

## Article

# Dealing with Undeniable Differences in Thessaloniki's Solidarity Economy of Food

Christabel Buchanan

Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR), Coventry University, Coventry CV8 3LG, UK;  
christabel.buchanan@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** In the context of capitalist crisis, a re-emergence of reciprocal economic relationships has been praised by postcapitalist researchers. Self-organised solidarity food economies have indeed brought promise of democratic change. However, this article draws on two years of fieldwork in Thessaloniki to develop Iris Young's *Politics of Difference* in order to challenge the view of solidarity economy as wholly a process of collaboration. Thus, the article overturns prevalent myths regarding the cultural ineptitude of Greek actors. In doing so, it highlights the need for food movements to acknowledge the inevitable tensions that arise from structural inequalities. The article argues that overcoming these tensions requires challenging difference-blindness in grassroots democracy. It concludes that an acknowledgement of shifting structural inequalities, exaggerated by the economic crisis, must be incorporated into an initiative's democratic processes alongside mechanisms for dealing with disharmony.

**Keywords:** self-organisation; solidarity economy; conflict; difference; economic crisis

*Angelos:* The truth is that we established [our small farm] ... but we saw how difficult it was, just the two of us who agreed with the basic rules and carried them forward.

*Interviewer:* Why was it difficult? What were the fundamental difficulties that you encountered?

*Maria:* We didn't find many young people who wanted to join us.

*Angelos:* And generally speaking our DNA doesn't contain collaboration, it is lacking that characteristic.

*Interviewer:* Is it our DNA though?

*Angelos:* Definitely.

*Maria:* Collaboration is a mentality, but we don't acknowledge it.

**Excerpt 1. A quote exemplifying the allegory that Greek people are innately unable to collaborate.**

## 1. Introduction

Experiments in autonomous food initiatives have emerged in response to the economic failures of the conventional food system. These reflect what is more generally referred to as the 'solidarity economy', which aims to build cooperation and collective action through closer, direct and more reciprocal economic relationships [1]. The solidarity economy has been welcomed by members of Greek society, their government [2], and intellectuals [3], as a solution to the capitalist crisis [4,5]. However, it is now ten years since the crisis began, and the process of building solidarity is not all hopeful [6]. During the years 2016–2018, which informed the research reported in this article, several initiatives experienced internal organisational dynamics or financial strains that have pushed the initiatives themselves into crisis. As will be elaborated in this article, the experience of conflict and tension has led to a narrative that the potential of the solidarity economy is limited by the nature of people. There is a reified cultural myth, held and perpetuated by Greek participants of the solidarity

economy, that as a society they are unable to collaborate and are prone to antagonistic relations, as exemplified in the quote in Excerpt 1.

This attitude is mirrored by depictions of a devastated social fabric. During the period after the dictatorship (metapolitefsi), considered the first period of stable liberal democracy, there was said to have emerged “an all-pervasive individualistic culture (accompanied by hyperconsumerism), which led to grave impairment of the sense of collectivity and taking care of one another, as well as of community, solidarity and shared responsibility within Greek society” [7] (p.5). Other scholarly work contends that a long-term corrupt and unaccountable culture of the political class has resulted in lack of interpersonal trust, purportedly demonstrated by European statistics on social trust in which Greece repeatedly comes last [8]. Evoking the term “civic pathology” to refer to the endemic distrust in Greek society, which existed before the recent crisis, Theocharis and van Deth [8] explicitly play down the effect of economic and financial crisis on solidarity relations, instead underlining cultural and political factors linked to political corruption and social distrust.

Similarly, in international commentary on the Greek crisis, the portrayal of Greek people has been overwhelmingly negative, with stereotypes of a “corrupt” and “irresponsible” society, whose immoral citizens are unarguably responsible for their own hardship [9,10]. Moreover, the anger of some Greek people at dissenting responses to draconian austerity measures is discussed as a possible attempt to evade their own responsibility and make sense of socioeconomic transformations perceived to be out of their control [11], facilitating the neoliberal myth of individualised responsibility for economic success or failure. This stereotype of Greek people has also been used to justify the structural adjustments forced on the Greek people by the Troika [12,13].

Based on 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Thessaloniki, this article challenges the common allegory of a fundamental cultural (or even ethnic) ineptitude to collaborate, indicated by the reference to collaboration “not being in our DNA” as expressed by Angelos in the above excerpt. Using ideas from Iris Young’s [14] *The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference*, I develop the argument that structurally rooted conflicts are amplified by the capitalist crisis [13]. Additionally, I argue that the romanticisation of solidarity, in the internal and external promotion of economic alternatives, alongside the lack of a political sensibility to recognise and mediate structural difference, allows for the glossing over of differences that are the cause of tension and divisions. Despite, and in fact possibly as a result of, efforts to create horizontal decision-making spaces, the denial of difference allows informal hierarchies to develop and power to accumulate with few individuals. The eventual consequence can be fragmentation based on exclusionary politics—a dynamic that does not sit comfortably with the concept of solidarity and therefore reinforces the problem.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Meaning of Solidarity (Economy)

Solidarity is not a static or uniform term; it has been the subject of debate amongst scholars and activists in Greece over these years of crisis [15–19]. Viewed as a moral act, it must be enacted outside of the family, without the intent of personal gain or profit, nor with the embedding of exclusionary practices such as soup kitchens run exclusively for Greeks [4,16]. Arampatzi [15] differentiates between the building of mutual and reciprocal relations for long-term social empowerment and collective political struggle, with one-sided humanitarian or philanthropic transactions, which reproduce vertical forms of social hierarchies. In crisis Greece, both forms exist. Emergency, direct provisions to people in need address a widening gap in the provisioning of human essentials and provide social safety nets in place of a withering state [16]. At the same time, solidarity initiatives act as “learning labs” for alternative forms of exchange [20,21] seen to inhabit the “solidarity economy”. Importantly, instead of the competitive individualist behaviour that neoliberalism encourages, the solidarity economy is seen as a practical attempt to rebuild practices of inclusivity, altruism, and collaboration, or what Miller [22] calls “communities of cooperation”.

These emergent “communities of cooperation” incorporate economic actors occupying diverse, overlapping, and shifting identities: consumer and producer, rural and urban, young and old, party affiliated and antiauthoritarian. Initiatives often incorporate new forms of decision-making such as direct democracy with the intent to implement inclusive, non-hierarchical participation and responsibility-sharing [22]. Solidarity initiatives are thus often based on an ideal of inclusivity, reciprocity, and democracy. Currently the theoretical literature on community and solidarity economy is based on this idea that its values are in opposition to those encouraged in a capitalist system:

“While incredibly diverse, these initiatives share a broad set of values that stand in bold contrast to those of the dominant economy. Instead of enforcing a culture of cutthroat competition, they build cultures and communities of cooperation. Rather than isolating us from one another, they foster relationships of mutual support and solidarity. In place of centralized structures of control, they move us towards shared responsibility and directly democratic decision-making” [22] (p.1).

Community economies are, however, not separate from a dominant capitalist cultural, political and social context (based on processes of exclusion, alienation, and othering) that gives shape, to varying extents, to solidarity initiatives. According to Young [14] (p.2), positioning community as encompassing “authentic” (collective) relations in a dichotomy to the “inauthentic” (individualistic) relations of capitalist society is not only false, but also problematic, since it “provides no understanding of the move from here to there that would be rooted in an understanding of the contradictions and possibilities of existing society”. In the transition to fairer food systems, models are praised as innately embodying solidarity-based relationships, free from self-interested “corrupt” behaviours [23], yet at the same time they are re-creating interpersonal connections that have been “damaged” by market competitiveness [24] (e.g., between producers and consumers). Following Young [14], however, these closer and more trusting relationships in solidarity economies do not automatically endow collaboration.

Allen [25] (p.10) highlights how local food systems in the US continue to marginalise some social groups through pluralist democratic organising, because asymmetrical distributions of power are being upheld, “which amplify some voices or completely drown out others”. Some research in Greece has also shown disagreement and division in solidarity initiatives (e.g., [6]). Rakopoulos’ [26] raises sources of conflict in the Greek no middlemen initiatives, including tensions caused by institutionalization and its consequences for radical politics. Similarly, Calvário and Kallis [21] point out that commitment to a solidarity initiative is negated by its dependency on volunteerism, and over time this is both socially and economically unsustainable. There is also a growing fear of co-optation (a form of homogenisation) of social movement politics in solidarity economies, particularly pertinent given the spotlight on Greece as a centre point of radical solutions to crisis, which Rakopoulos [27] contends can give rise to romanticised accounts of solidarity economy. Steinfert [6] argues from a post-structuralist perspective that movements in Thessaloniki could avoid fragmentary strategizing based on identity politics by undertaking “communal performative” narratives as transformation strategies that respect antagonisms and differences. This article contends alternatively that conflict, and the belief that it is inevitable, is exaggerated by overlooking the importance of structural difference in defining dynamics of self-organised initiatives. Once recognised, difference can be incorporated into food initiative strategies for solidarity-making.

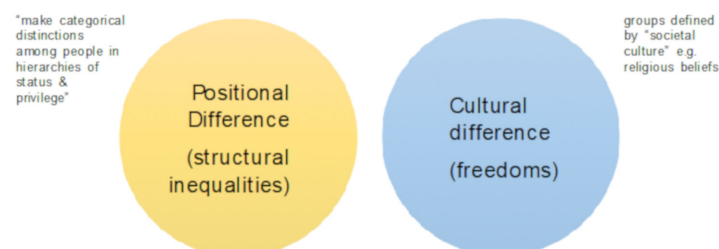
## 2.2. Examining Tension, Conflict, and Difference

In contrast to this vision of a harmonious pluralistic community epitomised by community economies theories [28,29], Iris Young [14] (p.2) raises the critique of the political ideal of community, which is seen as the alternative to oppression and exploitation that characterises a capitalist patriarchal society. Her most poignant argument against this is that the desire of community rests on “the same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism, on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other”. The community ideal is not inclusive as it is imagined, but exclusionary along identity lines; in effect, the process of creating a unified community denies difference, forces assimilation of beliefs and cultures, and thus excludes marginalised groups.

Difference is defined by Young [14] (p.4) as the “irreducible particularity of entities, which makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness or bring them into unity without remainder.” The ideal of community, when applied using universal ideas of equality amongst individuals, serves the interests and culture of the most powerful social groups whilst marginalising others”. Thus, a process of re-embedding the dominance of individuals in privileged social and organisational positions over others with less power and privilege persists through forced assimilation.

Moreover, she critiques the ideal of self-sufficient, decentralised “local” communities because they limit interaction and, thus, leave social justice aims and causes of oppression inadequately addressed. The view of community, which rejects individual competitiveness by asserting its “opposite”, assumes that social mixing between different groups appeases antagonism and, Young [14] argues, “fails to see that alienation and violence are not a function of mediation of social relations, but can and do exist in face-to-face relations”. Conflict is therefore possible, even probable, also in the process of direct and interactive solidarity making as a result of unequal power relations. Young’s [14] critique makes it necessary to explore the way that conflictual situations based on difference are dealt with, so as not to erase individuals, and their needs and desires, from processes of collaboration. Importantly, the non-recognition, either conscious or unconscious, of these differences that Young calls “difference-blindness” accentuates tension and can lead to conflict and fragmentation.

Fragmentation has been recognised as owing to the unrecognised presence of difference. For example, in research on civic food networks in Canada, Anderson [30] (p.117) concludes that from the beginning of group collaboration, intergroup difference should be discussed, and mutual understanding sought, so that differences do not “perpetuate the fragmentation of rural communities and foster individualistic approaches that limit the capacity for collective problem solving”. This paper focuses on Young’s notions of positional or cultural differences in order to discuss the effect of difference in heterogeneous urban initiatives. These categories of difference, represented in Figure 1, “concern issues of justice . . . the politics of positional difference concentrates on issues of structural inequality while the main issues that arise in a politics of cultural difference concern freedom” [31] (p.5).



**Figure 1.** Iris Young’s Categories in the Politics of Difference. Source: author’s interpretation.

In the remainder of the article, I draw on empirical findings from research to demonstrate the value of Young’s [14] *Politics of Difference* for understanding the development of hierarchies that lead to fragmentation within self-organised economies of food. In the analysis, I specifically emphasize points of contestation that have a specific social meaning in the changing political context of crisis and austerity. Namely, material disparities that establish unequal relationships and statuses between group members in positional variance, and differences in political cultures, political orientations, and visions of the future, which shape politics in solidarity economies. These in turn impact strategies and organisational culture in the creation of these self-governed “communities”. At the same time as Young’s [14] theory contributes to the understanding of decentralised food initiatives, this case study develops an extended politics of difference that enlightens social and political power struggles related specifically to self-organisation.

### 3. Methods

This chapter engages with data from a 24-month participatory video (PV) project in Thessaloniki, in a participatory action research (PAR) framework. PV is an engaged methodology. It has been shown to instigate action, and create democratic collaborations for doing so [32], and to reflect unequal distributions of resources and power [33]. In traditional social science it can be difficult to ascertain underlying tensions since research design and engagement with participants is somewhat detached from happenings below the surface [34]. Equally, distance from participants makes it less likely that they will talk to you about the difficulties they or the collective are experiencing, since building trust is crucial [33]. In Thessaloniki, we set up a participatory video research group consisting of academic and community researchers to design the research through an iterative process of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Calvário and Kallis [21] call for an action-activist research approach, arguing that there is an overemphasis on critique and skepticism in research that undermines the potential for research to contribute to constructive, progressive social change. Similarly, Gibson-Graham [28] advocate a community-based research practice that highlights actors' agency in producing a "politics of possibility". Encouraging the visibility of new economies, whilst successfully demonstrating existing heterogeneity and opening up possibilities, is matched with a double-edged imperative: a pressure to prove that another way is indeed possible. Solidarity initiatives face criticism from within communities, external funders, and partners based on a particular notion of success [35] (p.7). This is especially true when "success" and "failures" in transformation are thought of in terms of concrete goals rather than as a continual struggle [36]. Consistently, solidarity economy discussions centre on economic viability and opportunities for mainstreaming in a capitalist context [37], thus falling somewhat into the capitalocentric trap critiqued by Gibson-Graham [28]. Therefore, methods that are selected in an eager quest to demonstrate social solidarity can overlook conflict and its root causes.

Conversely, participatory research and ethnography conducted in this research drew out stories of disharmony and disquiet amongst participants that balance out those stories of promise. It was with the initial objective of teasing out lessons learned in their development since the capitalist crisis that we began to uncover these contradictions and tensions, building up a picture from various participants of difficult interpersonal relationships and clashes of motivations or strategies in these solidarity-based initiatives. The research began with the aim of showing the potential for movement building in the region. However, conflict became important to the theme of our research because of the events on the ground, most prominently, the experience of substantial internal strife (some to the point of crisis) or fragmentation in numerous initiatives.

#### 3.1. Participatory Video Group

Each member of the research group, of which there were nine members, was engaged to different extents, directly, through contacts or participation in events, with the different food initiatives. Included in the group were campaigners, members of social cooperatives, researchers, and activists, or a mixture of these identities. All participants were involved in choosing and collecting the data through filming events, processes, and conducting interviews. The 24 interviews with 27 interviewees (see Table 1) incorporated as data in this paper were semi-structured, in that we had prepared interview questions related to our topic of "lessons learned" and also to the individual participant and their respective initiative, but left the process open ended in order for the participant to guide the direction of topics. This allowed the participants to elicit their opinions more freely and to steer the dialogue to areas of which we as interviewers were previously unaware. It also allowed for the incorporation of emotive response, which, given the subject matter, was important to give deliberative space to contemplation in reference to the "lessons learned".

We held fortnightly meetings to discuss the data and the next steps. We discussed themes that came from the interviews in order to collectively shape our understandings of autonomous food initiatives as a group. At several moments when there were difficulties experienced by collectives, we



would share thoughts informally amongst ourselves to understand how the situation was evolving. In this way, we all had a role in the analysis. We also had workshops to brainstorm themes as a group and at events to show footage and instigate discussion amongst members of initiatives.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of interviews and discussions drawn from in this article.

Name of Initiative	Semi-Structured Interviews	Events	Fieldnotes— Ethnography/Informal Discussion
Perka	9 × single 1 × group (2)	Film screening and discussion Assembly discussing statute 2 × festivals	Dinners at APAN social centre Discussions whilst gardening at Perka 2 Informal chats with friends
Bioscoop	5 × single (1 repeat) 1 × group (2)	Mapping at festival Anniversary celebration event	Informal discussions with members
Koukouli	2 × single	Attended event at the shop	Informal discussions at store
Producers/activists involved in other initiatives	4 × single 2 × group (2)	Consumer–producer event at Mikropolis Pervolarides events Katerini/Thessaloniki ecofestivals	Farm visit to Giannis Discussions about collaboration at Ecofestival

### 3.2. Analyzing Conflict

Given the importance of collaboration and disagreement to the initiatives, this was a focus in coding on Nvivo, which I undertook alone, but in dialogue with certain members of the research group. This was in an effort to be consistent with coding whilst engaging feedback from other group members. The coding, when refined into interconnected sub-codes, uncovered themes related to collaboration, including difficult interpersonal relations, producer–consumer collaboration/tensions, activist–producer tensions, and finding the right people. The coding was then brought back to findings to draw comparisons and contrasts, exposing contradictory accounts of events. That versions of events did not match indicated discord and underlying personal (subjective) disquiet, as well as political or social frictions. The theory of the politics of difference was drawn on solely by myself as the author of the article to highlight phenomena in the data and discussions collected by the group. We recognize that discord may appear more exaggerated because of the tense period in which the fieldwork was conducted, although this pushed us to untangle notions of collaboration from conflictual realities. We also acknowledged that using video can also hide truths [38], which we mitigated through off camera conversations and participation in events. Names have been anonymized in this paper so as to retain confidentiality in discussions of sensitive topics.

Unlike conventional social science methods, engaged methods of inquiry undertaken by people implicated by them have been shown to produce results that are useful to their subject of study in the local context [39]. Our initial aim was not to build theory, but to gain an understanding of the overall situation amongst food movements in the city that could be useful for people involved in these initiatives. It was also helpful to think of generalized lessons from food movements, and from solidarity economy, which could be extended to areas in other parts of Greece, or overseas. However, in writing up the notes and interviews and finding connections, using coding, and reading on the Greek political situation, it became clear that there was a repetition of divisive situations, the cause of which was unclear, but purported to be a cultural phenomenon in a culture of individualism. It was Young's [14] theory that elucidated that a different kind of politics would lend itself to acknowledging and dealing with difference in strategies, tactics, and political culture, encapsulated by the heterogeneous alternative

food initiatives of Thessaloniki. Therefore, Young's theory was used to understand the context of conflict in the solidarity economy, and this study simultaneously helped to develop the theory.

The paper discusses three of the food initiatives involved as case studies, in which participants in the participatory video group were either engaged with, or conducted interviews with their members, supported by conversations and participation in events undertaken in a style of participant observation. The main case studies referred to in this paper were Perka and Bioscoop. The case of Perka is an ongoing struggle since 2011 to retain peri-urban land for food production. A total of 130 families grew for subsistence on plots organized into seven collectives. Two of the research groups were food growers at Perka. The PV group attended festivals and informed participants about the research through a mapping exercise. We held events, assemblies, and conducted interviews with eleven food growers on the topic of autonomy. We also participated in assemblies, including one discussing changing the statute, and collective film screenings where feedback was given to the group. The Perka collective has now won a campaign to move into the remit of the municipality, in order to protect it from being taken over by the national defence fund. Bioscoop is a pioneering consumer cooperative convenience store, consisting of over 350 consumer members, and stocking a mixture of niche, alternative, and mainstream products. It has been operating as a supermarket since 2014. We interviewed seven members of the cooperative, one of which was a follow up interview. Participants of the video research group also attended their anniversary celebration event and had informal conversations with participants of the cooperative. Koukouli is an urban cooperative made up of producer and consumer members, selling traditional and organic food products at their store and via online delivery. We conducted two full interviews with members, had informal chats with worker and producer members, and attended events held at their site. Individual producers and activists involved in various other initiatives were also interviewed during events and trips detailed above (in Table 1).

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Motivations of Solidarity-Making

Solidarity economy of food initiatives in Thessaloniki seek to address social needs of marginalised groups. Andreas, a catalytic member of the Pervolarides, a self-sufficiency solidarity initiative in the neighbourhood of Toumba, describes the long-term socioeconomic impact of building "genuine" solidarity with poorer people in the neighbourhood of their self-defined community. Active participation is encouraged, but is not imperative, since not all of those who need aid can participate.

"We don't want to make philanthropy. Let me give you an example. We have 22–30 families. Half of them cannot participate because they have serious health problems, mental problems, inside their families, ... But the other half, they come with us they prepare the distribution they distribute food to other people also, so it's like sharing the work, and spreading the work ... We will invite them and produce with them all together, the products will be consumed by them, by us and by other people who cannot participate. We have to mobilise people, not just to provide them with food, but because we want to give them a perspective for the future".

This description of acting in solidarity in the context of crisis and chronic poverty caused by austerity politics demonstrates that incentives to participate in such "solidarity initiatives" are multiple and complexly interlinked. Some participants experience a structural inability to access food (such as limited income possibilities) and associated physical and mental health difficulties related to food poverty as well as the difficulty of living with prospectively dire and uncertain economic futures.

Ethnographic observations and stories from participants showed that a significant factor affecting initiatives was poor mental health of participants, some of whom noted the damaging effect alcohol addiction had on collaborative participation since austerity began. This matched reports that economic and social insecurity impacted on social relationships, with increased tension and conflict in workplaces,

related to self-isolation, social suffering, and despair [7] alongside increases in substance misuse [40]. In this respect, complex needs related to the crisis situation are factors that necessitate moves to include particular social groups. However, they are the very same factors that inhibited consistent and “equal” participation. Following from this, symptoms of the financial crisis and social exclusion were not always conducive to collaboration.

Moreover, in the discussion with the Pervolarides, they mentioned that there is no binding contract between the few members, but that much of the participation in the collective is trusted as individual responsibility to the collective. In frustration of feeling let down, Andreas raises an important question that speaks to definition and enforcement of equitable cooperation in self-organised initiatives: “what happens when someone doesn’t offer what they should, how does the group work then?”

The recent pattern of division in Thessaloniki’s food initiatives is testimony to the need to find methods to create equitable cooperation. In fact, it became apparent from the interviews and discussions that interpersonal disputes and structural discord were perceived to exist in most self-organised food initiatives. There were numerous episodes where disagreement escalated to a scale that disrupted the functioning of a collective. Between 2015 and 2018, three cases of overt rivalry ended in a split—at Bioscoop, Koukouli, and Perka chronologically. In the two cases of urban consumer cooperatives, Koukouli and Bioscoop, the law was invoked to make claim to an injustice in management of funds and in election processes, respectively. In the case of Perka, the rift led to original members of the collective resigning their participation. Manos, a member of Koukouli describes the difficult situation in Greece’s autonomous initiatives, with collaboration being a central hurdle:

“The problems we talked about, they are the same throughout Greece, whether you are within the law, or outside of it, finding understanding between each other is a bit difficult. But the conclusion weighs up in the end, which is where you will find disagreements, the resignations, but nevertheless the initiative carries on, it stood its ground, and there is a recognition today of a wide range of citizens, so to say”.

Whilst seemingly contrary to the notion of solidarity economy, this widespread phenomenon of discord and conflict amongst those who were participating in the solidarity economy was in part related to the difficult economic and social context in which they acted, and the involvement of a plurality of different people. Manos describes the inclusion of plural actors as “a recognition today of a wide range of citizens”, an inevitability for food initiatives; but the question that remains is how do these initiatives include different actors as participants within them. Although conventions of individualistic competitiveness are being challenged through discussions of direct democracy and anti-capitalism in new economies [6], there still exists a confrontational politics within these new initiatives whose divisive characteristics rest on inequitable power relations.

#### *4.2. Politics of Difference in Context*

The starting point for understanding a deficit in equitable cooperation is to locate where conflict manifests, and owing to what kinds of differences, through the lens of politics of difference. This can help the collective to prepare ways to deal with conflict, avert consequences that marginalises or excludes, and to find ways to collaborate in acknowledgement of this difference.

Taking Young’s categories of positional and cultural difference, visualized in Figure 2, both categories are expanded to emphasize, on the one hand, the shifting material effect of austerity alongside the embedded structural inequalities that differentiate people’s socioeconomic status, otherwise understood as social capital. On the other hand, political strategies to social change undertaken in the city are connected to political ideologies. Political ideologies and organisational cultures substitute Young’s emphasis on societal cultures, which largely refer to religion. In this respect, since this research is on a microcosm of society, the framework gives more weight to the old and new political dynamics and identities associated with social struggle. This altered framework accepts



difference-based conflict as true, at the same time as situating it within a place and time of critical—and changing—social challenges related to austerity, scarcity, and dissent.

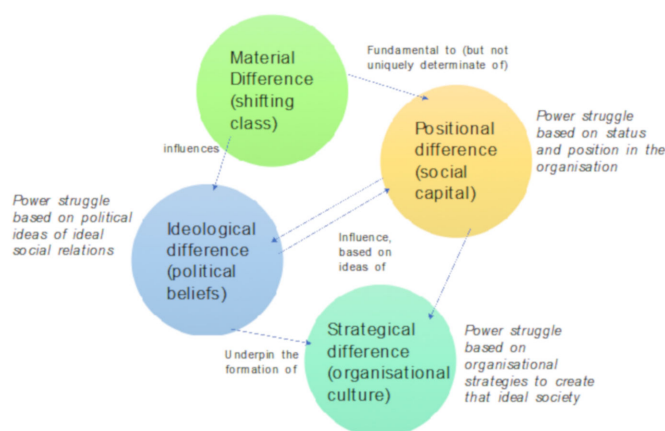


Figure 2. Politics of difference in context.

Material inequality, or class difference, is the foundational factor that affects societal power dynamics in that it determines relative positions of power in a collective. The fundamental link between class and oppression is expressed by Bishop (in [36] (p.201)): “on a structural level, class is different from other forms of oppression . . . Class is not just a factor in inequalities in wealth, privilege, and power; it is that inequality. Other forms of oppression help keep the hierarchy of power in place; class is that hierarchy”. For this reason, I discuss material differences separate to social capital.

As elucidated below, the data on these collectives demonstrates how material inequality influences both the position and status of an individual in the organisation, and their ideological grounding informs an individual’s vision of social change. The combination of the two shape the organisational strategy taken by the initiative to make that change. As relational positions of material disparity are entrenched by the crisis, economic capital and social capital unevenly distribute power to exert influence over the ideology or strategy of a collective, or part of a collective. Therefore, since politics “requires not principles that apply to all people in the same way, but a nuanced understanding of the particularities of the social context, and the needs particular people have and express within it”, self-governance and decision-making should, according to Young [31] (p.96), be considerate of these differences in order to reverse relations of domination.

#### 4.2.1. Material Difference

In the context of austerity and the debt crisis, the process of impoverishment is widespread, but each individual is inflicted to a different extent, and at different rates, with some being buffered by job security or financial backup. When difference in wealth (income, assets, sustenance, land, and familial or other financial support networks) manifests, this has an impact on the particular choices available to individuals as to if and when they act in the solidarity economy and their respective reliance on it as a source of material benefit. For example, on the one hand a paid worker of a cooperative may depend on this income for their livelihood, whilst another unpaid member of the cooperative, with employment elsewhere, is not dependent on their involvement for income. Meanwhile, the cooperative does depend on voluntary labour offered in their free time. Since work is rarely remunerated in the Greek solidarity economy, and in cases where it is, the pay is usually low, many individuals dedicate voluntary hours for the functioning of the collective endeavour [6]. People are motivated to dedicate unremunerated hours often to put their politics into practice, or with the hope that this new endeavour may offer economic and social stability in the future—and as a result this is commonly considered a sign of virtue or a test of political credentials.

Karina from Bioscoop observed that the majority of members of the cooperative, excluding only the workers, were middle class—although she acknowledged that this was based on concepts of middleclass before the crisis, since what counts as “middle class” is shifting as jobs and wages for both public and private sector workers have decreased. Dependency on a solidarity initiative was, therefore, a material need for some individuals to participate and not for others, but for the initiative to survive it was impossible for everyone to be materially dependent on it. This unequivocally differentiates people; even if participation is well meaning, an individual’s own higher economic capital before entering the initiative—and resultant social capital from volunteering—can lead to an unequal division between them and their worker peers. Whilst this is not a disparity that is unique to the solidarity economy, in the context of high unemployment and job insecurity, dependency on work is felt acutely in the choice to participate in the solidarity economy at that moment.

Yet, material difference is also present in initiatives that are based on non-monetary systems of production and exchange. For example, at Perka, the growing material needs of nearby residents of the neighbourhood coincided with an increased membership in the collective, since the original members predominantly came from more affluent central neighbourhoods. The increase in new members shifted the overall ideological emphasis of the collective membership: from the original wish to create long term self-sufficiency by using heirloom seeds and techniques for environmental sustainability, to more members cultivating using bought, hybrid seeds and chemical inputs. The latter was seen by those dedicated to the original ethos as an individualistic and short-term recourse to “guaranteed” yields. When subsistence is one part of material wellbeing, yields are arguably a justified priority. Inexperience in alternative methods of cultivation were common, and although technique- and information-sharing events were held regularly, they were attended almost exclusively by the already converted; this may explain the recourse to using conventional methods by new and disinterested members.

At a workshop we held in 2017 to discuss the representation of Perka in a participatory film, active members who attended clearly understood that a tension existed between participants in the collective and those who acted as individuals, and also recognised that over time the practices had changed as the composite of members shifted (Figure 3). The reason for lack of participation in the collective was recounted as a result of the visible difference in motivations, that the others wanted to use the cultivation methods they knew despite the poor environmental credentials. They also considered that those individuals who did not participate in the assemblies had no interest in doing so because they did not have a collective spirit or had not been educated to be able to work collectively. Additionally, defying the original collectively agreed ethos of Perka, to respect the earth and encourage seed sovereignty, was perceived to be a result of taking shortcuts and committing “individualistic” acts, rather than being acts based on need.

Importantly, many new members who joined were from the poorer neighbourhood in which the site was located. As such, because the belief systems of an individual are connected to social position and class [41], in reality a combination of factors related to socioeconomic status, needs, and preferences would explain the different standpoints that contributed to the rift. This also corresponds to Young’s [14] view that “community” does not directly oppose “individualism” and that more nuance, as well as social understanding, is needed to read motivations behind action, which does not match a specific subjective logic the analyst may have. In the case of Perka, although an open collective, there was a clear expectation to assimilate in adherence to the ideological grounding of the collective, which did not always correspond to the self-perceived needs or the identity of new members. In terms of “collective education”—this was an opportunity to engage diverse members in collective organising as well as cultivation. However, the fact that individuals were allocated individual plots made it so that there was little incentive to engage with the wider collective if the motivations for some members was only to cultivate vegetables.



(a) An assembly at Perka



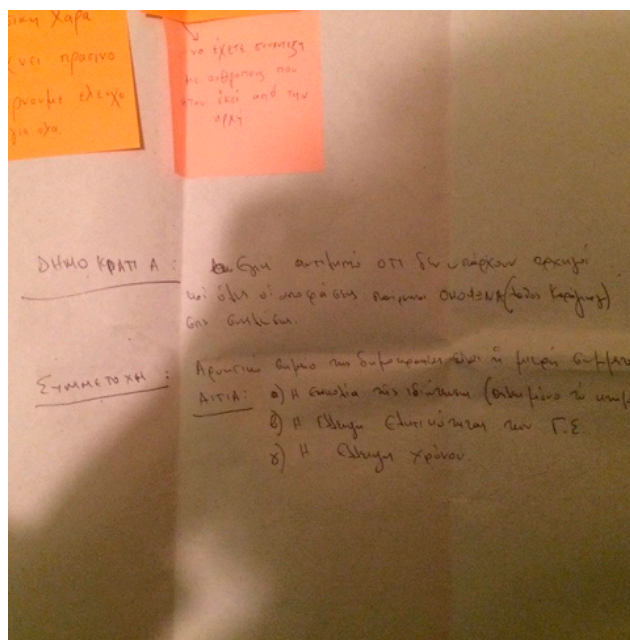
(b) Collective film watching



(c) Workshop with Perka gardeners at APAN social centre

Figure 3. Cont.





(d) Notes from the workshop \*

**Figure 3.** PV process and reflections from Perka workshop. \* Translation of text in Figure 3d: “Reasons for little active participation: (a) the ease at which individualism comes (only want to cultivate by themselves); (b) the development of elite movement in the general assembly; (c) the passing of time”.

Furthermore, the rupture in the initiative was taken to a new level in early 2018 when those who refused to abide by the conditions in the statute organised themselves into a separate group. They took a rebellious stance of continuing to cultivate the land but no longer tied to the rules of the statute. It was reported that friends and family were “recruited” in the previous months to support this break-away group, the favour-for-a-favour behaviour, which retorts of clientelism. From the perspective of those who had founded the collective and the statute based on principles of long-term socio-ecological resilience, they were faced with a situation of conflict within a community that threatened these very principles. Faced with this prospect of remaining a member of a version of Perka, whose principles were muddled by “individualistic” actions, several long-standing members resigned their membership. It was telling that before the split there was a drawn-out period of discussion about how to rewrite the statute, which featured many disagreements and ended in a decision-making stalemate.

A sentiment that came out in the reflection after the split was that the initiative had been “too open” to participants, meaning that the membership was easily obtainable, without a vetting process, which corresponded to the conditions in the statute. In other words, new members were trusted to follow the principles and to respect the function of the assembly in decision-making. Conversely, another active member had commented on their perception of the development of elitism in the general assembly that could have impacted on feelings of belonging to the collective and resentment to individuals with power. Moreover, now ex-members of Perka commented on the personal feud between a member of the group that defected and a prominent active member of the original group, the phenomenon of which will be discussed later in reference to the emergence of leaders.

The fact that the procedures could not establish cohesion in the self-organised group, but instead was a cause for contention, indicated that material inequalities, which became more acute with the arrival of new members from a different socio-economic position, should be recognised as they were—structural inequalities. This recognition of class difference empathises with the belief systems and connected actions of newcomers, and can help negotiate antagonisms to eventually fairly negotiate use of valuable space for cultivation. The politics of difference, according to Young [14], does not force assimilation to the dominant practices and belief systems, but instead it recognises the need for

mutual understanding and co-existence. Acknowledging structural differences could help create a compassionate and deliberative approach to work side-by-side with those who did not follow the statute. This is especially important given that in the economic crisis years, those in poorer neighbourhoods have been adversely hit with destitution [16] and so new categories of social exclusions are emerging (as are new categories of social class).

#### 4.2.2. Positional Difference Influenced by Material and Social Inequalities

Directly related to the material difference is the positional difference in terms of social capital or status of individuals in relation with one another in society or within an initiative. According to Bourdieu [41], social capital is gained over time through involvement in networks through which norms and values are emulated. It is through the establishment of connectedness that mutual trust is established, and it is through this process that different positions are established, sometimes at odds with one another. Needless to say, the position of individuals within these groups is infinitely different, determined by relative class, gender, ethnicity, social capital, and age. The relational basis of the food chain is of particular importance, especially in solidarity initiatives whose membership includes a combination of all or some of producers, activists, workers and/or consumers. Consumer cooperative and social cooperative enterprises (KOINSEP) are unusual in their membership diversity, especially in respect of workers. In consumer cooperatives workers are also members, and KOINSEPs hold that members can volunteer up to 16 h a week, while workers are registered as such, but can still also be members (but don't have to be). In these situations, actors are mutually interdependent in relations of economic, social and cultural power dependent on the status they occupy within the legal and organisational structure of the initiative.

We heard through interviews that a member of a cooperative who volunteers their time to the cooperative has the potential to gain social capital from the experience, through connections, media appearances, and prestige that come from being seen to be behind the pioneering "solidarity" or "cooperative" projects. Whilst the old cooperatives were financially lucrative to certain people in the old cooperative system, the new cooperatives are talked about by some as sites that allow power acquisition.

"... the old cooperative had to do with money and profits, they were profit, while we are not-for profit, so none of them has as a motivation the money, nobody gets extra money by doing what they do. Which is a basic difference. But it's the same thing, you put power and it's the same thing. There are some people who want to be in charge of the cooperative movement of Greece. They want to be in charge for different reasons, they may hope to claim better position governing, cooperative Greece, I don't know, maybe, I am sure that some of them just want to be the number one lecturer and the number one guy when the media want to discuss with someone about cooperatives".

Participation in solidarity initiatives, therefore, rewards individuals unequally and is dependent on whether reward takes the form of economic value (or the potential thereof) or social capital. Bourdieu [41] views social capital as self-fulfilling, being reproduced through "a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. It implies expenditure of time and energy and so, directly or indirectly, of economic capital ... and an acquired disposition to acquire and maintain this competence, which are themselves integral parts of this capital". The narrative of this generation of cooperatives being novel is based on the idea that they are less corruptible, since they are driven by people from social movements. However, being in a position to "pioneer" such an initiative can give certain members social capital on which to elevate themselves using the success of the initiative as currency. To build real solidarity there is a need for self-instituted mechanisms to mitigate power acquisition.



#### 4.2.3. Positional Differences Influenced by Ideological Differences

Another example of difference is when organisational hierarchies are influenced by a particular ideology. These hierarchies are established either by formal positions within the organisation, or they are informal and emerge frequently along lines of oppression. They can also occur when there is an imbalance of power or knowledge, including experience (age), expertise (legal and institutional know-how), and social capital (contacts, influence inside and outside of the organisation). In the consumer cooperative, Bioscoop, workers are employed to manage the day-to-day activities of the grocery store and, on paying their EUR 150 share, must adopt member status when employed. Workers attend meetings and participate in decision-making with the same weight as another paying coop member—on the basis that the procedures were intended to be flat structured. However, there existed different political beliefs on the position of the workers in relation to the general assembly. In particular, at the time when two workers were fired in summer 2016 through a referendum in the general assembly (in the second case with one vote difference), a split—which participants later reflected had been emerging for many months—suddenly became evident. It was in hindsight that the causes of the rift in Bioscoop were diagnosed by some participants, as owing to the unresolved power inequalities, embedded by non-transparent political organisational strategies and positions of the board of directors. A cause of contention was the manner in which individuals with board member influence were seen to force a decision based on what they wanted, and they used undemocratic methods to do this. Orfeas describes the situation then:

“So all the important decisions were made in closed assemblies, without trying to decide what happened, without inviting the persons involved to give us an explanation of what they did, without trying to warn them, or give them, I don’t know, just tell them, if you do this again we will fire you. So we underestimated forgiveness, cooperation and education and we worked with punishment and power. That bothered me very much and ... that’s the reason why many people of the board resigned, because we wanted to discuss about our problems, we didn’t want like a big hammer to smash them all the time”.

The tension that resulted in what came to be seen by some as unfair dismissals has its roots essentially in attitudes to workers’ positionality and rights in the mixed-identity initiative. A member who has been a worker in the coop, Nikos, views that effectively, but not explicitly, the assembly is the boss of the workers.

“You can’t neglect real life and practicing of a theory. Because ok in theory [a board member] was a member of the cooperative, [a worker] was a member of the cooperative, we have the weekly assembly where everyone can participate with direct democracy, so we have no bother, but you can’t keep the fact that there is also a board of directors, there is also a collective boss, so we would say the assembly, the weekly assembly is the boss of the workers, ok, the workers can participate in the assembly and can influence things, but in the end, a decision has to be made, and some people need to comply with that decision”.

Although on paper, there are no bosses. A worker who was fired, Fotis, agreed wholeheartedly that bosses existed because of the legal system that enforces a board of directors, and because some members do not willingly allow for their position of power on the board to be re-allocated. He expressed that it was worse to have many ambiguous bosses observing you than one named boss giving you orders. Conversely, another member, Pantelis, who has been on the board describes the position of workers as no different to any other member—to distinguish between them and the rest of the membership would create a hierarchy, which would go against their cooperative principles of horizontality.

“Yes we said that there is no place for initiatives which employ employees. All employees must be workers and all members should be workers, in order to not have employees ...

There are people that believe that they are not equals, and they must be employees, that is let's say the right-wing approach of the cooperative work. The systemic. And some other they believe that the workers must decide for everything and the other members are just sponsors. They put just the money for the cooperative share. Wait a minute. I don't accept the idea that the workers are my employees. My employees? I am not the boss".

Importantly, workers are generally employed based on previous knowledge and connection to movements, and they are selected by the board to become worker-members on this basis. There are currently 12 workers, paid EUR 100 a month above minimum wage, in a cooperative of approximately 350 members. Workers, too, pay the one-off membership fee for their share, so are both paid workers and paid-up members. Where he says "some others believe that the workers must decide for everything and the other members are just sponsors", Pantelis is inferring the opinion held by some members of the cooperative, in opposition to him, that workers should have more autonomy in decision-making, particularly related to the shop floor and dealing with producers, in order to acknowledge their particular knowledge of day-to-day activities. At times, there are delays in shop functions because decisions have to go through the assembly in accordance with the direct democracy practices, which is a core principle of the cooperative. Overall, they argued, the processes lacked a recourse to mechanisms to give the minority group voice and autonomy on their daily work. Hahnel's [42] view on economic democracy can enlighten us on how direct democracy does not always work for communities making decisions together, since giving each individual one vote does not mitigate difference. Instead, Hahnel [42] (p.54) argues that decision-making power should be allocated according to the degree that individuals are affected by that decision.

When there is a positional difference, such as between worker member and volunteer member, not only do the stakes in the initiative differ in types of capital, but there is also power at play because of the non-recognition of this reality and the governance structures which embed this. That is to say, there is difference-blindness that obscures existent hierarchical relationships in an image that the cooperative works on non-hierarchical principles. Horizontal organising is an aspiration held by many cooperative members, but its current narrative can obscure inequalities, as expressed by Young [43] (p.164):

"The achievement of formal equality does not eliminate social differences, and rhetorical commitment to the sameness of persons makes it impossible even to name how those differences presently structure privilege and oppression".

Pertinently, the decision as to how to "discipline" a worker was taken by the board of directors, and the vote by an assembly referendum. So, while worker members are seen as equal members, with equal rights to participate and to vote, their role within the cooperative is dependent on decisions taken by other cooperative members, and in particular board members, whose decision favours the majority (however marginal). The non-worker members of the cooperative could not be "sacked" in the same way, which is another indicator of difference. The only occasions that membership has been disputed is when an individual has been a member of more than one of the same type of cooperative in the city of Thessaloniki, which is against the law. Moreover, the recourse to reprimand for misbehaviour, or going against the interests of the collective, are still contested. Some believe that individuals should be worked with and given compassion and time to see the impact they are having on the collective and given a chance to change their ways, whilst others deem it necessary to have means to eliminate 'individualist' threats to the cooperative. Although the rivalry has settled, there is a chance that these differences will resurface if not confronted, especially since people have lost trust in the 'other side' and their ideological convictions.

"I and many other people of the cooperative think that they don't work with cooperation anymore, they don't try to build on different views in order to create the road that the cooperative will take, but they insist on their own view and they isolate all the people with different views than them, so they are more hard than they should be ... , and this happens

despite them going to the media every other day and saying and declaring how democratic we are how everything is amazing and how equal everybody is. But what they say and what they do is different”.

(Orfeas, Bioscoop)

It was during this time that one non-worker member of Bioscoop described the firings as a technique to control not only the workers, but other members whose ideas contradicted the prominent members of the initiative. Whether this claim is an accurate portrayal, or skewed by bias of being on the “other side” of the rivalry, is difficult to say. However, what this did expose is that ultimately by aligning all members as equal participants and claiming that no hierarchies or bosses existed, the outcome was to erase the workers’ claim to a particular position within the cooperative. The paradox was two-fold. Firstly, the wish to create a non-hierarchical organisation in reality did not reflect the power that the assembly, specifically the board members, had over the workers through disciplinary proceedings, and thus direct democracy on paper and in practice was used as a tool of disciplinary control. In this case the workers were massively outnumbered and, therefore, represented a minority interest group.

Secondly, although this erasure of difference happened because of political ideology, a vision of a better society, which held egalitarianism in the highest esteem, the consequence in practice was to entrench inequalities. This resonates with Young’s [43] (p.165) view on privilege and difference-blindness in liberalism, “... the ideal of universal humanity without social group differences allows privileged groups to ignore their own group specificity. Blindness to difference perpetuates cultural imperialism by allowing norms expressing the point of view and experience of privileged groups to appear neutral and universal”. This power had existed but remained unchallenged, and as a consequence, power was allowed to concentrate in formal and informal hierarchies. This shows the countering effect of attempting to assume non-hierarchical organisations in the reality of material and positional inequalities. Additionally, it reasserts the question of whether each member should be allocated one equal vote on all matters, or whether there should be a decision-making process based on the politics of difference, such as those suggested by Hahnel [42].

#### 4.2.4. Strategic Differences Influenced by Ideological Differences

After the episode at Bioscoop exposed underlying tensions and resulted in a two-camp split, the initial years of setting up the cooperative were reflected upon. At the beginning, adherence or support for political parties was seen by some members as less significant whereby plurality and cooperation replaced sectarianism. Now, old political divisions revealed themselves to have been present all along in the mode and manner of organising around decision-making. It was at this point that previous cooperation became the subject of suspicion.

“... so we had people from let’s say anti-authoritarian or anarchist movements up to I don’t know the central mainstream PASOK movement, PASOK political party, but all these people used to manage to cooperate and work with each other very well, and that was the main thing that attracted me and made me participate in this effort ... we were very confident the first three years, we were all believing we had strong bonds with each other, even with the two opposite sides, we were something like friends, there was big trust between us, and all of this slowly and steadily started collapsing, until we reached this point where no way I cannot trust them. And maybe them me”.

(Orfeas, Bioscoop)

In the case of Bioscoop, it was interesting how the political divisions were noted by the participants. The two sides (though not entirely clear cut) can be characterised by narratives (the one side about the other) as on the one hand, old socialist visionaries, soldiers to the cause, and with many connections and a particular organising culture built through years of political party participation. Leaders on this “side”

initiated the bureaucratic protocol; they were knowledgeable about cooperative laws and ultimately acted to discipline the worker. On the other side, younger-on-average, non-partisan, anti-authoritarians and egalitarians constituted the majority; they were said to be more recently politicised. Members I spoke to supported the interest of workers at the cooperative as a distinct group, and one advocated their empowerment through establishment of a workers' assembly with decision-making powers over day-to-day shop floor activities. Splitting along ideological lines mirrors Young's [14] theory that sectarianism is a possible consequence of forcing "community" through the denial of difference.

Whilst the adherence to political ideologies or experience with political groups was stricter amongst some participants than others, the split drew a line between those who had been involved in centralised organizing, and those who did not adhere to political parties, but were politicised in the spirit of direct democracy in recent social movements. Interestingly, though, the members of the cooperative who were later accused of being centrists were vocal advocates of non-hierarchy. Whilst the political orientation of individuals within the collectives informed their perspectives on appropriate strategies for the collective, a marked difference between the old socialists and the anti-authoritarians, was their respect of legislative bureaucracy. A member participant talked about the particular attention to legal matters that the 'leaders' had in the interests of the cooperative, which he had put down to age and experience. He would concede to their views in the beginning, but had at certain points argued for principled action. In one instance, the block on stocking products from an occupied factory, Bio.Me, for reasons of them not having documentation, was lifted. Nikos explains:

"... when he was the leader, or at least one of the leaders in the working group of the quality and compatibility, they always stopped Bioscoop from having Bio.Me products because Bio.Me products don't have the license. And Bioscoop could have a fine because of that, but we decided that we were willing to take this risk, we need to support Bio.Me and if a fine comes, we will find solidarity, we will find a way to solve it".

The idea of solidarity here is to share risks with other initiatives who are more vulnerable in respect to the market/state. It was other solidarity initiatives selling their products for a period of time without receiving a fine that softened the pressure to decide. In the interim, though, the risk of legal punishment was a fear that prompted other members to block decisions. This example demonstrates the common ideological, legal tension that divided members of the initiative, especially between strongly principled, anti-systemic members, and members more used to working according to a long-term strategy connected to the end goal of economic longevity and high reputation of the initiative.

These oppositional forces were made more concrete with the presence of separate, conflicting, decision-making, and democratic processes in cooperatives. There was a clash between the direct democracy structures of the cooperative, the structure that is associated publically with this new generation of cooperatives, of which Bioscoop is one of the first, and the board of directors that is obligatory for all cooperatives. Legally, the board's decisions surmount any decisions made by the all-member assembly. Additionally, as a basis for ensuring rights and responsibilities of the cooperative, the law can potentially be mobilised for partisan purposes, which was claimed to be happening when one Bioscoop member attempted (but failed) to dissolve the new board in a legal dispute during the period of conflict. The legal claim was that the elections of the board-members did not follow the rules stipulated by law. This shows the flimsiness of creating horizontalism in decision-making and organising, when it could be over-ridden by outside procedures. It also shows that state mechanisms for 'justice' can be used to upend parallel grassroots mechanisms for justice in this process of democratisation. Saying this, it is important to give consideration to circumstances where serious injustices necessitate appropriate external, judicial intervention.

#### 4.3. *The "Political" Becomes "Personal"*

Having seen how non-recognition of difference can lead to the formation of informal hierarchies, we will now explore how this process of injustice manifested into personal rivalries. The consequence

of difference-blindness is that structural inequalities can turn into personalised feelings of being the subject of an injustice, as the Perka example indicates. This feeling of injustice can be understood as personal, especially if the positional differences are not recognized, and this results in what exhibits as personal rivalries. The emergence of leaders is talked about as a significant factor contributing to divisions. For example, in all three cases of major internal conflict, Koukouli, Bioscoop and Perka, prominent male members of the collective were spoken about as triggering conflict by making a decision or change that invited opposition. The vast majority of participants in the solidarity economy are male. Given this, it is not possible to determine conclusively whether the fact that emergent leaders were mostly male was a result of strong societal presence of patriarchy, or simply a result of probability. However, an example of how “the political” turns personal is when members of an initiative react in an attempt to dislodge another member from their position of power. This echoes with an observation by McAlevey [44], that “the obsession with leadership development and not leader identification prevents all members of a movement from gaining the collective power they need and deserve”. In the case of Perka, one possible reason for the forming of an alliance against the statute was given as personal resentment by the leader of the “opposition” towards a charismatic member of the founding group.

Although on the surface there seems to be simply a “clash of egos” between the two members, what gets uncovered in these conflicts, when investigated within their context, is that there are structural and cultural differences that set them, and other collective members, apart. At the same time, a patriarchal culture, which permeates even alternative organisations in Greek society, ensure that men predominantly reach leadership positions, and for the same reasons it is also usually men who compete with those in positions of authority. There are, however, gender issues that have not been fully developed in this research. Although it is a concern that is strongly relevant to the politics of difference, gender did not emerge as a distinct theme from the research group, and neither were critical discussions offered willingly in informal conversations or semi-structured interviews with members of these initiatives.

Interestingly, calamitous splits were not shaped by informal leaders alone, but were incarnated when a following was gathered in support or in reaction to the leaders. In the case of Bioscoop, the “leader” figures were said to use their comrades, firstly to achieve the minimum number of members at the very beginning, and during the last years to rally support for important decisions. This splitting into sides mirrors bipartisan, representational political systems that the direct democracy structures of these self-organised groups are trying to surpass. Division emerging around leadership formation not only undermines democracy of the initiatives, but also threatens the survival of the initiatives. In the consumer cooperative Bioscoop, the division was acute, and reconciliation was a convoluted and exhausting process. Three years old at the “crisis” moment, the response was to focus on resolving difficulties and the internal processes that could alleviate tension, such as bringing in role rotation systems and, when the rivalry was at its most severe, an external mediator to resolve confrontations.

Another way in which personal rivalries impacted on the willingness of initiatives to engage in collaboration was connected to reputation. News of the Bioscoop events resonated throughout the city, where those connected to social movements heard about it through word of mouth. There were also social media posts that “outed” the conflict to the public and those purportedly behind it. This was compounded by a handful of public announcements by initiatives in Thessaloniki requesting Bioscoop treat its workers better. This public acknowledgement had a knock-on effect: indeed, it could have impacted income, with a significant drop in number of shoppers, perceived by members to be owing to the fact that some people from the movements lost faith in the initiative. Because some participants fear this kind of economic hit, initiatives are reluctant to show and share weaknesses, and therefore to learn from each other. This is especially true of larger organisations, such as Bioscoop, who rely on purchasing power and large consumer support for membership. The attitude to resolving conflict in the solidarity economy is voiced by Themis, who coordinates farmers movements, as immature:

“The collective spirit is a thorn in our side. Though, we are working hard to improve it. That is to say, even though we say that we are doing things collectively, we can often blow them



apart with just one detail. This means that we are not mature, while we say things, we sign things, we do things too, [but] very often we dissolve things”.

This can be translated as not having the collectively agreed and enforced systems in place to ensure fairness through recognising the structural difference faced by participants. Allowing processes to be shaped mostly by those who offer time and commitment leave the cooperative processes open to the whims of those who participate most and, thus, feel the most entitled (to recognition and social reward). As well as not distributing responsibility on a collective basis, it (mis)places trust in few individuals who self-nominate for responsibility, which later becomes a source of resentment. Arguably, this confirms the accusation of immaturity, since self-organised initiatives have not yet developed mechanisms to avoid individuals taking too much power or for organising for effective role and power sharing. As a result, self-organised configurations lack organisational know-how for dealing with crises and conflicts—which explains why collectives break down. An organisational maturity could be developed through networked learning in conjunction with other initiatives, since as we have seen, by not linking up their struggles, initiatives become politically and organisationally introvert. Equally, if lessons on democracy, inclusion, and participation are not passed from one initiative to another, the opportunity to build an interconnected solidarity-based food movement is missed.

## 5. Conclusions

The solidarity economy creates reciprocal relationships that previously did not exist because of the alienation created by competition and individualism in the capitalist system [24]. The achievement of these new collaborative relationships is laudable. However, this paper has addressed the overly romanticised view of solidarity initiatives, by highlighting the conflicts that emerge in cases where differences are negated, in an effort to create an equal community. In reality, Young’s [14] *Politics of Difference* reveals power inequities that set individuals within communities apart. The elaboration of this theory in the autonomous food initiatives in Thessaloniki exposed shifting material conditions and existent political cultures contributing to the uneven influence that individuals have in shaping visions and strategies of self-organised initiatives.

This research took place over a two-year period in Thessaloniki, when internal crises were “epidemic” and in a context of a growing lack of trust and of belief in collaboration amongst movement actors. The celebration of “community economies” shows that there is indeed an existing alternative to capitalism, and the claim is made with well-meaning intentions to elevate alternative economies to the realm of the possible, while maintaining their desirability in respect to capitalist relations. Nevertheless, this fieldwork supports Young’s [14] contention that to accomplish cohesion in solidarity-making processes, a collective must understand and confront integral difference to avoid unintended consequences that counteract collaboration.

Firstly, emphasising collective achievements (including both the rhetoric of new economies as oppositional to capitalism and in the public promotion of new ventures) potentially glosses over fractures and excludes more marginal individuals or groups, for instance, workers and women. The claim of direct democracy and horizontality supposes non-hierarchy; however, structural inequalities and their associated power asymmetries exist throughout society. In fact, the research showed that assuming equality between all members can erase the power of those in more marginal groups; therefore, there is a need to first recognise both informal and formal hierarchies in order to be able to break them down. Iris Young’s [14] analysis shows alienation and violence exist in all societies with structural inequalities. These antagonisms are themselves exaggerated by the ongoing economic crisis (a time of growing inequality, austerity, and new types of exclusions, including a complex mental health situation).

The denial of difference (material, positional, and ideological) in these plural collectives allows informal hierarchies to emerge unrecognised. Although disagreements and arguments are commonly heard and felt, the end-product of an unfair decision-making procedure can force those who feel like their voice is consistently marginalised to become resentful, and it can result in conflict that

forces side-taking by other members. Non-recognition of inequalities that exhibit as differences (difference-blindness) are the source of conflict, and not just the differences themselves. In this way, the attempt to create communities without an explicit politics of difference leads to division and fragmentation—the opposite of what is intended. In contradiction to the argument that political culture is to blame for social conflict [8], this paper shows that the capitalist crisis (and crisis of political legitimacy) contributes significantly to current dynamics, whereby clashes of political cultures and a shifting political economy have a detrimental impact on equitable collaboration.

Secondly, internal crises in solidarity initiatives can lead to fragmentation, where self-selected groups and smaller-scales are preferred for future organising. Participants close off alliances because of their personal grievances and stale interpersonal relationships. Finding the “right” people to cooperate with becomes a priority, therefore defining group membership based on common values, personal familiarity, and ability to collaborate (including processes of adopting passivity and compliance). Introverted self-protectiveness is pursued as a solution to internal difficulties and to preventing another internal “crisis” of collaboration. This indicates isolationary decentralised practices, which limit the “reaching out” needed for networking. At the same time, failure to network between autonomous food initiatives is symptomatic of the combination of a breakdown of trust, which pervades movements, and the labour needed to resolve conflicts. This perpetuates the fragmentary nature of initiatives down exclusionary lines, where principles of non-hierarchy function with less conflict in smaller assemblies. By eliminating disagreement, and with it, difference, there is a tendency for initiatives to reinforce inequalities and forms of domination. Young [14] (p.19) posits another problem, which is pertinent to autonomous food initiatives in Thessaloniki:

“... surely it is unrealistic to assume that such decentralized communities need not engage in extensive relations of exchange of resources, goods and culture. Even if one accepts the notion that a radical restructuring of society in the direction of a just and humane society entails people living in small democratically organized units of work and neighborhood, this has not addressed the important political question: how will the relations among these communities be organized so as to foster justice and prevent domination?”

Thirdly, in the cases of food initiatives in Greece, the rise to prominence of a few individuals with whom power was allowed to concentrate created resentment and competition for voice. As these hierarchies were informal, they were left unchallenged. Most were male participants—with charisma, knowledge, drive, and vision that set them apart. Informal hierarchies are perpetuated by unacknowledged structural power disparities, such as experience of political organising, interacting often with age, or connections to people with power. However, self-proclaimed leaders’ entitlement, which develops from dedication of time and personal efforts, propels forward a vision purportedly held by the entire collective. Visionaries, dedicated individuals with a determined “collective” mission for everyone, can also be detrimental to collective work, as they create unwanted hierarchies in the organisational culture.

Elaborating Young’s theory showed that difference extends beyond usual categories of race, class, and gender to differences in organisational position, social capital, and experience in politics. Some of these relational variances are associated more with structural imbalances of power (e.g., class), whilst others are influenced by material injustices but manifest in power struggles because of inequitable positions of influence held by individuals in the organisation, including political practice to contribute to the shaping of the collective’s vision and strategy. These are specific to self-organised initiatives, with notable polemics made significant by the quest to build more just communities.

Moreover, because the narrative of solidarity has the illusion of wholeness, when conflict arises, it can result in disappointment and disenfranchisement amongst movement actors. Even if the initiative does not “fail” and survives the conflict, the residue of bad feeling, rivalries, and distrust reproduces the difficult task of collaborating in new self-organised groups. Equally, it propagates the idea that people are unable to work together. Rather than being a character of Greek culture, self-organised

collectives are still maturing, as they attempt to develop mechanisms to deal with or avert conflict. These could be established by consciously employing a recognition of difference in decision-making implementation and mechanisms for fairly resolving conflict, as well as sharing lessons of democratic processes between initiatives. As we have shown, in order for this to be effective, a form of democracy based on participation, which builds equity between those with power and those more marginalised, such as those suggested by Hahnel [42], must be supported by “a commitment to anti-oppression by which movements educate themselves to understand how their internal cultures and practices might be oppressive, exclusive or exploitative” [36] (p.140). Besides this, though, more research is needed into the presence of extreme forms of exclusion and prejudice in food movements, especially given the nationalist and conspiratorial tendencies that have developed out of distrust of authority and that are now political realities in Greece [45].

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