Socialities of solidarity: revisiting the gift taboo in times of crises

This article addresses solidarity and the opening of social spaces in the relations between refugees and residents of Greece who try to help them. ‘Socialities of solidarity’ materialise alternative worldviews; they are loci for the production of lateral relationships; places inhabited by the prospects that derive from the political production of sociality. The article discusses the ‘gift taboo’, dominant in the pre-crisis era, that reflects the risks of giving to the formation of horizontal relationships. In the contemporary ‘European refugee crisis, and other crises, the gift taboo has collapsed, posing challenges to the egalitarian visions of sociality.

Key words sociality, solidarity, gift, European refugee/migrant crisis, Greece

Introduction

In 2015, an unprecedented stream of material aid was transported to Greek islands from all over the world and different parts of Greece in order to address the ‘European refugee crisis’ in the country. The recipients of these offerings were various solidarity initiatives and associations, some of which had recently emerged as a response to the huge numbers of people who crossed the Greek–Turkish sea borders. Delivery companies undertook the pro-bono transfer of parcels to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and collectivities. A single transport company transferred more than 6,100 packages, weighing over 95 tons, between November 2015 and January 2016.1 Storehouses were full of clothes, food and other items. The Internet was flooded with crowd-funding campaigns by people from abroad who gathered contributions in order to travel and volunteer in different parts of Greece. Local groups already active in refugee assistance were startled by the amount of donations in objects and money, and the number and enthusiasm of new volunteers who came to join their activities. Tourists in the Greek islands decided to turn their vacations into the systematic assistance of border-crossers, distributed water and food or transferred people with their cars.

This massive delivery of material aid portrays a shift from the dominant understanding of the gift in Greek society. Greek ethnography has depicted a picture of a society where giving is met with suspicion, and the limitations of solidarity are bounded to the predominant agonistic principles of social interaction. Nevertheless, in line with the phenomena explored in the other articles in this issue, local responses to the refugee crisis in 2015, and, in particular, the abundance of giving, call for a re-evaluation of the contemporary practices vis-à-vis the gift in Greece.

In this article, I discuss socialities of solidarity in relation to giving, and what I name ‘the gift taboo’: the predominant prohibition of material and immaterial offerings

that I witnessed in the 2000s when I did fieldwork on voluntary work with refugees. Volunteers at the time stressed the distinction between solidarity and charity (cf. Theodossopoulos and Cabot, this issue). Gift-giving was considered a threat to the formation of egalitarian relationships in a cultural setting where autonomy is of crucial importance and one-way offers are met with suspicion. However, in the last years a significant transition has occurred from the gift taboo to the proliferation of generous giving. Taking as a vantage point the island of Lesvos in 2015, I explore the negotiation, if not altogether breaking, of the gift taboo. I thus address solidarity and the formation of new social spaces in the relations between immigrants and refugees and residents of Greece who are trying not only to help them, but also to incorporate them in culturally significant forms of social interaction. I choose to speak of ‘socialities of solidarity’; social spaces that intend to materialise alternative visions of society; places inhabited by the contradictions and the prospects that derive from the political production of sociality. Forms of sociality draw on existing patterns of relatedness and, at the same time, broaden them. Solidarity resonates with potent moral ideals of how society should be, and how people should relate with one another. In no sense am I introducing a moralistic and uncritical view of these relations. On the contrary, elsewhere I have pointed out their hierarchical elements (Rozakou 2012). Human relations are never devoid of ambiguities and contradictions and the people involved are, most of the time, not only aware of them but also self-reflexive, even before the anthropologist appears on the scene.

It was in early July 2015 when I read the news on social media: a woman was arrested in Lesvos for transporting people who had trespassed across the border. The 59-year-old woman was facing felony charges for facilitating irregular immigrants’ transfer, whereas, apparently, all she was trying to do was assist a few of the people who had to walk dozens of kilometres under the hot sun until they reached the Coast Guard registration office in the capital of the island. Thousands of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and other countries arrived on this Aegean island every month following a perilous journey from the Turkish shores. The sight of people walking for hours was inescapable throughout the summer. Sometimes forced to walk 80 kilometres, they were not allowed to use means of public transportation or hire a taxi. The authors of online messages called for support for the woman during the trial that was to take place a few days later. The description of the woman, her age, occupation and area of residence made me jump in my seat. ‘Melina’, as I name her in my writings, was a member in one of the voluntary groups that I studied more than a decade earlier in Athens. The group supported a guesthouse for male asylum seekers. They also visited old abandoned houses and wandered in squares where people from the Middle East and Africa temporarily stayed. Their aim was to ‘approach’ immigrants and refugees in their living spaces and form social relationships with them. Melina was my muse for several years and my guide to a social world that aimed to materialise the vision of solidarity with refugees.

Melina and the rest of the group were then pioneers in ‘supporting immigrants and refugees’, as they depicted their actions. Long before what has come to be known as the ‘European refugee crisis’ in 2015, in the 2000s there was already an established ‘asylum crisis’. 

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2 A total of 500,018 people arrived on this island with a population of 85,000 in 2015, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id = 355; accessed 1 February 2016).

3 All names used in this article are pseudonyms.
crisis’ in Greece: applications were slowly examined, the refugee status was rarely attributed and the reception infrastructure was practically non-existent (Cabot 2014). Despite the fact that solidarity was still far from a ‘bridge-concept’ (see Introduction in this issue) or an ‘all-encompassing notion’ (Rakopoulos 2014: 98), for Melina and her fellows it was a powerful emic category that fuelled their endeavours. Whereas normative discourses then saw an ‘underdevelopment’ of volunteerism in Greece (Rozakou 2016), this small group demonstrated remarkable persistence in ‘approaching’ refugees.

In 2015, nevertheless, things were quite different. Allileggi (solidarity) had become part of the everyday vocabulary; it was evoked by state representatives and the Prime Minister himself, and it was reproduced in journalistic reports on local responses to the refugee crisis in Lesvos and generally in Greece. In recent years, allilèggi (solidarian) had turned from an adjective to a noun; this grammatical shift signified the radicalisation of solidarity and the predominance of specific forms of public sociality. The term ‘solidarian’ emphasises lateral and anti-hierarchical sociality and the contrast with bureaucratic frameworks (Rozakou forthcoming). The solidarian has come to embrace diverse forms and areas of action: from attendance at protests to the distribution of material goods (Theodossopoulos, this issue); from visits to detained immigrants in pre-removal centres (Rozakou forthcoming) to the creation of refugee shelters; from the running of health clinics for all (Cabot, this issue) to anti-middlemen initiatives (Rakopoulos 2015).

My narrative begins with the pre-crisis era, in the early 2000s, and continues with transformations and continuities in solidarity with refugees and immigrants in recent years. During my first fieldwork (2002–7), I focused on voluntary work with refugees. Melina’s group was then representative of a form of sociality that pursued lateral and anti-bureaucratic relationality both among the volunteers and with the refugees (Rozakou 2016). Since 2012, I have been studying ‘solidarity initiatives’, as they are widely known, namely, open assemblies formed ad hoc to support various immigrants and refugees groups in Athens. Throughout the summer and autumn of 2015, I did research in Lesvos. My fieldwork took place inside and around centres where border-crossers were registered and, in some cases, detained, as well as in incidents when volunteers distributed material goods, cleaned up space and transferred people in their cars. Apart from participant observation and interviews, I collected secondary material throughout 2015. This material included announcements and discussions in social media; calls for the collection of goods; published lists of items; volunteers’ accounts; and solidarity groups’ statements, among others.

**Alternative socialities with the ‘other’**

Sociality as an analytical concept emerges from the debate on society and the times of critical rethinking of major analytical categories in anthropology and broader social theory. It was in 1989 in Manchester, UK, when Marilyn Strathern and Christina Toren suggested the turn to ‘the relational matrix which constitutes the life of persons (...) always embedded in a matrix of relationships with others’ (Strathern 1996: 66).

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4 Since 2014 the research has been conducted as part of the research project ‘The social life of state deportation regimes: a comparative study of the implementation interface’ of the University of Amsterdam. The project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC-Starting grant 336319).
Sociality aims to connect the cultural and the social schools in anthropology through the study of the cultural formation of relations. In a recent revisiting of the concept, Long and Moore approach sociality ‘as a dynamic and interactive relational matrix through which human beings come to know the world they live in and find their purpose and meaning within it’ (2013: 2). The emphasis is on the plasticity and malleability of human interaction and its resonances with historically and spatially informed ethical imaginations (Long and Moore 2013: 14).

Emergent socialities and their ethical resonances are the subject of ethnographies that seek to explore the production of collective subjects (Dzenovska and Arenas 2012; Lazar 2013; Pink 2008), novel spaces of relationality in times of social precariousness (Allison 2012), vis-à-vis the authoritarian state (Yurchak 2005) or in the setting of virtual social spaces (Long 2012). Sociality turns the ethnographic lens not only to organised political action (in terms of social movements) but also to mundane human encounters, and brings to the fore their political potentialities. Human encounters become sites that challenge state-based definitions, boundaries and lines of power (between citizen and non-citizen, for example). Hence, the relationships between border guards and border-crossers in Latvia are not defined solely by the border regime, but also by particular understandings of public sociality (Dzenovska 2014: 272). These encounters unexpectedly turn into interactions between subjects who are not merely defined in terms of state belonging, but also as people in search of a ‘normal life’ (Dzenovska 2014). Interactions between the indigenous population and newcomers incorporate and expand culturally shaped patterns of sociality. In Spain, *convivència* is a key term of popular discourse claiming a multicultural legacy that derives from the historical experience of the coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the Iberian Peninsula (Glick 1992). As the ‘dominant construction of difference’ (Suárez-Navaz 2004), *convivència* is evoked in the reception of immigrants, fuelling practices and social spaces (Suárez-Navaz 2004; Erickson 2011; Rogozen-Soltar 2012).

The historically formed impetus of ethno-cultural similarity shapes the formation of sociality in Greece. Identifying it as the ‘dominant state of alterity’, Papataxiarchis (2006) emphasises the perseverance of sameness as a constitutive principle of sociality, thus associating the level of mundane interactions with the broader sphere of national formation. The *xenos* (stranger) is incorporated in the social world of the native – yet only partially and conditionally. It is no coincidence that hospitality has haunted public discourses, the country’s self-representation and treatment of immigrants and refugees, as well as anthropological scholarship for decades (Herzfeld 1987). In a potent reproduction of the nation-state in domestic terms, *filoxenia* (hospitality) is a national value and an act of extravagant generosity toward the *xénos* (Herzfeld 1997: 74–88). Hospitality is both the manifestation of the incorporation of the *xéno* in sociality and a transformative and deeply hierarchical form of inclusion. Sociality turns into a lesson to appropriate ways of behaviour and similarity, in a context where difference is a threat to ethno-cultural similarity (Papataxiarchis 2006: 1–8). In recent decades, immigrants and refugees seem to fit ideally the hospitality scheme in the sense that it

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5 For a recent interdisciplinary study of forms of public sociality in 20th-century Greece, see Avdela et al. (2015).

6 Due to lack of space, I will not here enter into an extensive review of the study of hospitality in Greek ethnography. For this discussion, see Herzfeld (1987: 74–88), Papataxiarchis (2006), Papagaroufali (2004: 84–103) and Rozakou (2012). See also the section on the gift taboo in this article.
manifests their deeply hierarchical and conditional social incorporation. Nevertheless, contrary to their structural exclusion, liminal legal status (Cabot 2014) and invisibility (Rozakou 2012), the sphere of informal daily interaction becomes the locus where their social existence is acknowledged (Papataxiarchis 2014). Sarah Green (2012) broadens the perspective of the interrelation between similarity and sociality in her work on the undocumented dead bodies of border-crossers in Lesvos. From the locals’ viewpoint, these bodies are recognised as social persons despite their anonymity. Although they are not similar to the locals, yet they are familiar to them as conceptually placed in a culturally significant system of social relationships: kinship. ‘Almost everybody has relatives somewhere’ (Green 2012: 138) and so do these unmourned bodies.

**Solidarity in times of prosperity**

**Approaching refugees**

The 2000s was a period of economic growth and prosperity for the middle classes in Greece. During that time, a set of legislative frameworks, subsidy flows, scholarly works and state policies aimed to enhance volunteerism and were actually part of the construction of voluntary work as an ideal of civil participation (Rozakou 2016). In contrast to the professionalisation and institutionalisation of volunteerism then in the making, Melina and the rest of the group rejected their definition as ‘volunteers’. For lack of a better word, they self-identified as ‘activists’. What they embraced was a historically – and culturally – informed understanding of social relations that promotes fluidity, openness and egalitarianism and counterpoints the professionalised ethos of volunteerism. They denounced state and EU funding, as well as any sponsorship from private companies. They were not merely expressing a critique to neoliberalism and the demise of the welfare state – a demise which was then embryonic compared to austerity-ridden Greece (cf. Cabot and Theodossopoulos, this issue). Although they often declared that they were against ‘doing the state’s job’, what they did was distant from the provision of ‘services’. The group adopted neither the dominant eligibility mechanisms of NGOs nor bureaucratic labels. Hence, they did not refer to the people they addressed as ‘beneficiaries’ according to the predominant vocabulary in professionalised NGOs. Furthermore, the group did not aim to alleviate some of the pain of the refugees in humanitarian terms. They systematically sought to incorporate them in sociality and recognise their social existence.

Most of the participants shared in common a similar political past, when they were active in left-wing political groups that ranged from the extra-parliamentary Left to the,

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7 Andrea Muehlebach, who did fieldwork around the same time in Italy, records the ethical production of citizenship in Italian volunteerism at the era of neoliberalisation (Muehlebach 2012).
8 The denouncement of the self-definition ‘volunteer’ was related to Olympic Volunteerism campaigned in preparation of the Olympic Games Athens 2004. Participants in the voluntary association I studied protested against it and the commercialisation of the Olympic Games.
9 Heath Cabot records a different picture in pro-bono legal aid to asylum seekers; one much closer to the professionalisation of volunteerism (Cabot 2013). I have the impression that the professional character of legal aid strongly shapes the site she studies and the production of volunteerism.
then still small, political party of Synaspismos. Since the 1990s, when the number of immigrants and refugees in Greece rose considerably, this part of the Left had incorporated the discourse of ‘social exclusion’, which was originally directed to internal ‘others’; ethnic and religious minorities. The Left expanded the traditional vocabulary of class solidarity to that of difference and included broader spectrums and subjects. As non-citizens residing in the marginal zone in the nation-state, immigrants and refugees became the prominent subject of the left-wing inclusionary rhetoric.

The US-led wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003 led to a further rise of the populations fleeing these countries and seeking refuge in Europe. These were, mainly, the people Melina and her group *proséggize* (approached). The term ‘approach’ reflects both the hesitancy and the potentiality of the group’s endeavour. It reveals the uncertainty they felt when they knocked on a *xénou* (stranger’s) door or when they addressed a *xénos* in the park. Their attempts always began with a timid and careful introduction ‘we come from a small association; we are not the state; we try to approach people’. The group considered it a ‘success’ when they were accepted, people answered their questions and, especially, when they invited them for tea. Commensality was the manifestation of a sociality that transcended or even reversed hierarchies. The political formation of sociality was grounded on the level of human interaction; on the ways in which activists sought to engage with the ‘other’. This observation is not limited to this particular group or period of research but refers to various collectivities that share solidarity as their formative concept. These are groups that acquire different forms and activate in diverse fields: from Greek and English language lessons, street-work in parks, to visits to detainees in pre-removal centres. Their activities are only the pretext for their aim, which is the formation of egalitarian relationships.

Signifying a break with the extravagant generosity of hospitality, solidarity seeks to overcome the limitations and the perils deriving from one-way offers. In the premises of the voluntary association where Melina participated, a poster read in 2003: *‘Dhe mirázoume típota, mirazómaste ta pánda’* (‘We distribute nothing, we share everything’). The slogan refers to the gift taboo and summarises a version of sociality that is grounded on reciprocity. Giving was always the cause of serious debate. Whether formula to an infant or escorts to the hospital, all offers required significant self-reflection on behalf of the group, who considered gifts as a threat to their vision of a society of equals. ‘We do as much as we can. *Sometimes* we gather clothes or blankets we then give out.’ Dimitra introduced herself and her fellows to several Afghan men who had accepted the group’s invitation and came to the premises of the association one afternoon in the summer of 2003. Other volunteers carried on this introduction and set things straight: ‘There are *not many things we can give you*’ and ‘what we do is *very little*’. Vasilis summarised the purpose of the meeting: ‘We invited you in order to *get to know each other*.’ The group always considered it extremely important to make it completely clear to the refugees that giving was random and that it was not, in reality, an essential part of their activities.

10 ‘KKE-Esoterikou’ (Greek Communist Party Interior) emerged from a split in the Greek Communist Party and developed as a Eurocommunist party. It later formed a great part of ‘Synapsismos’, which was the main predecessor of contemporary Syriza.

11 Similar observations have been made about the Italian and the European Left (Però 2007).
At some point during my fieldwork I had the awkward feeling that the topic of my research was somehow unfitting. I was there, exploring ‘voluntary work with refugees’ but nothing resembling ‘work’ took place. What I witnessed was people who hesitated collecting and distributing goods; so-called ‘volunteers’ who resented the label ‘volunteer’; people who questioned and felt uncomfortable when they had to make a decision about accompanying refugees to the hospital or to public services. I noticed how hard it was for them to hand out clothes and blankets in the rare moments they had decided to do so, and how specific people would not participate in these distributions. I saw them hand out maps with directions to health clinics and hospitals, and encourage the refugees to go there on their own while they discussed among themselves that taking the refugees to the hospital was inappropriate.

Melina, always a rebel, was too often the subject of accusations because she meticulously collected and redistributed things to refugees. Her storage room was full of clothes, blankets, furniture and provisions that she gathered from friends. Melina would violate even the most elementary principles of the gift taboo and she would give money to refugees despite the disapproval of her comrades. In long discussions, they accused her of being a ‘charitable volunteer’, a paradoxical figure who jeopardised the prospects of egalitarian relationships with the people they approached. After all, this was what they all struggled for. It took me several months to appreciate the significance of these conflicts. From the volunteers’ perspective, all offers – either material or immaterial – threatened to generate power relations and to place the refugees in an inferior position. Indebted to their donors, they would be unable to pay them off. *YPHΩΡΕΩΣΙ (obligation and, also, the state of being in debt)* was considered incompatible with the prevalent egalitarian ethos of this collectivity. For Melina, all these concerns were merely ‘theoretical’ and irrelevant to the practical issues of everyday life. ‘When a child is hungry, you have to feed it’, she often told me. Contrary to most of her fellows, who were single and childless, Melina was both married and a mother. Even though she considered herself far from the traditional model of the woman who is only concerned with the domestic space and her family, she identified with the effort required for the care of the family and the children that occupied some of the refugees. For the remaining people in Melina’s group, the gift posed serious threats to their lateral ideal and unreciprocated offers were met with distrust.

**The gift taboo**

The first anthropological studies of rural Greece underlined the importance of kinship as the fundamental organisational principle of Greek society and depicted a world of competition between households. Solidarity was only possible within the household or the realm of kinship, in a world governed by agonistic social interactions. John Campbell’s (1964) ethnography of the transhumant community of the Sarakatsani in the 1950s demonstrates how local attitudes towards the gift are based on differences in kin ties. Thus, although exchanges of favours between consanguine relatives were common among the Sarakatsani and did not require a counter-gift (1964: 97), favours and services between affine relatives were always grounded on the principle of reciprocity (1964: 144). Du Boulay attributes this predominance of the ‘calculated’ gift to an environment of scarce resources over which Greek villagers competed (du Boulay
In fact, extravagant generosity to the stranger was possible (and so widespread) exactly because the stranger did not partake in the same social landscape (du Boulay 1991: 52). Respectively, excessive offers and a highly performative hospitality to the stranger in mountain Crete were associated with male pride and the agonistic character of male sociality (Herzfeld 1985). One-way offers to the stranger were thus embedded in a moral universe of social worth, *filótimo* (love of honour), which was widespread in Greece and in the Mediterranean in general (Herzfeld 1980). The prevalent reservation towards gift-giving (or, rather, to gift-receiving) is attributed to the Greek people’s repulsion to obligation and hierarchy, and, in particular, to the predominant principles of autonomy and freedom (Hirschon 2001). Papataxiarchis (1994), nevertheless, proposes another perspective. The cosmos of *kafenío* (coffeehouse), he suggests in his study of an Aegean island community, was an alternative to the world of obligations demarcated by the domestic sphere. Men at the *kafenío* delved into practices of generalised reciprocity; they offered each other drinks disregarding any sense of obligation. *Kéfi* (good humour) was related to the accomplishment of an ideal condition of the self; one grounded on obligation-free and spontaneous sociality. The essence of this sociality was the symbolic production of a world of equals and the transcendence of hierarchies.

In the early 2000s what was at stake for the volunteers who approached refugees was a reversed version of the culturally emphasised principle of autonomy (cf. Hirschon 2001: 24). It was not the volunteers’ autonomy that was jeopardised, but rather the refugees’. The transgression of status differences and the production of laterality that is accomplished in other settings of sociality (cf. Papataxiarchis 1994) were not considered possible in the relationships between the volunteers and the refugees where difference prevailed. The gift taboo is, hence, related to certain cultural understandings of gift-giving. Moreover, it predominates in quite different ideological projects: from the left-wing version that opposed the institutionalisation of volunteerism, like the one expressed by Melina’s group, to official volunteerism then under construction. In the setting of the promotion of volunteerism in the early 2000s, the Greek distrust towards the gift interacted with broader trends in volunteerism and the shift from donations to ‘empowerment’.

In mid-19th-century Greece, people who participated in emergent forms of social intervention towards the ‘poor’ called their practice ‘charity’. In the early 21st century, charity was considered a politically dangerous and, frequently, discredited concept by the most diverse actors. Since the middle of the 1970s, NGOs had emphasised ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ over material goods (Benthall 2001). This shift signalled the transformation of the actual gift offered from the provision of material offers to ‘advice’ and ‘information’ to local communities. The key slogan became ‘help the poor help themselves’ and the final gift offered was the gift of self-reliance (Stirrat and Henkel 1997: 73). The transition from charity to humanitarian aid (Bornstein and Redfield 2010), and the distinction between development and

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12 The logic of the Greek gift seems to be in tension with the ‘modern’ institution of organ donations that is promoted in the ‘modernised’ Greece of the 1990s (Papagaroufali 2004). Although official discourses at the time reproduced the model of Greek hospitality in their campaigns encouraging organ donations, they have proven unsuccessful into mobilising Greek people towards this kind of altruistic offer.

13 There is a rich body of historical works on charity in 19th-century Greece. See, for example, Korasidou (2000).
charity (Stirrat and Henkel 1997), echo the symbolic character of the gift. NGOs internationally struggle to distinguish what they do from charity and from the inequality it generates. Nevertheless, although the gift is no longer material, this does not mean that it is not a gift. It is still an offer, if not ‘charity under a different name’ (Benthall 2001).

Compatible with Theodossopoulos’ observations on the critique of philanthropy (this issue), the gift taboo and the construction of volunteerism that I witnessed in the early 2000s seems to speak directly to the great patriarchs of social theory and, in particular, the Maussian puzzle of the gift. The gift taboo specifically echoes Mary Douglas’ comment in the first paragraph of her Foreword to The gift: ‘charity wounds’ (Douglas 1990). The prohibition of the gift entails a classification of offers that considers material objects inappropriate and money the most polluted (see Bloch and Parry 1989). Money, belonging to the sphere of market exchange and interest, cannot enter areas of social relations that, by definition, stand beyond that and seek to reach sociality in its purest (morally) sense. Whereas charity in its archetypical form tries to approach the ‘free gift’ as much as possible, volunteerism in early 21st-century Greece denounced any connection with the gift, particularly individual giving and material offers. In training seminars, volunteers were warned to control their ‘impulse to give’, both a serious threat to the ‘instrumentally rational giving’ (Bornstein 2012: 25) and a potent, almost bodily imperative of need (Malkki 2015). Sociality in the setting of professionalised volunteerism has a potent transformative element of empowerment and the gift seems to pose a threat to these plans. Gifts are potentially dangerous, because they invoke the vicious circle of reciprocity: by definition, an unreciprocated gift generates inequality and places the giver in a hierarchically higher position. Consistent with contemporary volunteerism, one-way offers create relationships of ‘dependence’ and impede the autonomy of the people ‘served’. The idealisation of the ‘pure gift’ (Parry 1987) has been replaced by wariness of any kind of offer.

Reconfigurations of solidarity in times of crises

‘European capital of solidarity’

Martha noticed the pregnant woman first. She was carrying her child in her arms and she was loaded down with things. She could not walk anymore and had decided to stop. Martha pulled over and picked her up. The woman’s husband and older child were a few metres behind them, accompanied by another family of four. Martha invited all of them in her car and they headed to the capital of the island. On the way, she noticed a coast guard vehicle and stopped to ask where registration of new arrivals took place. ‘Where should I take them?’ she asked. ‘Police’ was the only word the people were saying and, apparently, the only word in English they knew. Martha had already tried to talk with them, but they were Afghans and only spoke Persian (sic). Instead of replying to her question, the coast guard told her ‘Are you aware of the fact that what you are doing is illegal?’ Martha claimed that she had no idea, and, pointing at the pregnant woman, she said that she was merely helping her and her family go to the Police. ‘I have to arrest you’, said the coast guard and took all eight people to the Port Authority. The two women tried to persuade the coast guards to release Martha. ‘She is
one of us’, they seemed to be saying, feeling bad about the threat that Martha was facing. At some point, they had to leave the Port Authority and go to a shelter. They put their arms around Martha’s body and hugged her tightly. All three women were very emotional at that moment of separation. During the trial that led to the withdrawal of all charges against her, the coast guards who had arrested Martha testified in her defence. ‘The young lady is a good person’, they said, delivering a discourse in ethical terms.

I was sitting with her in a café in Mytilene, the capital of Lesvos, as Martha described to me her arrest and its aftermath. Earlier, as I was waiting for her, I had come across police officers who were turning away newcomers who had camped in the square. It was late August and although these people had been registered and were technically free to move, they could not leave the island because there were no available tickets for the ferries travelling to mainland Greece. The year 2015 was the year of the great passage in Lesvos transforming the island in, so far, unpredictable ways.14

The left-wing Prime Minister Alexis Tspiras visited Lesvos in October 2015, just a few weeks after his government was re-elected and amid the announcement of a new set of European measures that addressed the ‘refugee crisis’. The Prime Minister, accompanied by the Austrian Chancellor, went to registration sites as well as to a self-organised reception centre; a municipal property squatted by solidarians that has run as an open shelter for refugees for the last three years. In his comments on the situation in the island and the response of locals and foreigners, the Prime Minister stated that Lesvos should be announced the ‘European capital of solidarity’.15 In just a few months, the composition of the population of the island altered significantly, not only because of the arrival of people who crossed the ‘doorstep of Europe’ (Cabot 2014) in a perilous journey, but also because of the presence of various groups of people supporting them. These consisted of tourists who overstayed their visit and became volunteers; others who travelled from various European countries specifically for that purpose; solidarians from all over Greece; and local volunteers who have been active for years. Volunteers waited on shore and welcomed newcomers as they stepped out of water. People distributed sandwiches, bottles of water, dry clothes, shoes and hats to people on the move. Others visited camps and delivered food, clothes and medicines. Finally, people cleaned up encampments and beaches of the remains of life vests and torn dinghies. Informal, mostly, groups coexist and, sometimes, cooperate with renowned national and international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations (INGOs) who have turned Lesvos into their new ‘field’. Though it would be simplistic to categorise this fluid and rich setting, one cannot ignore the centrality of solidarity as the principal concept that specific initiatives share in common. NGO and INGO employees embrace a professional rhetoric, whereas solidarians, rather than defining their activities in terms of ‘service’ to ‘beneficiaries’, abide by the principles of egalitarian and empowering relatedness outlined in this article.

14 On the remarkable impact of the refugee crisis on the local level in Lesvos, see Papataxiarchis (2016).
15 The Prime Minister was apparently referring to the island’s candidacy for ‘European Capital of Culture’ for the year 2021. In the meantime, throughout 2015 there were several reports in international media on the solidarity demonstrated to refugees in Lesvos: ‘Tourists on Greek island join local volunteers to aid refugees’, The New York Times, 7 July 2015, and ‘Give me your tired, your poor… the Europeans embracing migrants’, The Guardian, 3 August 2015.
A few weeks before Martha and Melina were arrested, a demonstration took place against the prohibition of transporting border-crossers across the island. Melina was one of the initiators of the protest that included a convoy of 40 cars bearing the sign ‘Solidarity drivers’. The cars drove around the island while two police vehicles accompanied them as they collected and transferred people. Martha remembered the protest and although she could not take part in it, she recalled meeting the convoy on her way to work and enthusiastically honking at them. Melina and Martha had never met in person, but they had heard of each other’s arrest. The two women were quite different. Melina was in her late fifties, a mother of two and grandmother of a toddler. She worked hard in a family-run hotel and had been ‘approaching’ refugees for more than ten years. Although in her youth she was member of the Left-wing Eurocommunist party, she no longer participated in political parties, preferring instead to be part of groups of volunteers, or do as much as she could individually. Melina has been systematically involving her hotel customers in her activities for many years. Under her guidance, some of them regularly donate money to various collectivities on the island and others engage in voluntary work during their holidays.

On the other hand, Martha was in her mid-twenties, a graduate student at the university and a local on Lesvos. She worked part-time as a waitress and she was thinking of migrating, facing the lack of prospects in austerity-ridden Greece. Martha had come across refugees before, a couple of years earlier, while she studied in Patras. She used to hang out a bag of cooked food for the young men who camped near her apartment as they tried to find a way to go to Italy. Standing behind her window, she watched them pick up the food and leave. Her offer was far from what James Laidlaw describes as the ‘free gift (that) makes no friends’ (Laidlaw 2000); in Martha’s case, the relationship between herself and the young men was created even in absentia and without ever meeting each other in person. At the same time, her offers respected the norms of the dangerous gift and sought to protect the recipient of any feelings of obligation.

What both women had in common was that they refused to abide the indifference towards the walkers that other passers-by showed. Like numerous other people in Lesvos, Martha and Melina challenged the dominant dehumanisation of the newcomers. Media discourses and analyses commonly referred to them in aquatic terms as ‘waves’ or ‘flows’ (see Introduction). Furthermore, as I noticed during fieldwork, people engaged in the management of these populations (primarily police officers) further dehumanised and produced them as zóa (animals) or aghrímía (wild animals) unable to conform to the norms of ordered behaviour, queue in a line for registration and obey the rules of bureaucratic procedures. This production of the newcomers as ‘animals’ was deeply hierarchical and classified them in the realm of nature, as opposed to the one of culture where social beings reside. By turning to them, ‘solidarity drivers’, solidarians and volunteers overtly challenged these assumptions and introduced sociality as a rehumanising process. Welcoming rituals on shore involved the same symbolic basis. Saluting the dinghies that headed to Lesvos and helping the travellers step out of the boats, solidarians welcomed them to the island and to Europe and materialised their acceptance. By inviting them in their cars, they

16 Another example of the pan-European movement transporting refugees and immigrants is the documentary ‘Io sto con la sposa’. The documentary, filmed in 2013, recorded the journey of a fake wedding crew, which travelled from Italy to Sweden and enabled the transportation of irregular Palestinian and Syrian refugees: http://www.iostoconlasposa.com/en/.
engaged with them in a sociality that was often time-bounded and limited, since they would probably never meet again. Other times this sociality on the move transformed into virtual sociality as people exchanged photos and news on Facebook and volunteers still heard from them as they reached their destinations in central and northern Europe.

**The gift taboo compromised**

The explosion of solidarity in austerity-ridden Greece, examined in this issue, goes hand in hand with a noteworthy transgression of a different kind. A decade ago, arguments against the gift prevailed not only in the official construction of volunteerism, but also in the anti-professional and anti-institutional formations that defined their activities in terms of solidarity. In contrast to the heated debates I witnessed then, and the long hours of discussion on the hierarchical implications of offering and its destructive consequences to the egalitarian essence of sociality, in 2015 the gift taboo seemed to have collapsed. Amid the ‘refugee crisis’, numerous solidarian collectivities emerged in the islands and in mainland Greece. In addition, there was an abundance of donations sent from Greece and all over the world to Lesvos and other places, which received vast numbers of newcomers. Solidarians recalled that the amount of donations was hard to manage. Throughout 2015, there were lists with *anages* (needs) frequently updated on social media and newspapers; items that ranged from infant formula and sleeping bags to rucksacks and raincoats that served the specificities of a mobile population. Donations were so many that in autumn 2015 collectivities in Lesvos had to ask publicly for a halt until they sorted and distributed the items they had accumulated.

A critical eye might claim that the ‘needs’ were different and that the ‘refugee crisis’ itself was calling for new solutions. The argument based on the ‘needs’ of the newcomers was often outspoken by solidarians. However, this vocabulary repeats the essentialisation of multiple ‘crises’ (refugee/migrant, economic, humanitarian etc.). The ‘needy’ refugee, this classical figure of humanitarianism (Fassin 2007; Redfield 2005), has entered the sphere of solidarity. Despite the fact that, perhaps, only a minority of local people actively got involved in organised voluntary work with refugees, the accumulation and circulation of goods was massive. Even people who were sceptical of the newcomers and fearful of contagious diseases, contributed offerings. ‘Everybody gives’, solidarians noted, and added that the specificities of the Syrian refugee population mobilised these donations. ‘They are families, children and women’, they explained; thus, groups who are not only vulnerable in humanitarian terms and fuel typical portrayals of refugeeness (Malkki 1996), but also culturally significant social categories (cf. Green 2012; Voutira 2003). Thus, in a context where kinship is highly valued, the view of families en route generated vast and, sometimes, unexpected local responses.

Possibly, the mobility of the newcomers during the refugee crisis affects the relationships solidarians form with them, turning the emphasis to the short-term provision of goods and survival, rather than to their incorporation through sociality. The violation of the gift taboo and the shrinking of self-reflection is an indication of a crucial shift. In the case of solidarity with the refugees, the egalitarian prospects of sociality that predominated in the 2000s is severely threatened or, certainly, transformed under the collapse of the gift taboo. However, instead of evoking some
kind of essentialising approach of the gift as \textit{by definition} source of hierarchies and inequality, the transformations of gift-giving are associated with broader reconfigurations at work in Greek society.

The other articles in this issue also bring to the fore the material aspects of solidarity and giving in times of crisis [whether this is food, clothes, money (Theodossopoulos, this issue) or medicines (Cabot, this issue)]. What is remarkable is how this boom of solidarity and its egalitarian essence (see Introduction) penetrates initiatives that include people who share so much in common in terms of social background, especially when the middle classes are facing such decline. The transformed self-identification of Greek people during the Greek crisis has made the compromise of the gift taboo possible. These are times when the valued principle of autonomy is overall severely threatened. The middle classes resort to charitable donations themselves, and middle-age people face unemployment and resort to their elderly parents in order to survive. The gift is hence largely re-signified in austerity-ridden Greece. One-way offers are no longer considered merely the malevolent carriers of \textit{ypohréosi} (obligation), since the burden of \textit{hréos} (debt) affects Greek society to an unprecedented extent.

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Socialités de solidarité: revisiter le tabou du don en temps de crise

Cet article traite de la solidarité et de l’ouverture des espaces sociaux dans les relations entre les réfugiés et les résidents de la Grèce qui tentent de les aider. Les « socialités de solidarité » matérialise les visions du monde alternatives; ils sont des locus pour la production de relations latérales; des lieux habités par les perspectives qui découlement de la production politique de la socialité. L’article traite du « tabou du don », dominant à l’époque avant la crise qui reflète les risques de donner à la formation de relations horizontales. Dans le scenario contemporain du « réfugié européen » et d’autres crises, le tabou du don est effondré, ce qui pose des défis sur les visions égalitaires de la socialité.

Mots-clés socialité, la solidarité, le don, européen réfugie/crise migrant, la Grèce