) below provide the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1

Demographics of Focus Group Participants

| Name | Gender | Age | Employment | Marital status |
|------------|--------|-----|---|----------------|
| Theodoris | Male | 59 | Unemployed carpenter | Married |
| Tonia | Female | 48 | Housewife | Widowed |
| Katerina | Female | 47 | Secretary | Divorced |
| Vasilis | Male | 43 | Plumber and owner of plumping supply shop | Married |
| Dimitris | Male | 53 | Marble and tile contractor | Married |
| Alexandros | Male | 49 | Small business owner | Married |

Note. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

Table 2

Demographics of Interview Participants

| Name | Gender | Age | Employment | Marital status |
|------------|--------|-----|--------------------------------|----------------|
| Panagiotis | Male | 48 | Retired military officer | Married |
| Sofia | Female | 62 | Retired secretary | Divorced |
| Michalis | Male | 38 | Bankrupt bookstore owner | Single |
| Georgia | Female | 56 | Foreign language instructor | Divorced |
| Maria | Female | 47 | Foreign language instructor | Married |
| Manolis | Male | 63 | Retired journalist | Married |
| Despoina | Female | 45 | Unemployed waitress | Divorced |
| Iakovos | Male | 50 | Unemployed building contractor | Married |
| Anastasia | Female | 44 | Restaurant owner | Divorced |
| Stelios | Male | 64 | Unemployed engineer | Married |
| Nikos | Male | 57 | Real estate agent | Married |

Note. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

Data Production

During the period from October through December 2014, 11 semi-structured interviews and one focus group were conducted (six participants). Members of the coalition approached the Psychiatric Department of Rethymno General Hospital and members from Department of Psychology at the University of Crete requesting psychological help for debtors in their network who were facing severe mental health challenges. As they requested, the specific research was conducted to clarify their needs and help bolster their collective actions.

Interviews and focus group, ranging in duration from thirty minutes to two hours, were conducted by the first author and took place in private in the official office of SAOR in Rethymno. Interview questions were based on two axes: participants' daily lives under the shadow of austerity measures and their involvement in SAOR. The structured part of semi-structured interview protocol contained questions such as "Has your life changed during the years of economic crisis?" and "How did you deal with your financial obligations?". Prompts such as "How has your participation in SAOR impacted your life?" or "Is there something that you do not like in the way that coalition functions?" were used in focus group to elicit responses from participants. The interviews and the focus group were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, translated into English and analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Analysis

The vigorous and systematic procedures and data analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a framework for coding the data. The phenomenologically informed thematic analysis included familiarization with the data, data reduction via coding, using the coding to identify patterns across the data corpus in relation to the research questions, deriving themes and producing condensed data in conceptually grouped analytical units. These procedures were followed separately by each researcher and were culled by comparing codes and embodying them in one common codebook and constant comparison and discussion resulting in the three overriding themes. The main reasons for choosing this method was its theoretical freedom and flexibility in that it permits researchers to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivist and objectivist theoretical approaches and discuss aspects that are bounded to both epistemological frameworks. It is therefore important for this study to discuss the dialectical relationship between participants' accounts and objective reality.

Results

Data analysis yielded three superordinate themes which are interdependent and comprised the participants' stories with semantic continuity. The themes were: Living on the precipice: shocked, hoodwinked, and debt-ridden; Mutual anger against the 'betrayers' and the need for resistance; and the 'national' bankruptcy and unending deliberations regarding country's and coalition's fate. These themes comprise a story entitled: The neoliberal 'myth' of austerity: Indebted personhood in a bankrupt nation.

The Neoliberal Myth of Austerity: Indebted Personhood in a Bankrupt Nation

Participants provided thick narratives regarding their experiences of over-indebtedness and described how they felt anesthetized by austerity discourses and lapped into a fatal lethargy triggered by the neoliberal "siren" song. Realizing that they had built their personhoods according to neoliberalism's principles and that they are now being forced to accept society's transformations, they reflected on their personal and collective predicament contemplating how to bring about social change and overcome apathy and lethargy.

Living on the Precipice: Shocked, Hoodwinked, and Debt-Ridden

In the first thematic entity, participants described their lives and affectivity before indebtedness and the precarious and taxing 'crisis' years that impregnated people's lives with tremendous uncertainty leading to the collapse of their dignity. They described how they had worked hard and had managed to have sustainable livelihoods before the 'crisis' and the brutal neo-liberal adjustments. The stories they narrated made apparent that all that transpired

was beyond them and brought on by economic policies, politicians, powerbrokers and governing bodies—those yielding great powers. The first theme discerned from the data describes participants' lives on the precipice, with their futures reconfigured within a context where the traditional building blocks of living life with dignity had collapsed.

Personal debt in the shadow of the past — Most of the participants describe their lived experience through the crisis years as a state of rumination, where thoughts revolved around social and familial hardships and financial concerns. Also, the present state of affairs was compared to what appeared to be a romanticised past. As Iakovos explains: “Some years ago, I remember that my phone was ringing 30 times a day with people relaying jokes... Those days are over; they are over... people's interactions are finishing...people are isolated...everybody is shut down in his world of problems”.

Furthermore, participants recalled that they had led honest and conscientious lives. They describe themselves as trustworthy and above-board in their financial obligations, and as a result of this, their words conveyed bewilderment and bemusement concerning their over-indebtedness. Participants expressed a sense of injustice since they were unable to implement the promise to pay their debts and blamed external factors. Georgia stated that “because of all these and without being responsible for any of the problems, I was disappointed...since I was consistently responsible with obligations, in my taxes, in society, in my family...everywhere... all this was beyond my means”. Despoina also declared:

We were living; we were living...we were working, we were living with our families in a beautiful manner...neither were we stealing, nor taking out loans... we were paying our taxes...our tax returns were submitted on time and were clear of problems, and they brought us to this situation...why?

Participants like similarly positioned European and North American citizens, rejected the personal responsibilities bestowed upon them and expressing feelings of ‘nostalgia’ for a lost era of prosperity appeared arrested in neoliberalism’s ‘good’ old days (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). The neoliberal promises were breached practically overnight, and people were left to ponder ‘who’ or ‘what’ is to blame.

Shock and awe: Emotional collapse, precarity, and despair — The economic crisis and ensuing austerity policies ravaged the participants’ daily lives and pushed them to the edge of what they described as an “abyss.” Some of them referred to this as a “desperate time” stating that they were not able to buy their “daily bread” (Despoina) or a “soap to shower with” (Manolis). Initially, debt was a solution for people facing mounting overdue bills owed to public services, taxes, and social security costs. In essence, people were forced to incur more debt through bank loans to be able to continue their civic responsibilities and fulfill culturally imposed expectations (Hodgetts, Garden, Groot, & Chamberlain, 2015). As Despoina describes: “If you become entangled with banks...it’s difficult to get away...and I fell into this...then, credit cards were recourse, a lifeline for me, the solution...but essentially they were not a solution...they just delayed what is sometimes inevitable.”

Participants also described the nation’s financial demise and their challenges which amplified the collective struggles. Anastasia and Despoina had divorced and raised their children in single-parent households, Georgia, Iakovos and Michalis were shocked from the shutdown of their business, Sofia was unable to help her son facing mental health challenges, Manolis and Despoina faced health problems, and Maria was unable to assist financially her children who were university students. The crisis affected them disproportionately, leaving them feeling unproductive and forced to carry the weight of collective guilt for delivering a bankrupt nation to the generations to come.

This situation constitutes for participants loss of integrity and brings about stagnation, which along with the shock that the austerity measures provoked, created an insurmountable amalgam of contempt and humiliation. Participant's economic hardship and difficulties in providing for their children spoils their personhood by going against the core personal, intergenerational, and civic responsibilities that their generation is trying to bring to fruition. Along these lines, Georgia declared that "I felt great responsibilities for my children because I have three children and I have to provide for them...in addition I worried about my students" and Manolis stated that "every day a new generation of those looted, those heavily mortgaged, those indebted, is produced". Despoina also reiterated this:

I feel that I don't have dignity... I feel ashamed... I am... that I am disgraced... that I shouldn't live. I don't have dignity. I can't support my children. I can't help them. That means that I don't have dignity anymore.

Their personhood was so compromised that, much to their chagrin, taking a walk in the city they lived and worked has become enervating and enfeebling. As Iakovos describes: "first of all, you were likely to run into someone to whom you were in debt, and I could not stand this" and as Anastasia echoes: "my social contacts were necessarily severed or reduced since I had no money." These individuals were rendered stagnant, disconnected from their community and estranged from others and their developmental trajectories were thwarted. Despoina clarifies: "I do not feel a member of the community of Rethymno...only member of my family ...everything else is strange for me".

As Despoina's words echo what Caffentzis (2016) elucidates, contrary to the collective nature of wage, debt tends to estrange and alienate debtors not only from themselves, their belongings, the collective and class struggle but primarily from other debtors. Has the neoliberal homo economicus, as Brown (2015) wonders, thoroughly absorbed and displaced homo politicus? Along these lines, Manolis' words highlight the difficulties participants faced as humiliated and indebted Greek citizens in the era of austerity. Furthermore, unable to treat, share and be with one's friends and to participate fully in social life is anathema culturally for a Cretan man and equated with loss of dignity. Manolis expounds:

After the 15th or 20th of each month, when the pension money is finishing, I am ashamed to go for a coffee...because a group of friends will come...and I won't have money to treat them. I am invited to weddings and I say "Oh my Holy Mary, how will I go?" We are hurting...I am not embarrassed to say this. We are suffering; we are suffering.

These abominable circumstances which have been confronted daily engendered despondence and desperation. In other words, debt economy deprived European citizens the future - as a time, as a choice, and a possibility - they had bought into and hoped for (Lazzarato, 2012). For example, Iakovos reciting a *mantinada* (Cretan couplet) states:

Well, in this situation...when you are in it you do not see a tomorrow, because ...if you say "a good day will come tomorrow" you have hope... "alack the man who doesn't dream, who is pained and has stopped hoping that there is healing"...this is tragic for our society.

The descriptions of lived experience that the participants provided resemble what Naomi Klein (2007) dubs "shock therapy"- abrupt economic changes that produce a cascade of intended psychosocial reactions. After a widespread implementation of the "shock" therapy in the Global South and the Arab world, both the Southern hemisphere of Europe and Greece specifically constitute the first examples of applying these policies in the Global North (Kioupiolis, 2014; Woestman, 2012).

For participants, this shock was connected to the abrogation of their daily life, perilous positioning, humiliation and the annulment of their developmental trajectories. They poignantly describe how, at this point in their lives, their losses were economic, social and emotional. The feelings expressed by participants elucidate their respective sense of ‘shock’:

They put you in buckram and you are 57 years old...you cannot get up or recover like someone who is 30 or 25 years of age would...this is very painful...you are exhausted and then they say to you “now is the starting point of the Golgotha.” (Nikos)

I was crying and saying “my whole life was there, all that I had achieved, and in one moment, you say to me, indirectly, not directly, ‘STOP!’ I...who sacrificed so many hours... it is like they gave you (a punch) in your head and it broke...that was the shock...I fell apart. (Georgia talking about the shutdown of her business)

Participants of this study can be considered as an ideal paradigm of what can be named as “indebted personhood” or what [Türken, Carlquist, and Allen \(2015\)](#) define as “morally failed indebted individuals”. Experiencing this debt crisis through the neoliberal individualist frame, debtors across the world have perceived themselves through the bizarre prism of the subjecthood of shame, guilt, and humiliation. This subjecthood - compatible with neoliberal governmentality - has been enabled and constructed through the main neoliberal technologies of the self (individualization of the social and responsabilization of the individual) and the dominant psychologizing discourses which attribute the debt problem to the personal characteristics of the debtor ([Lazzarato, 2012](#); [Walker et al., 2015](#)). The risks of this crisis are socialized and externalized onto citizens, but the profits are privatised.

Mutual Anger Against the ‘Betrayers’ and the Need for Resistance

These common impasses participants faced, the personal and national problems, the disappointment emanating from the political system, the loss of social status, the lack of control over their lives and their fears regarding their own and the generations to come futures, pushed them, for first time in their adult lives, toward collectively organized actions aiming at social reform. Their civic engagement entails becoming part of an “activist” network whose primary aim is suspending bank foreclosures of people’s homes. The aim of their political praxis depicts how they are not “dishonest” and that the onus of guilt and debt, personal or national, public or private, lies with governments, banks, and IMF. Hence, they bring debt to the forefront as a critical site of exploitation and political struggle.

The participation in S.A.O.R. and solidarity as recourse — Most of the participants were small (family) business owners who had never before participated in social actions and movements. As Michalis, a bookstore owner who has filed for bankruptcy states “I was never involved and I hated common actions...everything related to common struggles...I didn’t want it, I was leaving”.

However, their need to feel socially productive has pushed them to find common answers for their common impasses. Anti-eviction groups, such as SAOR and PAH, have provided a sociospatial topos of communication, where indebted citizens and those who sympathize with them, encounter each other in a commonplace to make sense of the crisis and forge collective identity by challenging the mainstream narratives of indebtedness and comprehending the commonality of their indebtedness ([Suarez, 2017](#)).

As Michalis’ and Georgia’s words show the creation of the coalition has helped the members deal with guilt and self-stigmatization and to resist the individualisation of debt. Georgia said: “If these movements were missing, I don’t know what I would be...I might have committed suicide” and Michalis disclosed:

At first, I was helped from the first moment, since I found people, who had...they were facing the same destiny as me. I didn't feel that I am the lonely, the asshole, the alone, the crook that the state wants us to be...that we are the swindlers who have the responsibilities on our backs. (Michalis)

What has united them in this collective effort was their common anger against “the betrayers” and the need for resistance. The goals of the SAOR collective are also reflected in the words of Katerina who said: “That which is visible to most of us is that we go there in order to stop the foreclosures of homes”. Panagiotis added that their struggles is an attempt “to save our dignity and our homes” and Iakovos declared: “For me personally, it was...to exist as a collective resistance against the system and whatever they were preparing for us, robbery of our property...to adjust (our debts) and give us a chance to work and pay”.

This moment when individuals overcome the feelings of guilt, alienation, and shame and disclose in public space their status as ‘debtors’ is the most crucial in the making of the coalition. What is going to determine the frontline struggles of our era is, according to Caffentzis (2016) and Ross (2014), the contingent transformation of invisible indebted individuals into visible and active subjects, who will collectively resist against the debt economy.

The occupation of their place, as homeland and home — One of the fundamental aims of members of SAOR mobilization is the fight against ‘the occupation’ and the conquest of their place, as both homeland and home. Despoina clarifies that “I do not have the means to pay them, so I expect at any time now, a notice to come to me...to evict me from my house...and I literally will be found on the street with three children” and Iakovos also reports that “I will blow it up, I will burn it and I will leave...in my house, no German or anyone else will enter...when I leave, it will be burned”. Furthermore, their activist praxis has gone beyond the bank takeovers of people's homes to ethnic and national ramifications, and the concept of home was extended to the homeland. Manolis states: “Their second target is the public property...because Greece is a blessed place” and Alexandros expounds: “There is a war now, and we (the Greeks) can't find... we don't see a tangible enemy...because Greece lives a war at this moment, so? A financial war five years now and you can do nothing”.

As it can be surmised from these excerpts, the attack is double: both on their homeland and on their homes. On the one hand, participants are trying to save their last solid ground – the ‘sacred’ and ‘blessed’ nation which is under occupation/threat from ‘foreigners’ (EU institutions/IMF/refugees) and these circumstances push them to adopt in, many cases, patriotic and xenophobic views. On the other hand, home conjures up feelings of ontological security and, as a result, the foreclosures of homes and the ‘mortgage bubble’ have dramatic consequences for people's mental health (Houle, 2014). Caffentzis (2016, p. 9) describes this moment when, a debtor getting in his/her home “enters the front door of a treasury of objects that are continually crying out that they are not his/hers, but at the same time the debt used to purchase them is definitely the debtors”.

Democracy threatened and the blamed and betrayed populace — According to participants, an “execution” (Iakovos) and a “premeditated crime” (Michalis) are being committed, since in the country “a ‘Junta’ the likes of which has not passed ever before through Greece” (Iakovos) has been instituted. During the austerity years, people's political disappointment combined with a lack of trust in government, political institutions, and political parties have risen dramatically in Greece, and this brings to the forefront the ‘democratic legality of memorandum’ policies (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou, & Exadaktylos, 2014).

For the participants, such policies result in defending the rich and powerful people's rights and interests and not in resolving the economic and social problems since as Katerina states: “No austerity policy brought...of course

government says that it must be done in order to pay the debt...**this is a fairy tale** anyway...no austerity policy brought growth in any place...at least as...as I know...all this is a fairy tale anyway which is said to people in order to put us to sleep". The issues of political disappointment and betrayal mentioned by SAOR members were also reported in [Rodik's study \(2015, p. 72\)](#) about indebted citizens: "Respondents often expressed the sentiment that they had been tricked, that their trust had been misused and that they were not protected by the government."

In contrast with the mainstream neoliberal narratives which responsabilize debtors in national and individual level, participants – being fully aware of the myth of austerity- highlighted the responsibilities of the external Others (Troika, Germany, IMF, creditors, banks etc.) and the Others within (influential political figures, businessmen etc.), while emphasizing that they do not belong in the team of "we all consumed the country's wealth together". They vehemently disagreed with the mainstream neoliberal narrative, which equates debt with one's identity and one's citizenship to an entrepreneur of his/herself, a master of his /her existence and a homo economicus. Participants in our study did not take the guilt being tossed in their direction. Along these lines, Georgia states: "The phrase 'we all ate it together' ('we are all in this together') doesn't include me...I was not in this team, of course, I was not" and Nikos expounds:

Namely, he comes and says to you "everything you knew...forget it...I have nothing more to say to you"...he puts the bl...the blame on you..."we all ate it together"...we ate the crumbs they gave to us... their system...that was, to give us crumbs to eat and make us jointly responsible because we ate the crumbs and they ate caviar...because we drank wine, and they drank champagne..... this shared responsibility was placed on us.

Participants expressed rage and the bitterness against all of those who responsabilised them, attacked their dignity and enslaved them and their homeland, saying:

And the fury I feel...the fury is personal... I want him, him, him to pay for the crime they committed to me, to my family, to my mother, to my father, to my friend, and to my neighbour. However, it starts from a selfish (motive), in the sense that they did it **to me** and they have to pay for this. (Michalis)

Standing against the simplistic but dominant discourse of the 'irresponsible', 'rascal' and 'profligate' debtor who uses credit unethically, participants stated that debt was for them a systemic necessity and that they stopped paying their debts because they had to deal with the dilemma 'mere existence/survival versus debt' (see also [Rodik, 2015](#)), pointing out:

I won't accept the option to deprive a child of milk to give an installment to a banker...I give this money to my children, to my grandchildren, to my neighbour whose children are hungry, as opposed to giving it to the bank...no way. (Georgia)

Despite the fact that 'debt cancelation' and the refusal to pay odious debts can be liberating and relieving for individuals and nations, the demand for a more profound restructuring of a social and economic system that creates indebtedness and the development of creative alternatives are much more pressing issues ([Caraus, 2016](#); [Ross, 2014](#)). Notwithstanding, participants as indebted people blame those governing, the State, the refugees, the banks and national and European institutions, but fall short from responsabilising the whole neoliberal agenda and system and there is no talk for social and economic restructuring.

The National Bankruptcy and Unending Deliberations About Country's and Coalition's Fate

As depicted above, participants are trying to resist in their construction as “indebted” and “irresponsible” citizens. Furthermore, they also categorically stated that the whole country is a “debt society” and is bankrupt, hence, all Greeks should be considered over-indebted. Also, the lack of generalized and effective mobilization from both Greek citizens and the members of SAOR makes them desperate and apprehensive about the country's and the coalition's future.

Greece as debt society and the diffusion of indebted person's figure — During the austerity era, Greece has been dubbed a “debt society” (Stavrakakis, 2013) and “debt colony” (Giannacopoulos, 2015) and in this context of uncertainty and insecurity, participants' worries about the future were very intense. For them, all Greek citizens are going bankrupt both financially (huge national loans) and as “personhoods” because of the “ethical” and “political” bankruptcy, values crisis and clientelism (see also Pappas, 2013). Hence, citizens with personal debts are not the only ‘indebted people’. Iakovos discloses that “Everybody who is in lion's den...that essentially all the Greek citizens are... everybody has taken cards, loans for holidays...we all fell in lion's den” and Nikos explains: “Well, people who have problems, those who are debtors are the majority...they are the ninety percent, I don't say one-hundred percent”. Dimitris also referred to the adage “we are all indebted” and stated that “No one...no one can say to me today that he doesn't confront psychological problems in his household...because of unemployment or debt”.

SAOR's sociospatial topos of daily struggles like other anti-eviction groups (Ordóñez et al., 2015; Suarez, 2017) have made feasible a cross-class alliance of people from various ideological backgrounds (from supporters of communist parties to voters of Golden Dawn), but their accounts, tied to the perception of the people as a homogeneous ethnic group (the “Greek” people), create a hodgepodge with regard to the common identity of the coalition. Furthermore, we have to critically pose some questions regarding the similarities between participants' narrative (‘we are all debtors’) and Lazzarato's (2012) theoretical approach regarding the diffusion of the figure of the indebted man in the public space. Is every citizen indebted to the same degree? Is debt diffused in the same way in every citizen, every culture, and every nation? Is debt the fundamental technique of governing and controlling subjects?

Illusive solidarity, impasses in collaboration and worries about country's and coalition's fate — Another concern for participants is that the coalition does not have as many members as it should, to be useful in its praxis. Maria describes: “If I fight alone or if 10-15 people fight in SAOR, we will not yield results...it is frightening for those ruling to see many people” and along the same lines Theodoris discloses: “The coalition is very inactive...the coalition is making efforts, but there are no people.....this, this is my worry...I don't see people.” In the centre of their common impasses, one can also find the elusive character of solidarity, a concept which has come in the forefront of the Greek public space as a nodal point of the anti-austerity campaign (Rakopoulos, 2014). Participants critically reflected on how the austerity avalanche had thwarted the feasibility of forging solidarity ties between the members of the network. As Stelios states:

Hmm...and what is written in coalition's name here... solidarity coalition and things like that, I find them fake...to hope somewhere, to give products and things like that...and I was thinking...I say “when you...are unable to survive, how can you give to someone else?”

Concerning the country's future, as the following extracts illustrate, participants are teetering between hope and despair, fluctuating between pessimism and fighting spirit and aligning with ethnocentric ideologies. Manolis states:

“Patience...as when Germans came in 1941 and killed us...they left...freedom came...where there are cataclysm and freeze, the rainbow will appear” and Dimitris concludes: “The situation is intolerable...I see that in the future every month and every year is getting worse... I foresee that things won't get better when the government changes if it changes...I don't see that we will experience something positive for many years.”

Conclusions

The focus of this research initiative was to highlight both the subjective aspects of neoliberal capitalism and the liberatory – but also ambiguous– responses, accounts, experiences, and viewpoints of Greek “indebted” citizens who are trying to transverse a crisis-ridden context and resist collectively against debt economy. The culturalisation of the so-called ‘Greek’ crisis and the diffusion of a discourse of national and collective responsibility for it have contributed to the making of a neoliberal paradise in Greece (Kiouпкиolis, 2014; Mylonas & Kompatsiaris, 2013). All Greeks, becoming ‘normal’ and obedient citizens and abandoning eastern characteristics, are forced to enter – through austerity – in a full process of westernization (Mentinis, 2013). These problematic dimensions of the neoliberal narrative – widely underscored by participants of this study – are pressing concerns (Gane, 2015; Read, 2009).

Participants – and similarly positioned Euro-American citizens – have been gravely impacted by appallingly destructive neoliberal adjustments, severe austerity measures and astounding national and personal debt. Their response to the collapse of a neoliberal growth-oriented lifestyle, to the increase of unsustainable lifestyles, and to the breach of the promises of modernity for progress are pressing issues (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). Feelings of nostalgia for a lost era of social cohesion, the patriotic framing of their struggles and the unquestioning approval of the liberal, colonial and individualized conceits of property ownership (see also Roy, 2017) are some examples of the general controversial responses of the citizens of Global North to the current crisis. This blurring between the polemics against neoliberalism and austerity regimes and the difficulties involved in disputing well-established values and ways of being before the crisis is the crux of the idiotypic befuddlement discussed in the present research.

Despite the aforementioned problematic dimensions of their struggles and taking into consideration the individualising nature of debt, the process of creating an anti-foreclosure network can be considered a liberatory step. SAOR members have chosen to resolve the austerity regime's ramifications by adopting active, collective and solidarity discourses (participation in a coalition) and not a self-destructive and individualistic stance (the suicide or passivity options). Their understandings of the coalition's praxis exemplify how they construe social justice when it comes to debt and austerity and their strategies to change a system that seems oppressive to them. Withal, SAOR members' accounts broaden our understanding of the impact that civic involvement can have on individuals (personal feelings of generativity, engagement, and redemption), communities (saving homes and defending rights, sharing and reaching out to others), and societies (protest against ‘unfair’ policies); all culminating expressions of consciousness-raising about debt within communities.

Despite the elaboration of ground-breaking approaches in the debt literature by Lazzarato (2012) and Graeber (2011) there is little empirical research that has focused on how debt has contextualized and restructured people's daily experiences, personhood, and praxis. In addition, to our knowledge, this is the first study focusing on an anti-foreclosure and anti-debt coalition in Greece. Papamichail's and Mizamidis' (2015) study in the austerity-

stricken Greek context and Hayes' (2010) study in Debtors Anonymous have focused on the psychological well-being of people in debt and their studies report similar results to ours regarding the structural causes of indebtedness and the stigmatization, labelling, and feelings of shame and social isolation of indebted citizens. Also, following the ethnographic research of Suarez (2017) in PAH and the comparative case study of Ordóñez et al. (2015) in PAH and BZV, this qualitative study can add useful insights about the anti-foreclosure network in Greece, especially regarding the grievances and agonies of evicted and indebted citizens and the complexities and contradictions involved in reconfiguring one's subjectivity and aligning it with collective praxis and shifts in social and political positioning.

Furthermore, there are many avenues for further research. For example, future research should take into consideration the gendered aspects of the figures of homo economicus and femina domestica and explore the gendered dimensions of citizens' experiences and responses to indebtedness, foreclosures and political struggles (see also Brown, 2015). Also, our research was not longitudinal limiting the connections that we can validly make between successful foreclosure interventions, bankrupt businesses, SAOR members' responses and changes in government policies. Longitudinal research is sorely needed to develop deeper understandings of the implications of such complicated life and historical circumstances. It is important to note, that this is a localized qualitative study and further inquiry should be made into the anti-foreclosure coalitions that have sprouted across Greece and Southern Europe.

Additionally, the prism of this research differs from the majority of psychological studies, which focus on the psychological profile of debtor or on the internal and psychological factors, which are studied as causes of over-indebtedness (Walker et al., 2015). Many studies also, that highlight the enormous human cost of austerity regimes, reproduce mainstream psychologized narratives and discourses. Doing so, they contribute on the depoliticisation and psychologisation of the "Greek crisis" (see also Mentinis, 2013) and reflect and reproduce the sort of atomistic individualism associated with neoliberalism. In contrast, we attempted to highlight how people are reacting to the structural factors that have played an essential role in the debt crisis and pinpointed an urgent need to reposition debt in its psychosocial, political and economic context. It is social scientists' debt to talk about debt.

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