

**Solidarity movements in Lesbos and the case of refugees:
A philosophic view about the current social context**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the conjunction between the integral parts of a crucial antithesis: theory vs. praxis, proposing a form of interdisciplinary “reconciliation”, through the case study of the recent refugee crisis. The sociological aspects of the present refugee problem will be discussed using two methods in parallel, i.e. the method(s) of social sciences and the philosophical one. The paper can also be interpreted as an example of a “dialogue” between the two disciplines, from the perspective of a current problem.

The crisis having affected the economic and social reality all over the world had severe consequences for Greece and the Greek people. Some predicted the disintegration of the Greek social nexus, whereas others insisted that the crisis was not only the result of recession, but was also interconnected with a decline of moral values penetrating the entire Greek society. In contrast to this view, there are examples of voluntary organizations and solidarity groups which have stood by the victims of crisis.

The positive effect of several of these groups was soon amplified to provide assistance to refugees who have been arriving *en masse* in Greece since 2014, while many gradually focused their attention exclusively on refugees. Despite the insufficiency of funds and resources, these solidarity groups flourished after 2014 stepping forward with many more volunteers. This phenomenon contests *typical* analytical views focusing on social disintegration, passivity and the decline of moral values. On the other hand, a lot of people were not involved in solidarity groups or movements supporting refugees (or even other Greeks victimized by the crisis and "condemned" to poverty and homelessness), or have been influenced by xenophobic hysteria and declarations about the “invasion of immigrants” instigated by certain mass media or the preaching of the Greek extreme right-wing political party “Golden Dawn”.

This melee of conflicting views and concepts produces an interesting analytical sample that can help us reinterpret aspects and embodiments of the crisis from a new analytical perspective. The paper focuses on the case study of Lesbos, the Greek island having received the greatest flow of refugees after 2014-2015, and concerns social aspects and transformations of social structure interconnected with the refugee flow, as well as philosophical views and theoretical problems arising from the concept of *solidarity*, examined as a fundamental connection between the results of sociological research and the leading ideas in Social and Political Philosophy.

Introduction: “Solidarity” as a worldview

Modern societies face History in a postmodern way. Trying to overcome the influence of mass-media - in parallel with the “spectacular” self-description of the society in which they function - peoples found a new ground for creating the image of “polis” on the Internet. The History of wars, due to which refugees are forced to move in the world map, is hence dictated through social media, whereas the idea of *solidarity* is comprehended in a new historical context. In this paper the theoretical concept of *solidarity* is discussed in brief and the idea of *solidarity* as the “praxis” of the people in Lesbos facing the multitude of immigrants arriving to the island is discussed in detail. Recent circumstances reinstated post-war debates about “the solidarity of the peoples” which finally took the form of globally-expanded norms. The starting point of this discussion, is the tripartite motto of French revolutionaries in the 18th century (“Liberté,

Égalité, Fraternité”) signifying the very beginning of modern times. The notion of solidarity transforms the claim for fraternity or the brotherhood of mankind, expressed in the third part of this motto.¹

In the light of Marxism, this idea was comprehended as a result of class revolution, since “civil society” emerging from the bourgeois revolution historically did not substantiate the realization of “equality” and “liberty”. A new revolution arising from class struggle was expected to break frontiers, in order to unite the global “brotherhood” of workers. For Marxists, the overthrow of capitalism was a fundamental precondition of real “solidarity” between nations, thus continuing the philosophic axiom of Hegel about “totality”: historical changes obeying the rule of “dialectics” can be explained only under the light of “totality” as a law of History. The latest form of capitalist states, namely the “society of spectacle”, brilliantly described by the group of “Internationale Situationniste (International Situationists) during the early 1970s² signified in advance that the battle about the end of History which would later be widely propagated is just an illusion. We can now definitely conclude that History never stopped, bringing again to light the necessity to re-comprehend the idea of “solidarity”. In addition, new circumstances allowed for “solidarity” in some cases to become the main option of society’s “self-description” with the aid of social media. The idea emerged again as a safe way to observe not only ourselves but the whole world, being simultaneously a view about our society and also a worldview. However, the new, postmodern problem that History revealed in the current social context is the disconnection between “solidarity” and “totality”, a crucial philosophical problem of our times, which we will try to analyze also focusing on the new social phenomena that appeared due to the refugee crisis and interpreted through the spread of social media.

Lesvos and the refugee flow

Lesvos is a Greek island which lies on the north-eastern Aegean Archipelagos, very close to the coast of Turkey. Due to its geographical location Lesvos has been chosen as a major entrance point of the sea routes leading to Greece and thus the “European territory” by refugees gathering in Turkey.³ Some sporadic attempts of passage, (mainly) by Afghans, began in 1985, and were followed by some Kurdish people in 1998, and then again by Afghans in 2001-2002. Arrivals of refugees during this period were relatively rare. After their arrival, taking place almost exclusively at night, under the cover of the darkness, they would put themselves under the authority of the police and/or the port-police. More or less, all these people were treated as “illegal immigrants” by the authorities. In general, they were arrested and detained in police stations before their release, and were provided with a “note” stating that after their release they had to leave the country (Greece) in a month. Incomers had the right to apply for asylum and their applications were examined by the police. Legal procedures however, were extremely slow and most incomers were unable to support their applications efficiently, as they did not speak or read Greek, and could not afford to pay for lawyers to assist them. Therefore, some continued their journey towards other European countries (following various routes

¹ The anarchist option of the idea (“mutual aid”) that emerged in the 19th century involving Ethics (Kropotkin, 2009: 194-195, 209, 243; Kropotkin, 2007: 39-49) is reexamined in the theory of “libertarian municipalism”, which appeared in the essays of Murray Bookchin, during the last decades of the 20th century.

² Human experience “has been drawn away and replaced by representations”, since “the spectacle is the capital which has been as much accumulated as to be a spectacle” (Debord 1986: 9, 21). See also: Vaneigem 20-21, 38.

³ Compared to other islands in the North Aegean, also close to the Turkish coast (e.g. Chios and Samos), Lesvos received and hosted greater numbers of refugees. Though the reason for this is still not clear, it may be due to the particular topography of the Asia Minor coast and specific locations offering “easier” access to the Greek islands, or due to the specific allocations of networks of traffickers.

and means to achieve this) or stayed in Greece and were in some cases able to gain a legal residence status.

By the end of the 2000s, the number of incomers was high enough to motivate local (Lesvian) authorities to restrict them in an old prison establishment in Lagada, in the city of Mytilene, and then in another establishment in Pagani, Mytilene, which was turned into a detention center. The accumulation of prisoners there, led to an uprising (25th - 31st August 2009) supported by the movement "No Borders" (established by European activists) and local volunteers, and resulting to the closing down of the detention center of Pagani and the release of detainees. The previous year (i.e. 2008) a hosting structure for unaccompanied minor refugees had been established in Ayiassos, Lesvos, named by the refugees "Villa Azadi" (i.e. "Liberty Villa"), which continued to operate until 2013, when the funds supporting the project dried up.

After 2009, there was an interval in the flow of refugees, as they took to the overland route through the Evros River, which delineates the border between Greece and Turkey in Thrace. Statistics available by the Greek police authorities point out that in 2009, 8.787 "illegal immigrants" were arrested trying to enter Greece through the land borders between Turkey and Greece (i.e. the Evros river area) and 27.685 at the sea borders between Turkey and Greece, whereas in 2010 only 6.204 immigrants attempted to enter the country via the sea route and 47.088 via the land route⁴. Around 2012, and following the erection of a fence on the Greek side of river Evros, and along the Greek-Turkish border, refugee and migrant flows gradually "returned" to the Aegean islands. According to statistics from the Greek police, 200 people were arrested in Lesvos in 2011, whereas in 2012 this number increased to 1.417. The most characteristic example was the arrival of 40 Afghans in November 2012, which mobilized the reflexes of the local society and local authorities in various ways, as described further on. In the beginning the numbers of refugees were small and the flow was not continual. But the flow gradually increased according to statistics available by the Greek police for Lesvos: in 2013, 3.793 "illegal immigrants" were arrested and in 2014⁵ the police arrested 12.187 people.

Moreover, two new elements differentiate the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of incomers. The first one has to do with the percentages of different ethnicities constituting the sample of the incomers. For example, in 2010, the majority of "illegal immigrants" arriving to Greece according to police records are identified as Albanians (50.175), Afghans (28.299), Pakistanis (8.830), Palestinians (7.561), Algerians (7.336), Somalis (6.525) and Iraqis (4.968). In 2012 Afghans (16.584) and Pakistanis (11.136) exceed the number of Albanians (10.602), and Syrians appear for the first time in remarkable numbers (7.927). In 2014 Syrians take the lead (32.590), and are followed by Afghans (12.901) and Pakistanis (3.621)⁶. A second crucial differentiation in concern with refugee populations is that before 2010, most of the people moving to Greece (and by extension to Europe), were men, travelling alone, without their families, and planning to secure a place for themselves in "Europe" - or even in the "humble" but still European "neighbourhood" of Greece - and then call their families to follow them legally, in terms of a reunification process.

Some Afghan families followed a slightly different strategy. Instead of adult men they would "send off" unaccompanied male youngsters (aged 15, 16, 17 or even younger sometimes) as "scouts" trying to secure a place for themselves in order to call the rest of the family to the European "heaven" afterwards. However, after 2012, women, children and families gradually appear in greater numbers among the refugees. This tendency

⁴http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&perform=view&id=3665&Itemid=429&lang=
[Accessed 09/05/2016].

⁵http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&perform=view&id=38019&Itemid=73&lang=
[Accessed 09/05/2016].

⁶http://www.astynomia.gr/index.php?option=ozo_content&lang=%27..%27&perform=view&id=55858&Itemid=1240&lang= [Accessed 09/05/2016].

possibly reflects urgent needs emerging in their countries of origin. For example, most of the Syrians had no choice: they knew that by leaving their families behind they were exposing their beloved ones to great and constant danger because of the fights raging all over the country, when - at the same time - they were probably convicting their children to be deprived of proper education or - at worse - to starve to death because of the lack of food in cities or neighbourhoods under siege. But we can also assume that the tendency to include families and children in the “refugees’ caravans” marks a deeper change of strategies adopted by incomers. We do not know if other ethnicities were inspired or even encouraged by the Syrian paradigm, or by the general “atmosphere” indicating a relaxation of the measures combating “illegal” immigration to Europe, which emerged as a prospect in early 2015. The fact is that more people from different ethnicities adopted this practice, increasing the number of incomers, and changing the qualitative composition of the refugee stream.

In any case, in the year 2015 there was an outburst of the refugee flow: boats and various types of vessels full of refugees began to arrive (mainly) to the Greek islands of the north-eastern Aegean all day long and on a daily basis. The police records testify that 499.495 Syrians, 213.267 Afghans, and 91.769 Iraqis entered the Greek territory in 2015. Many of the Syrians, a considerable number of Iraqis, and some Afghans, Somalis, etc, travelled as families, including men, women, children, or even older family members, like grandfathers and grandmothers. In Lesvos the arrivals were about 1.000 per day in May and June 2015; then the numbers increased even more. In October 2015 the arrivals of refugees exceeded 5.000 people per day. The local newspaper “Embros” in an article on the 1st of October 2015, refers to 186.270 “refugees and immigrants” passing from Lesvos during the past nine months of 2015, whereas in September, the arrivals were 73.179.⁷ The article also points out that this number was “almost triple the total population of the island”. Official police statistics show an even more pronounced image: 512.327 people passed from Lesvos in 2015 and 124.520 in two months in 2016, when the corresponding average of the first two months of 2015 was only 4.657.

As a result, there was a dramatic escalation of shortages in infrastructures and human resources. During this period the role of local volunteers, offering help, food and (occasionally) shelter to refugees, proved decisive, at least for the period from 2012 to July or August 2015, when a lot of Greek and international NGOs arrived in Lesvos and became actively involved and aiming to give relief to refugees.⁸

Among Lesvian volunteers the main role was played by the network named “Village of All Together” (as they themselves have translated their name in English). The “Village of All Together” was originally established in 2012 as a network and umbrella organization the members of which were a series of associations and clubs of Lesvos with different and even divergent aims. For example, the network included and allowed for the coexistence of agencies/bodies or associations linked to the Church the activities of which were often in divergence with partners/members who clearly had a more “politicized” and/or “radical” viewpoint about the Crisis “phenomenon”, its causes and the policies adopted by the Greek political authorities and the EU, and about the policy responses to the refugee crisis.⁹

⁷ Newspaper “Embros”, Thursday, 1st October 2015.

⁸ The exact number and the identification of the NGOs involved in the Lesvos refugee crisis is still questionable. But it can be assumed that from July - August 2015 until May 2016, more than 150 NGOs have been activated in Lesvos, including some very well known and powerful (politically and financially) organizations like IRC (International Refugee Committee) or “Caritas”, and also the Greek section of the “Doctors without Borders” and “Doctors of the World”. There were also some Muslim NGOs with most of their members coming from second or third generation refugees who were accepted and naturalized in Northern Europe. The UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) were of course diachronically present and active (long before the arrival of other Greek and international NGOs).

⁹ The network of the “Village of All Together” was originally established by the “Network Electron for exchanges and solidarity in Lesvos”, the “Social Dispensary and Pharmacy of Lesvos”, the movement “I won’t pay” (a title referring to unjustifiable taxes and fines introduced after the first Memorandum and

The main focus of the network “Village of All Together”, was originally to support and offer relief to the inhabitants of Lesvos (without excluding non-Greek people) who were or would be victimized by the Greek economic Crisis. Having this scope, the main ideological concept which motivated the actions of the network’s members was *solidarity*, a concept which was not restricted by any criteria or categorizations referring to race, age, gender, religious beliefs, or membership in specific social groupings or aggregations/bodies. As a result, the members of the “Village of All Together” were among the first citizens of Mytilene who tried to offer support to the 40 homeless Afghans who arrived in Mytilene in November 2012, and had settled in an open area next to the building which at the time accommodated the Municipality. Because of the upcoming winter, the Mayor allowed them to be temporarily housed at the former children's camp of PIKPA¹⁰ that was not functional at the time. Many volunteers from the “Village of All Together” followed in order to help by clearing up the area, and distributing clothes, blankets and food. This was the beginning of the well-known Refugee Facility of PIKPA, which to this day (i.e. May 2016) is still working as the only open and self-organized refugee hosting structure in Lesvos and perhaps throughout Europe.

The necessity of the PIKPA establishment emerged because the Greek state responded with considerable delay to the increasing flow of refugees. The detention center in Moria (outside a village of Lesvos and relatively close to the capital city of Mytilene), financed by European funds was established in 2013, while in 2015 under the refugee flow pressure the Municipality allocated a space originally organized as a “Traffic Park for Children” in an area known as "Kara -Tepe" (very close to Mytilene) for hosting refugees.

In this context PIKPA functioned mainly as a hosting structure for vulnerable categories of refugees who had applied for asylum, as for example disabled people, families who sought reunification, people suffering from injuries or illnesses. In general, the people hosted in PIKPA were selected through a cooperation process between local authorities and the members of the “Village of All Together” who ran the Facility. Despite the cooperation though, there have been incidents of dysfunctions. For example, in 2014, the increased refugee flows resulted in a temporary operation failure of the centre in Moria, so the “Village all Together” shouldered the responsibility to host some 600 refugees in PIKPA. Apart from that, there were sporadic interventions by the Municipality or the State authorities questioning the usefulness of the operation of PIKPA and proposing the abolition of the relevant structure. However, despite efforts to abolish it, PIKPA has been functioning to this day (i.e. May 2016).

austerity programme), the “Union of the Consumers”, the “Social Grocery” (run by the Archdiocese of Mytilene), the “Social Grocery” of Plomari (a provisional town of Lesvos), the “Greek Lesvos Rescue Team”, the association “Coexistence in the Aegean” which focused on the maintenance of peaceful relationships and cultural exchanges with the inhabitants of the western Turkish coast, the NGO “Agalia - Hug” (being activated in Kalloni, another provisional town of Lesvos), the “Environmental and Cultural Club ‘Oak’ of Skalohori” (a village of Lesvos), the “Club of Blood Donors”, the “Club of People Suffering from Cancer in Lesvos”, the “Thalassemia Club”, the “Association of Alzheimer's Sufferers” (of Lesvos), the “Association of People with Special Needs ‘Kipseli’ - Beehive”, the NGO “Iliatida” (Sunbeam), which focused some of its activities on helping Disabled People, some volunteers from the staff of the University of the Aegean, the organisation “Help” which focused its activities on youngsters’ and the support of children, the “Greek Scouts” (of Lesvos), the “Producers of Open Markets”, the “Medical Association”, the “Friends of the Archdiocese”, the association “Smile of the child”, the “Civilians’ Academy”, the “Psychologists of the Hospital” (of Mytilene, Lesvos), the “Company of the Archangels”, “Civilians of Parakela” (another village of Lesvos), “Civilians of Mytilene”, “Solidarity for Everyone”, organization “Welcome 2 Europe” and independent volunteers.

¹⁰PIKPA is the acronym of “Patriotiko Idrima Kenonikis Pronias kai Antilipsis”, which means “Patriotic Foundation for Social Welfare and Perception”, a characteristically grandiose title coming from the Greek post-civil war period. In general, PIKPA as a foundation focused its attention on children’s care and health. That’s why it had organized camps all over Greece to host children for their summer vacations. One of them was the camp of Mytilene.

In 2015 the heavily-packed refugee flow tested the endurance and the resilience of local authorities and volunteers, of the Lesvian community as a whole, and - of course - of refugees themselves. As the authorities had no concrete plan of reception, they were obliged to improvise according to the circumstances. Initially incomers, landing mainly in the northern part of the island of Lesbos, which is closer to the Turkish coast, were deprived of basic reception facilities, and information centers to inform them about the conditions that determined their arrival and their (potential) onward journey to other European countries, with developed economies, as for example Germany, France, Sweden, the UK, which were the ultimate goal for most of them. What is more, the authorities made no provisions for setting up a transportation system, thus obliging refugees to walk 40-50 kilometers in order to "surrender" to the authorities in Mytilene, and leading them to undergo innumerable hardships. The lack of (any type of) transport also caused major traffic problems both to the residents of Lesbos and tourists. The hardships of incomers however continued even after their arrival in Mytilene. At times they were gathered at the port in order to gain access to the certification center of Moria; sometimes they were expelled from the port area and were obliged to settle around the port, and sometimes, when recording procedures came to a stop due to the lack of sufficient staff, they pitched out their tents in the city parks.

Under these circumstances, the assistance of the volunteers of the "Village of All Together" and other organizations or associations, set up in this context, was crucial. Volunteers offered food, provided basic information about legal procedures regarding residence or asylum provisions and took care of vulnerable groups, single-handed until August 2015; and have not stopped doing so to this day, even after the massive "invasion" of various NGO's.

As a result, a different kind of discourse was developed, reflecting public reactions to refugees, and differing largely from official announcements by the authorities or mass media publications at the time. Using the public discourse of the "Village of All Together" and of other volunteer groups, organisations/associations, etc, portrayed in their announcements, uploads in the mass media, the social media, etc, as a key example, our goal is to contrast this discourse with publications of mass media in Lesbos, Greece and on an international level.

Theorizing contemporary media: the self-description of society in mass media and social media

N. Luhmann stated that the most important operation of social systems is undoubtedly their self-description. By this, we mean the (self)-identification of a social system as a unit and the description of its properties (Luhmann, 1990; Luhmann, 2008). It is exactly this operation that ensures their continuation into an ever-changing environment as discrete entities. According to some recent developments in sociological theory, the mass media take over the role of constructing descriptions of the society as a whole. But the recent proliferation of social media platforms through the internet seems to change this situation in unforeseen ways: it might be that case that society takes over its own self-description, not any more via a specialized sub-system (i.e. the mass media), but rather through the unsolicited participation of persons and social systems through the social media. If this is the case, then the theoretical apparatus of contemporary sociology can be expanded to new fields of socio-technical systems, that (as a communications medium) offer an unmediated field, upon which - maybe for the first time in the history of humanity - all kinds of self-descriptions can be constructed.

According to the systemic paradigm, every system is immersed into its environment (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Maturana & Varela, 1980). The environment is the irreplaceable condition for the systems' existence. According to Niklas Luhmann (1986) we could conceptualize social systems, as *living systems* - that is, as systems that

continuously reconstruct their constitutive parts. The phenomenon is called *autopoiesis*, a term coined by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (ibid) in an endeavour to rigorously define the characteristics of living systems. They came up with the conclusion that a system can be considered as living, if and only if, that system continuously recreates itself; they called this kind of system an "autopoietic system".

By definition, "*An autopoietic machine is a machine organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components that produces the components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (the components) exist, by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network*"¹¹ (Maturana & Varela, 1980: 72). Autopoietic machines are autonomous and "subordinate all changes to the maintenance of their own organization" (ibid, p. 80), they have individuality, they always function as unities *and their autopoietic network is strictly internal and circular*: the living machine continuously regenerates itself, and therefore autopoiesis triggers autopoiesis in a circular process.

So living systems do not remain unchangeable; on the contrary, it is exactly change - a *continuous* process of becoming - that guarantees the continuation of the living system as such. Therefore, *autopoiesis is a continuous process of becoming that conserves being (identity)*. We need to emphasize here, *that in no way autopoiesis is governed by the living system's environment*: autopoiesis remains an autonomous function or else there is no autopoiesis and the living system disintegrates. Putting it another way, we can say that the living system changes in a circular homeostatic procedure, which *is triggered but not specified by its environment*.

Niklas Luhmann paved the way to a new theoretical apparatus that brings the notion of autopoiesis into sociology, placing the people (the psychic systems) in the environment of social systems. Social systems according to Luhmann *are constituted from communications* (i.e. communicative actions), manifested by communications, and owe their coherence and continuation to the production of meaning. That is, psychic systems (persons) do not communicate to each other directly (as if their nervous systems were interacting directly), but through the social system; and doing so they reproduce it. Every communicative action is inherently social and communication is a *sine qua non* for society: there cannot be any communication outside the social system (Luhmann, 1986; 1995).

Therefore, were we to rewrite the original definition of autopoiesis in a Luhmannian way, it would read like this: *An autopoietic social system is a system organized (defined as a unity) as a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of communicative actions that produces the communicative actions which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the system) as a concrete unity in the space in which they (communicative actions) are manifested by specifying the conceptual domain of its realization as such a network*.

In order to realize the incorporation of the autopoietic theory into sociology, one has to conceive the communicative action as a meaningful *event*, and examine it as such. For Luhmann, meaning is an evolutionary achievement due to the interaction between psychic (personal) and social systems: "*Psychic and social systems have evolved together. At any time, the one kind of system is the necessary environment of the other. This necessity is grounded on the evolution that makes these kinds of systems possible. Persons cannot emerge and continue to exist without social systems, nor can social systems without persons. This co-evolution has led to a common achievement, employed by psychic as well as social systems. Both kinds of systems are ordered according to it,*

¹¹ Emphasis placed by the authors.

and for both it is binding as the indispensable, undeniable form of their complexity and self-reference. We call this evolutionary achievement 'meaning'." (Luhmann, 1995: 59).

Meaning and media

So meaning offers the ground upon which both social and psychic systems emerge. This assumption however, does not imply "intersubjectivity" except in a very limited way; on the contrary, every system retains its autonomy by means of a basic, ever present negation: "I am not you". So, the environment is necessary for the system, in order for it (the system) to define which its next ontogenesis will be; the environment must remain always "the other" and moreover it has to *be* "other" – otherwise the system cannot define itself. This way, the autopoietic system reconstructs itself and redefines its boundaries in an endless cycle that concurrently also reconstructs its environment: as the self-referential system changes in order to remain the same (i.e. to retain its coherence and identity) the other self-referential systems in its environment employ the same autopoietic process. This situation is not exceptional for systems of that kind: they continuously exchange their being for a perceptual process of becoming. And, when it comes to social systems, the whole autopoietic process is triggered solely by communication and manifested only by communication.

That is, every self-referential system operates constantly on the basis of the self-descriptions it constructs; it describes itself in correlation to its environment, in an endless loop that continuously reconstructs it as the outcome of a self-reference that is triggered by hetero-reference. Put in a different manner, the social system "finds its way" through time due to its relations to its environment –as long as it continues to exist.

In the modern society theorized by Niklas Luhmann as a whole consisting of functionally differentiated systems, a special place is reserved for the *mass media*. The mass media is a specialized system which accomplishes the description of the society as a whole. "*Whatever we know about our society or indeed about the world in which we live we know through the mass media*" (Luhmann, 2007:1). When the other social systems need information about the case, they turn to the mass media as the privileged observer that can return a more or less accurate "report" of the descriptions the society itself should adopt for itself. For instance, "there are financial problems", or "criminality is reaching new heights", or even "science offers new hopes" etc. From a theoretical point of view, it is irrelevant if those descriptions are "correct" or not. As far as the mass media insists that the case is such and such, a "truth" is constructed and finds its way into the self-description of every social subsystem. Those descriptions are the most important operation living systems perform. In fact, everything said is a description. When - for instance - one talks about oneself, he/she operates as an observer of himself/herself in relation to a presupposed environment; systems, either psychic or social, circularly construct descriptions of themselves; even when they describe their environment, in fact they describe their own conception of their environment. But we need to keep in mind, that, although social systems are autonomous, they are at the same time interdependent. That is, the operation of the construction of descriptions takes into account the systems' environment as an ever-changing pool of events. Although the events cannot determine their meaning for each observing system, they are still the only ground upon which each observing (i.e. living) system can reconstruct its unique identity. Therefore, although in contemporary society everyone understands that the mass media cannot be fully trusted (Luhmann, 2007:1), still, one cannot underestimate their importance with respect to the operation of social self-description.

Until the proliferation of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) networks, communication was bound by spatial and economic characteristics. It was not realistic to initiate and maintain a discussion (i.e. an exchange of descriptions) in real time, engaging numerous participants around the globe. Would an earthquake hit for

instance Venezuela, the people in Russia would “hear the news” with the intermediation of the mass media; in fact, through a long chain of mass media starting from Caracas and ending up at Moscow. This means that “the news” would have been filtered through the various mass media services and the international news agencies until they reached the final “consumer”. It also means that all those nodes of the information network would have applied their own “coding” (i.e. their evaluation processes about what is “news” and what is not), and that that operation would be reflected (albeit implicitly, “hidden” so to speak) into the final “news report”.

The Internet has changed this situation drastically. Various platforms and services, such as YouTube.com, Facebook.com, Twitter, and the various versions of blogging platforms (e.g. blogspot.com, wordpress.com etc.), opened up wide a horizon of possibilities. Gradually, citizens started to realize the power of self-publishing their own views which cover virtually every aspect of human life. That is, descriptions constructed by independent citizens or social systems, disengaged from the nexus of the mass media and pushed their way through the ICT networks to society. Of course, the mass media followed the same course, i.e. they enforced their presence on the Internet, albeit as a supplement of their typical day to day operations. But within the networked society (Castells, 1996), the penetration of the mass media is not as deep as through - say - television. Furthermore, certain journalists seem to try to surpass the rules set forth by mass media enterprises and use blogging or tweeting as a means of contacting the citizens directly, a kind of “unsolicited reports”.

The concept of “solidarity” as a key meaning of the description of Lesvian society

Today the picture of Lesvos as the “island of solidarity” seems indisputable, as it has been projected repeatedly by the mass media all over the world. The confirmation of the award of this honorary “distinction” endorsed formally by the joint visit of the Pope and the Patriarch in Lesvos, accompanied by the Archbishop of Athens and the Greek Prime Minister, on the 16th of April 2016. Before and after these honorary visitors, a lot of other “distinctive” personalities of the worldwide star system like the famous actress Angelina Jolie or the Queen of Jordan Rania, preceded or followed, or will probably follow in the future. But the question still remains: how was this “label” for Lesvos constructed, through which procedures up to which point does it represent a “self-description” of the Lesvian society? To answer these questions, we approach the process of the construction of the key meaning of “solidarity” through comparative readings of the local Press (represented mainly by the newspaper “Embros”, which has the largest circulation in Lesvos), of some of the uploads or announcements of local volunteers of the “Village of All Together”, or some other associations of volunteers who (more or less) acted in cooperation with the “Village of All Together” in the context of the refugee flow. Some examples follow:

An anonymous volunteer involved in the task of the relief of refugees describes in an E-mail the sufferings of the refugees *after* their arrival in Lesvos: “*Last Wednesday (03/06/2015) we started early in the morning (at 7.00 am) from Mytilene. Approaching Mantamados (northeast of Lesvos), about 7:30 - 8:00 a.m., we started to see the first refugee/immigrant groups ascending from Skala Sikamias where they had landed, walking towards Mytilene, where they had to surrender to the police (or perhaps to the port-police - I don't know) to be transferred to the Moria registration center and obtain a temporary residence permit in Greece, in order to continue their journey to Athens. The picture is beyond any imagination: women - many of which were accompanied by small children - climbing the hills of the area, older people trembling under the burning sun, minors and youngsters slumped on the road exhausted, while everyone was begging to be arrested immediately and be transferred to the Moria registration center... (But) the lack*

of coordination of state and local authorities obliges them to walk 50 kilometers to be typically arrested in the port of Mytilene”.

The local press was not particularly concerned with the aspect of refugees' sufferings, but the local television channel and independent cameramen recorded several scenes; some were presented via local television reports or were made available and enriching the news on nationwide channels. Broadly speaking the relevant reports focused on the risks created for passing drivers and were interspersed with “spectacular” images, showing refugees carrying small children by dragging them inside trash bins. But an intervention of the “Village of All Together” sent a different message. On Sunday 14/06/2015, the volunteers organized a “solidarity caravan” with the participation of more than 100 cars and multiple volunteers. The “solidarity caravan” collected refugees walking from Molyvos and Skala Sykamnias and transported them to the reception center of Kara-Tepe. The police adopted a “neutral” attitude, and watched the motorcade making no arrests, especially since G. Zerdelis, an (then) MP of SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left), which had meanwhile risen to power, participated in the final stage of the motorcade. The relevant law changed immediately afterwards, allowing the transfer of refugees by volunteers, under the condition that their actions would be reported to the police. This does not mean that the police withdrew from repressive actions: the following weekend (4-5 July 2015) the police and the port-police arrested two volunteers who transported refugees to state and local hosting structures. These volunteers were acquitted on all charges. In this case the newspaper “Embros” (07/07/2015) clearly expressed its disapproval of the police practices. The relevant article presented a main title declaring that “Volunteers are persecuted for humanitarian actions...”, but the subtitle reiterated the problems arising from the amassment of thousands of people in Kara-Tepe; an issue that was the preferable topic of some of the articles published in the newspaper the days that followed.

To begin with we present reportage in “Embros” on the 3rd July 2015. Both the main title “The Guadanamo of Kara-Tepe”, and the subtitle referring to “a boiling cauldron due to the residence of thousands of immigrants”, prefigure the content. At the beginning the journalist underlines the fact that “the number of residents living there is unknown”, and goes on with a description of the “appalling sanitary conditions, (despite) the best efforts of the workers of the local Municipality”. Then he describes scenes of people lying on the main road which implied that their “safety, but also the safety of bystanders” is threatened, and ends up with a reference to the conflicts between different ethnicities with “dozens” wounded on daily basis. What is missing from this reportage is any reference to the actions of the volunteers of the “Village of All Together” and other associations or organizations of volunteers which distributed food and clothes and tried to pacify spirits and address the most urgent cases who had health problems by transporting patients to the local hospital. Similar reports continued until the end of July 2015, strengthening a climate of insecurity and uncertainty among local inhabitants of Lesbos, with regard to the refugee flow. In August 2015 these reports started to decrease but they soon “returned” with a feature story on the 5th of September, which denounces the “unforeseen amateurism of incompetent and ‘irresponsible’ authorities who emptied the harbour and filled the city”, referring to a period when the recording of refugees had stopped due to the lack of sufficient staff, the result being that refugees were pitching up their tents in the city parks. This kind of critique continued until the end of September.

All this period the local inhabitants of Lesbos reacted with ambivalent feelings to the rumble of communicative events and their personal unprecedented experiences were activated by the refugee flow. Some offered everything they could to refugees, many abstained from any action in a positive or negative way, a minority was opposed to the refugee flow, asking for more repressive measures to control the flow and for specific restrictions regarding the accommodation of refugees, whereas some entrepreneurs, especially those operating in the sectors of catering and housing benefited financially from the situation. This ambivalent treatment of refugee flows and the (supposed)

appropriate way of dealing with it is also reflected in the attitude of Municipal authorities, which periodically revived the demand for the abolition of the independent PIKPA structure hosting refugees, from the summer of 2015 until now (May of 2016). In the interim period there were (more or less) unsuccessful attempts by members of the extreme right-wing party of "Golden Dawn" to hold rallies of fans protesting against the "refugee problem", as well as a growing criticism about the "deregulated" action of various NGOs which were activated on the island (mainly) from August 2015.

A characteristic example is a short reference of "Embros" on the 5th of December 2015, describing a brawl involving a photojournalist and members of the NGO "Lifeguard Hellas". According to the story, the photojournalist tried to take photos of some women changing their wet clothes immediately after their arrival in Lesbos and some of the members of this NGO intervened to stop him.

Another aspect of the conflicting views about the refugee flow can also be spotted in the (fictitious, as undoubtedly proved today) reports about refugees desecrating Christian temples, which were part of the stories that monopolized the media pages during that period. Various "misunderstandings" or deliberate disinformation efforts were also recorded at the time. For example, on the 10th of June 2015, the organization "Welcome 2 Europe" (Welcome to Europe or W2Eu) was obliged to post an announcement to denounce "untrue information" published in the local news site "Lesvosnews.gr". As the W2Eu point out, they had issued some booklets in different languages informing incoming refugees about their legal status and their rights, which were distributed by members of W2Eu at various arrival points or concentration areas for refugees. This action was presented in an article in "Lesvosnews.gr" as "an action of Turkish traffickers". W2Eu point out in their announcement that *"...the article shows once again how reality is distorted arbitrarily. Seen benevolently one could say that we are dealing with a highly unprofessional author. But in reality it is a right-wing - if not a fascist - attempt by local media to criminalize solidarity and the right to asylum...through the booklet refugees and immigrants receive some basic information about their situation (e.g. they are informed on the documents received on the reservation concerning family reunification procedures, or about simple things like the ship ticket cost for someone travelling to Athens)..."*

According to these (and other) reports, local inhabitants and local volunteers (and members of Greek and International NGOs having flocked to Lesbos after the end of July 2015), seem to follow a rather distinct path of action. For example, an internal report of the "Village of All Together" on 29/08/2015 does not refer to any of the problems arising from the presence of the refugees in the city of Mytilene, but to an entirely different story, relevant to the miraculous salvation of a woman who was initially considered lost, but managed to survive from a boat-wreck and to unify herself with her family. It starts like this: *"9/8 Yesterday morning we heard that there is an ongoing rescue operation in New Kydonies (an area in north-eastern Lesbos). A woman was missing. For us this news is usually nightmarish news, concerning tragic death that animates all shipwrecks traumatic memories we have experienced. Despite difficult weather conditions two boats have arrived in Lesbos. Trafficking networks and the need of those people to flee were not stopped by the waves. In the boat there was a little girl 5 years old. Her mother was among the people missing. The child was taken to PIKPA, where 150 people were already being hosted. All beds were full with families, but as soon as they heard the incident they took care to settle the child and her uncle in their beds. The child knew that her mother was missing. She had heard her shouting her name and then she was not heard again. The shocked survivors talked about their boat being capsized just off the Gulf of Ayvalık. Late in the afternoon we received the first piece of unconfirmed information. A woman was walking alone in Xambelia region (in the north-eastern part of Lesbos) and she was transferred to the hospital Mytilene. She told us that a force pushed her to wrestle with the waves for 18 hours, as she didn't know how to swim and she was afraid of the sea. When she finally reached the shore she saw an orange life jacket like the one she had put*

on her child and started crying. But she found the courage to walk towards some houses she had spotted. When she met her daughter again she felt ineffable joy.”

This divergence of interests, objectives, particular strategies and tactics defining differences among the “Village of All Together”, foreign and local volunteers, municipal and state authorities and the local society, seems to have deteriorated, at least temporarily, under the burden of the increased refugee flow after September 2015. Different ideological and practical approaches of the “refugee problem” seem to recede in favour a common response strategy towards the refugee flow. A key communicative act which symbolizes this “melting pot” was definitely the photo shot by L. Partsalis in the beginning of October 2015, depicting three grannies in the village Skala Sykamnias, who take care of the baby of a refugee woman who had just landed on the coast. From that point onwards the concept of Lesbos as the “island of solidarity” was ideologically enhanced by the majority of the local population and local authorities, and also by a worldwide audience, and was substantiated and translated into a series of actions for refugees decisively motivated both by the municipality authorities, and by a significant part of the local population. It is not by accident for example that the first photos of local families hosting refugees or refugee families in their homes were introduced in the social media (Fb or other) on this occasion. This does not mean that diversities of the past were eliminated; on the contrary, they continued to exist and they were defined - and are still defined - as certain options adopted with regard to the “refugee problem” and in accordance with diverse choices challenging the local society nexus. But the main focus seems indisputable from now on: Lesbos has acquired the status of the “island of solidarity” and it seems that local people, authorities and volunteers are willing to keep on and to respond to this “label” from now on.

Epilogue: An accomplished society lacking in totality?

No matter how deeply we managed to approach the theoretic conjunction between the Luhmannian “intersubjectivity” and “objectivity” (e.g. whether the existence of the social “environment” is independent of our view about the world as a whole, etc.), the new form of society as a series of communicational actions has become one of the most significant phenomena in social History.

However, if we examine Modern History of the past two centuries and secure its continuity, in which position is this new type of “organized society” to be placed? The Hegelian Greek philosopher Kostas Papaioannou offers a definition of the “organized society” and its historic destiny to collapse due to the uprising of the masses. According to this claim, the historical presence of “organization” for society is always a prerevolutionary state, whereas society “recognizes” itself as the final symbol of timeless stability (Papaioannou, 2003: 41, 170). Obviously, the whole discussion about the contemporary “self-description” of society - perhaps a new kind of worldview - matches with the second part of Papaioannou’s definition. In other words, trying to argue theoretically about the power of new media as the direct way to new forms of “organization”, sociologists do nothing more than defending the non-temporary character of the “communicative” phenomenon from the threats of History. To put it in the reverse way, if the outbreak of communication in social media is just a short, temporary condition, then the rules one tries to extract from that are useless. Yet, if we finally agreed with the ultimate part of Papaioannou’s definition, the refugee matter as a crisis in the context of global capitalism obliges us to take the “prerevolutionary” character of the current social context into account.

Through the previous analysis, we approach the real facts that formed the Lesbians’ “self-description” as inhabitants of the island of “solidarity”, not only via the “liberal” character of social media but also via the “official” descriptions of global state mechanisms. “Solidarity” once again has become “fashionable”, perhaps for the first time

to this extent after the Second World War. The Greek society, suffering for long due to the austerity commands of the European Union - unsuccessfully rejected by the referendum of June 2015 - gained the ethical justification, that is prior to its "self-description", owing to the "solidarity" it showed; the whole planet accepted this part of the Greek identity. From this point of view, the fundamental element of "self-description" for society - i.e. the recognition from others - has been accomplished. Yet, although Greek solidarity serves as an example of "the brotherhood of mankind", war still remains in our neighborhood and refugees insist on knocking on our doors. Then the question is transformed philosophically: why is our solidarity inadequate, when attempting to influence the global *status quo* or change the worldview of mankind? Perhaps it is too soon to conclude whether something of the kind will be possible in the near future, but recent developments regarding the ongoing crisis are not promising: the war has not ended and Greece has once again been forced to go into deeper austerity. It seems that the accomplishing of the Greek society (especially in Lesbos) on the basis of solidarity is something lacking from wider areas (i.e. geographical, ethnic, and social).

As we claimed at the beginning of the paper, the concept of solidarity has inherited the values of a great Revolution; for some Historians, modern times start from the French Revolution. We also referred to the "prerevolutionary" nature of any "organized society", especially when it faces an economic crisis, as defined by classic Marxism. The problem is that, according to the postmodern condition,¹² "totality" - in this case, the great transformation of society - has been broken into several "pieces" (for example, ecology, the gender issue, etc.). We argue that we do not have enough facts yet, in order to decide whether "solidarity" has become an aspect of the situationists' "spectacle", namely whether real experience of "the brotherhood of mankind" has come to be another "representation" through the ideological influence of the mass media. After all, the fight between mass and social media is still going on. On the other hand, connection between "solidarity" and "totality" has been lost in postmodern times, since in the battle of ideas the "whole" is comprehended as an aggregation of the part; the transformation of society is confronted as an "ethical" deepening of the rights, not as a system which must be replaced. If society can be considered "accomplished" with the aid of the "solidarity" praxis that became a major "self-description", perhaps a "self-representation" too, then what happens with the "myth" of transforming the economic relations underneath?

When Papaioannou introduces his ideas about "organized society" as an intermediate step before the overthrow of the social system, he probably has in mind the perspectives of George Sorel's argument about the "myth of the mass". According to the latter, the idea of society change matures at first in the consciousness as a "myth", a positive utopia which waits for History to allow its realization (Portis 1980). We now know that 21st century capitalism has turned the "myth" into a "virtual reality": the deeper social media spread across society - at least up to now - the harder it becomes for social resistance to grow.

However, we are still away from "totality", and from being conscious of the new world to be. "Solidarity" in Lesbos proved to be a contemporary, and adequate answer against social "Darwinism" that neoliberalism is trying to enforce on the peoples. The concept of "solidarity", as a "self-description" of society, managed to gain the position of a worldview; however, it is still threatened of being disintegrated under the influence of the "spectacle" which is a powerful weapon of the economic forces governing the world. Let us hope that social media will not become a part of this ideological mechanism. But even if it does however, argumentation will still be open to research and deeper analysis.

¹² On the "other-directed" type of human being in "modern" society, see also: Riesman, 2001: 24-30.

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