**For: Living Under Austerity: Greek Society in Crisis**

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**From the Twilight Zone to the Limelight:**

**Shifting Terrains of Asylum and Rights in Greece**

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In 2008, I conducted an interview with a refugee advocate from the European North who had recently begun a project on Lesvos, the Greek Aegean island that, since the early 2000s, had become a key site of crossing for asylum seekers and migrants entering Europe. He explained that it was “obvious” to anyone working on asylum in Europe that Greece was “the place” to do a successful advocacy project. “Everyone knew terrible things were happening in Greece,” he explained, “but no one was talking about it.”

We went on to discuss the detention and policing situation in Lesvos: the notorious Pagani detention center (which later closed in 2009), and the frequent unofficial pushbacks of asylum seekers to Turkey (of which local lawyers and advocacy groups had intimate knowledge, but which European powers had hitherto ignored). We also discussed the Evros land border in the north, with its river, marshlands, and nature preserve popular with bird watchers. He described Evros as a “Twilight Zone” for both the difficulty that advocates faced in accessing its squalid detention centers, and the nightmarish accounts of refugees and migrants who passed through the area. Indeed, some of the refugees I met during my research on asylum had themselves encountered the *narkes* (landmines) buried in the marshes from earlier conflicts with Turkey. For border-crossers, these mines were notorious for blowing legs off and riddling the unlucky with shrapnel, sometimes with fatal consequences.

In the intervening years, I have often ruminated on this conversation, as I have watched Greece become a site that is now very much “talked about.” Greece has since moved out of the darkness of the “Twilight Zone” so to speak into the global limelight via two overlapping crises: first, Greece’s role in the global “financial crisis” owing to its unsustainable debt; and second, in 2015-16, for its crucial geopolitical position in the “refugee crisis.” Over 800,000 of the million people seeking refuge in Europe in 2015 entered through Greece, primarily through the Aegean islands; 500,000 or more entered via Lesvos. This refugee crisis, rightfully, garnered extensive press coverage, sparked heated policy and political debates, and mobilized donors and volunteers both in Greece and throughout the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as international organizations such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and *Médicins du Monde*, and Greek and European NGOs, strived to meet the often urgent needs of those entering Greece. Meanwhile, volunteers from all over the world traveled to Greece to participate in the humanitarian response. Perhaps most striking was the scale of the response of Greeks and other locals on the ground, through the mobilization of informal, but highly organized networks based on the principle of “solidarity” (*allileggii*) with refugees.

Since 2005, I have studied asylum in Greece from an anthropological perspective, focusing on the peculiar dilemmas that Greece has faced as a threshold of Europe. My book, *On the Doorstep of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece* (Cabot 2014), examined the crucial role of the Greek NGO sector and other civil society groups in offering legal aid and social support to asylum seekers. I conducted most of my anthropological fieldwork between 2005 and 2011, beforethe civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State. At that time, Iraqis and Afghans, along with others from Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, were the primary groups seeking refuge in Greece from wars spearheaded by the US and NATO and both economic and political forms of violence. Greek and other European organizations specialized in issues of asylum began speaking of a “humanitarian crisis” in the Aegean as early as 2007.[[1]](#endnote-1) The dangers of border crossings, the lack of access to the asylum system and social services, the grinding fear of moving and living with precarious status—these were already everyday crises for my field interlocutors in Greece, long before they made headlines in the broader Euro-American world.

Since then, there have been material changes in the global configurations of power and violence that led to unprecedented movements of people into the EU in 2015-16. I cannot speak directly to the specific histories that caused refugee movements from Syria. In earlier work, however, I highlighted in detail the structural problems that continue to impact EU and Greek migration and asylum regimes: the dearth of resources for member states and civil society groups to provide services to refugees; the lack of social support for refugees themselves; the ambiguous responsibilities of member states in granting safe haven; and deeply problematic, inequitable legislation at the EU level (see [Rozakou 2006](#_ENREF_51); [Magliveras 2011](#_ENREF_35); [Rozakou 2012](#_ENREF_52); [Papageorgiou 2013](#_ENREF_43); [McDonough and Tsourdi 2012](#_ENREF_36)). For those I met in my earlier research on asylum, it was obvious that not just the Greek state but also the EU were deeply, perhaps even willfully, ill-prepared for earlier refugee movements—let alone the war in Syria. These systemic deficiencies have persisted and perhaps even increased, combined with the what Karpozilos, and Cheliotis and Xenakis, in this volume describe in terms of the increasing political violence and criminalization affecting migrants in Greece under austerity. In the meantime, however, as Burgi shows us in her analysis of the Greek healthcare system (this volume), economic instability and debt in Europe’s poorer countries, and the forms of neoliberal governance at work in austerity policies, have made it even more difficult for member states like Greece to provide care and support to both citizens and non-citizens (see [Athanasiou 2012](#_ENREF_4); [Davis 2015](#_ENREF_16); [Douzinas 2013](#_ENREF_17); [Knight 2015](#_ENREF_32); [Rakopoulos 2014](#_ENREF_47); [Stuckler and Basu 2013](#_ENREF_57); [Lazzarato and Jordan 2012](#_ENREF_33);[2014](#_ENREF_34)).

In this chapter, following the provocations of the editors, I consider some of the key changes that have taken place with regard to asylum and refugee issues under austerity, in the face of what EU Migration and Home Affairs Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos[[2]](#endnote-2) described as the “worst refugee crisis” in Europe since World War II. Yet I also emphasize the many continuities that undergird the current moment of crisis. I argue that many of those events that have become visible as “new” (including the “crisis” itself) are in large part products of existing structural inequities as well as, often systematic, policies and practices: Greece’s geopolitical and economic marginality in Europe; increasing projects of securitization; legislative patterns that have persistently outsourced the “problem” of migration and asylum to the EU’s external borders and beyond; and finally, the ongoing neoliberal devolution of rights and services necessary for livable (let alone good) lives to venues outside the state. Ultimately, I suggest that the changing context of asylum in Greece in the age of austerity indicates a crisis in the state of rights in Europe today, for both citizens and non-citizens.

**Chasing the Limelight**

Conducting scholarship in sites and times of “crisis” is a challenge that more and more social scientists are confronting, as this historical moment is punctuated with multiple crisis discourses and “hot spots.”[[3]](#endnote-3) At such moments, it is easy to forget that change is always happening, even in periods of apparent stasis; time seems to speed up, and the present simultaneously acquires an added density (Cabot 2015). Crisis or *krisi,* which in Greek means also “judgment,” also denotes a point of reckoning when we engage collectively, though in deeply heterogeneous ways, in rethinking the past, present, and future ([Roitman 2014](#_ENREF_49)). The “common sense” of everyday structures, practices, and lifeworlds is thrown into question ([Turner 1974](#_ENREF_60); [Gluckman 2006 [1965]](#_ENREF_29)).

Even critical accounts of crisis, however, frequently neglect the continuities that undergird these moments of rapid change and the often entrenched practices and socio-political forms that underlie them. Crisis has a bewitching quality for researchers, making certain topics and places dangerous and exciting when they were not before, and promoting an urgent need to be on the frontlines of whatever is coming next. But crisis thinking is distracting, encouraging us to approach such moments as exceptions to the social and political order ([Agamben 2005](#_ENREF_1); [Athanasiou 2012](#_ENREF_4)). Crisis thinking is also dangerous for how it reifies power relationships and active decisions that lie behind political and economic realities, presenting certain injustices as given and perhaps unavoidable. The editors of this volume are careful to talk about “Greece under austerity” as opposed to “crisis Greece,” highlighting how economic and financial instabilities (read as “crisis”) cannot be excised from the austerity packages that Greece has been made to adopt since 2010. The concept of “austerity,” for instance, helps us critically analyze a political reality, a set of intentionally-crafted and imposed policies and practices, whereas crisis speaks to the mystical authority of the “market.” Similarly, the language surrounding the “refugee crisis” strips European governments and decision makers of responsibility for a situation that has been, as I argue here, in the making for years.

Like many of the other authors in this volume, I can chart Greece’s ascension into the arena of scholarly and public attention to the financial crash of 2010. When I began my graduate research on asylum in Greece in 2003, however, Greece was not deemed a particularly exciting or socially-relevant place to be doing research. I had to respond to frequent questions of “why Greece?”—always asked to justify why this site was interesting or promising.[[4]](#endnote-4) At that time, Greece was enjoying the so-called “good years” of neoliberal development, excessive borrowing, and deregulation (see Placas this volume; [Aimee Placas 2011](#_ENREF_46); [Aimee Placas 2016](#_ENREF_45)) associated with the Olympic Games and recent accession to the Euro.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, Greece was still largely approached by more global publics as a friendly, disorganized, and somewhat backward country on Europe’s Mediterranean margins. Within Europeanist anthropology, meanwhile, Greece was certainly the site of deeply respected work but was still often framed as a bit old-fashioned: a place to study (certainly interesting, but not always “sexy”) topics such as the uses of history, kinship, village life, and gender roles (largely associated with more “traditional” anthropology). Greece did not have the added political-economic interest of the post-socialist world, and was also lacking the (post)colonial connections that have made, for instance, England and France particularly intriguing for questions of identity, power, erasure, hybridity, and the like. Finally, as a site for the study of migration, Greece was, at that time, also of lesser interest than Spain (the Canary Islands and Melilla) and Italy (Lampedusa), which had entered the limelight earlier as problem areas with regard to issues of migration and asylum.

Having begun my work in a context in which scholars Greece were marginalized almost as much as Greece has been, I am still somewhat amazed by Greece’s ascension as a hot spot of scholarly and media interest (see also Cabot 2016). “Crisis” has swept Greece up and catapulted it into the center of attention. But this limelight should elicit more questions than it does. What was going on behind the scenes, in those “uninteresting,” gray Twilight Zones that characterized pre-crisis refugee and asylum politics in Greece?

**Continuities and Changes**

In 2015, global publics were confronted with Greece’s position as Europe’s doorstep and the stark role of border regimes in shaping people’s capacity to live, die, move, or remain stuck not just *outside* the EU, but also within Europe’s territorial boundaries. Images circulated in the news and on social media: of a desperate rush to reach Europe, of people landing on Aegean shores, of deaths and drownings, and enormous numbers in limbo in makeshift camps in Greece and elsewhere in the Balkans as they sought to enter contiguous European territory. Some European leaders and citizens expressed the need to welcome refugees; others (especially after the Paris attacks in January 2016) emphasized the danger of the impossible-to-regulate “floods,” “tides,” and “waves” of “migrants,” who not only were non-European, but also largely Muslim. In March 2016, a “statement” was signed between the European Union and Turkey allowing European authorities to return “irregular migrants” back to Turkey. This controversial decision has furthered reinforced the marginality of Greece even as it has altered the territorial profile of Europe by extending bordering practices not just to the edges of Greece but beyond, to Turkey itself.

The refugee crisis of 2015-16 threw into sharp relief longstanding European patterns of governance and border legislation. EU approaches to border management, combined with unique geopolitical factors, have, since at least the early 2000s, made Greece both a crucial point of arrival and the “prison of Europe,” to cite the succinct description of one of my field interlocutors (an Iranian refugee speaking in 2011). Greece is a site where people have long sought to arrive but also which they usually also strive (sometimes unsuccessfully) to leave ([Cabot 2012b](#_ENREF_10); [Triandafillydou and Maroufof 2009](#_ENREF_59); [Papadimitriou and Papageorgiou 2005](#_ENREF_42)).

During the first years of my fieldwork (2005-08), Greece’s geopolitical position, with land and sea borders imminently close to Turkey, made it the primary entry point for persons fleeing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, the emergence of new consumer markets in Southern Europe ([Rosen 2011](#_ENREF_50)) had also made Greece (like Italy and Spain) a key site for many different forms of labor-related migration (see also Placas this volume, Rosen this volume), primarily from Southeast Asia, China, and West Africa ([Fouskas 2013](#_ENREF_26)). Increasingly militarized policing measures in other regions of Europe's Mediterranean also redirected to Greece boats that were originally headed to Italy and Spain from the African coast. Few migrants and asylum seekers I met during my research described Greece as their stated destination. However, Greece’s peculiar position as an outpost of non-contiguous EU territory presented border crossers with further challenges as they sought to move further into the EU. Many paid smuggling networks for passage to the North. Others attempted to cross on their own from the port city of Patras by hiding themselves in container trucks or climbing the port-side fence and embarking ferries bound for Italy. From Greece, the road that many sought to travel often extended as far as the U.K, Sweden, and Norway, but France and Germany were also highly sought-after destinations. Despite attempts to leave, however, many who were apprehended and detained applied for asylum in Greece,[[6]](#endnote-6) and for others, the fear of arrest and detention made an asylum application expedient and even necessary. As a result, many of those hoping to move on to elsewhere in Europe became “stuck” in Greece.

The spatial politics of EU immigration and asylum law are contradictory. On the one hand, EU legislation frames the EU as a smooth, homogeneous space, “as natural, innocent, and absent of systems of domination” ([Volpp 2012](#_ENREF_61)). However, the vision of a Common European Asylum System, which is crucial to the legislative frame of immigration and asylum in Europe, does not sufficiently take into account the differential positions and capacities of member states. Moreover, in many cases, EU legislation reinforces existing power differentials and exacerbates the marginality of border states. The Dublin Regulation, first signed in 2003 and recently renewed in 2013 (producing “Dublin III”), requires that asylum seekers apply for protection and *remain* in the country where they first enter EU territory. This law was initially articulated as a way to encourage “responsibility-” or “burden-” sharing among member states. However, given that most people enter Europe via the borders, it has long had the effect of constraining asylum seekers to border countries. The early years of my research were rife with people in the asylum system struggling to survive while stuck in Greece, unable to leave owing to internal European policing regimes. Many others were caught in the Dublin system, shuttling back and forth between Greece and other places in the European North where they worked, had families, or otherwise made their homes. Since its inception, the Dublin system has been variously challenged, invoked, selectively applied, and suspended by member states ([Thielemann and Armstrong 2013](#_ENREF_58); [Brekke and Brochmann 2014](#_ENREF_8)). Most crucially, in 2011, a case brought by an Afghan asylum seeker to the European Court of Human Rights, *M.S.S. vs. Belgium and Greece*,*[[7]](#endnote-7)* exposed a level of brutality in Greek detention systems that the Court deemed unacceptable, alongside highly precarious access to the asylum system and social services. This decision highlighted the Greek State’s ongoing incompetence in this area, as well as lack of political will to institute meaningful changes in asylum and reception systems. It also incited a moratorium on Dublin returns to Greece, which, until recently (March 2017), has been adhered to fairly consistently ([Moreno-Lax 2012](#_ENREF_38)).

At the national level, in the mid-2000s, the (then relatively untried) Greek asylum process faced an enormous spike in applications, increasing from around 5,000 applications in 2005 to approximately 25,000 in 2007 ([Cabot 2014](#_ENREF_11); [McDonough and Tsourdi 2012](#_ENREF_36); [Papageorgiou 2013](#_ENREF_43)). These larger numbers concurrently placed greater pressure on both asylum bureaucracies and civil society mechanisms of support. Meanwhile, as most applicants remained in the system for a matter of years, the number of “backlogged” cases grew, eventually reaching 52,000 in 2010, the fourth largest number of backlogged cases globally (after South Africa, Ecuador, and the United States) (UNHCR). The Greek state provided access to healthcare and the right to work to those awaiting decisions on their asylum claims, but other often urgent social needs (primarily housing and food) were left almost entirely to civil society organizations and collectivities, primarily the (at that time very few) NGOs focused on asylum related issues. As I write in detail elsewhere (Cabot 2012), applicants—finding themselves in this state of limbo (often for many years)—had to deal with the difficult challenges posed by precarious, indeterminate status and negligible social support.[[8]](#endnote-8) NGOs such as my primary fieldsite sought to provide important, though limited, forms of assistance. A further irony was that even those who eventually did receive asylum in Greece found themselves without meaningful assistance in finding housing, employment, and building lives.

By 2010, Greece had become a crucial area of concern for advocates and government officials in Europe, initiating significant legislative changes to make Greece compliant with European directives. These legislative shifts had important, if relatively slow to emerge, impacts on the ground. Asylum applications used to take place through the police authorities (primarily in Thessaloniki and in Athens), generating nightmarish scenes of hundreds in line waiting for days, weeks, or months, to apply, as police monitored the crowd, often violently. Those successful in making an asylum application then went to a more in-depth hearing in front of a committee in order to receive a final decision from what was then known as the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection (again, often after years in limbo). In 2011, however, the Greek Parliament approved Law 3907/2011, which established a new asylum system meant to institute greater transparency and compliance with relevant EU directives: a new, semi-independent asylum authority, new employees, and regional offices for applications. This new system was not enacted until 2013, and even then, both the old and new systems functioned simultaneously: new applicants would enter the new system, whereas those who had applied under the old remained in that process until they received a decision. The police authorities stopped reviewing all applications in 2015.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Geopolitically, practices of border management, policing, and securitization initiated further adaptations in routes and tactics of border crossing. In 2009, forces from the EU border management service, Frontex, began policing the Aegean much more aggressively, a move that redirected most migration traffic to the North, and by 2010 the Evros border had become the most crossed border in Europe. This emergent “crisis” in Evros, in turn, generated the deployment of Frontex “rapid response units” to the Evros region. The construction of a border fence in Evros was initiated under the PASOK government of Giorgos Papandreou, who in other respects was much more open on questions of migration, particularly in comparison to the earlier, conservative government of Costas Karamanlis (New Democracy). Antonis Samaras, from a more conservative wing of New Democracy, completed the fence. While EU funds were not expressly used for the construction of the fence, surveillance equipment was accessed via EU programs, and Frontex continued to participate in securing the border ([see Feldman 2012](#_ENREF_21)). With massive displacements from Syria in 2015-15, the Aegean sea (and the Greek islands) emerged again as the primary theater of crossing.

In the contemporary context, policing practices in the Balkans and within European territory have made passage from Greece even more fraught and complex. In 2015-16, with no viable way to move between Greece and Italy, the hundreds of thousands entering Greece had to find a way North, leading to the emergence of the “Balkan Route,” in which people exited not only Schengen but also European Union territory in order to reenter again. This route was closed in Spring of 2016, positioning thousands in muddy, makeshift camps in Idomeni, near the border with Macedonia (FYROM). Meanwhile, the effects of the EU/Turkey agreement of Spring 2016 were swift and palpable, instituting a fast-track border procedure at the Hotspots in which those asylum seekers found not to constitute “vulnerable” categories of people are marked to be sent back to Turkey ([Rozakou and Kalir 2016](#_ENREF_56)).[[10]](#endnote-10) While returns to Turkey have taken place, many still remain at the Hotspots awaiting processing and examination, highlighting the ongoing strategic use of limbo and uncertainty as key governance tactics in Greek (and European) asylum regimes ([Cabot 2012a](#_ENREF_9); [Rozakou 2017](#_ENREF_55)).[[11]](#endnote-11) The walling up of the northern borders has made Patras again a site of dangerous internal European crossings, and people can be seen trying to climb the port-side fence, attempting to board ferries headed for Italy.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Now, with the heavy policing of EU internal borders, and with arrivals continuing (though in vastly diminished numbers), refugees and asylum seekers in Greece face extreme difficulty in relocating to elsewhere in Europe, both formally and informally. Those who made applications for asylum *before* March 20, 2016, and the institution of the “EU/Turkey Statement,” may have their cases examined by other European countries. Yet relocation processes are protracted, and success is anything but guaranteed.[[13]](#endnote-13) Others must await the examination of their claims in Greece. Still, advocates and refugees alike speak openly of informal methods of transit, and of the steady “leakage” of European internal borders, through which refugees in Greece continue to relocate via smuggling routes to other European countries.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Expanding one’s temporal scale of analysis beyond a “snapshot” view of the current refugee crisis highlights some of the ongoing structural difficulties that characterize EU border regimes. The violent effects of these contradictions are felt, of course, primarily by border-crossers themselves; as well as, to lesser degrees, by advocates and others working at the borders. Governance practices at EU, national, and regional levels have persistently placed Greece in a contradictory position regarding its own territorial sovereignty, on the one hand, and its responsibility to regulate Europe’s borders, on the other. Greece must guard the frontiers of Europe, always subject to critiques and interventions with regard to European-level security needs. Meanwhile, the the need for a humane, functioning asylum system that complies with European standards has also made Greece the ongoing subject of critique for its own (very real) inadequacies in the treatment of asylum seekers. These systemic challenges do not excuse the actions of Greek governments that persistently have been unable or unwilling to respond meaningfully to various refugee movements over the years. Most recently, accounts have documented significant deficiencies in policy and practice instituted by the current Syriza government, specifically in the use and misuse of funds ([see Howden and Fotiadis 2017](#_ENREF_30)). With regard to asylum seekers themselves, these contradictory regimes of border management have only intensified with the current refugee crisis, placing those seeking refuge in Europe in increasingly untenable positions. Facing extraordinary dangers in the crossing *to* Europe, refugees entering Greece now—as before— must navigate protracted dangers and struggles *within* Europe: facing extreme difficulties in finding meaningful protection in Greece but often unable to move elsewhere.

**From NGOs to Solidarity**

I first went to Lesvos in 2006 with workers from the Athens-based refugee advocacy NGO where I conducted much of my fieldwork, which was at the time one of the few of its kind in Greece. It was late November, when crossings become particularly dangerous. A boat carrying forty-five Afghans had arrived, most of them appearing to be minors. I accompanied two pro-bono lawyers who met with the boys in the courtyard of the Pagani detention center, a concrete space open to the elements, with just a roof and bars on the windows and doors. As the lawyers informed the boys of their right to asylum with the help of an interpreter, a local woman—a volunteer social worker—circled our makeshift meeting-space, bringing the boys sweaters and cleaning their faces with the rough care of a Greek grandmother.

At that time, Lesvos, along with the other large islands in the Eastern Aegean, including Samos, Kos, and Leros, had already become relatively accustomed to refugee arrivals. However, with the lack of a local, state-sponsored infrastructure for reception, nongovernmental organizations from the mainland often provided assistance. Since then, the Eastern Aegean has become a hub of not just refugee arrivals but of modes of humanitarian governance that extend far beyond the formal designation of NGOs. These initiatives have been extraordinary in both their scope and their capacities to mobilize and organize voluntary labor and resources ([Rozakou 2016b](#_ENREF_54); [Papataxarchis 2016](#_ENREF_44)). NGOs and international organizations have, of course, been active in the emergency response in 2015-16, and the number of professionalized organizations, both Greek and non-Greek, dealing with refugee issues has also exploded. But perhaps even more strikingly, and especially in the early days of the crisis of 2015 (late summer and fall), locals from throughout Greece, in collaboration with volunteers from throughout Europe and the world, developed modes of assistance and support in spheres sharply demarcated as outside of, and perhaps even antithetical to, the NGO and nonprofit sector. Instead, these initiatives were explicitly framed as *in*formal, non-professionalized, consisting of citizens acting in “solidarity” with the other. The very woman who I met working as a social worker ten years ago in Pagani is now locally famous as a stolid leader in what has become known as the Greek solidarity movement (*kinima allileggiis)*.

The solidarity movement refers to the deeply heterogeneous network of initiatives that seek to collect and redistribute resources to people in need, including Greek citizens, longterm migrants, and newly arrived refugees. These initiatives include *pantopoleia* (groceries), anti-middlemen markets ([Rakopoulos 2015](#_ENREF_48)), food and clothing banks (Theodossopoulos 2016), soup kitchens, pharmacies and clinics, and even language classes and other opportunities for continuing education. The Solidarity Movement can be framed, in part, as a response to rising poverty and unemployment accompanying austerity, though it can also be traced to the forms of protest and civic action (including “direct democracy”) that have emerged among an increasingly politicized and active populace ([Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos 2011](#_ENREF_28); [Panourgia 2011](#_ENREF_41)). Further, the solidarity movement often positions Greeks and non-Greeks alongside each other as sharing common predicaments and political projects.[[15]](#endnote-15) For instance, many active in the movement have long engaged in actions meant to provide support to migrants and refugees. A number of those active in the solidarity movement explained to me that the 2011 hunger strike by 300 migrants demanding papers was particularly important in catalyzing the collective organizing that undergirds solidarity networks.

Recent scholarship (including my current research on social solidarity clinics and pharmacies) (see Cabot 2016, Rakopoulos 2016) highlights both the novel and creative aspects of solidarity, as well as its roots in longer Greek histories of resource pooling and redistribution, which other anthropologists have examined in both rural and urban contexts ([Bakalaki 2008](#_ENREF_5); [Du Boulay 1974](#_ENREF_18); [Friedl 1962](#_ENREF_27)). For many participants themselves (many of whom call themselves “solidarians”), solidarity, as an organizing and ideological principle, marks the movement as unique, in contradistinction to other forms of service provision, including state formations, non-governmental organizations, or more traditional forms of charity or philanthropy (Theodossopoulos 2016).[[16]](#endnote-16) In the talk of many participants, as well as in the discursive trends that frame the movement, *solidarity* is grounded on lateral, explicitly anti-hierarchical modes of organization and resource distribution. I have, for instance, been told repeatedly that solidarity is equally open to all, and that there are no “leaders” among these collectives (even if leaders often seem to emerge in practice). Conceptually, this horizontalism also includes those who receive assistance. Maria, a volunteer at a solidarity clinic in Athens, explained to me that solidarity is different from humanitarianism or philanthropy because it is not based on a *keno* (gap) between the one who offers support and the one who receives. Indeed, I have met a number of people who participate as volunteers in solidarity initiatives and also receive assistance. Further, at a time when the misappropriation of funds (by the Greek state and banks) is seen as inextricable from the current period of austerity, many solidarity initiatives seek to subvert what Katerina Rozakou (2016) describes as the polluting tendencies of money by eliciting donations of material resources and labor, while resisting or rejecting outright monetary donations. This rejection of capital is not just an attempt to produce alternative (non-capitalistic) modes of exchange, but also an acknowledgment of how money generates mistrust among both beneficiaries and those not engaged in the solidarity movement. Finally, these initiatives are notable for their valuation of informal, non-professionalized forms of voluntary participation ([Rozakou 2016a](#_ENREF_53)). While the role of professionals is unavoidable in certain cases (such as volunteer doctors in the clinics), solidarity networks are framed as venues where anyone may take part, but never with monetary compensation.

Many participants cite these aspects of solidarity as distinguishing the movement from other spheres of civil society, especially NGOs. As such, solidarians tend to frame NGOs as hierarchical, grounded on monetary compensation and the professional capacity for expertise (or the building of professionalism through formal internships and practicums). Of course, the practice of solidarity may look very different from how it is imagined and described. For instance, one volunteer explained to me that no matter what people want to call these initiatives, they are a form of “charity;” likewise, despite solidarity’s rejection of money, rumors—true or not—abound among collectives and beneficiaries about monetary donations that are accepted behind the scenes.[[17]](#endnote-17) Such moments of internal critique, while commenting on the weaknesses or challenges of solidarity in practice, do not question the underlying ideological matrix of solidarity itself.

With the refugee crisis of 2015-16, drawing on existing know-how and networks, solidarity initiatives mobilized and coordinated to generate a wide-ranging, yet highly effective, response meant to “welcome” refugees.[[18]](#endnote-18) These efforts were featured and celebrated in the international press, even garnering a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. Still, many solidarians themselves would remind us that this movement, a topic of such celebratory discourse, is itself largely a product of the failure of state and EU infrastructures to provide rights and livable livelihood to refugees—as well as to Greek citizens. The devolution of rights not just to formal civil society groups (NGOs) but, in the form of solidarity, to “regular people,” highlights the ongoing precaritization of rights and services for both citizens and noncitizens attached to neoliberal polices and practices ([Muehlebach 2012](#_ENREF_39)).[[19]](#endnote-19)

**Remaking the Ground of Rights**

As I have just shown, bordering practices have rendered the right to asylum increasingly precarious for seekers of refuge. Through austerity, the right to livable livelihood has become increasingly precarious for citizens as well. The neoliberal quality of austerity policies have been extensively documented in the literature cited throughout this volume, and their neoliberal effects are thrown into particularly high relief by the changing terrain of both human and social rights evident on Europe’s margins. When I speak of rights here, I refer, first, to “international human rights:” the legislative apparatuses formed at international, EU, and national levels, which—formally speaking – “should” apply irrespective of one’s status within a national territory (i.e., whether one is a citizen or alien). Yet I also invoke a particular vision of the relationship between person and society implied in the organization of the welfare state in Europe, the notion that by performing the obligations of citizenship (in particular, complying with taxation), one has access to those things necessary for not just a livable life, but even a good one. These consist of social rights, and workers’ and citizens’ rights, including healthcare, education, housing, safe retirement, a clean environment, etc. These conceptions of rights are linked but differentiated. There is a robust debate among scholars and practitioners about whether “social” rights (such as healthcare, for instance) *should* be framed as human rights ([see for instance Farmer 2005](#_ENREF_19)). Formally speaking, however, international human rights are *supposed* to apply to all people, irrespective of one’s legal status, whereas citizens’ rights apply primarily to those who are, in fact, citizens.

Critical legal scholarship has, however, shown that one’s legal status mattersdeeply in whether one can access or realizeinternational human rights. Perhaps most famously, Hannah Arendt ([1976 [1951]](#_ENREF_3)) demonstrated that citizenship within a national territory in Post-World War I Europe was a determining factor in realizing even the right to life, while stateless persons and refugees, squeezed out of regimes of legal protection, were ascribed to the margins of life. As discussed earlier, even as the rights of refugees are formally recognized in both international and European law, the rights of refugees on Europe’s margins have, in practice, become increasingly precarious. Concurrently, the rights of citizens in Greece have *also* been destabilized through a variety of factors—in particular, austerity measures. The extant Greek welfare state has been persistently dismantled by policies that explicitly attack the public sector (see Burgi this volume). In my current research, I have conducted numerous interviews with Greek citizens who no longer have access to healthcare, retirement, and social support. A number of my interlocutors have emphasized that this shared predicament makes their positions similar to those of refugees and migrants; some have even used the term “internal refugees” (*esoteriki prosfiges*) to describe Greeks who themselves have been displaced from the workforce and frameworks of social assistance. In Greece today, the state of rights for both citizens and noncitizens is deeply uncertain, a feature that has often been framed as an end-result of neoliberal governance ([Allison 2013](#_ENREF_2); [Muehlebach 2012](#_ENREF_39)).

In discussions of neoliberalism, we often hear of a “rolling back” or stripping down of the welfare state. But Pierre Bourdieu ([1999](#_ENREF_7)) offers a more precise metaphor for the trends toward neoliberal governance at work in Europe, the costs of which are felt so deeply at its borders. In a speech from the mid-1990s, when the Eurozone was on the horizon but as yet unrealized, he discussed the dangers of this imagined polity grounded on shared currency and financial interests. He describes the State as having two hands: the right hand in charge of the management of economy and finance, the left in charge of “welfare” and social services. The problem under neoliberalism, he explains, is that the right hand no longer wants to know what the left hand doing—and more importantly, does not want to pay for it. He critically acknowledges the possibilities that supranational government may also offer for a revitalization of the welfare state, through legal and governmental apparatuses that might reestablish nation states as safehavens for *both* citizens and noncitizens. However, the age of austerity seems to have confirmed Bourdieu’s fears rather than his hopes for Europe. European laws and policies continue to encourage what is good for capital (the free movement of goods, elite labor, and money), while European commitments to rights have waned. Through austerity, EU bodies have placed active strangleholds on even national governments’ capacities to protect and care for citizens and noncitizens. As such, rights are now distributed differentially across and within Europe, leaving states and persons (both citizens and refugees) on the margins in positions of increasing precariousness.

Even in such sites of precariousness, however, rights frameworks are dependent upon, and presuppose, particular social configurations through which persons do or do not become recognizable to othersas subjects of rights. Regardless of their formal instantiation in law, rights are interpreted, negotiated, claimed, and realized locally and interpersonally, through multilevel and multivalent translations and mistranslations ([Merry 2006](#_ENREF_37)). During my own ethnographic engagement in Greece, I have observed a distinctive shift in the grounds upon which both refugees *and* citizens may be recognized as rights-bearing subjects. Formally speaking, both refugees and citizens are supposed to be recognized by state governmental bodies as entitled to rights. However, in Greece today, the distribution of services necessary for livable livelihood, for both citizens and refugees, has been increasingly “outsourced” to venues outside the state. Rights are thus grounded increasingly on social, rather than legal and political, grounds of recognition.

One must also consider whether the (deeply necessary) services provided by NGOs and solidarity networks alike are, in fact, “rights-based,” if they lack the consistency and legitimacy of state bureaucratic and legal structures. Many scholars of humanitarianism, for instance, have argued that the ethic of *care*, whether framed in terms of compassion ([Fassin 2005](#_ENREF_20)), hospitality ([Rozakou 2012](#_ENREF_52); [Cabot 2014](#_ENREF_11)), or in this case solidarity (Theodossopoulos 2016), undermines the aspects of entitlement that are formally endemic to rights-based infrastructures.[[20]](#endnote-20) As the right to refuge in Europe has been increasingly devolved not just to the borders but to formations explicitly marked as non-state, this right itself has been thrown into question.

Yet, scholarship has also shown that non-state institutions and networks are always crucial for the recognition and practice of rights. Humanitarian and rights-based NGOs have attested to their ambivalent position vis–à–vis the State ([Fisher 1997](#_ENREF_24); [Ferguson 1994](#_ENREF_22)). Gupta and Ferguson ([2002](#_ENREF_23)) for instance, argue that “neoliberal governmentality” must be considered in terms of a respatialized state, which is intimately entangled in institutions and networks marked as “civil society.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Political anthropologists themselves have been pushed to reconceptualize how they and their interlocutors frame the boundary between “state” and “non-state.” This was a crucial tension that I explored in my earlier research on asylum, in which the limited capacity and willingness of the Greek state to receive and support asylum seekers and refugees was widely discussed by state employees, NGO workers, and refugees alike. NGO workers spoke of the ambiguities and contradictions that they negotiated in their work: having the desireand responsibility to help those seeking assistance, but without the capacity, resources, or legitimacy of an (imagined, but non-existent) state infrastructure for assisting asylum seekers and refugees. Workers often voiced frustration at how they did “the state’s work.” Still, the NGO’s role as a formal organization, with close ties to the state (financially, bureaucratically, and socially), and its professionalized, bureaucratically-robust approach, made it distinctly “state-like.” Thus, well before the current refugee crisis, a small, professionalized sphere of NGOs and international organizations took on the crucial, though highly imperfect, work of seeking to ensure rights and services for asylum seekers and refugees, emerging as a kind of shadow-state beneath and alongside the “state” that was most visible.

The rise of solidarity networks in austerity Greece, while certainly innovative, also attests to the increasing precaritization of rights. Through solidarity, rights and services are no longer based on one’s recognition as a rights-bearing-subject by the state or even a *shadow-*state (such as an NGO). Rather, such recognition is increasingly grounded on lateral, informal networks, shared socialities, and an explicit rejection of professionalized, hierarchically-structured labor. Solidarity initiatives, like NGOs before them, have taken on the task of remaking a venue for the distribution of rights and services outside the state, at a moment when the state of rights has, in many ways, failed. However, the state *and* the shadow state remain constitutive frameworks against which solidarity claims a space for itself. In the summer of 2015, at a small festival of solidarity networks in the historically leftist neighborhood of Kaisariani, I read a poster meant to educate citizens on “what is” and “is not” solidarity; one of the very first distinctions mentioned was that solidarity structures *“are not* NGOs.” Yet solidarians’ persistent engagement in drawing such distinctions itself underscores the continuing slippage between those who seek to provide rights and services outside the state and the specter of the state itself. As the state under austerity has been increasingly absent (and hamstrung) in its provision of rights to both refugees and citizens, alternative venues have emerged for the realization of livable livelihood and rights. Still, behind this increasingly neoliberalized state, a failed vision of the European state as a state of rights remains, emerging as a kind of specter in the venues where rights are indeed (if only partially) remade. This specter haunts the projects of NGO workers and solidarians alike.

CONCLUSION

By the time this article is published, we will certainly have entered a new phase of Europe’s border contest; Greece may or may not be in the limelight. Still, as I have tried to show, a focus on “crisis” does little to underscore the systemic and structural factors that make crises possible, which most often unfold in the twilight zones far beyond the range of public interest and attention. The “refugee crisis” must be understood not as a simple aberration, but in part as an effect of longstanding patterns of securitization and neoliberalization instituted, quite systematically through European financial and migration-related policies and practices. To return to Bourdieu ([1998](#_ENREF_6)), in a talk he gave to the trade unions of Athens in 1996 on the dangers of neoliberalism, he called on the need for the combined critical power of intellectuals, workers, and associations of all kinds to question the withering away of the state of rights. My various research interlocutors, both then and now, before and after the onset of austerity, have sought to provide venues for rights and livable livelihood against the backdrop of what has increasingly become a crisis, a moment of reckoning and judgment, regarding the state of rights in Europe today.

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1. See, in particular, Proasyl and Group of Lawyers for the Rights of Refugees and Immigrants, Athens. 2007. "The truth may be bitter but it must be told:" The Situation in the Aegean and the Practices of the Greek Coast Guard.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dimitris Avramopoulos, "A European Response to Migration: Showing solidarity and sharing responsibility" (Brussels, August 14, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I have also presented a similar argument regarding crisis and continuity in an essay for *Allegra Laboratory*: ([Cabot November 10, 2015](#_ENREF_12)). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In a field that has been famed for its appreciation of everyday life and small, even “out-of-the-way” places, this may rightfully strike some as contradictory. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Olympics of 2004 are a case in point regarding the ways in which Greece remained marginal in the global public eye, even as it symbolically entered the Modernity of the modern Games. Even as Greece renovated its metro system and built quite extraordinary infrastructures for the Games, international (Anglo) media coverage focused on aspects of disorganization and corruption: the “last minute” aspects of the building process, the “corruption” of taxi drivers and hotel operators who overcharged tourists. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, in migration literature, the concept of “transit” countries versus “destination” countries has been increasingly complexified, as it has become clear that persons increasingly spend significant time in countries where they may never have set out to stay, while even places people may seek to reach may themselves become places of “transit” ([see Coutin 2005](#_ENREF_15)). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Grand Chamber, European Court of Human Rights, January 2011. M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. As the M.S.S. decision itself shows, while housing and social support for asylum seekers is always an issue in Europe, the dearth of social support to asylum seekers in Greece is particularly noteworthy in comparison (see for instance [Norredam et al. 2006](#_ENREF_40); [Clarke 2013](#_ENREF_14); [Ioakimidis et al. 2014](#_ENREF_31)). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. With the enormous numbers coming into Greece in 2015-16, the Greek government—at the behest of the EU—created “hotspots” on the Greek islands, with the formal goal of registering asylum seekers and granting them temporary permission to stay in order to apply for asylum. With the inauguration of the Turkey/EU deal in March 2016, however, these hotpots have effectively become, in the words of one interlocutor (a worker on Lesvos) “detention centers,” where many people are subject to removal to Turkey. Meanwhile, the problem of housing and services for those in limbo extremely concerning. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. After the institution of the agreement, asylum committees in Greece initially refused to make decisions that would return asylum seekers to Turkey on the grounds that Turkey cannot be deemed a “safe third country.” This sparked the Minister of Migration, Giannis Mouzalas, to reconfigure the personnel on the asylum committees in order to make them more restrictive. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The fear of being returned to Turkey, along with other policing measures, seems to have served as a deterrent. It is also noteworthy how policing on the opposite side of the Aegean (from the Turkish coast) seems also to have limited arrivals in Greece. For a detailed overview of how the hotspots are supposed to function, see European Council for Refugees and Exiles (2016). *The Implementation of the Hotspots in Italy and Greece: A Study.* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See a recent account of crossings taking place in Patras: http://www.slate.com/articles/news\_and\_politics/gender\_and\_migration/2017/07/the\_greek\_port\_of\_patras\_is\_a\_makeshift\_refugee\_camp.html [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. As in all asylum regimes, decision-making for country relocation is subject to the shifting political and social contexts of the examining country. For instance, I have recently heard numerous accounts (from advocates and asylum seekers) of palpably restrictive decisions rendered by Germany and France, in particular. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. By the time this chapter is published, the asylum system in Greece will almost certainly have undergone significant changes. The Asylum Information Database (AIDA) provides frequent updates on asylum systems. The most recent is this summary of the key changes to the Greek asylum procedure in 2016-2017. http://www.asylumineurope.org/news/28-03-2017/aida-2016-update-greece. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. As Anna Carastathis ([2015](#_ENREF_13)) shows, another trend has been forms of hostility to migrants that frame increasing racism as a result of austerity and the “bitter pill” that Greeks have had to swallow. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Whereas *solidarity* is a concept most often associated with the more radical left ([Rozakou 2006](#_ENREF_51)), it has exploded in the public sphere since the onset of economic collapse in Greece. The current politicization of solidarity, however, tends to elide the ways in which this category has often been associated with spheres of civil society that “solidarians” themselves would reject, including Allileggii, the NGO of the Orthodox Church, which significantly predates the crisis. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. These rumors themselves highlight the role of money as a moralizing force in austerity Greece, either as a way to claim moral purity or ascribe moral impurity. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. As the reception challenges in Greece have become more chronic, formal NGOs and international organizations have now become relatively dominant, not so much superseding as functioning alongside and sometimes overlapping with solidarity initiatives (though not always in harmony). As the relative urgency of the situation has waned, some solidarity groups have disbanded. Other collectivities with roots in the solidarity movement have taken on the status of formal NGOs or nonprofits, an example of what Katerina Rozakou refers to as the “NGOification of solidarity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. As I argue in a recent article, solidarians themselves are rarely naïve about these overlaps between solidarity and neoliberalization, and they often engage in heated moments of internal critique and debate regarding solidarity’s role as an emancipatory force which is, simultaneously, entangled in neoliberal tendencies (Cabot 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In my book (2014), I show how the concept of hospitality, based on asymmetry and obligation, is contradictory to the enactment of rights-based assistance, which are grounded on entitlement. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Such approaches are, of course, grounded in the Foucauldian argument that modernity is characterized by the pastoralization of governmental power and its diffusion into the arenas of ethics and care of the self ([Foucault 1988](#_ENREF_25)). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)