



Reinventing traditions: Socially produced goods in Eastern Crete during economic crisis



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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the way the newly issued framework for social economy creates the preconditions of social cooperation in the ethnographic context of Sitia region in eastern Crete. It is argued that local agents based on their empirical knowledge for making ends meet create or enter local social networks treating them as paths of provisioning and as generators of tangible outcomes in the form of economic capital. These networks are mediated by a set of material transactions which in their turn are sustained and reproduced by the logic of generalized reciprocity as a form of exchange. We argue that local agents by taking advantage of the social economy framework, by producing goods and by using local social relations form a whole which is formed and reformed when they transact with each other in commodity production aiming at making their lives possible. The data is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the region of eastern Crete.

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1. Introduction

The present paper deals with the way products, goods and services are “re-invented” in the context of the so-called social economy in the Sitia region of Eastern Crete. This area is one of the most remote and isolated places of the island in geographic terms with a strong rural character. During the last decade, especially, the area has undergone a significant economic decline. This is mainly due to the lack of its agriculture’s infrastructural modernization, high transfer costs and a passive past reliance on E.U. subsidies. As agricultural policy tends to endorse a less protective and more market appealing orientation currently, there is a new generation of farmers locally who try to improve their social reproduction by developing novel entrepreneurial ideas. Such innovation involves agricultural initiatives producing goods in a “traditional” way by investing in notions such as purity, originality and locality through the emergence of family or friendship based small or middle-scale social enterprises and cooperatives. Relying on the preliminary findings of ethnographic research in process, we argue that these entities came into being more out of structural necessity than out of a historically defined ethos of social cooperation and innovation.

This is due partly to E.U. decision-making which promotes social economic policies encouraging agents to take action individually. From this perspective, we focus, in ethnographic terms, on the ways local agents perceive the situation previously outlined. We also focus on how they try to make the most out of a social cooperation framework and, based on that, on how they earn their living through bridging the needs of actual self-interest and pre-existing patterns of commodity production. So far, we have managed to enter the field by gaining the trust of interlocutors of local origin who, having returned back to the area, attempt to produce and promote foods by daring to focus on quality, innovation and cooperation.

This research takes place against the background of the Greek economic crisis, which broke out in 2010, and which set the structural conditions for the emergence in the public discourse of the notion of cooperation as a way to alleviate the negative consequences of unfettered market forces. Hence, in a similar manner to the rest of the world, there is an ongoing discussion on social innovation with greater emphasis on social cooperative enterprises. This “promising” alternative to mainstream entrepreneurship, by empowering and facilitating social participation, suggests a seemingly viable solution towards sustainable growth involving all other-than-economic means which, however, result in material benefits (Defourny, 2001; Drayton, 2008).

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We present the elementary aspects of the Greek version of the so-called third sector and the character of the agricultural sector in that particular ethnographic setting. We argue that agents undertake risks and develop an economic rationality oriented to making ends meet relying on their social networks. These are, mediated by the newly issued legal framework of social economy which facilitates cooperation, collective decision making and social innovation. These agents are characterized by trustworthiness and entrepreneurial intent, that is non-material qualities which create stronger ties among social partners which in turn became essential for effective, materially directed transactions. Thus, cooperation as such, in the process of production, distribution and consumption seems to be a valuable resource which, in due course, is transformed into tangible outcomes. Moreover, we show that agents, products and social relations form a kind of Maussian total fact which is renewed in different forms, especially when agents enter transaction spheres where commodities and specific social properties are exchanged in order for a living to be earned.

2. A social economy point of view

In the literature, the spectrum of social economy is very wide - its boundaries range from traditional non-profit at one end to traditional for-profit on the other. However, these boundaries are uncertain and the level of dedication within them to social impact varies greatly (Alter, 2008; Nicholls, 2008; Seanor et al., 2013). Those variations are dependent upon the local and national perspectives that affect the environment within which social co-operatives emerge. The differences in social, economic, political and cultural backgrounds shape the diverse social co-operative traditions (Ziegler, 2009). For instance, in Europe, the various forms of social economy reflect the European tradition of collectivism that involves employees, customers and stakeholders in business activity to ensure an accountable, transparent and innovative management (Defourny and Nyssens, 2010). According to the European Commission definition, social economy involves those organisations whose primary goal is to achieve social impact rather than generate profit for owners. Therefore, these social economy orientated organisations reinvest profits generated through commercial activity in order to achieve their societal or social objectives (Hazenberg et al., 2016).

Similarly, in Greece, the shape of the social economy sector embodies the peculiarities of the country's social and economic character. Due to recession and the austerity measures undertaken by the Greek government in the last six years, the unemployment rate has increased significantly, averaging at 24% in 2015 and reaching an historical high of 28% in 2013. Those effects have been reported to be harsher on people living in urban areas, who asked for some action to be taken (Geormas, 2013). As a result, skilled but unemployed workers had to decide whether they would look for job opportunities abroad or whether they would attempt to readjust the available resources they had and reinvent "forgotten" ways of social being. The option and trend of not only relocating in rural areas but also going 'back-to-the-land' has been reported in international media and has been confirmed by relevant research (Gkartziou, 2013). The motive for the young city dwellers is the lower cost of living, as the majority of them own a house in the province, and there is the opportunity to work in agriculture and the availability of extended family networks is present. As Damianakos (2002) stated, relocation under those circumstances is not difficult in the Greek environment, since the urban and rural identities there were never truly separated.

International and European experience has proven that social economy models could provide an ideal basis for the necessary evolution of social relations and the emergence of innovative

institutions (Kentikelenis et al., 2011; Touraine, 2011). In formal terms, the social economy sector was established in 2011 and allowed forms of social economy to emerge in a new legal pattern. According to the legislation, Social Cooperative Enterprises (SCE) represent the sum of the economic, entrepreneurial, productive and social activities undertaken by the juridical entities or associations whose statutory aim is the pursuance of collective benefit and the servicing of general social interests (Hellenic Parliament, 2016). To be more specific, the definition provided by the parliamentary act, establishes this new entrepreneurial form as "a civil co-operative with a social cause, whose members can be either individuals or juridical entities. Its members participate with one vote regardless of the cooperative shares they possess. According to the purpose they serve, SCEs are categorised as SCEs for the social integration of vulnerable groups, for Social Care focusing on the provision of products and services for specific social groups, and there are SCEs for collective and production purposes serving unmet social needs and empowering local communities.

In this light, the Greek social economy sector includes social enterprises and organisations of various legal forms like co-operatives, associations, funds, civil non-profit companies, foundations and various informal entities, while it introduces the legal form of social cooperative enterprises (Nasioulas, 2012; Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare, 2013).

The recent emergence of social cooperative enterprises has further attracted the interest of researchers due to the fragmented manner in which they develop in Greece. State funding dependence and political affiliations that develop to fit in with the narrow interests of various pressure groups seem to be endemic in the way social economy organisations come to emerge (Rakintzis, 2014). Social Cooperatives are usually penetrated by attitudes and structures transmitted from civil society where transparency and accountability were absent. Consequently, agents lost their trust, not only in cooperatives but also in the governments that failed to safeguard the balance between society and market power and the necessary transparency in economic transactions (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2002; Lyberaki and Tsakalotos, 2002). Yet, despite the frustration, the economic crisis, the weakening of social bonds and the difficulties of the welfare state, spontaneous grassroots groupings emerge to seek solutions and create change in their communities. People come together to form small groups based on their social and family relationships, attempting to address unmet social need through economic activities which necessitate risk taking (Bornstein and Davis, 2010; Bourikos and Sotiropoulos, 2014).

This phenomenon has been attributed to the society's defensive reaction to the unrestrained power of markets that will be looking for ways to protect itself (Polanyi, 2001) and the society's resistance to the power of the state (Murray et al., 2010). This can be viewed as an expression of independence and detachment from formal structures and the negative aspects of mainstream economy (Bourikos and Sotiropoulos, 2014). As a matter of fact, in the context of spontaneous bottom-up initiatives, people started to form social co-operatives and with their kin or friends contribute to local development. The partners forming the new social co-operatives share similar characteristics. They are people dissatisfied with the current social, economic and political system and try to avoid any relation to the old-fashioned and corrupted co-operatives. They are usually more open to new ideas, new business models and innovations through their education and experience, and they believe in collaboration as a way to break with the past, attempting to establish a kind of a new social contract of trust and solidarity (Light, 2008).

Due to the low trust in formal institutions and the lack of an ethos of collaboration in Greek society, the development of social

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