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Politicizing hospitality: The emergency food assistance landscape in Thessaloniki

ABSTRACT

The ethnographic focus of this article is on municipal strategies for the 'immediate management of poverty' (gia tin amesi antimetopisi tis ftohias*) in the city of Thessaloniki, in northern Greece. These involve several food assistance practices: two daily soup kitchens, two social markets and a food bank. Diefthinsi Koinonikis Politikis/The Department of Social Policy also called* Pronoia*/Welfare sustains a dormitory for homeless people, clothing banks and provides health services to poor, unemployed people, who have no health insurance (*aporoi, anergoi, anasfalistoi*). Although municipal policies aim to comfort poverty, hunger and deprivation, it is argued that there is a failure in meeting the basic prerequisites of hospitality and fair treatment as claimed. The landscape of food assistance in the city is characterized by tensions and contradictions: internal divisions, antagonistic discourses and power relations seem to be present at all stages. All of the above create a complicated picture of food assistantship and provision, and it remains questionable whether the Municipality's initiatives provide long-term solutions to the growing problems of poverty and hunger. The main argument supported is the overall disempowerment of food assistance experience, which inevitably leads to an inability to provide comfort and to 'host' as initially aimed. The ethnographic case presented becomes the starting point for the analysis of the ethics of food production and consumption and the right to food, a deeply politicized issue and a basic human right, according to international conventions. Consequently, issues of power, exclusion and inequality*

KEYWORDS

charity
urban poverty
emergency food assistance
welfare policies
moral spaces
ethics

are posed and problematized. Overall, the article adds to the documentation and the discussion of emergency food assistance in Greece.

INTRODUCTION

Greece came under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010 when it requested 80 billion Euros from the European Union (EU) and 30 billion Euros from the IMF (IMF 2010). In order to get the loans the country had to sign three memoranda, which compelled the Greek government to implement a series of drastic economic and financial policies. Salaries were cut dramatically, people lost their jobs, businesses closed down and taxes increased immensely. The situation could be described as one of rising unemployment, urban poverty and increasing debts to the IMF and the EU. All in all there was a deepening economic, political and social crisis.

In 2011 the situation resulted in massive gatherings of people in central city squares like Plateia Sintagmatos in Athens and Plateia Aristotelous in Thessaloniki (see http://amesi-dimokratia.org; http//real-democracy.gr). This movement had significant participation and important appeal to Greek society in general. The agenda of the 'movement of the squares' included the promotion of participatory democracy and it adopted practices such as the gathering of clothes and blankets for the homeless. The movement openly blamed the politicians and the government, and some of the slogans that were heard at that time were 'We will never pay', 'The debt is not ours', 'Take the memorandum and go away', 'You do not represent the people of this country' and 'Let the rich pay' (Givanopoulos and Mitropoulos 2011). Social protests and the expression of social anger and disbelief became common phenomena, with national parades and celebrations becoming loci of expressions of discontent with politicians. For example, during the celebrations of Greek independence, or the independence of the city of Thessaloniki, the president of Greece was called 'a traitor'. During the parade students wore black armbands to show that they 'mourned' the current situation in Greece. Many refused to turn their head (according to the protocol) towards the politicians who were present. Similar reactions took place in other Greek cities like Athens, Volos, Giannena and Preveza and also in Crete and the Peloponnese (see e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azZzeIuOf3w).

Unemployment, a consequence of the general crisis, resulted in economic disempowerment of families and created conditions of desperation and anger. According to recent analysis (Fragoudaki 2013), unemployment affected not only the economic profile of households but also resulted in constant insecurity and social humiliation. In this situation of serious economic, social and political depression the role of the state as a social provider was seriously questioned. There were various responses to the social predicament created, which mobilized different agendas and created diverse and, at times, conflicting rhetoric.

This article seeks to trace possible links between the political, economic and social conditions in contemporary Greece and a series of practices 'for the immediate management of poverty'. In doing so, it assesses the applicability of the concept of hospitality to the analysis of Greek reality and attempts to link hospitality with some of the most pressing social, economic and political issues in Greece today. The notion of hospitality is viewed as a set of relations that escape idealized and moralized discourses. The offering and

receiving of hospitality act as a reflecting mirror of the present political, social and economic situation in Greece. As such, any stereotypical analysis, which considers hospitality a timeless essence and a local cultural value, is seriously questioned.

The social assistantship landscape in the city of Thessaloniki is presented and discussed as an endeavour to manage recent social predicaments and to promote a politics of comfort based on the principles of solidarity, redistribution and donation. The concept of 'comfort politics' refers to the implementation of certain public measures that aim to provide relief to the population in need, especially by providing food and shelter to the hungry. These comfort strategies have intensified as a means of facing the dramatic economic situation created after the severe cuts in welfare provisions and the general cuts in the government's social agenda. This agenda should be seen as part and parcel of the neo-liberal rhetoric of privatization and weakening of the 'big' and 'ill' public sector, which is held responsible for all present bureaucratic pathogenesis. The municipality's activities are also analysed and assessed within the framework of a growing literature on emergency food assistance, which discusses similar ethnographic examples from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. The contradictions and problems of charitable assistance are thus problematized.

The main argument of the article is that, although the intentions are good, food assistantship is far from being effective and functional. Bureaucracy and disagreements lead to a series of contradictions between aims and practices, which result in restricted accessibility and exclusivity. At the same time, passivity and dependencies are produced leading to the reproduction of social inequalities and exclusions. Consequently, there seems to be a serious failure to 'host' as initially claimed and to provide long-term, viable solutions to poverty and hunger.

In what follows, the food activists' polyphonic agenda is presented and analysed as an alternative discourse of 'ethical' food provisioning and as a reaction against modern inequalities. The different groups involved, including social workers and employees of the municipality, the non-governmental organization that formally assists the municipal work, and the Church, which contributes by providing a municipal soup kitchen, seem to have diverse agendas. Such different agendas often lead to tensions and asymmetries that perplex the main aim, which is the assistance of the hungry, deprived and homeless. After all, the question raised is not only 'who is entitled to food assistance?' but also 'who is the most empowered to provide such assistance?' and of course 'which are the criteria by which such assistance is met'? The ethnographic case uncovers the layers and internal contradictions of the meanings of food assistance, a complex notion with multiple shifting translations: social workers (both working for the municipality and the NGO) use the notions of 'beneficiary' and 'entitlement', as far as food assistance is concerned, and the notion of 'hospitality', in the case of the dormitory. On the contrary, Church representatives mobilize the rhetoric of 'humanitarianism' and 'philanthropy', which inevitably raise the issue of charity. Multiple and often contradictory discourses are also promoted by the food activists in the city, who engage in a number of activities in order to provide and distribute food in a more 'humane' and 'ethical' way.

The phenomenon of poverty and deprivation in relation to the recent economic predicament in Greece has not been widely discussed or documented. Moreover, there is a growing literature on food assistance policies

in many western countries (Dachner et al. 2009; Lambie-Mumford 2013; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012; Tarasuk and Eakin 2003), but food assistantship in Greece is similarly under-examined. Overall, the article aims to add – ethnographically at least – to the understandings of and responses to the present economic, political and social predicament in Greece. Methodologically speaking, in-depth ethnographic analysis, which includes 'traditional' anthropological methods like participant observation and open-ended interviewing, is combined with Internet-based netnographic search (Kozinets 2010). Apart from the accumulation of detailed, first-hand, ethnographic data on the topic, the article also offers theoretical and epistemological contributions to knowledge. Building upon an emerging body of recent work that avoids stereotypical analyses of hospitality (Papataxiarchis 2006; Rozakou 2012), this article attempts to link the notion of hospitality with the turbulent social situation in Greece to produce critical and political understandings of the topic that escape older apolitical readings.

The article begins with discussing literature on food assistance and moral economies as different responses to social, political and economic crises. This is followed by a conceptual discussion of the way crisis, poverty and deprivation construct socially marginalized 'others'. Hospitality practices are then assessed along with the applicability of the notion of hospitality in conceptualizing the food assistance responses. In this section there is an attempt to rethink the notion of hospitality and place it within a modern political agenda. Following a discussion of the methods, the findings of field research are presented and the different voices of those involved are 'heard'. A complicated food assistance landscape emerges that leads to different, often contrasting, interpretations and antagonistic relations. Consequently, issues of power, ethics and inequality are examined further in the discussion and conclusion.

FOOD ASSISTANCE AND MORAL ECONOMIES

The situation of social, political and economic upheaval was not experienced exclusively in Greece or in countries that are found under the economic supervision of the IMF. In fact, due to the global economic crisis and instabilities in the capitalist system of production, similar situations were experienced on a global scale resulting in a dramatic snowball recession. In particular, according to Action Aid International, hunger in developing countries has reached the level of a global crisis and 102 billion people die of starvation in countries of the South (FAO 2003). It was noted that 43 million people who live in developed market economies face the risk of food poverty and food insecurity (Stuart 2009 cited in Riches 2011). As such, countries develop strategies and design actions in order to manage the dramatically growing phenomena of urban poverty, hunger and deprivation.

According to the growing literature on emergency food assistance there are by now several charitable organizations that aim to help the most vulnerable in society by providing free meals. Most of these faith-based organizations are linked to Christian charities formed during the 1800s, mostly in Victorian England, and later during the vast deprivation of World War II (Dachner et al. 2009). Yet, in the last decades, there seems to have been an explosion of poverty, hunger and malnutrition in rich countries due to under-funded social welfare linked to neo-liberal agendas, the emphasis on privatization, public sector financial cuts, market-driven economic growth, 'Big Society' rhetoric and the consequent emphasis on individual 'responsibility' (Lambie-Mumford

2013). As argued over the last twenty years, hunger and food insecurity have become worrying problems of the First World countries and they are linked to structural changes in social policy (Dachner et al. 2009). This situation boosted the establishment of food banks: the first food bank in Canada, Edmonton, was established in 1981 and in North America, Phoenix, Arizona, in 1967. In the last 30 years charitable food banks and free meal programmes not only in North America and Canada but also in Europe, Australia and New Zealand have functioned as community responses to hunger and food insecurity in the developed world within the context of economic downturns (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012; Riches 2002).

An ethnographic study of food banking in Ontario (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003) stresses supply limitations and uncontrollable supply of food that result in a kind of 'invisibility' of real needs. This situation results in unmet needs and little impetus for either community groups or governments to seek other solutions. It remains a 'symbolic gesture' dissociated from people's structural needs.

Food banks are now a reality in the developed world and in rich countries, such as Britain, where the first food bank was established in Salisbury in 2000, and the first half of 2011 saw the establishment of one new food bank every week (Lambie 2011). The Trussell Trust foundation, a Christian-based organization, has helped to set up many such charity activities. The food banks 'operate as a result of referrals from registered Care Professionals such as Social Services, Health Visitors, Probation Officers, Church Pastoral Workers, schools and others working in the front line of poverty' (Trussell Trust 2004: 1). The food is collected through churches, schools and local supermarkets. On the organization's home page one can read 'Restoring dignity and reviving hope. Community projects tackling poverty and exclusion'. The Trussell Trust, which was started in Bulgaria in 1996 by UN workers, receives no governmental funding and is supported by businesses such as supermarkets like Tesco 'to hold a nationwide food collection to provide emergency food to more local people in crisis'. There is an effort to create a strong emotional appeal to the visitor by including real stories like 'If there was no food bank I'd have to steal something to feed my family' or 'We had to borrow a tin of soup from next door to stop our 18-month-old daughter from going to bed hungry' (http://www.trusselltrust.org/).

However, despite the good intentions, there are a number of serious problems related to the assistance that the Trussell Trust and similar organizations provide to those in need (Lambie 2011). The first concern is that Trussell Trust's food banks are led by local churches; therefore, the question raised is whether the Christian focus creates issues of accessibility for people of other faiths and also how the Trust reaches places where no active churches can be found. Other issues raised relate to the dangers of institutionalization, the quality of the food given, the difficulties in accessibility created by the voucher referral system and the relationship of dependency that inevitably emerges. Some voucher holders in the United Kingdom commented on their reluctance to go to the food bank because it felt like 'charity' and 'begging' (Lambie-Mumford 2013).

Food banks and charitable meals seem to reproduce socially unacceptable ways of finding food, resulting in stigmatization and passivity, undermining human advocacy. The human right approach to food (Lambie-Mumford 2013; Riches 2011) emphasizes that what has to be cured is not the symptoms of food insecurity but its causes, and, as such, charitable food assistance is to a great extent part of the problem of food insecurity in rich countries.

An alternative approach suggests considering food security as the ultimate human right. The Food and Agricultural Organisation notes that food security exists 'When all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preference for and active and healthy life' (FAO 2003). This holistic understanding of food and eating incorporates the discourse of human rights, as well as sustainable development, health issues, social equality and justice.

Increased poverty and deprivation have led to the realization that emergency food assistantship is often incapable of comforting large urban populations, especially due to restricted access to such 'relief structures'. Thus, alternative solutions have been sought. Food activism, for example, can be seen as a radical response towards modern economic predicament. In the case of food activism, economic activities are taken over by citizens themselves, who have produced a model of a more humane, supportive economy based on mutuality and exchange. The notions of 'human economy' and 'community participation' (Hart 2010) are central in understanding how people reinterpret and mobilize the economy so as to create more viable lives. Following this argument, people must find alternative ways of organizing life and economy instead of relying exclusively on capitalist markets and profits. Drawing from a very long tradition in social anthropology, which goes back to the classical analysis of the gift economy of archaic societies (Mauss 1954), economy is assessed as something made and remade by people themselves rather than as an impersonal apparatus functioning outside their everyday lives. As such, new social conditions and new ethical discourses are being created. Food activists construct alternative forms of resistance, a moral reaction against globalizing forces that produce immorality and deepen economic and social inequalities.

Economic anthropologists (Hart 2010; Rakopoulos 2014) have discussed how people at a local level resist global capitalist forces of mass production and create networks of exchange, reciprocity and mutuality, which transcend local economic arenas to more humane arenas, where social values prevail. The example of the small associations of women working in the *bidi* tobacco industry in India is a relevant case (Mitter 1987 cited in Narotzky 1997). Since the foundation of these associations in 1980, their members have been involved in a series of political fights and they have won a number of economic rights such as minimum wage and insurance and the distribution of cheap cereal and oil to working women. There is also a house for *devadasis*, temple prostitutes, funded by *bidi* workers. *Bidi* women also fought against the payment of dowry and for using men's alcoholism as the basis for divorce. This is clearly a case where the economy is linked to political and social struggles and local markets are inspired by humanistic and moral values creating spaces of comfort and hospitality to others in need.

POVERTY, DEPRIVATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'PROBLEMATIC' OTHER

Many theorists of globalization have commented on the increasing manufacture of risks in modern life and the consequent 'loss of ontological security' and 'existential anxiety', which result in situations of imbalance and instability on a personal and social level. Pre-capitalist societies had not developed a concept of risk in the past (Giddens 1999). Risk, a concept created and used in the modern world, is associated with the increased uncertainties of

modern life (on a personal and social level) as well as future possibilities. In this sense, 'risk' has to do with processes of colonization and the conquering of the future. For example, the Azande and many other African tribes denied the idea of chance: for them misfortune was a result of sorcery, whereas other societies believed that everything that happens was intended by gods and spirits (Giddens 1991). So in a way pre-capitalist societies had developed social mechanisms to eliminate risk, non-predictability and social imbalance, whereas modern societies are risky societies par excellence and ours is considered a 'runaway world' (Giddens 1999).

Modernity is a culture of generalized risks and the 'protective cocoon' (Giddens 1991) of the modern self has been seriously threatened. The self is by no means a passive entity but it is reflexively made and remade on an everyday basis. Therefore, self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour. This situation of generalized disorientation and distrust creates feelings of personal meaninglessness; life has nothing 'real' and 'positive' to offer. This becomes the fundamental psychological problem of late modernity. Modernity is thus viewed as liquid (Bauman 2006), uncertain, unpredictable and fearful.

Modern life inevitably has its outcasts, notably the production of 'human waste' or wasted lives (Bauman 2004). According to his thought-provoking analysis, modernization creates superfluous populations of migrants and refugees, people who are not wanted and who are unable to live 'viable' lives. Similarly, Agamben (1995) problematized refugee status and the fact that for those non-citizens citizenship is denied; thus, the notion '*denizen*'/'denied citizens' is proposed instead. If we go back and rethink Douglas's analysis of pollution and taboo (1966) we could argue that this human waste resembles what she called 'matter out of place': growing quantities of human beings, who are deprived of adequate means of survival. In this light the increasing number of urban poor, unemployed and depressed people can be seen as the growth of human waste or matter out of place. Therefore, we are facing not only a situation of personal risk and anxiety but a generalized and dramatically growing situation of social risk and security fears.

Unemployment can be seen as an absolute modern trouble. It is an abnormal condition, an anomaly in a modern society in which full members are above all classified as producers (Bauman 2004). Full employment is not only a desirable social condition but as its own, ultimate destination and the basic prerequisite for social order and systemic reproduction. Modern societies honour production and at the same time cherish consumption and consuming lifestyles. In other words, we have moved from the work ethic to the ethic of consumption and a culture of consumerism. People who cannot be classified as producers or even consumers immediately constitute a problematic 'other', a misplaced category and a threat to social balance. Those people are the 'new poor', unable to produce or to consume, and this has a huge effect on the way poverty is experienced in the modern world.

HOSPITALITY PRACTICES: TREATING THE 'OTHER'

The concept of hospitality is based on inclusions and exclusions and creates a relationship of hosts and guests: the host is supposed to provide hospitality in an unconditional way, whereas the guest becomes its receiver, who is in a way obliged 'to reciprocate' and whose behaviour is restricted within certain ethical limits (Lynch et al. 2011). In the Greek understanding of the term, 'to host' means to provide shelter, food and gifts to the stranger who is considered 'a

worthy guest'. However, this assertion has often led to apolitical readings of hospitality and to uncritical understandings of it as a pure ethical principle and a moral obligation. However, it might be the case that hospitality is a reciprocal code, which regulates relations and therefore creates dependencies and hierarchies. As such, issues of power relations, empowerment and disempowerment are raised. Beyond any idealized and romanticized interpretations of hospitality the key question remains: who is eligible to receive hospitality, by whom and for what reasons?

As discussed below, anthropologists working in Greece mainly in the 1960s and 1970s treated hospitality as a timeless, moral essence and thus deprived it from its political ramifications. However, recent works viewed hospitality as having a political agenda that often leads to dependencies, asymmetries and power relations. Far from being a 'traditional' Greek value and a local, unchangeable ethical code, hospitality strategies reveal a lot about conflicting discourses, the management of alterity and the creation of inclusion and exclusions. From a critical perspective the concept uncovers some of the most serious social and political issues of our time.

The work on hospitality and the treatment of the strange 'other' by Greek anthropologists and mainly non-Greeks working in Greece goes back to the 'honour and shame' anthropological literature (Campbell 1974), whose main hypothesis was that the Mediterranean people, including Greeks, were inspired by a dualistic ethical code and some basic ethical values that prevailed in social life. With a strong dash of male-biased thinking, Greeks, like others living in the Mediterranean basin – for example, Italians, Spaniards and northern Africans – were seen as living in conservative, closed societies with very strict ethical codes that dominated behaviour and human contact. Davis (1977) and Peristiany (1965, 1976) were among the first scholars who put in the agenda 'the unity of the Mediterranean people' and thereby to a certain extent mystified the different historical, economic and political realities in the region.

Greek culture in particular was characterized by social anthropologists as the epitome of hospitality, and women were seen as the main providers: this meant that they had to be able, at any time, to deal with 'strangers', and thus to provide hospitality by offering them food, sweets and a soft home-made alcoholic drink. In this way, the family's good reputation was ensured and men were socially recognized as 'honourable' persons (Campbell 1974; du Boulay 1976; Friedl 1962; Zinovieff 1991). The proper hospitable housewife should be ready at any time to treat the stranger/*ksenos* and to provide hospitality/*filoksenia* with wine or ouzo (if he was a man) and salty foods and coloured home-made liqueur to women: women were associated with sweetness and men with salty substances (Cowan 1990). The honour and shame model, the supposed Mediterranean essence, and the stereotypical views on Greek hospitality referred mainly to rural life and as such had no application at all to the rapidly changing urbanized life in Greece mainly after the 1980s.

Later studies that problematized honour and shame stressed the fact that this dualistic scheme perpetuates stereotypical thinking and emphasized the fact that hospitality had been interpreted as a metaphysical, timeless essence exclusively belonging to the domestic sphere. A number of scholars (Dubisch 1986; Goddard 1987; Herzfeld 1980) criticized this pan-Mediterranean ethical code and the idealized notion of Greek hospitality as a very simplistic, ethnocentric and male-biased hypothesis that proved unable to explain the complexities of lived experiences and the complex and shifting realities in

urban settings. Recent ethnographic accounts on Greece have underlined that hospitality could be considered in a much broader sense – for example, it could be analysed according to Herzfeld (1997) in terms of 'cultural intimacy', the social poetics of the nation state and the relationship developed between the state and its citizens. For Herzfeld, Greek hospitality was often used as a distorting mirror, a national stereotype, and as such it was reproduced by the state in order to create a sense of domesticity and familiarity among civilians. Papataxiarchis (2006) analysed the creation of discourses of otherness and the consequent inability of modern Greek society to deal with immigrants who were at the same time 'strangers' and non-Greeks. For Papataxiarchis the static notion of Greek hospitality implied national similarity and certainly had no application in contemporary transnational encounters.

The discourse on hospitality seems to be dominant in humanitarian contexts. Rozakou (2012) discussed the biopolitics of hospitality and the implications of humanitarianism and the management of refugees in Greece. Unconditional offer and help create the discourse of hospitality as a politics of managing alterity. Refugees are thus treated as 'worthy guests', those who find themselves at the crossroads between biological life and full social existence and experience. This 'state of exemption' deprives them from any political and social existence. Thus, the notion of hospitality has strong biopolitical connotations and is associated with issues of citizenship, human rights and relations of power.

Hospitable activities aim at repairing the damaged social tissue and govern the unbalanced social relations, creating a new ethical discourse, new morals and new values that respond to specific political needs. We have a case of constructing 'a surplus of ethics' (Lynch et al. 2011) and thus managing a situation of social imbalance and threats to social trust. Hospitality is treated as a means to an end, which releases social pressures and manages social asymmetries, thereby becoming a metaphor of social balance. It has been argued (Popke 2007) that in global modernity there should be a strong relationship between morality, ethics and politics: global responsibility and awareness should lead researchers to a more meaningful cosmopolitanism. This means that the notion of hospitality is not abstract but has a material life and leads to political readings. The global geographies of capitalism stress that every modern social reality is a theatre of power and inequality, and as such is deeply political.

Within the context of hospitality the construction of space becomes a meaningful process with strong political associations that reflect different motives and different interpretations. The plurality of social mobilities and positionalities experienced nowadays challenges the idea of a single and objective space and stress the fact that space is constructed and defined through human processes, via material practices and the human activities that take place in it (Harvey 1990; Stoller 1989). Adopting a materialist perspective, we come to understand the reproduction of social life by uncovering ambiguities, contradictions and struggles over the control of material processes and resources. Modernity is lived not as a grand narrative but more through small networks with specific functions. The content of the relationships experienced within these networks constantly defines and redefines new spaces, new places and new scapes.

Such spaces could reveal a lot about the politics of everyday life as well as about the uses of space often involved in political programmes. For Foucault (1980, 1986) conventional critical theory dealt with time and historicity but

failed to deal with spatial issues. Space cannot be treated as fixed, immobile, given and unchangeable. The notion of '*heterotopy*' that Foucault developed involves the creation of an imagined space within a 'real' space. Therefore, as described in the ethnographic case that follows, several '*topoi*' are the loci where food is distributed and consumed and hospitality is offered. These represent imagined spaces, new urban spaces, where life can become viable for people in need. These hospitable spaces are constantly constructed, reconstructed, negotiated and imagined via social actors, their interactions and their feelings. All these result in a process of moralization of space and the creation of imagined moral scapes and landscapes of morality. Hence, the notion of hospitality acquires a material dimension and enables political readings that link domesticity with public discourses. It could be argued that hospitable practices in a sense domesticate the public sphere.

Bell (2007) discusses the creation of spaces of hospitality within the city and thus of the 'hospitable city' in the modern capitalist condition, where new patterns of urban living arise. Hence, the ethics of conviviality create theatres of hospitality within the complex cityscape. What is stressed here is the importance of co-examining the notion of hospitality with the development of contemporary cityscapes and urban patterns of living. By this token we move away from individualistic and apolitical readings of hospitality. Hospitality appears as a social quest that finds applicability in modern urban conditions and releases social tensions and threats such as poverty or hunger.

The present article, drawing from modern conceptualizations of hospitality, is an attempt to relate hospitable practices to municipal social policies in order to 'manage poverty' in Thessaloniki. Such initiatives, along with the initiatives of the actors involved (the NGO and the Church in this case), can be put within a general framework of the politics of comfort. The main aim is to provide shelter physically, biologically and psychologically to those in need – in other words, to provide hospitality, both real and imagined, to their co-citizens, who lack the basic means to live a viable life. At the same time, hospitality can be seen as a means of social control, releasing tensions, eradicating inequalities and ultimately managing a stranger who represents a threat to social stability. Hence, the concept of hospitality could be used as an analytical framework through which we can make sense of the urban poverty and social crisis in Greece and the specific measures to deal with them.

METHODOLOGY

Before any further discussion on this ethnographic case it would be meaningful to present the methodology and the data collection process. My fieldwork was divided into two phases: initially, my material was collected through intense Internet search (photos, videos, blogs and online newspapers) that lasted between January 2013 and May 2013. This systematic examination of the virtual representation of the current social, political and economic situation in Greece was illuminating, and its analysis resulted in a kind of netnography as proposed by Kozinets (2010). Thus, my fieldwork at this stage could be seen as an attempt to trace the field beyond the screen, which revealed implications of a reality that is electronically mediated. Taking into account the complexities and interdependencies of modern life, which inevitably lead to ontological questions of what 'a culture' represents, a more flexible, fluid and less bounded fieldwork has been proposed (Geertz 1973). As such, the notion of 'traditional' anthropological fieldwork in a specific time and place

has been critically assessed (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Internet-based research can suggest a 'virtual ethnography' of the virtual worlds, which are always on the move (Wittel 2000; Lugosi et al. 2012).

This study drew from purposive, online research, which focussed on carefully chosen message threads (Lugosi et al. 2012). The search engines used were both Google and Yahoo to ensure that various data could be produced. The key words and phrases typed were 'Greek crisis', 'social upheavals in Greece', 'parades and protests in 2011', 'movement without middlemen' and 'social markets'. I also searched online newspapers (e.g. tovima.gr, avgi.gr, news.gr, eparousia.gr and econews.gr) for relevant articles on Greek crisis and food distributions. There was a systematic search of relevant blogs (amesidimokratia.org, real-democracy.gr, melissocosmos.com and politestouvirona.blogspot.gr), which enabled me to have 'a taste' of Internet interactions. Videos released on the Internet (on sites such as YouTube) provided me with important visual data related to the movement of the squares in Athens and Thessaloniki, and also parades in many other Greek cities in 2011. Of course, there is always an ethical consideration when doing online research: people's statements and ideas are reproduced without explicit consent. Considering these limitations of netnography I also used conventional ethnography, which was based on people's consent.

Researching such cyberspaces has other limitations, such as the validity of the data drawn, but it is true that even 'classic' anthropological methods, like fieldwork or participant observation, are equally problematic when it comes to 'objectivity' and 'validity' (Kozinets 2010). This virtual ethnography was investigative, which offered a rich but potentially partial picture on the topic. Thus, further empirical data, which mainly involved interactions, were gathered to achieve in-depth understanding of individual experiences, choices and motives.

The second phase of my fieldwork was undertaken between December 2013 and March 2014, which utilised observations concerning the activities of the Municipality of Thessaloniki, and in particular of the Department of Social Policy. This involved visits twice a week to the Departmental offices, informal discussions with the employees, formal discussions in combination with in-depth interviewing of some key people like the social worker, food technologists, NGO members, and also visits to municipal soup kitchens, the municipal social market and the dormitory. The church representative, who is involved in a soup kitchen, was also interviewed. In total, twelve formal interviews were conducted with the people involved in food assistantship. I was denied any access to the other social market, which functions in collaboration with a very big non-Greek supermarket. According to the director of the social market, who works for this supermarket,

> It is really complicated to gain permission for such an observation because I have to ask the directors of the supermarket in Athens. And even if so, it is very unlikely...

The fieldwork on municipal food assistance in Thessaloniki was in fact short term compared to long anthropological studies that last one or more years. Without any intention to undermine the qualities of long-term fieldwork it is now widely accepted among social scientists (Knoblauch 2005; Marcus and Okely 2007) that such fieldwork worked in colonial, 'exotic' conditions of the early and mid-twentieth century but is unlikely to respond to modern, fragmented, differentiated

and highly mobile urban contexts. What is proposed instead is 'focused ethnography' (Knoblauch 2005), which involves part-time settings rather than permanent, intensive use of data collection and analysis, a focus and specification in the formulation of research hypothesis, and a prior knowledge of the 'field'.

In an attempt to create a more holistic picture of food initiatives I also visited a 'non-profitable', cooperative food market and had informal discussions with food activists, who were involved in the 'cheap food' distribution movement. This second phase of fieldwork also involved a systematic Internet search on sites suggested by people who engaged in the cheap food movement. The social market's website (www.bioscoop.gr) provided me with valuable information on its overall philosophy as well as on specific actions and future plans of the cooperative. What is important is that electronic advertising seemed to be meaningful to participants themselves and it was seen by them as a weapon to make their work and ideas known and appealing to a wider audience. However, the article does not – by any means – exhaust the issue of solidarity economy, which is a very crucial, contemporary debate in social sciences and especially in social anthropology. It has to be noted that there have been other attempts in Thessaloniki to create social markets. However, this specific market is the most recent of all and its function is tied to the economic predicament experienced in Greece.

MAPPING EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE IN THESSALONIKI

Emergency food assistance can be seen as part and parcel of the comfort politics employed by the social services of the Municipality of Thessaloniki to manage poverty and hunger. It involves a daily soup kitchen, which takes place at the local *kentro anoiktis prostasias ilikiomenon*/centre for the open protection of the elderly, an institution founded during the 1980s in Greece when the socialist government of that time inaugurated a number of social interventions. The other municipal soup kitchen in the city is distributed from the basement of a neoclassic building that belongs to the Church and is coordinated by a representative of the local Church council/*epitropos* and women of the church charity council/*philoptoho*. The Municipality is also involved in the distribution of free food products in social markets/*koinonika pantopoleia*: poor families, unemployed, homeless people and those who are without any insurance/*aporoi, anergoi, anasfalistoi* can choose specific food items by using a card provided by the Municipality. People are given a card and according to their needs, as defined by the social worker, are allowed to spend a specific amount of money to get the food items they need.

The Directory of Social policy of the Municipality of Thessaloniki was situated in a new six-floor building opposite the railway station of the city, in a rather poor and impoverished area near the centre. On the first and second floor people had to wait in long queues, fill an application form and give their documents so as to claim benefits. On the third floor one could find the health policy department, where doctors examined and vaccinated children, and gave advice for a healthy and balanced diet. On the fourth floor the social worker of the department (the only one in the Municipality) had an office and you could also find the office of the psychologist, who provided 'psychological support' sessions to individuals feeling depressed or frustrated. On the fifth floor there was the office of the director of social policy, and finally the vice mayor's office on the sixth floor.

On the fifth floor there was also the social market of the Municipality in which members of a local NGO worked. Apart from food items stored in big

wooden shelves, like oil, tomatoes cans, pasta, rice, salt, marmalades, biscuits, etc., one could find a big clothes bank. As the people from the NGO explained to me, this programme was partly funded by the EU and they worked in collaboration with the Municipality of Thessaloniki. The EU provided some money, so NGO members were paid for their work, but this did not cover all expenses. In fact, as a municipal employee told me 'the social workers receive exactly the same as the cleaning ladies', which she considered 'totally unfair'.

The food distributed in the social market was mainly donated by people in response to a campaign by a big media channel. Food and clothes donated and assembled in a big square of the city in Christmas 2013 were distributed via the social market. The slogan of this media campaign was 'I care, thus I share', and, according to the NGO members,

> People reacted in a very touching way! We did not expect so massive participation. They were bringing us food and clothes and they were commenting that it is time to think of the others who suffer. But the most touching moment was when children left chocolates and sweets for poor children.

One could immediately sense that the first two floors were crowded and very noisy on a daily basis during the opening hours of the department (7 a.m.–2.30 p.m.) in opposition to the other floors and the relative serenity in all other services. During all my visits I saw the same people coming for the second or the third time to claim benefits. Once, I was discussing with people working on the third floor when a woman, working on the first floor, suddenly came in:

> Again, we have the same... a woman standing in the queue fainted... So many people... Do you have any juice left to give her? I will come back and ask for the doctor if things get worse

The cleaning lady had pretty much the same opinion:

> Thank God I am not cleaning the first floor, it is much more work...

As the bureaucratic procedures were very complicated and time consuming, it took more than just one visit to be allowed any benefit by the department. Every resident of the city was allowed, on a theoretical basis, to raise social claims but many documents were needed: a photocopy of the identity card, the unemployment card (if there is one), a receipt of an electricity or a telephone bill, certificate of the family status and of course a tax form completed to certify that their income was low. The process for receiving a benefit or free health insurance, after handing in the documents required, could take more than eight months according to the employees because 'there are not enough personnel to check and sign them'. This resulted in daily queues of frustrated people, some of whom were immigrants of Greek descent from the ex-Soviet Union, who were unable to speak and understand Greek. In the case of homeless people the procedure was much shorter and there was a list of people who did not have to be checked again and give their documents. The social worker commented:

> These are old clients, I know them very well. I have been working as a social worker in the Municipality for the last sixteen years. The

> Municipality of Thessaloniki took also in the past action against poverty but certainly the people who need help are many more now... the two soup kitchens in the centre of the city serve 400 people and in total at this moment in the whole Municipality we give around 700 meals on a daily basis.

The food technologist seemed to agree that the economic predicament of the last years was widely responsible for the increased food needs of the population:

> When the soup kitchens operated for the first time in Thessaloniki the majority were immigrants, now the majority are Greeks! The last soup kitchen that serves 300 people started because of the problems that the economic crisis caused. Before the crisis we had no more than 200 people that were given free meals. But now... Most of them are people who have lost their jobs, families that have been left without any stable income. They have brought us to a really difficult situation. None knows where this is going to stop. We might end up in their situation, who knows...

And yet the problem of accessibility to municipal help was still an issue: the old 'lists' of people in need were not representative any more of the real food needs of the city dwellers. The 'new poor'/'*neoptohoi*' had to go themselves to the Department of Social Policy and go through an 'interview' with the social worker to decide on 'the emergency of their condition' and to be referred. To use the social market these people had to bring all the documents mentioned before, and, according to the NGO members, 'In some cases it is really difficult for those people to collect all these documents, and it is an expense for them even to make photocopies. There was an extra difficulty to have them signed by official authorities'. In case of homeless people they were referred as 'emergency situations' and the Municipality's social worker agreed to issue an 'emergency bag' from the social market, which could relieve their situation temporarily. The bureaucratic delays and confusion were things that even municipal employees criticized openly:

> People who proceed and sign applications in this Department create so many confusions, at first they ask for one thing and then after three months they need something else. So many signed documents! I don't really see the point. Just before a woman claiming a benefit started screaming in my office! I don't know what to say to her and you know something? She is right!

One day after my visit to the Department of Social policy I went to the nearby bus stop. Suddenly, a middle-aged man with long hair and poor clothes started shouting:

> I will burn down *Pronoia*, this brothel! I have been there many times and they keep asking me all these stupid documents. 'Your ID card is not enough'. Honestly, all you need is some gas to put fire in this dam place. But again what about all these innocent people in there asking for help...

Looking really furious and frustrated, he got on a bus and left.

THE MUNICIPALITY, THE CHURCH AND THE NGO: DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FOOD ASSISTANCE LANDSCAPE

In all the discussions I had with the social worker of the Municipality she emphasized the fact that 'the Municipality is doing a lot more than originally planned' and was actually 'doing the things that the state is obliged to do'. *Kallikratis*, a law for the unification of municipalities, which was established in 2010, saw the transmission of all welfare national politics from the large prefecture of Macedonia to the Municipality of Thessaloniki. So, at that moment there was 'disorientation', 'too much work to be done' and a 'lack of personnel', which resulted in an 'inability to cope with the increased social needs'. She kept telling me that the amount of work she had was huge and 'the state actually now promotes the collaboration with the NGOs as the only solution'. She stated that this was 'due to the economic crisis' and the fact that the state did not have the money to pay for extra employees:

> I believe that volunteering work has to be organised in order to function properly. You know, when you have people, who have no coordination, volunteering work can be an obstacle and not a real help … Now, because the state has no money makes me work in these structures for managing poverty with NGO members, who are not paid directly by the state. They are either paid by EU or they work on a volunteer basis. OK, the collaboration is good, but it can also be difficult, problems might arise.

Every time she wanted to introduce me to NGO members she used to comment, 'They are not very experienced but they are willing to help …'. In all cases when NGO social workers were present, she was the one who took over the conversation, interrupted them to add 'important' information, often patronizing the whole discussion. Once, she openly admitted that if she was in charge of the NGO workers things would have functioned in a much more productive way.

There were many people who found themselves in a difficult situation and were left unemployed because of the economic crisis. It was very difficult for them to join the soup kitchen since 'it is really important for the kids to see their mother cooking instead of receiving a ready meal cooked by someone else'. There was one case, I was told, when the mother took food for all family members and when she returned home she pretended that she had cooked it. According to the social worker,

> It is difficult for family and for those who just found themselves in this situation. Especially soup kitchens … It reminds them that they are totally vulnerable and unable to do something for it … I try to avoid putting sending these people in the soup kitchens. They feel uneasy … I try to send them to the social market to choose food in order to cook at home. It is important for family life. You can immediately understand them. They do not mix with the others, they are isolated.

When I visited the soup kitchen of Aminda street one man came to pick up his food tray. As they told me, he used to have a local factory, which was shut down, and he was literally left on the streets. Whereas other people were smiling and saying hello to everyone, this one seemed really sad, waved at no one and avoided any eye contact. In a few seconds he picked up his tray and left.

The social worker argued that there were 'permanent' cases, people who 'have learnt to live like that', to be fed, to be passive. She observed that, in some cases, problems of poverty were coupled with mental health problems, and that these were the 'multi problematic families'. She used to make use of the term 'entitlement' and 'beneficiary' as 'proper' notions to explain food assistance. In many informal discussions municipal employees and the municipal social worker also used the term '*filoksenoumenoi*', meaning those offered hospitality, to account for all the city dwellers in need of social care. The NGO social workers also used the same notions. For them 'Hospitality has nothing to do with food provisioning. It is associated with the case of the dormitory and the offering of shelter to those who need it'.

The Church, which was also involved in a soup kitchen, had a different agenda. As mentioned previously, food in the soup kitchen was being distributed in plastic, disposable trays from the basement of a neoclassical building, which belonged to the local church. If 'bodies matter' then leaning in front of a narrow window in order to get the food tray could have some symbolic associations for the situation that poor and homeless people experience. The trays were given by a municipal employee, although during my visit there were five women from the church charity council and the churchwarden. The basement from the inside was spacious: an office, a living room and a store full of basic food items and frozen meat. The decoration clearly had religious associations: crosses, holy icons, holy shrines and religious books. I was surprised to find, in that store, bottles of wine for the holy communion, which I initially thought contained vinegar. As the churchwarden told me,

> We give a bag to some people who come directly to the church. I don't know what happens with them. They are not listed because for some reason they are embarrassed to go to the Municipal offices. But of course we don't give food to everyone. They have to go to the priest with a piece of paper that has their name on and he has to sign it and stamp it. And then they come here … We give them bags with basic food items and of course some wine to drink … They are humans, they want their wine, they ask for it …

During the interview he constantly made use of the terms 'humans' and 'humanitarianism'. There was a strong underlying emotional background for him in helping poor and homeless people to eat. In all the examples, he made use of the term 'others', implying other people, who were also fed in the soup kitchen 'since they are humans as well'. When a black woman came to pick up her tray he commented,

> These black women are kind, at least the majority … Yet, we had one last year who was yelling a lot! (Laughing)

This kind of 'humanitarianism' was in fact really exclusive: the Romas were seen as people who are not wanted because they were very 'pushy', 'scary' and 'they are a different, peculiar story'. The feelings of compassion and the assertion that 'they are also human beings' contradicted the fact that, according to the churchwarden, queues of homeless people were not wanted and avoided: 'Because it is certainly not a nice thing for the neighbourhood to watch these people arguing for food …'

It is interesting to note that the menu was based on Orthodox Christian fasting, and thus every Monday, Wednesday and Friday there was no meat. According to the churchwarden, 'The menu is designed for those who fast, and those who don't can eat their cheese or salad'. However, one wonders if cheese or salad could be sufficient to feed the hungry, deprived and homeless three times a week.

THE FOOD ACTIVISTS' INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FOOD ASSISTANCE LANDSCAPE

In the last couple of years, food activists seemed to create their own agenda and their own rhetoric in the city. Based on the principles of solidarity economy they created 'non-profitable' cooperative markets where the emphasis was on both 'local' and 'cheap' food. Food activism is an organized practice to deal with poverty and overcome food provision difficulties. In this case activists organized themselves and created social cooperative markets – 'non-profitable' (*mi kerdhoskopika*) as they call them – where food products were sold. These goods (food items and detergents) were produced predominantly – at least in one cooperative market I visited in the city of Thessaloniki – in the wider region and not branded or imported. The slogan in the advertising brochure was 'We take our food in our hands!' and the following declaration was made:

> Ask, get informed, shop, try and if you agree come to join our tiny power in order to start to change the present situation where only a few make huge profits by ripping the consumers and the producers while destroying our health and our planet. We are calling you to cooperate with us in a space where the direct democracy functions so as to achieve social solidarity economy.

On a visit to one of the non-profitable cooperative markets on the opening day, at the end of December 2013, I wrote in my field diary:

> I arrived at the market at about 12 p.m. A middle-aged woman also came in. An old man came near and said 'I will explain everything to you, of course you can see for yourselves and take brochures. Some of us got together and decided to give an amount of money to buy collectively all these products. The basic thing is that you know what you buy. No chemicals, no middlemen and of course no big brands. Local, Greek products' Next to the cashier there was a donation box for factory workers who were on strike. I asked him to tell us more. 'Well we support them, they are on strike but honestly I do not know much. We have to support their rights'.

Some activists seemed to actively participate in citizens' movements and organize cheap food distributions. Food products 'without middlemen' were sold and distributed there directly to consumers at much lower prices. Some of these food distributions were also organized by Universities. The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki organized cheap food distribution a couple of years ago. A middle-aged woman whose relatives had gone commented:

> It was really hell! For me this model is far away from the model of the young family men. Older people, waiting in the queue for hours... It is

> so humiliating. I think this way human dignity is lost. … I prefer food exchange among my family. At least I know what food I cook and that taxes are being paid properly.

Mainly big cities like Athens and Thessaloniki were the main loci of such initiatives, but similar initiatives existed in smaller cities like Katerini near Thessaloniki. The process was the following: a food distribution was at first advertised (by posters, leaflets or through the Internet) and then a square was selected to become the scene or the 'locus' of distribution. Everyone was allowed to come and buy food, mostly potatoes, rice, pasta and sometimes flour and oil. The quantity was fixed beforehand so that there would be enough food for everyone. Food products were either very cheap – since they came directly from producers to consumers and there were no middlemen – and in some cases they were given for free. A food activist, a man in his late 40s, explained to me how he was arrested for assisting a food distribution and how the policemen found it really difficult to accept that he was an academic:

> They took me to the police station together with an old man who was one of us. It was funny the old man said 'I was not afraid of the dictators, and I will not be frightened by you'. As you can understand the context can easily be considered illegal. There is a series of permissions to be obtained in order to use public space in a legal way. And you can imagine if someone in the local council is a political opponent then it is easy to accuse us for improper use of the space. Well (laughing) they could not believe that I am an academic! I was wearing my black boots and I was carrying rugs with potatoes! After a while the Mayor came and ordered our release. We are considered illegal because we are exposed ... I am also involved in a citizens' movement and I spent two hours every day helping either at the cooperative market, in food distributions or in the social hospital we have created in my neighbourhood. Others help many more hours. In times of crisis you see the complete lack of caring but you can also witness very sentimentally loaded reactions. Like for example the Greek diasporic communities that offer hospital equipment or diabetic people who give to our pharmacy a tiny proportion of their everyday doze of insulin. So, things are working. And what is needed is social discipline, otherwise we cannot respond to injustice.

Thus, by engaging in 'moral' food distributions, food activists attempted to balance social relations, fight social passivity and condemn the state's inability to comfort poverty. The words of a food activist, a man in his early 40s, were quite indicative of the state's responsibility towards citizens and the urgent need of a restructuring of welfare policies:

> All these social markets that give food for free and social hospitals and other charitable acts are functioning on a wrong basis: they provide services that the state should have provided. Because nations are obliged to provide food and health to their citizens! But this way the state is rendered lazy and it is made passive, unable to do something. It resembles a drug addict who cannot react and just passively accepts the next doze to survive...

Food activism seemed an alternative, dynamic response to the generalized economic predicament in Greece. The food activist agenda stressed the importance of 'lost' social values, such as reciprocity and mutuality. However, internal tensions, contradictions and the 'market logic' reproduced were often serious obstacles in the implementation of a food activist policy. As a result, various and different voices were raised, leading to a disorientation of the original scope and a generalized scepticism of the 'true' intentions involved. It remains to be seen whether food activism is able to provide long-term, structural and holistic solutions to the problem of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion.

Food activist ideology appeared to become more popular but did not succeed in persuading many family men and women. As an informant commented,

> All this movement was quite popular last year but it is not so now. It started as a reaction against the nation but I don't think that it has achieved its initial goals. And at the end of the day you don't know if they don't baptize the Bulgarian potatoes to Greek potatoes! I prefer food exchange among my family, this way I can be sure of the food I give to my children.

Other informants commented that the food sold in cooperative supermarkets was 'not at all cheap', so there was 'no real point' in buying food products exclusively from there. Indeed, large supermarket chains could have very competitive prices. It was widely accepted that they offered low-quality food at much lower prices, something quite tempting for those who could not afford to spend much.

DISCUSSION: LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL PROBLEMS

Despite the good and sincere intentions of the individuals involved – and this was mostly the case for NGO members – in emergency food assistance, serious social and political issues are raised, such as the power and applicability of human rights, the right to full citizenship and inevitably social inequality and exclusion. In the ethnographic case discussed, important issues remain unanswered, such as ethics, moral regulation and power. As mentioned, several political questions emerge, like 'Who is entitled to food assistance?', 'Who is the most empowered to provide such assistance?' and 'Which are the criteria by which such assistance is met?'

The municipal loci, the soup kitchens, the social market and the dormitory constitute 'hospitable spaces', meaning mobile, imagined homes, where human conditions and hospitality can be found by those who cannot find them in their own homes. In them we find the creation of symbolic, urban spaces of new hospitable (humane) and thus moralized spaces. Ideally, poor, unemployed people in need find a '*topos*', where they can feel wanted, protected and be hosted in a friendly, hospitable space.

However, a less idealized and romanticized analysis of municipal hosting policies suggests that the intention 'to host' the homeless and the poor is the state's strategy to release social tensions and to manage social threats. Poverty, hunger and deprivation are thought of as emergency phenomena, which to a certain extent threaten social balance and stability. It is much more efficient to seclude and isolate citizens who find themselves in a difficult situation

and find it hard to respond to life demands. Thus, by providing hospitality, one could argue that the state and the Municipality aimed to disempower the 'problematic' other and create conditions of dependency and second class citizenship.

The complex bureaucratic procedures seemed to perplex the situation for those asking for help, rendering food assistantship almost impossible and discouraging people in need. The different and diverse interpretations of food assistantship in the city by the Municipality, the Church and the NGO created an unclear social response that was far from being targeted and effective and ranged from social obligation to charity and donation perceptions. Thus, both bureaucracy and disagreements discouraged people from asking for help and resulted in significantly restricted access to hosting practices.

The religious-centred approach of the Church often leads to politics of religious exclusion. In the ethnographic example discussed above, in the soup kitchen of Aminda, non-Orthodox Christians had to follow fasting; otherwise, the only thing they could eat for a whole day would have been salad or cheese. Thus, issues of accessibility and several exclusions in reality undermined the basic aim, which was to 'host' those in need. This disempowered and undermined the overall food assistance experience. Since food assistance policies sharpened exclusion and exclusivity, they significantly failed to provide comfort and shelter and to 'host' in the politically correct sense of the term.

Unemployment and social passivity might lead to stigmatized human behaviour, and for that matter charitable food assistance can create feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety. These issues are raised in the sociological analysis of stigma and stigmatized human behaviour (Goffman 1963), which draws from autobiographies and case studies to analyse the above situation. Stigmatized people do not enjoy full social acceptance and they constantly strive to adjust their social identities. This was the case of the new poor who joined the soup kitchen of Aminda in Thessaloniki in recent years: they felt embarrassed, they avoided mixing with other people waiting in the queue for food, avoided any eye contact and they eventually picked up their tray silently and left. Charity often felt like begging, and agency, advocacy and dignity were non-existent. The whole situation created feelings of isolation and led to a failure to 'host', in the sense of providing shelter and protection to the deprived citizens.

The widespread government and media support as well as the high degree of public legitimacy of charitable food assistance raises additional ethical issues and opens up the discussion of national austerity and collusion. In the ethnographic case presented, the issue of ethics was raised several times. The canned food donated via the Media campaign 'I care, thus I share' organized in December in Thessaloniki started to be distributed in social markets in mid-February, almost two months after its accumulation. In the case of chocolates and sweets the situation was even more urgent: as the social worker suggested, they were about to expire. It was widely accepted among the Municipality's employees that the food items donated by big supermarkets were about to reach the 'use by' date. Is it a terrifying realization that what could not be sold to consumers was given as a donation? Supporting and reproducing charity solutions thus resulted in national irresponsibility and the failure to implement a basic notion of civil society. Food need and poverty cannot be treated as images to be consumed; instead, they must be seen as political questions and as key concerns of all democratic states.

Donation and charity as mentioned before are practices of hospitality that render the initial aim to host completely dysfunctional and problematic. Thus, they uncover the internal contradictions between principles and actual practices. What should be rejected is the liberal ideology of victimhood and the renouncement of all serious political programmes for the sake of some short-term solutions of avoiding the worst. The liberal utopia creates a condition of apolitical living that relies on charity, philanthropy and prideful giving. Fundamental rights are definitely more than just the 'right to dependence'. Therefore, 'when confronted with a starving child, we are told "For the price of a couple of cappuccinos, you can save her life!", the true message is: "For the price of a couple cappuccinos, you can continue in your ignorant and pleasurable life, not only not feeling any guilt, but even feeling good for having participated in the struggle against suffering!"' (Zizek 2011: 117). These questions bring up issues of empowerment and advocacy and at the same time disempowerment and dependency. Emergency food assistance and charitable comfort politics seem to endlessly reproduce social polarization and, to an extent, stigmatizing solutions. This is why a number of people who find themselves in need of food help do not openly ask for it as all the actors involved in food assistance in Thessaloniki openly admitted. As it has been argued, food provided by way of donation is by all means socially unacceptable (Riches 2002).

Charitable food assistance seems unable to deal with poverty and recession on a massive scale (Lambie-Mumford 2013; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012) and creates 'unmet needs' (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). Several obstacles for receiving municipal support pose issues of access and eligibility and consequently lead to food insecurity. The call for national and international political measures and the empowerment of national welfare policies seem to be the only viable solution. After all, treating poverty should be a political issue, a priority of the national agendas, and the right to food should be an unquestioned human right; there should be national and international measures in order to think and act 'outside the charitable food box' (Riches 2002). Welfare policies should be seen as the paramount obligation of states towards their citizens. Thus, the efficiency of local solutions to respond to globally produced asymmetries, which should be treated first on an international and a national level, is seriously questioned.

The human rights-based approach to food has to be recognized, and understood as such by states, and taken seriously into account in order to achieve national food security and effective social policy (Riches 2002, 2011; Lambie-Mumford 2013). The human rights thesis seriously questions humanitarianism and charity as being unable to provide long-term solutions to the structural problems of poverty and hunger, creating conditions of dependency, eradicating human advocacy and reproducing unethical conditions. Such 'politics of compassion' are not only founded on social inequalities, hierarchies and exclusions but they also dangerously reproduce them (Rozakou 2012). Philanthropy becomes a powerful rhetoric of social heroism and hypocrisy, and unselfish giving is criticized as being ultimately impossible (Bakalaki 2008).

Food activism seems a more dynamic response to the urgent problem of urban poverty. According to the food activist agenda, economic exchanges should escape economic reductionism and revive the values of morality and reciprocity. In this model of moral economy, humans are not passive victims of capitalist infrastructures but active creators of their own lives and thus

economic and social agents. However, the conceptualizations of food activism and the ethical guidelines proposed are interpreted differently by different people (Rakopoulos 2014). Class consciousness and occupational status seem to be decisive factors that create various and often conflicting discourses such as 'purity', 'originality', 'anti-market logic', 'regional food' and 'nationally produced food'. There is a contradiction in terms: although food activism aims in principle to eradicate social inequalities, the diverse conceptualizations and translations of such activism might lead to inefficiencies and a blurring of the original scope and orientation. Food production serves a marketing logic and reproduces the food provisioning system and its infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Emergency food assistance, a strategy to cope with the current difficult economic situation, does not in fact provide any structural solution to the deep economic and social problems and seems to temporarily relieve the symptoms and not the deeper causes of hunger and poverty (Riches 2002, 2011). What is provided is 'comfort food' but only temporarily. It is crucial here to move away from discourses of philanthropy or charity and to treat food security as a political and basic human right (Lambie-Mumford 2013; Riches 2011). Only this food entitlement can meet the prerequisites of fair giving and unconditional hospitality. In this case, hospitality escapes the limits of individuality and becomes an important social value, mostly significant in contemporary urban settings. Emergency food assistance is a locally produced solution; yet the problems, the inequalities and the asymmetries are created on a global level. Thus, global awareness, globally produced measures and international awareness seem to be the only viable answers. The state, which is supposed to be the main provider of social care, seems to be absent. One could argue that we are witnessing a national collusion, so that the globally imposed austerity can be sanctioned and justified. As far as Greek reality is concerned, political parties, elected to represent Greek people, instead of taking political action to relieve the population, have all allowed and even encouraged this situation, thus proving their unwillingness to create an effective political agenda as well as their inability and incompetence to represent those who have voted for them.

This article has attempted to highlight an area of study of particular political importance and as such to bridge the theoretical and ethnographic gap of food assistance policies in contemporary Greece. It is noted that, although several articles discuss the issues of charity and philanthropy, there are no systematic attempts to link the above issues with the phenomena of food assistantship in the current social and economic context of the Greek recession. Interestingly enough, although there is by now a widespread discussion of similar situations in Europe and America (e.g. food bank distributions), there is not enough ethnographic material on how the Greek crisis is experienced and what strategies have been employed to manage it. Thus, the notion of Greek crisis has been analysed via the examination of a specific ethnographic case of food assistantship in northern Greece. Moreover, this article attempted to link the topic of hospitality with food assistantship policies and other municipal strategies to manage poverty and deprivation. As such, hospitality has escaped cultural reductionist readings and is seen as a notion that goes beyond individuality and enables political readings. In this ethnographic case, hospitality practices are employed by the various agents as a means of

treating the problematic other in an unfriendly, impersonal urban setting. The article also stresses alternative discourses to food assistance, like food activism, a model that was compared to the dominant response to increased urban poverty, and there was an endeavour to incorporate the food activists' interpretations of the food assistantship discourse.

However, there are serious limitations in this study. The most important one is that there is a silent victimization discourse, in the sense that poor people themselves are almost absent. Their voices are not heard and as such the puzzle of food assistance in Greece remains inevitably incomplete and partial. Future research should focus more on the ethnography of the disempowered, the people in need, whose voices need be heard in order to have a holistic and fair account of contemporary economic and social malfunctioning in Greece. Only this way can poverty and exclusion be understood as lived and experienced phenomena and the picture of food assistantship seriously benefit from a bottom-up perspective. After all, hunger and poverty are multilayered, multi-dimensional phenomena, often leading to different, subjective interpretations and idiosyncratic reactions.

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