

# The Political Ecology of Austerity: An Analysis of Socio-Environmental Conflict Under Crisis in Greece

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on two largely understudied and interrelated aspects of the post-2008 economic crisis: how the politics of austerity influences the dynamics of environmental conflict, and how the environment is mobilized in subalterns' struggles against the normalization of austerity as the hegemonic response to crisis. We ground our analysis on two grassroots conflicts in Greece: the "no-middlemen" solidarity food distribution networks (across Greece), and the movement against gold mining in Halkidiki (Northern Greece). Using a Gramscian political ecology framework, our analysis shows that by reciprocally combining anti-austerity politics and alternative ways of understanding and using "nature", both projects challenge the reproduction of uneven society-environment relations exacerbated by the neoliberal austerity agenda.

**Keywords:** austerity, philosophy of praxis, socio-environmental conflicts

## 1. Introduction

Defined by Harvey (2011, 85-86) as a class politics for re-engineering society and privately appropriating the commons, austerity has become the main response from the part of capital and state institutions to the post-2008 crisis of late neoliberalism. Despite a wealth of analysis suggesting that austerity measures accentuate rather than repair socio-economic problems under conditions of crisis (e.g. Krugman 2009), policies of budgetary discipline "to reduce workers' salaries, rights and social benefits" (Douzinas 2013, 28) prevail. A growing body of academic literature has focused on examining the disastrous and uneven socio-economic impacts of austerity (e.g. Reeves et al. 2015; Hill 2013; Karamessini and Rubery 2013; Peck et al. 2013).

The environmental dimension of austerity has received less attention. Amongst the notable exceptions is Hadjimichalis (2014) work, which examines how austerity and a discourse of economic recovery

49 facilitates land dispossession, whilst Lekakis and Kousis (2013) and Apostolopoulou and Adams (2015)  
50 show how those increase environmental degradation. Other scholars have emphasized how discourses  
51 of “crisis” and “austerity” have been combined with ideas like green growth and self-provision to  
52 enhance social control (Ginn 2012), or intensify accumulation strategies (Goodman and Salleh 2013;  
53 Safransky 2014; Caprotti 2014). Still, this newly emerging literature has thus far paid little attention on  
54 how the tensions and contradictions arising from austerity influence the dynamics of environmental  
55 conflict, and may give rise to new forms and practices of social mobilization and resistance. In this  
56 paper we do just that. Following Armiero’s (2008, 61) suggestion that focusing on “conflict” allows to  
57 shed light on alternative “ways of understanding and using nature”, we focus empirically at two  
58 grassroots conflicts that grew under crisis: the “no-middlemen” solidarity food distribution networks  
59 (across Greece), and the movement against gold mining in Halkidiki (Northern Greece).

60 The emergence of new forms of social mobilization and resistance has received significant academic  
61 attention, with scholars highlighting the novel aspects of anti-austerity protests including the shift of  
62 focus to national sovereignty, distrust in the institutions of representative democracy, and an emphasis  
63 in participatory and deliberative visions of democracy (Porta and Mattoni 2014). Scholars also argue  
64 that the occupy movement and new solidarity networks have led to the creation of new subjectivities  
65 and communities (Douzinas 2013), and to the re-making of social relationships (Stavides 2014), or  
66 emphasize the power of popular spontaneity, informality and creativity to undermine neoliberal  
67 hegemony (Leontidou 2014). Other scholars draw attention to the plurality of contestations, noting  
68 that not all are progressive or emancipatory. In examining the occupation of the Syntagma square in  
69 Athens, Kaika and Karaliotas (2014) show the existence of two distinct Indignant Squares: one often  
70 divulging nationalistic or xenophobic discourses, the other centered on an inclusive politics of  
71 solidarity. Featherstone (2015, 27) also cautions “against ways of opposing the austerity politics in ways  
72 that intensify divisions and exclusionary nationed imaginaries/practices”. In analyzing emergent “urban  
73 solidarity spaces” in Athens, Arampatzi (2016) shows that “solidarity from below” is a counter-austerity  
74 narrative that aims to empower the disempowered in face of growing xenophobic, charity and  
75 philanthropy ideas and practices; and that the development of the “social / solidarity economy”  
76 expresses an alternative paradigm to austerity, not without processes of negotiating differences among  
77 activists. This rich debate on new social movements and resistances, however, has paid less attention to  
78 the relation between austerity and environmental conflict and to the ways in which the environment is  
79 mobilized in subalterns’ struggles against austerity.

80 In this article we address these questions by looking at the aforementioned grassroots conflicts. These  
81 were chosen because they complement each other: the “no-middlemen” solidarity food distribution  
82 networks (henceforth “X-M”) emerged as a response to the general social hardship of austerity  
83 measures and became a way of localizing resistance to austerity after the downturn of national mass-  
84 protests. The Halkidiki movement (henceforth “SOS Halkidiki”) started out as a local environmental  
85 conflict (against the expansion of gold mining at the area) and became engaged in broader resistance to  
86 austerity policies. Although Greece is not the only country to be affected by the economic crisis, it has  
87 nevertheless undergone one of the lengthiest and intense programs of austerity in Europe after 2010.  
88 The framing of crisis as “a national and moral problem” (Mylonas 2014, 305) that can be traced back  
89 to an “overgenerous welfare state” and to its “laziest people” (Pentaraki 2013, 701), has contributed to  
90 boost authoritarian, nationalistic and xenophobic ideas and practices. A wide range of resistance  
91 movements to austerity were formed, which contest not simply austerity measures per se, but also  
92 address the broader ideological and political aspects of austerity. As Bramall (2013) argues, austerity is a  
93 site of discursive struggle between different visions of the future playing out in the terrain of popular  
94 culture and people’s everyday life. It is precisely “in the problematic articulation of the moral and the  
95 economic [that] the struggle for consent is being fought out” (Clarke and Newman 2012, 15) by  
96 grassroots movements. Our two case-studies are illustrative of these dynamics.

97 To conduct this analysis, we follow a Gramscian political ecology approach. With a special focus on  
98 Gramsci’s notion “philosophy of praxis”, this approach provides pathways for understanding how  
99 austerity shapes the dynamics of environmental conflict and, more generally, social mobilization. More  
100 specifically, it can help to obtain insights into how the subalterns fight against the normalization of  
101 austerity, and attempt to forge an alternative hegemony.

102

103

## 2. A Gramscian Political Ecology Approach

104 Recently, a growing number of scholars have mobilized Gramsci's work in order to develop a more  
105 systematic understanding of how the "environment" is entangled in the exercise and consolidation of  
106 ruling class hegemony (Ekers 2009; Perkins 2011), but also on how it informs subaltern mobilizations  
107 (Karriem 2013). In this paper we focus on the latter, and engage with Loftus' (2013, 179) argument that  
108 "nature must be situated within the overall philosophy of praxis."

109 Gramsci's concept of a "philosophy of praxis" gives expression (and also guidance) to subaltern  
110 struggles. He highlights the importance of developing autonomous forms of political practice and  
111 elaborating "a superior conception of life" (cited in Thomas 2009, 436) in the move from a position of  
112 subalternity towards one of leadership, or hegemony. This concept is grounded on his broader political  
113 theory on the nature of power in capitalist societies. For him, the ruling class governs through a  
114 combination of (economic and/or armed) coercion and (active and/or passive) consent. The  
115 hegemony of elites, i.e. their ability to provide intellectual-moral leadership over other social groups is  
116 predicated upon this combination. Consent is produced when the values, norms and institutions of the  
117 elites around which everyday life is organized are accepted and internalized as natural, i.e. constitute  
118 part of the common sense for a given society. As Liguori (2009) puts it, common sense is a sort of  
119 people's philosophy shaped by elites' hegemonic ideas and practices. Therefore, Gramsci argues, any  
120 form of political action that targets (state) power cannot succeed unless it involves a long-term process  
121 of intellectual-moral reform of the subaltern classes.

122 Gramsci establishes the individual "as the elementary 'cell' of hegemonic struggle" (Thomas 2009,  
123 375). For him, each individual is composed by plural, at times contradictory, world-views present in  
124 society. As Ives and Green (2009, 3) argue, the fragmentation of common sense "is a political  
125 detriment, impending effective political organization." What is needed, then, "is a deep engagement  
126 with the fragments that make up subaltern historical, social, economic and political conditions" (3).  
127 Therefore, a prime role of political intervention is to empower individuals – understood as an ensemble  
128 of social relations (Thomas 2009) – to "work out consciously and critically one's own conception of  
129 the world" (Gramsci 1971, 323). This transformation of subjectivities by a political practice "rooted in  
130 the messy practices of making a life in the world" (Loftus 2013, 179), "involves elaborating the good  
131 sense in popular culture while denaturalizing unexamined elements of the same culture" (Kipfer and  
132 Hart 2013, 330).

133 For Gramsci, however, it is not enough to critically know; "one must also be able to *do* in order to know  
134 more adequately" (Thomas 2009, 123; emphasis added). Put differently, it is through the direct  
135 involvement in political action of transforming others and the social relations in which one is  
136 embedded that individuals transform themselves. In Gramsci's words, "one can say that [the person] is  
137 essentially 'political' since it is through the activity of transforming and consciously directing other  
138 [people] that [the person] realizes his[her] humanity, his[her] 'human nature'" (1971, 360). The unity  
139 between the capacity to know and the capacity to act requires coherence. That is, it involves a praxis  
140 that adopts "a systematic (coherent and logical) conception of the world" (Gramsci 1971, 136), which  
141 recognizes "its own foundation in common sense" (Thomas 2009, 374) and "comprehends its own  
142 conditions of possibility" (382). Both knowledge and practice are thus co-determining and co-evolving.

143 The concept of philosophy of praxis is particularly pertinent when it comes to understanding and  
144 changing society-environment relations. Gramsci notes that individuals and social (subordinated)  
145 groups "enter into relations with the natural world... actively, by means of work and technique. Further:  
146 these relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious. They correspond to the greater or  
147 lesser degree of understanding that each [individual] has of them. So one could say that each one of us  
148 changes [one]self, modifies [one]self to the extent that [the person] changes and modifies the complex  
149 [society-environment] relations of which [the person] is the hub" (1971, 352).

150 In other words, individuals shape, and are shaped by their relations with the environment through social  
151 labor and technology. As hegemonic ideas and practices are internalized in day-to-day interactions with  
152 the environment, so the ability to "develop oneself... [involves] modifying external relations both with  
153 nature and, in varying degrees, with [others]" (360). Thereby, to politicize and mobilize the subalterns

154 within a unitary and coherent conception of the world also involves a transformation of the  
155 relationship between human beings and the environment.

156 A philosophy of praxis also is about generating practices of solidarity-making among subalterns in  
157 order to form a “hegemonic bloc.” According to Featherstone (2013), Gramsci has a relational  
158 understanding of solidarity in which alliances are not instrumental additions but involve the mutual  
159 transformation of the groups that ally with each other. In this process, Gramsci argues, the subalterns  
160 must become conscious of their capacity of self-organization and self-government. This implies an  
161 active attempt to forge “political hegemony” before even seizing state power. Without such an attempt  
162 to transform leadership in civil society into political hegemony, civil hegemony itself can only inevitably  
163 “be disaggregated and subordinated to the existing... political hegemony of the ruling class” (Thomas  
164 2009, 194). A philosophy of praxis thus seeks to develop alternative ideas and practices for re-  
165 structuring relations of social and political power, and this necessarily includes society-environment  
166 relations.

167 From a Gramscian political ecology perspective, when examining grassroots movements and  
168 resistances, the analytical lens should fall on the ways in which alternative ideas and practices on the  
169 environment are mobilized at the terrain of popular culture and everyday life for politicizing and  
170 mobilizing the subalterns. In the two case-studies we detail in the following sections, such alternative  
171 ideas and practices become mobilized as the quilting points for a broader struggle against the  
172 normalization of austerity, and for forging an alternative hegemony for challenging elite power. In a  
173 process akin to a philosophy of praxis, this involves a political practice rooted in the messy practices of  
174 making a living for transforming subjectivities and engaging the subalterns in political activity (a self-  
175 reinforcement process); generate solidarity-making among subalterns; and potentiate self-organization  
176 and learning processes of self-government.

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### 3. Case-studies and Methodology

179 The first case-study focuses on the X-M, which consist in local markets organized by solidarity groups  
180 where farmers can sell their products directly to consumers at a pre-agreed price that is 20% to 50%  
181 lower than the standard market price. These initiatives began in February 2012 in the town of Katerini,  
182 Central Greece, by distributing potatoes (hence the X-M is also known as the potato movement).  
183 Distributions rapidly spread across the country, especially in Athens and Thessaloniki where the effects  
184 of austerity are more severe. The products diversified to include flour, vegetables, olive oil, and others.  
185 In 2014 there were at least 45 solidarity groups across Greece, 26 of which operated in Athens; each  
186 group comprised an average of 19 core activists and 29 volunteers who helped with food distribution  
187 (S4A 2015). Groups self-organize through open assemblies and consensus procedures. They informally  
188 coordinate at the regional level and five national events were organized between 2012 and 2015, three in  
189 Katerini and two in Athens. More than 5.000 tons of food has been distributed between 2012 and 2014  
190 (S4A 2015).

191 The second case-study focuses on the SOS Halkidiki. This movement was born out of an  
192 environmental conflict that had been simmering for years, but gained momentum, national scope,  
193 increasing international recognition and attention when, at the aftermath of the crisis, the government  
194 decided to lease the rights for gold extraction at the area to the Canadian mining company Eldorado  
195 Gold. The project has been presented by national and European state authorities as the type of  
196 solution Greece needs to overcome its debt crisis. It involves land dispossession and negative impacts  
197 on local livelihoods and ecologies. The movement that resists this project was formed in March 2011  
198 with mass mobilizations and local assemblies across 16 villages at the municipality of Aristotle (18.294  
199 inhabitants, according to the 2011 Census). Over the last years it has challenged the environmental  
200 permit of the project at the Council of State (Greece’s highest administrative court), has organized  
201 protests, scientific and cultural events, solidarity actions with other movements, and has succeeded in  
202 growing into a national movement with global networking, despite facing the opposition of local  
203 miners and state violence.

204 This paper draws upon qualitative research. A preliminary research period in Athens in February 2014  
205 included conversations between the first author and key-informants: academics, food cooperatives,

206 farmers and activists from two X-M groups, and the coordinator for food issues of Solidarity for All (a  
207 structure set up by the political party SYRIZA). Between April and June 2014, she conducted 23 in-  
208 depth interviews with core activists from the X-M groups in Athens (12), Thessaloniki (7) and Central  
209 Greece (4). Questions concerned motivations, organizational issues, and future perspectives. She also  
210 attended a national meeting in Katerini (February 2014), participated in local assemblies in Athens (2),  
211 and observed distributions in Central Greece (3), Thessaloniki (1), and Athens (4). Between October  
212 2014 and March 2015, the second author conducted 27 in-depth interviews with local activists of SOS  
213 Halkidiki (20), miners (5), councilors of Aristotle municipality, where the mining is taking place (2).  
214 Interviews aimed at identifying the rationale behind the local conflict and its relation with austerity  
215 politics.

216

#### 217 **4. A Political Ecology of Contesting the Class Politics of Austerity**

218 In this Section we look at the X-M and the SOS Halkidiki to examine how the politics of austerity in  
219 Greece has shaped conflicts over “food” and “land-uses” and how grassroots resistances have  
220 mobilized alternative ideas and practices on them to contest austerity as the hegemonic response to  
221 crisis. In the X-M case, building “solidarity from below” (Arampatzi 2016) is a counter-austerity  
222 narrative and an alternative pathway out of the crisis. In the SOS Halkidiki case, resistance involves  
223 alliance-building with other movements and advancing alternatives to austerity-driven patterns of  
224 development. By bringing a Gramscian political ecology approach to the analysis we shed light on the  
225 ways in which alternative understandings and uses of “nature” are set in motion so that to politicize  
226 and mobilize subaltern groups, and generate solidarity-making, new forms of self-organization and  
227 learning processes of self-government.

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#### 229 **4.1. X-M: Politicizing Austerity through “Food”**

230 Issues of food poverty, combined with questions of social justice and uneven development hit home  
231 for many, as austerity forced “thousands of lower and middle-income households to substitute  
232 nutritious food for fewer and cheaper products, living on diets of inadequate nutritional value and  
233 quality” (Skordili 2013, 130).

234 This changed radically both the conceptualization and practice of “alternative food networks” in  
235 Greece. Prior to the crisis, alternative food networks catered mainly for the “cultural preferences of the  
236 few” (Morgan 2013, 4). The X-M and other grassroots food distribution networks emerged to tackle  
237 the severe effects of austerity on the social reproduction needs of the many. But differently from  
238 alternatives such as solidarity food banks and social groceries, the X-M goes beyond distribution of  
239 food as such, to address some of the structural factors behind food poverty. Panagiota<sup>1</sup>, a young X-M  
240 activist in Kalamaria, explains that the X-M emerged because “It was very obvious that something was  
241 very wrong. With the crisis incomes decreased but food prices did not go down, whilst farmers  
242 themselves came under increasing economic pressure” (Interview, Thessaloniki, 16 May 2014). As  
243 Skordili (2013, 136) notes, “A concurrent issue in the national press is the widening gap between the  
244 price paid to farmers and the final price of goods on supermarket shelves; the latter has remained  
245 relatively high despite the recession”. The inflation of food prices suggested unwarranted middlemen  
246 profiteering. By-passing intermediaries were considered necessary to lower prices, but also to support  
247 domestic production to secure food provision. Konstantinos, a founder of an organic food  
248 cooperative, comments that “under crisis alternative food networks shifted focus from fair trade to  
249 local production: why support farmers of the global South and not local farmers?” (Interview, Athens,  
250 15 February 2014). For Giorgos, a long-time left-wing activist engaged in the group of Petroupolis, an  
251 important achievement of the X-M is that “land is now being cultivated again” and “the prices [went]  
252 down in supermarkets too” (Interview, Athens, 12 April 2014). For many in the X-M, the support of  
253 domestic production and control of the agro-food system are central for toppling the neoliberal  
254 austerity agenda. As one activist argued at an X-M national meeting, a “country that does not produce

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of our interviewees we use fictional names

255 enough food cannot achieve political uprising from external debt-creditors” (Katerini, 16 February  
256 2014).

257 In addressing broader questions of production and control, the X-M is a practical manifestation of  
258 food sovereignty: the right of farmers, consumers, and communities to control and decide on “what  
259 food is produced, where, how, by whom and at what scale” (Desmarais and Wittman 2014, 1156). As  
260 this is not about advancing liberal notions of choice, the X-M are not typical farmers’ markets, which  
261 simply provide alternative market circuits to conventional supply-chains. In each X-M group, prices are  
262 not set individually by farmers and/or consumers, but are collectively decided in horizontal assemblies,  
263 according to social criteria: to ensure a fair price to farmers so “that they can then continue to  
264 produce”, Panagiota explains, and to guarantee affordable prices to lower and middle-income strata of  
265 the population. The point is to conciliate the interests of farmers and consumers against traders. Most  
266 of groups also only work with small farmers, and have strict quality criteria on the products (taste,  
267 durability, absence of chemical residues). The goal is to support local small-scale farming, and promote  
268 a healthy, sustainable agriculture. Many groups show environmental concerns and adopt measures to  
269 reject farmers who abuse rural workers; however, these are difficult to implement. A main objective of  
270 the X-M is to “encourage small farmers to self-organize to sell without the intervention of traders”,  
271 Thanos, an unemployed man from the group in Tumba, explains (Interview, Thessaloniki, 18 May  
272 2014). This is done by a “learning-by-doing” process, in which farmers must become aware of the  
273 advantages of cooperating between them (rather than competing). In calling farmers to sell at  
274 affordable prices and to give for free 2-5% of their goods for impoverished families, the X-M also seek  
275 to “educate” farmers to move beyond narrow profit-making interests and engage in solidarity-making  
276 relationships with consumers and the population in general.

277 In short, the X-M develops into everyday life an alternative conception of the agro-food system away  
278 from narrow economic-corporatist interests. This is an alternative based on re-localization, small-scale  
279 farming, short-supply chains, popular control, and solidarity that builds upon the daily needs and  
280 struggles of the subalterns. Like Sotiris (2014) argues, these types of networks “are not only means to  
281 deal with a problem. They are also learning processes in order to see how things can be organized in a  
282 different way.” Thereby, for activists in the X-M, food distributions are not only a response to the social  
283 hardship of austerity measures; rather, they are inserted within a philosophy of praxis of forging a  
284 hegemonic conception of the world. Katerina, an X-M activist in the low income neighborhood of  
285 Kipseli, spoke for many:

286 “We don’t want to deal only with the crisis; we also want to promote different ways of selling, working,  
287 etc.; we want to provide quality food at fair prices, but also to participate in the reorganization of  
288 production through the solidarity economy” (Interview, Athens, 13 April 2014).

289 This effort depends greatly on the active involvement and self-organization of farmers and consumers.  
290 As Kostas, active in the group of Piraeus, explains: “[in the X-M] we do not want to act like or become  
291 middlemen” (Interview, Athens, 10 April 10 2014).

292 The perspective of some groups to constitute “a network of linked co-operatives” (Rakopoulos 2014,  
293 106) emerges from this strategic objective of re-structuring the agro-food system and potentiate self-  
294 organization; but also of some difficulties in organizing the X-M such as authorities’ repression, fatigue  
295 of activists, and co-optation by private-capital and pro-austerity municipalities. Activists also state very  
296 clearly that distributions must go beyond being safety-nets and volunteerism. Discussions around  
297 alternatives within the local groups and national meetings run in parallel with the development of  
298 “proposals that come from the political life of the movement to push the government”, Giorgos  
299 comments.

300 Another way of resisting austerity is by undermining a “charity rhetoric [that] has been employed to  
301 legitimize the rationality of austerity and transfer the financial burdens of public cuts to local or non-  
302 state institutions...; and countering exclusionary, racist and xenophobic practices...[of] blaming ‘the  
303 other’” (Arampatzi 2016, 7). This is done by promoting solidarity as “a lived shared experience forged  
304 in common among [equal] participants” (7). The organization of X-M through open, horizontal  
305 assemblies supports this process.

306 In order to fully understand the dynamics of X-M vis-à-vis austerity is necessary to consider the  
307 broader context of resistance and social mobilization. The neoliberal offensive that coupled the  
308 implementation of austerity in Greece was widely contested from 2009 to 2012. Numerous  
309 demonstrations, strikes, and the occupation of the squares movement in 2011, attest to the elevation of  
310 social struggle whose “immediate political effect was the rapid loss of moral and political credibility for  
311 the bipolar Greek political system” (Hadjimichalis 2013, 128). The downturn of this wave of mass-  
312 protests was followed by the rise of a number of “grassroots social solidarity movements” (S4A 2015).  
313 Hadjimichalis (2013, 128) notes that “most major [protest] events found their continuation in these  
314 initiatives, deepening and extending the question of how to link ‘our problems’ to the quest for broader  
315 political change.” Nikos, a university professor engaged in the X-M group of Themi, explains that:

316 “the [anti-austerity] movement is declining all over Greece. There is know-how of how to join people  
317 in social movements and protests, but there is fatigue. The only movements succeeding are the  
318 initiatives that not only react [to austerity] but also do something positive. Through the solidarity  
319 actions we put issues on the political agenda and force the state to react; we also give a positive feeling  
320 to people, call them to engage.” (Interview, Thessaloniki, 15 May 2014).

321 In mobilizing alternative ideas and practices around “food”, activists in the X-M convey the idea that  
322 austerity and its “politics of fear” are not inevitable; they aim to construct a “politics of hope” that  
323 gives the material and subjective conditions for that the subordinated social groups can “claim rights...  
324 and think on what kind of society and democracy they want to claim”, as Thanos argues. A main  
325 objective of the X-M is to politicize and activate subjects into collective action, while supporting the  
326 critical elaboration of a “superior conception of life”, as Gramsci would put it. This effort of  
327 politicization is made through an anti-austerity discourse that is more explicit in some groups than  
328 others. Most of the groups distribute leaflets and put banners with anti-austerity messages, organize  
329 debates on issues such as privatizations and the far-right, and try to create convivial spaces against the  
330 “politics of fear.” Alekos, a middle-aged unemployed man from the X-M group in Vironas, tells:

331 “We have posters denouncing the politics of crisis and austerity and urging people to stand up.... We  
332 give the leaflets during food distributions, but also outside them. We want to inform people and activate  
333 them.” (Interview, Athens, 15 April 2014).

334 For the X-M thus, tackling social reproduction needs is considered a strategic step towards activating  
335 subjects and advancing counter-austerity ideas and practices. Over time they have become much more  
336 than food distribution networks to embody a philosophy of praxis for transforming subjectivities and  
337 mobilizing the subalterns. Through a politics rooted in the messy practices of making a living, the X-M  
338 express an autonomous form of political practice that seeks to denaturalize austerity, charity and  
339 exclusionary ideas and practices, and normalize solidarity relationships in all social realms; and to  
340 generate practices of solidarity-making, to potentiate new forms of self-organization, and learning  
341 processes of self-government.

342 Although there are different political orientations within and between the groups, the activists  
343 interviewed are aware that their activity is over-determined by the state and, therefore, it is inescapable  
344 to deal with it. Generally, they claim that they struggle not for replacing the welfare-state by a network  
345 of “solidarity from below”, neither for a simple return to the “old” welfare-state (rejecting thus co-  
346 optation by institutions). Instead, they ambition that “the state transforms itself towards the solidarity  
347 economy”, Kostas argues. For many, struggling for changing government power, either nationally or  
348 locally is considered necessary. Some activists took part in the June 2014 local elections as part of their  
349 understanding that they need to build an alternative local power to grow. Activists thus show an  
350 ambition to re-structure the social relations of production and generate new forms of social and  
351 political power from below beyond the limits of traditional forms of bourgeois power. In doing so,  
352 they attempt to articulate different forms of politics within an alternative paradigm for forging an  
353 alternative hegemony.

354

#### 355 *4.2. SOS Halkidiki: Denaturalizing Austerity-driven Development Patterns*

356 The debt crisis in Greece has been a lever to reinstate the “old-fashioned faulty view that at times of  
357 economic crisis, environmental protection is a luxury and hindrance to development” (Lekakis and  
358 Kousis 2013, 316). In fact, the environment is being actively remade within the austerity framework  
359 through the creation of financial mechanisms that promote the fast and massive privatization of  
360 natural resources and state-owned assets (mainly public land) (Velegrakis et al. 2015). Under the debt-  
361 related discourse of “national survival”, “urgency”, and “obligation”, there is an escalation of land  
362 dispossession to extractive, luxury tourism and renewable-energy large projects based on corporate  
363 interests (Hadjimichalis 2014, 503). The leasing of land for the implementation of a gold mining  
364 project in Halkidiki at the height of the crisis is illustrative of these dynamics and the growing conflicts  
365 over land and land-uses.

366 Halkidiki, a prefecture in Northern Greece, has a long history of ore mining. Over the last forty years  
367 this has been a direct source of contestation and conflict for local residents. In 2011, the government  
368 approved a large-scale private project for the expansion and intensification of gold extraction at the  
369 area. It has granted to Eldorado Gold rights over land, permits for mining, fiscal incentives, and fast-  
370 track approval procedures. The Canadian corporation acquired 31.700 hectares of agricultural and  
371 forest land, two pre-existing mines, and waste tailings exploitation structures, and it plans to construct a  
372 new open-pit gold mine and a metallurgy factory. The three mines will increase the current annual gold  
373 production by tenfold (ENVECO 2010). Eldorado Gold’s most controversial project is the  
374 development of an open-pit/underground mine in the middle of the Skouries forest on the Kakavos  
375 Mountain. According to the company’s own estimates, the open pit alone can lead to several  
376 environmental problems such as air pollution, emissions of heavy metals, deforestation and pollution  
377 and depletion of the area’s water resources (ENVECO 2010; Hartlief et al. 2015; SOSHalkidiki 2013).

378 The announcement of the project faced great opposition locally. Health and quality of life concerns  
379 aside, in a region where the economy mainly depends on tourism, farming, bee-keeping and fisheries,  
380 increasing gold extraction puts into serious jeopardy the sustainability of existing local economic  
381 activities. Between March and December 2011, the villages of Megali Panagia and Ierissos organized  
382 small protests, created assemblies and advanced a legal battle against the permit for gold mining. In  
383 March 2012 the first mass mobilization took place at Skouries forest. Since then, more local assemblies  
384 were formed, while solidarity committees were created in Athens and Thessaloniki and a nation-wide  
385 campaign developed.

386 Since the approval of the project, the government has propagated the idea that mining is the only  
387 possibility for creating jobs and developing the region, especially under the crisis. By portraying SOS  
388 Halkidiki as a localism and anti-development reaction, it has tried to socially isolate the movement and  
389 enforce divisions amongst residents. This discourse has been particularly directed to the local working  
390 force, which are mainly miners. The objective is to enforce the project’s acceptance and that workers  
391 internalize the idea that there is no alternative. In a general crisis context of unemployment, low wages  
392 and precariousness, while the corporation has promised secure jobs and high salaries for miners, several  
393 ministers have visited the miners and ensured them that “the state is responsible for securing the  
394 project. It is a signal to world markets that the country is open for business and protects foreign  
395 investments” (Hartlief et al. 2015). Alexis, a young miner, illustrates the general feeling of the miners,

396 “Our grandfathers were miners, our fathers were miners, and we will be miners as well. It is our only  
397 option to survive in our villages; our only alternative to migration.” (Interview, Athens, 11 March 2015).

398 A discourse of “mining as the only possible future” has influenced the movement’s approach. Miners  
399 are fighting for their jobs, but also are the anti-mining activists. Those who oppose mining range from  
400 long-term unemployed, low-income unskilled workers, seasonal employees at the local tourist industry  
401 to young people with no job opportunities locally. However, this diversity of local inhabitants is united  
402 not just to oppose the mining project per se or to protect their local environment; they do this by  
403 critically approaching the hegemonic models and pathways of development. Contrary to the miners  
404 who just support a developmental logic on the basis of their narrow and immediate economic-  
405 corporatist interests, local activists have moved towards a more universal plane. The movement has  
406 problematized issues of development and elaborated alternative proposals for the local economy based



407 upon social needs of inhabitants, participatory democracy, and non-domination views of the  
408 environment. In this process, it has developed a proposal for an alternative development of North-East  
409 Halkidiki together with other institutional and economic actors (e.g. Technical Chamber of Greece -  
410 Makedonia's department-, the Agriculture School of Aristoteleion University of Thessaloniki and the  
411 Hotel Association of Halkidi). This proposal is based on the creation of jobs within a sustainable  
412 economy and environment through the promotion of small-scale agriculture, ecotourism, local fisheries  
413 and forestry activities, and a network of local cooperatives. In creating a space for experimenting  
414 alternative visions, discourses and practices of local development, SOS-Halkidiki integrates in its  
415 struggle a philosophy of praxis for forging an alternative conception of the world.

416 A second aspect that has influenced the movement's politics was the high level of repression faced.  
417 After an incident where activists bombed part of Eldorado's local premises in February 2013 – an  
418 action condemned by the movement itself, activists were classified as terrorists by the government. This  
419 resulted in the detainment, interrogation, and illegal DNA sampling of more than 250 local residents.  
420 Anna, a 65 years old pensioner from Ierissos, speaks about the police brutality in local demonstrations:

421 “The police used tear gases in the main square. It was the first time in my life I saw the riot police. I  
422 was shocked and really scared. We had to face a very cruel situation.” (Interview, Ierissos, 10 November  
423 2014).

424 State violence, however, has only contributed to focus the struggle against the developmental strategies  
425 that dictated the project, instead of continuing protesting against the corporation. Petros, a 62 years old  
426 farmer, notes,

427 “We are not fighting against a greedy company. We fight against a state that is not protecting our rights.  
428 We address our demands to the Prime Minister, not to the CEO of Eldorado Gold.” (Interview,  
429 Ierissos, 10 November 2014).

430 The use of the same type of violence faced by broader anti-austerity protests, also has played a role in  
431 transforming ideas of one-self and others, and contributed to construct a shared identity between both  
432 struggles and future synergies. Maria, a 39-year-old unemployed woman, explains:

433 “In June 2011, when watching on the TV the Syntagma square mobilizations and the riot police  
434 operations, we thought that this was something far away from us. That it was something only  
435 happening between the police and anarchists; only taking place in Athens. A few months later I saw  
436 the riot police in my village. They were really brutal. I didn't understand why they were beating us. Why,  
437 when we were just trying to protect our forest? Then, I completely changed my mind about the  
438 Syntagma square movement. I am now one of them.” (Interview, Ierissos, 11 November 2014).

439 The police violent intervention and state coercion approach had a hand in directing the movement's  
440 strategy towards establishing alliances with other local struggles against large-scale projects in the  
441 country. More than addressing violence per se, the movement has through alliance-building reinforced  
442 the legitimacy of its struggle and amplified its scope and capacity to influence the decision-making  
443 procedures affecting their lives. The participants in the SOS Halkidiki movement became very  
444 conscious that their struggle was not isolated but part of a larger opposition against an anti-democratic  
445 development pattern. Therefore, the movement established solidarity relations and joined forces with  
446 struggles such as the water anti-privatization initiatives in Thessaloniki and Pilio (Central Greece), the  
447 anti-mining movements in Kilkis (North-West Greece) and Thrace (North-East Greece), the  
448 movement against large scale landfills in Keratea (nearby Athens) and the initiatives against renewable  
449 energy industrial projects in Crete (Southern Greece). Furthermore, they have organized protests jointly  
450 with significant international socio-environmental movements of the same period such as the NO TAV  
451 initiative against the construction of high speed railway in Northern Italy or the Rosia Montana  
452 movement against gold extraction operations in Romania. The movement has also gained increasing  
453 international recognition and media attention and the support of international NGOs including  
454 Amnesty International and Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) who described  
455 the mining project as “a project of police repression, criminalization of the local community and  
456 environmental degradation” (Hartlief et al. 2015, 16). Vasilis, a 42 years old teacher, explains:

457 “Originally we started this fight to protect our land and environment against a greedy company. It  
458 quickly became more than that. We now also have to challenge a state that promotes austerity as the  
459 only possible way to get out of the crisis.” (Interview, Ierissos, 11 November 2014).

460 Panagiotis, a 67 years old pensioner, signals the synergies between SOS Halkidiki and other anti-  
461 austerity struggles:

462 “We are not alone. We have the support of several movements all over Greece, such as the water anti-  
463 privatization movement in Thessaloniki or the movement for the creation of the Metropolitan Park in  
464 Helliniko, Athens. They are not alone too, we support them. During our last demonstration in Athens,  
465 we delivered medicines to several social clinics and pharmacies [part of the solidarity movement]. We  
466 fight all together.” (Interview, Megali Panagia, 13 November 2014).

467 SOS Halkidiki implicitly (sought to) creat(ed) “subaltern geographies of connection” (Featherstone  
468 2013, 80) with several anti-austerity struggles all over the country and abroad in order to constitute  
469 strong alliances and scale-up their struggle. Solidarity-making is embedded in a philosophy of praxis  
470 that empowers their participants to critically approach and actively struggle against an undemocratic  
471 and violent development pattern that overlooks social needs and local practices. In this process, they go  
472 beyond particular and local interests and bring forward alternative ideas and practices of land-uses,  
473 local development, and society-environment relations. Therefore, SOS-Halkidiki struggle goes beyond a  
474 simple standoff between the forces of “development” and environmental- local protection concerns. It  
475 is an active and ongoing challenge of hegemonic ideas and practices on austerity-driven development  
476 patterns together with a day-to-day political involvement, activity and praxis in ways that transform  
477 one’s everyday life and one’s subjectivity (see, e.g., Velicu and Kaika [2015] on this subject). The social  
478 movement itself and the alliance-building with other movements give content to the “dynamic  
479 geographies of subaltern political activity and the generative character of political struggle”  
480 (Featherstone 2013, 66). Geographies of solidarity, therefore, are not constructed (merely) on the  
481 ideological terrain but on spatial practices, identities, knowledge and experiences exchange and  
482 subaltern alternative politics.

483

484

## 5. Conclusion

485 In analyzing grassroots conflicts under crisis in Greece, this paper sheds light on how struggles over the  
486 environment can become the quilting point around which austerity as the hegemonic response to crisis  
487 can be contested. Drawing on a Gramscian political ecology approach, we explore the ways in which  
488 alternative ideas and practices around “food” and “land-uses” are developed on the terrain of everyday  
489 life to contest and politicize austerity, mobilize the subalterns, generate practices of solidarity-making,  
490 new forms of self-organization and learning processes self-government. Both cases under study  
491 actively and consciously set in motion a philosophy of praxis for forging an alternative hegemony,  
492 albeit in a disorganized and fragmented way.

493 As we have shown, the class politics of austerity in Greece has been a catalyst of conflicts around  
494 “food” and “land-uses.” In dealing with these conflicts, activists of the X-M and SOS Halkidiki have  
495 shown the ability to move beyond a reaction to the social and environmental hardship of crisis towards  
496 a “universal” praxis. The X-M is more than a response to the immediate economic interests of farmers  
497 and consumers in face of greedy traders. Through “food”, the X-M seek to politicize and mobilize the  
498 subalterns against the politics of austerity, while set forth processes of experimentation and learning  
499 from below, showing how things can be organized differently beyond the limits of existing forms of  
500 social and political power. These processes are based on generative practices of solidarity-making  
501 between different social groupings, presupposing the mutual transformation of individuals and groups.  
502 Starting from protests in favor of its particular and local interests, SOS Halkidiki soon transcended  
503 these and searched for broader alliances with other movements struggling against large-scale projects  
504 related with austerity-driven neoliberal patterns of development. In this process, the movement  
505 engaged in elaborating alternatives away from hegemonic models of growth so that to denaturalize the  
506 neoliberal austerity agenda. The forceful imposition of the project combined with the violence faced by  
507 anti-austerity protesters, transformed identities and created bonds and convergences between  
508 participants and diverse struggles. In sum, both projects mobilize alternative ways of understanding and

509 using nature for advancing contestations to the class politics of austerity. In doing so, they go beyond  
510 resistance to austerity per se to engage in struggles that aspire to achieve broader social and political  
511 change.

512 By mobilizing a Gramscian political ecology approach that links “nature” and a “philosophy of praxis”  
513 we have provided here a lens through which to examine the relationship between performativity and  
514 questions of subject-formation. From a Gramscian perspective, these relationships are non-linear and  
515 complex, depend on conscious and active political intervention, and must necessarily have a concern  
516 with political objectives and outcomes – which are directly linked with issues of agency, strategy and  
517 struggle for social and political power.

518 This paper also offers empirical material that enriches the debate over questions of political strategy  
519 under the crisis of late neoliberalism. As our two case-studies show, a politics that mobilizes alternative  
520 ways of understanding and using nature on the terrain of everyday life provides pathways for forging  
521 an alternative hegemony that approaches issues of social and political power in and across places,  
522 spaces and scales. More research is needed on resistances and movements that mobilize this type of  
523 politics to understand its strengths as well as its limitations in different geographical settings and  
524 political conjunctures.

525

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