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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In other words, individuals shape, and are shaped by their relations with the environment through social labor and technology. As hegemonic ideas and practices are internalized in day-to-day interactions with the environment, so the ability to “develop oneself... [involves] modifying external relations both with nature and, in varying degrees, with [others]” (360). Thereby, to politicize and mobilize the subalterns...
within a unitary and coherent conception of the world also involves a transformation of the relationship between human beings and the environment.

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

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

3. Case-studies and Methodology

The first case-study focuses on the X-M, which consist in local markets organized by solidarity groups where farmers can sell their products directly to consumers at a pre-agreed price that is 20% to 50% lower than the standard market price. These initiatives began in February 2012 in the town of Katerini, Central Greece, by distributing potatoes (hence the X-M is also known as the potato movement). Distributions rapidly spread across the country, especially in Athens and Thessaloniki where the effects of austerity are more severe. The products diversified to include flour, vegetables, olive oil, and others. In 2014 there were at least 45 solidarity groups across Greece, 26 of which operated in Athens; each group comprised an average of 19 core activists and 29 volunteers who helped with food distribution (S4A 2015). Groups self-organize through open assemblies and consensus procedures. They informally coordinate at the regional level and five national events were organized between 2012 and 2015, three in Katerini and two in Athens. More than 5,000 tons of food has been distributed between 2012 and 2014 (S4A 2015).

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

This paper draws upon qualitative research. A preliminary research period in Athens in February 2014 included conversations between the first author and key-informants: academics, food cooperatives,
farmers and activists from two X-M groups, and the coordinator for food issues of Solidarity for All (a structure set up by the political party SYRIZA). Between April and June 2014, she conducted 23 in-depth interviews with core activists from the X-M groups in Athens (12), Thessaloniki (7) and Central Greece (4). Questions concerned motivations, organizational issues, and future perspectives. She also attended a national meeting in Katerini (February 2014), participated in local assemblies in Athens (2), and observed distributions in Central Greece (3), Thessaloniki (1), and Athens (4). Between October 2014 and March 2015, the second author conducted 27 in-depth interviews with local activists of SOS Halkidiki (20), miners (5), councilors of Aristotle municipality, where the mining is taking place (2). Interviews aimed at identifying the rationale behind the local conflict and its relation with austerity politics.

4. A Political Ecology of Contesting the Class Politics of Austerity

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

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

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

This changed radically both the conceptualization and practice of “alternative food networks” in Greece. Prior to the crisis, alternative food networks catered mainly for the “cultural preferences of the few” (Morgan 2013, 4). The X-M and other grassroots food distribution networks emerged to tackle the severe effects of austerity on the social reproduction needs of the many. But differently from alternatives such as solidarity food banks and social groceries, the X-M goes beyond distribution of food as such, to address some of the structural factors behind food poverty. Panagiota1, a young X-M activist in Kalamaria, explains that the X-M emerged because “It was very obvious that something was very wrong. With the crisis incomes decreased but food prices did not go down, whilst farmers themselves came under increasing economic pressure” (Interview, Thessaloniki, 16 May 2014). As Skordili (2013, 136) notes, “A concurrent issue in the national press is the widening gap between the price paid to farmers and the final price of goods on supermarket shelves; the latter has remained relatively high despite the recession”. The inflation of food prices suggested unwarranted middlemen profiteering. By-passing intermediaries were considered necessary to lower prices, but also to support domestic production to secure food provision. Konstantinos, a founder of an organic food cooperative, comments that “under crisis alternative food networks shifted focus from fair trade to local production: why support farmers of the global South and not local farmers?” (Interview, Athens, 15 February 2014). For Giorgos, a long-time left-wing activist engaged in the group of Petroupolis, an important achievement of the X-M is that “land is now being cultivated again” and “the prices [went] down in supermarkets too” (Interview, Athens, 12 April 2014). For many in the X-M, the support of domestic production and control of the agro-food system are central for toppling the neoliberal austerity agenda. As one activist argued at an X-M national meeting, a “country that does not produce

1 To protect the anonymity of our interviewees we use fictional names
enough food cannot achieve political uprising from external debt-creditors” (Katerini, 16 February 2014).

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

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

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

This effort depends greatly on the active involvement and self-organization of farmers and consumers.

As Kostas, active in the group of Piraeus, explains: “[in the X-M] we do not want to act like or become middlemen” (Interview, Athens, 10 April 10 2014).

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

Another way of resisting austerity is by undermining a “charity rhetoric [that] has been employed to legitimize the rationality of austerity and transfer the financial burdens of public cuts to local or non-state institutions...; and countering exclusionary, racist and xenophobic practices...[of] blaming ‘the other’” (Arampatzi 2016, 7). This is done by promoting solidarity as “a lived shared experience forged in common among [equal] participants” (7). The organization of X-M through open, horizontal assemblies supports this process.
In order to fully understand the dynamics of X-M vis-à-vis austerity is necessary to consider the broader context of resistance and social mobilization. The neoliberal offensive that coupled the implementation of austerity in Greece was widely contested from 2009 to 2012. Numerous demonstrations, strikes, and the occupation of the squares movement in 2011, attest to the elevation of social struggle whose “immediate political effect was the rapid loss of moral and political credibility for the bipolar Greek political system” (Hadjimichalis 2013, 128). The downturn of this wave of mass-protests was followed by the rise of a number of “grassroots social solidarity movements” (S4A 2015).

Hadjimichalis (2013, 128) notes that “most major [protest] events found their continuation in these initiatives, deepening and extending the question of how to link ‘our problems’ to the quest for broader political change.” Nikos, a university professor engaged in the X-M group of Thermi, explains that: “the [anti-austerity] movement is declining all over Greece. There is know-how of how to join people in social movements and protests, but there is fatigue. The only movements succeeding are the initiatives that not only react to austerity but also do something positive. Through the solidarity actions we put issues on the political agenda and force the state to react; we also give a positive feeling to people, call them to engage.” (Interview, Thessaloniki, 15 May 2014).

In mobilizing alternative ideas and practices around “food”, activists in the X-M convey the idea that austerity and its “politics of fear” are not inevitable; they aim to construct a “politics of hope” that gives the material and subjective conditions for that the subordinated social groups can “claim rights… and think on what kind of society and democracy they want to claim”, as Thanos argues. A main objective of the X-M is to politicize and activate subjects into collective action, while supporting the critical elaboration of a “superior conception of life”, as Gramsci would put it. This effort of politicization is made through an anti-austerity discourse that is more explicit in some groups than others. Most of the groups distribute leaflets and put banners with anti-austerity messages, organize debates on issues such as privatizations and the far-right, and try to create convivial spaces against the “politics of fear.” Alekos, a middle-aged unemployed man from the X-M group in Vironas, tells: “We have posters denouncing the politics of crisis and austerity and urging people to stand up… We give the leaflets during food distributions, but also outside them. We want to inform people and activate them.” (Interview, Athens, 15 April 2014).

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

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

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

Halkidiki, a prefecture in Northern Greece, has a long history of ore mining. Over the last forty years, this has been a direct source of contestation and conflict for local residents. In 2011, the government approved a large-scale private project for the expansion and intensification of gold extraction at the area. It has granted to Eldorado Gold rights over land, permits for mining, fiscal incentives, and fast-track approval procedures. The Canadian corporation acquired 31,700 hectares of agricultural and forest land, two pre-existing mines, and waste tailings exploitation structures, and it plans to construct a new open-pit gold mine and a metallurgy factory. The three mines will increase the current annual gold production by tenfold (ENVECO 2010). Eldorado Gold’s most controversial project is the development of an open-pit/underground mine in the middle of the Skouries forest on the Kakavos Mountain. According to the company’s own estimates, the open pit alone can lead to several environmental problems such as air pollution, emissions of heavy metals, deforestation and pollution and depletion of the area’s water resources (ENVECO 2010; Hartlief et al. 2015; SOSHalkidiki 2013).

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

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

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

A discourse of “mining as the only possible future” has influenced the movement’s approach. Miners are fighting for their jobs, but also are the anti-mining activists. Those who oppose mining range from long-term unemployed, low-income unskilled workers, seasonal employees at the local tourist industry to young people with no job opportunities locally. However, this diversity of local inhabitants is united not just to oppose the mining project per se or to protect their local environment; they do this by critically approaching the hegemonic models and pathways of development. Contrary to the miners who just support a developmental logic on the basis of their narrow and immediate economic-corporatist interests, local activists have moved towards a more universal plane. The movement has problematized issues of development and elaborated alternative proposals for the local economy based
upon social needs of inhabitants, participatory democracy, and non-domination views of the environment. In this process, it has developed a proposal for an alternative development of North-East Halkidiki together with other institutional and economic actors (e.g. Technical Chamber of Greece - Makedonia's department-, the Agriculture School of Aristoteleon University of Thessaloniki and the Hotel Association of Halkidiki). This proposal is based on the creation of jobs within a sustainable economy and environment through the promotion of small-scale agriculture, ecotourism, local fisheries and forestry activities, and a network of local cooperatives. In creating a space for experimenting alternative visions, discourses and practices of local development, SOS-Halkidiki integrates in its struggle a philosophy of praxis for forging an alternative conception of the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The police violent intervention and state coercion approach had a hand in directing the movement’s strategy towards establishing alliances with other local struggles against large-scale projects in the country. More than addressing violence per se, the movement has through alliance-building reinforced the legitimacy of its struggle and amplified its scope and capacity to influence the decision-making procedures affecting their lives. The participants in the SOS Halkidiki movement became very conscious that their struggle was not isolated but part of a larger opposition against an anti-democratic development pattern. Therefore, the movement established solidarity relations and joined forces with struggles such as the water anti-privatization initiatives in Thessaloniki and Pilio (Central Greece), the anti-mining movements in Kilkis (North-West Greece) and Thrace (North-East Greece), the movement against large scale landfills in Keratea (nearby Athens) and the initiatives against renewable energy industrial projects in Crete (Southern Greece). Furthermore, they have organized protests jointly with significant international socio-environmental movements of the same period such as the NO TAV initiative against the construction of high speed railway in Northern Italy or the Rosia Montana movement against gold extraction operations in Romania. The movement has also gained increasing international recognition and media attention and the support of international NGOs including Amnesty International and Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) who described the mining project as “a project of police repression, criminalization of the local community and environmental degradation” (Hartlief et al. 2015, 16). Vasilis, a 42 years old teacher, explains:
“Originally we started this fight to protect our land and environment against a greedy company. It quickly became more than that. We now also have to challenge a state that promotes austerity as the only possible way to get out of the crisis.” (Interview, Ierissos, 11 November 2014).

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

6. References


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