

Article

The social aftermath of economic disaster: Karl Polanyi, countermovements in action, and the Greek crisis

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Abstract

The economic crisis in Greece resulted in high unemployment and the dismantlement of social protection policies. How does society respond to the collapse of both welfare-state and market mechanisms? I examine these issues through the study of one working class community in Athens over 2012–13. Since the onset of the crisis, my informants experienced a simultaneous drop in living standards, loss of social status, and debasement of their symbolic construction of reality. To respond to these pressures, they relied on a combination of material survival strategies, the reconfiguration of social resources, and the reconstruction of cultural imaginaries. To explain these findings, the article draws on Karl Polanyi's analysis of countermovements to marketization and commodification. I argue in favour of augmenting the definition of countermovements to capture local-level responses, emphasising cultural aspects of social protection, and tracing the micro-foundations of countermovements that are nonetheless shaped by the macro-institutional context shaping action. This reading of Polanyi's work seeks to integrate many moving—and potentially contradictory—parts into a holistic analysis of societal responses to rapid and radical socioeconomic change.

Key words: Economic crises; Social change, Karl Polanyi, Unemployment, Welfare state, Greece

JEL classification: Z1 Economic Sociology; Z13 Economic Sociology—Social and Economic Stratification; I3 Welfare, Well-Being, and Poverty

1. Introduction

On April 23, 2010, George Papandreou, then Greek prime minister and president of the international association of socialist parties, delivered the defining speech of his premiership. In front of the calm sea and scenic port of a remote island, he announced that—following months of economic turmoil—Greece would receive access to unprecedented international

financial assistance in exchange for far-ranging policy reforms: ‘We have before us . . . a new Odyssey for Greeks. But, by now, we know the way to Ithaca and we have charted the waters With a new collective conscience and common effort we will reach the destination safer, more confident, more just, more proud’ (Papandreou, 2010). In hindsight, such optimism appears unfounded. The economic crisis in Greece deepened rapidly, surpassing the US contraction during the Great Depression (IMF, 2017, p. 5). A social crisis ensued: unemployment rose from 7.7 to 27.3% between 2008 and 2013 (IMF, 2014), and—following exhaustive austerity and ‘structural reforms’—the welfare state became patently unable to cater to the needs of those who turned to it for support (Matsaganis, 2012; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2013; 2014a; Kentikelenis *et al.*, 2014; Kentikelenis, 2015; 2017).

The present study investigates the social aftermath of this economic disaster. What societal responses emerged to defend people’s livelihoods? Or, in Karl Polanyi’s (2001, p. 80) terms, can we observe a ‘countermovement’ to protect society ‘against the perils inherent in a self-regulating market system’? And, if so, how does it manifest? Polanyi’s enduring analysis of countermovements provides a powerful framework that has spurred voluminous social scientific literature (see Burawoy, 2003; Munck, 2006; Hann and Hart, 2009; Dale, 2010; Block and Somers, 2014). However, notwithstanding its heuristic merits, scholars have pointed out definitional ambiguities and a latent functionalism (Offe, 1998; Munck, 2006; Dale, 2010; 2012; Ergen, 2016). To overcome these limitations, I revisit the analytical foundations of the countermovement framework, and propose a three-point clarification consistent with Polanyi’s original account: augmenting the definition of countermovements to capture local-level responses, emphasizing cultural aspects of social protection, and tracing the micro-foundations of countermovements that are nonetheless shaped by the macro-institutional context shaping action. Furthermore, I advance a holistic analytical approach for examining the emergence of countermovements that integrates key strands of social action in a single, encompassing sociological narrative (see Block and Somers, 2014, pp. 58–72).

In tracing how countermovements emerge and develop, this study elaborates on the consequences of a two-pronged transformation in several high-income countries—particularly in the so-called European periphery—since the onset of the global financial crisis: mass unemployment matched by radical welfare state retrenchment (Lyberaki and Tinios, 2014; Matsaganis and Leventi, 2014b; Petmesidou and Guillén, 2014; Thompson *et al.*, 2017). The crisis-induced policy reforms and their social aftermath are not mere facets of the liberalization of countries’ political economies (which predates the crisis), but reflect the collapse of both welfare-state and market mechanisms.

In this study, Greece serves as a ‘strategic research site’ (Merton, 1987), offering a unique vantage point for the empirical study of countermovements to marketization and commodification. Since the onset of its crisis, the country’s three pillars of welfare provision (Esping-Andersen, 1990; 1999) became rapidly transformed: By being defunded, the welfare state failed to meet rising demand for its services. Due to severe economic hardship, market-provided social services became unaffordable for large parts of the population. Finally, the family became constrained in its capacity to cope with privation, as households with no income earners became more prevalent. To examine the aftermath of these changes, I rely on the ‘first-person study of concrete situations’ (Wacquant, 2008, p. 9) I encountered during fieldwork in a working-class community in Athens. My informants were people who prior to the crisis were able to secure a livelihood relying on a mix of market- and welfare state-provided resources, and who—after its onset—became excluded from both the labour market and welfare state services.

The main findings of this enquiry can be summarized as follows. As a response to the crisis, a range of material, social and symbolic responses emerged. First, people turned to the family and charities to cover basic survival needs—food, shelter and health services. These survival strategies helped them escape abject poverty and homelessness, and served as background conditions motivating and underpinning collective responses to unmediated exposure to the free market. Second, the social landscape was reconfigured to counter the disintegration of the community, and dynamic attempts at social mobilization emerged. These attempts remained grounded in the local level, but were influenced by the institutional environment. Finally, as people's skills were no longer validated by the market, they turned to the construction of a new socio-spatial imaginary to regain a sense of worth and belonging.

2. Karl Polanyi and the sociology of countermovements

Faced with the inability to find employment and ineligibility to access state-provided welfare services, how do people respond in order to protect their livelihoods? To answer this question, Karl Polanyi's classic, *The Great Transformation* (2001), provides an enduring analytical entry-point. For Polanyi, labour ('the human beings themselves of which society consists') is a fictitious commodity whose livelihood cannot be fully dependent on the market mechanism without the inevitable result being the 'demolition of society' (Polanyi, 2001, p. 76).¹ Faced with peril, society becomes 'activated' (Burawoy, 2003): countermovements emerge to combat the degradation of pure commodity status (i.e., the 'commodification' of labour) by introducing social protection measures and defending the 'right to live' (Polanyi, 2001, pp. 82–85).

To support this argument, Polanyi examined the socio-economic history of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, concluding that 'while on the one hand markets spread all over the face of the globe [...], on the other hand a network of measures and policies was integrated into powerful institutions designed to check the action of the market' (Polanyi, 2001, p. 79). In response to all-engulfing marketization and commodification, this emergent countermovement 'was more than the usual defensive behaviour of a society faced with change; it was a reaction against a dislocation which attacked the fabric of society' (Polanyi, 2001, p. 136)—that is, it sought to de-commodify labour.

While Polanyi's framework was developed to explain specific historical junctures, it nonetheless offers important insights for understanding responses to unrestrained market forces in contemporary neoliberalism (Streeck, 2012). As Nancy Fraser (2011, p. 139) explains, 'what we today call "neoliberalism" is nothing but the second coming of the very same nineteenth-century faith in the "self-regulating market" that unleashed the capitalist crisis Polanyi chronicled'. Importantly, Polanyi's enduring insight relates to how the market economy breeds a market society, but is ultimately untenable—it carries within it the seeds of its own demise, wrought by countermovements.

Notwithstanding the enduring appeal of Polanyi's argument, his work is less illuminating on the mechanisms through which countermovements to unmediated exposure to market forces emerge and develop (see Munck, 2002; 2006; Dale, 2012; Ergen, 2016). For example, he argues that 'the countermove against economic liberalism and laissez-faire possessed all the

1 For extended discussions of Polanyi's analysis of fictitious commodities (and the related concept of embeddedness), see Block and Somers (2014) and Gemici (2007; 2016).

unmistakable characteristics of a spontaneous reaction [...] by] a great variety of people [...] and] irrespective of their attitudes toward the principles underlying a market economy' (Polanyi, 2001, pp. 156–157). Summarising one strand of criticisms to Polanyi's account, Offe (1998, p. 40) notes that he 'lapses into the anonymity of functionalist logic' in explaining how counter-movements arise: 'ultimately what made things happen were the interests of society as a whole.' Overcoming this 'whiff of functionalism' (Munck, 2004, p. 253) is both desirable and feasible, while remaining within the parameters set by Polanyi. I posit that this can be achieved by three clarifications of the Polanyian problematic.

First, what counts as a countermovement? To achieve the end-goal of de-commodification, countermovements are commonly understood as having organizational manifestations with policy change ambitions at the national level (see Burawoy, 2003; Silver and Arrighi, 2003; Esping-Andersen, 1985; Streeck, 2007; Rea, 2016).² Yet, by overwhelmingly focusing on political demands articulated by social actors at the national level, smaller scale processes may go unnoticed. Local countermovements that do not (or cannot) scale up contestation of markets are nonetheless integral elements of responses to commodification (Burawoy, 2013; Kokkinidis, 2015a). Insofar as these local countermovements support individuals in maintaining livelihoods independent of the marketplace, they are integral elements of broader responses to rapid and radical (re-)commodification.

Second, Polanyian accounts need to adequately trace the micro-foundations of countermovements by grounding analyses in actors' purposive behaviour. This is structured by actors' available material, social, political and cultural resources, *and* the 'stimulating, enabling or even restricting [institutional] context' in which actions take place (Mayntz and Scharpf, 1995, p. 43). In other words, countermovements are embedded in an institutional environment that determines the possibilities for their emergence and influences the forms they will take. This environment is composed both of formal institutions (like organizational structures) and non-formal ones, including imaginaries and cultural frames (Thompson, 1984; Castoriadis, 1987; Lamont and Mizrahi, 2012; Hall and Lamont, 2013b).

Third, much Polanyi-inspired scholarship approaches the countermovement towards social protection as driven by the state and taking the form of welfare policies (see Esping-Andersen, 1990); that is, de-commodification is contingent on state-provided social protection measures aimed at ensuring the maintenance of individuals' material livelihood. However, this focus can obscure other—no less important—forms of social protection that feed into and contribute to de-commodification. Efforts to construct or reconstruct the symbolic underpinning of collective identities are also pertinent, and these can be spearheaded both by state and civil society (Burawoy, 2003; Somers, 2008; Fraser, 2011; 2012; 2013; Dale, 2012). Polanyi (2001, p. 76) clearly understood this when explaining the perils of individuals being 'robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions' following their subordination to the free-market logic. Expanding the concept of social protection to include symbolic dimensions can open up a Polanyian reading of cultural responses to marketization (cf. Swidler, 1986; Hall and Lamont, 2013a; Lamont *et al.*, 2014, 2016), and a fuller modeling of the elements constituting countermovements.

2 Despite some literature on countermovements focusing exclusively on social movements (e.g. Munck, 2004), Polanyi's concept is more capacious (see Burawoy, 2010; Ergen, 2016; Rea, 2016). Social movements are a possible (indeed, common) manifestation of—rather than synonymous to—countermovements. Similarly, not all social movements are necessarily countermovements.

Building on these clarifications, countermovements are understood here as the multifaceted societal responses to the failure of the market system and ensuing social dislocations. These responses—originating at the local-level—aim at achieving individuals' social, political, economic and cultural incorporation into the community, irrespective of their position in the marketplace. Consequently, analyses of countermovements serve as points of departure for explaining how society adapts (Beckert, 2009, p. 51), rather than points of arrival to some settled social order (see Streeck, 2007; Burawoy, 2013).

To understand how countermovements emerge and manifest, holistic accounts are necessary to weave together multiple parallel and mutually-informing responses arising in reaction to the collapse of welfare state and market mechanisms (Block and Somers, 2014, pp. 44-72). In other words, countermovements do not emerge in social or institutional vacuums, but are instigated by and in correspondence with other ongoing transformations. That is not to say that all responses to dispossession are parts of countermovements, but that countermovements cannot be adequately understood without explaining the social conditions—operating at the local, national or international levels—that lead to their emergence. This is the task of the remainder of this article.

3. Background to Greece's economic and social crisis

The Greek economy and welfare state accumulated severe structural problems prior to the crisis.³ Following entry into the Eurozone, the country followed a model of debt-led expansion, primarily used to finance government consumption, rather than public investment in areas that could yield future dividends and boost public revenues. In this period and despite the inflow of funds, little attention was devoted by successive governments to improving long-standing ills of Greece's political economy, including low-policy design and implementation capacity of the bureaucracy and inadequate tax collection mechanisms (Koukiadaki and Kretsos, 2012).

When the country revised the deficit from a projected 3.7% to 15.6% of GDP in 2009 (Matsaganis, 2014b, p. 112), a financial storm ensued. Soon, the government was in talks with the European Union about a possible bailout, and—in May 2010—the first bailout agreement was signed. In exchange for a €110bn loan, the government committed to far-ranging austerity measures and structural reforms overseen by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (collectively known as the Troika). A second bailout was agreed in October 2011, demanding further structural reforms but providing another €130bn. The drastic pace, extent and nature of the reforms demanded of the country tested the capabilities of the political system and contributed to deepening the recession (Matsaganis, 2014b).

Greece's welfare model was ill-equipped to deal with the crisis and its aftermath. Similarly to other Southern European countries, the Greek welfare state overwhelmingly favoured those working in the public sector and large industries (Ferrera, 2010; Matsaganis, 2011), while offering limited unemployment benefits, no active labour market policies and weak social safety nets (Matsaganis, 2013). Furthermore, a range of pre-crisis reforms had

3 This section primarily serves as backdrop to the empirical material presented later in this study. For overviews of crisis-related changes to Greece's political economy and welfare state, see Economou et al. (2014), Koukiadaki and Kretsos (2012), Matsaganis (2011; 2012; 2014a), and Voskeritsian and Kornelakis (2011).

already liberalized Greece's industrial relations, and trade union membership had experienced sustained decline (Koukiadaki and Kretsos, 2012; Koukiadaki and Kokkinou, 2016).

This already-inequitable model came under extreme pressure since the onset of the crisis, with the Troika prioritizing labour market reforms. Currency devaluation was not an option due to membership in the Eurozone, and the strategy opted into was one of 'internal devaluation' (Armingeon and Baccaro, 2012). Its aim was to increase competitiveness by reorganizing the labour market, sharply reducing public spending, and increasing in government revenues, including through privatizations (Voskeritsian and Kornelakis, 2011; Koukiadaki and Kretsos, 2012; Kornelakis and Voskeritsian, 2014; Koukiadaki and Kokkinou, 2016). In parallel to these changes, Greece did not update eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits despite drastically changed employment conditions: as Figure 1 shows, 36% of the unemployed were receiving benefits at the onset of the crisis in 2010, dropping to 12% by 2013 (Eurostat, 2014; OAED, 2015).

Other areas of state welfare provision were also deeply affected. A range of Troika-mandated reforms to the health system restricted access to services by increasing costs for patients and tightening eligibility criteria (Kentikelenis *et al.*, 2014; Karanikolos and Kentikelenis, 2016; Kentikelenis, 2017). The unemployed were eligible only for 2 years of social health insurance from the date of losing employment (Economou *et al.*, 2014; Kentikelenis, 2015). In the context of rampant unemployment, those who lost their jobs at the onset of the crisis—in 2009 or 2010—were essentially left without coverage by 2012.

In sum, state-provided welfare services in Greece patently failed to shelter scores of newly-unemployed individuals from hardship. To cope with the new socio-economic environment, the family maintained its traditional role as a social shock absorber (Rhodes,

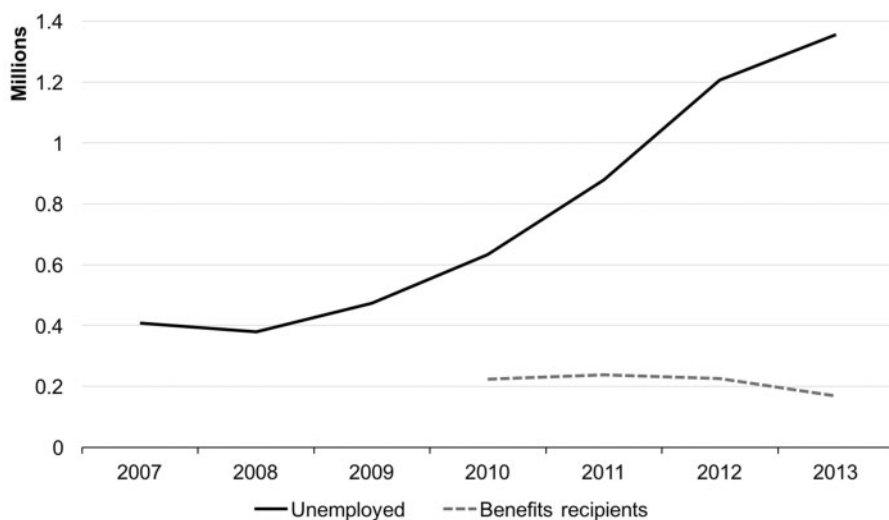


Figure 1. Unemployed and benefits recipients in Greece, 2007–2013.

Note: Active population has been between 4.8 and 5 million and total population has been about 11 million throughout this period.

Sources: Eurostat (2014) and OAED (2015).

1996; Allen *et al.*, 2004). Yet, the crisis severely constrained familial resources, which in turn limited the ability to provide effective coverage of members' needs (Lyberaki and Tinios, 2014). Indeed, Greece's 'familistic welfare model' started reeling under the pressure of severely curtailed pensions, collapsing employment in family businesses, and liberalized employment conditions (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis, 2013).

4. Research design

To trace the social aftermath of the Greek economic disaster, I focus on how residents in Athens' Perama neighbourhood—a community deeply affected by the crisis—sought to maintain their livelihood. Following Mauss (1985, p. 10), I purposefully selected a neighbourhood that 'represent[s] the extremes, an excessiveness which allows us better to perceive the facts than in those places where, although no less essential, they still remain small-scale and involuted'. While questions can be raised about the representativeness or generalizability of findings based on a single-neighbourhood study, Small (2009, p. 28) reminds us that 'the "representative" single neighbourhood does not exist.' Instead, I build on the long-standing tradition of studying extreme events through revealing 'strategic research sites' (Jahoda *et al.*, 1971; Merton, 1987), and reflect on the wider applicability of my findings in the concluding section.

My field site is located next to Athens' port, and is a predominantly Greek working-class area (see Spyridakis, 2016, pp. 102–105). The main employers include(d) the port authority, shipping companies, shipyards, oil refineries, and various small businesses (Leontidou, 1993; Spyridakis, 2015). Historically, Perama had above-average unemployment (Leontidou, 1993), and the effects of the crisis were prompt: according to the 2011 census, Perama's unemployment rate reached 25.9%, compared to a national average of 18.7% (ELSTAT, 2017); the unemployment rate continued to far exceed the national average in subsequent years (nation-wide unemployment peaked at 27.5% in 2013), but no municipal-level data is available for that period.

Perama was first populated by refugees from the Aegean coast of Turkey after the Greek-Turkish war that ended in 1922, and then witnessed a wave of internal migration as workers sought low-cost housing near the port and shipyards (Leontidou, 1993; Spyridakis, 2016). In practice, this meant appropriating public land to build humble dwellings that were later expanded into proper houses. After decades of struggle, the settlers were granted property rights to their plots by the early 1990s (Kyramargiou, n.d.). Population has been stable around 25,000 since the 1990s (ELSTAT, 1991; 2001; 2011). In terms of political preferences, the inhabitants of the area⁴ predominantly voted for radical-left SYRIZA party in the June 2012 elections (36.3% compared to 26.9% nation-wide). The populist-right Independent Greeks and neo-Nazi Golden Dawn were also stronger compared to the rest of the country (9.4% and 9.3% compared to 7.5% and 6.9% nation-wide, respectively) (Ministry of the Interior, 2012).

My analysis focuses on the responses of newly-unemployed working-class people,⁵ a key social group deeply affected by the crisis. I selected interviewees based on three criteria:

- 4 Broader electoral district (electoral data are unavailable on a neighbourhood-level).
- 5 Perama has also been the focus of recent studies by Spyridakis (2012; 2015; 2016). Unlike the present article, Spyridakis focuses on how precariously-employed workers make ends meet. Nonetheless, these studies also highlight the particularities of local responses and the cultural processes whereby residents of the area responded to their changed material conditions.

having Greek citizenship, having lost their jobs after the onset of the crisis (or be their spouse), and having resided in the area for five or more years.⁶ These criteria were designed to exclude three other groups: those indigent even pre-crisis, pensioners, and non-citizens.⁷

I conducted fieldwork in Perama during two visits in 2012 and 2013, respectively. My entry point into the community was a free medical practice catering to the uninsured (a large subset of the unemployed), where I conducted my initial interviews and then branched out. Subsequently, I followed a snowball approach with no more than two referrals per initial interviewee. In total, I conducted 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews (informed consent was always sought; all names appearing here have been changed). However, after spending five months in the neighbourhood, the interactions informing my analysis are considerably more, and include impromptu group discussions in public spaces, discussions with friends and family members of interviewees, and with social workers.

Occupationally, my interviewees had held blue-collar jobs, or been self-employed in low-status jobs. The youngest interviewee was 29 years old, the oldest 64; the gender breakdown was 15 women and 17 men. My inclusion criteria did not favour including younger people, and they are thus underrepresented in my sample: with 55.5% youth unemployment in 2012 (Eurostat, 2014), many were never able to enter the labour market, or did so in a haphazard and temporary manner. Last, a bias exists in my sample selection: Greece's newly powerful neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn, established a local chapter providing services and a space for socialization. Security considerations prevented me from recruiting interviewees from that group.⁸

5. Responding to socioeconomic change

Having discussed the institutional context shaping responses to the crisis (Section 3), I now turn to the lived experience of working-class people newly struggling to maintain a livelihood. I inductively categorize these responses under three headings: securing survival, reconfiguring social relations and reconstructing cultural repertoires.

5.1 Securing survival

A key shift that occurred in my field site was the transformation of the sources through which people maintained a bare livelihood: food, basic health needs and shelter. To cover the first two, many of my informants turned to charities. For example, a large global medical charity established a primary care clinic in the area in 2011 that also provided food and other supplies (like medicines, milk for infants or diapers) to those in need. Eligibility criteria were strict (proof of ineligibility of access to public services was required), and food was

6 This criterion was introduced to capture the likelihood that individuals have developed local social networks; see Lamont (2000).

7 Each group was excluded for different reasons. Those already indigent had likely developed ways of sustaining a livelihood, so—while the crisis did affect them—the drop in their living standards was not as steep compared to that of my interviewees. Retirees received large pension reductions, however they remained eligible for social services. Documented immigrants were entitled to welfare services depending on their employment status and past contributions; undocumented immigrants were never eligible to access most welfare services.

8 While I was conducting this research, an immigrant was killed by a Golden Dawn member in Athens, and journalists reporting on the party's activities had been harmed or threatened by party members.

only provided once a month (subject to availability): beneficiaries were given a box containing mainly pasta, rice, cooking oil, and canned tomatoes. The church also provided food to those in need in the form of daily soup kitchens. The scale of service provision by charities was new to the area. In the past, there was less local demand for such services among my informants, as eligibility for public services or ability to cover basic needs was not in question.

The challenge of survival in hard times was consistently brought up during my fieldwork. ‘When I’m alone sometimes I understand there’s no way out [of my situation] . . . but I try to survive like this’, explained one interviewee, expressing an ubiquitous sentiment among my informants. The process of securing survival was generally understood in negative terms, compared to the prior ability of securing basic necessities. For instance, a mother of two recalled the former ‘luxury’ of buying two loaves of bread, while now being barely able to afford one.

Furthermore, reliance on charities to secure survival was linked to feelings of shame.⁹ For example, my first experience in the charity-run clinic was encountering a woman in her 50s, brought in by her son. In tears, the woman told clinic staff that her old friend was living nearby and that she was too ashamed to go out, as she thought she saw her friend on the street. The woman explained that she had never expected that she would have gone through the embarrassment of relying on charities, and was worried of the reputational costs this would entail if her friend spotted her. This incident was not unique: resorting to charities was generally described in terms of necessity and embarrassment in most interviews. As Christos (61, partnered), the owner of a small—now bankrupt—shop who was no longer covered by the public healthcare system, put it:

‘Coming [to the NGO clinic] was really hard in the beginning. I was waiting at the bus stop one day and saw this old friend. He has diabetes, I have diabetes, he said: “You should go to the doctors downtown [in Perama].” I need to take some drugs for diabetes that cost 51 euros and [. . .] I do not want to feel obliged to my brother or to others [to give me money for medicines]. Of course, I still carry the remains of a former life. I mean dressing properly. Wearing a suit. Wearing a tie. Looking respectable. So, that day I was wearing my suit and my friend said, “don’t go like this. Go a bit more in rags.” I laughed and didn’t think more about it. But when my drugs ran out and had no money to get some, I came . . . The first time I came here, I welled up. I said to [the staff], “Don’t look at me in a suit like this. My friend told me not to come here like this. But if I got turned away I wanted to leave clean. With dignity.” I mean I didn’t want to go there in an old jacket so they would take pity in me . . . I was very ashamed when I came here.’

Beyond charities, the family provided a safety net that my interviewees could rely on to maintain their livelihoods. A common response to the crisis was moving back in with parents and/or grandparents. Especially in households with only one member receiving a salary or pension, this would often stretch out to cover the basic needs of everyone under the same roof. The maths of dividing a dwindling pension over more people escaped nobody and could become a source of tension. Manolis (29, single, unemployed since 2011), who worked as a carpenter, moved in with his grandparents after not being able to find a job for months: ‘[My grandpa] and my grandma can pull through with his €600 pension [per month]. But we fight a lot. They want me to pay a bit of the electricity bill, they say I live

9 On the links between the dynamics of economic crises (reduced income and retrenchment of welfare services) and feelings of shame, see [Thompson *et al.* \(2017\)](#) and [Grootegoed *et al.* \(2013\)](#).

there too and have to help. Look, I'm lucky [to be able to live with them], but where am I supposed to find the money?'

But even in cases with no such confrontations, the perception of no way out was pervasive. One proactive survival strategy—migration—was often described with mixed feelings. For example, Elena (45, married, municipality worker unemployed since 2011), whose husband lost his job in 2009 and her two children were unemployed, explained:

'My kids are thinking of leaving and that's something I can't bear; our family is very close. But what are the choices? [They are trying] to go to Australia. What are we to do? Sit around and go hungry all day? I mean my husband and I can get by with some bread and olives. I can make the bread—just need some flour. But we had taught our kids differently. We were poor growing up and wanted our kids never to experience this. The hunger. That's what's bad ... I said I will never let this happen to my kids. And now it happened ... Maybe it's best if they go.'

Aided by high rates of home ownership and strong tenant protection laws, the family retains its central role as a shelter from adversity. Yet, as the quotes above suggest, this became a role fraught with difficulties stemming from shrinking family budgets. The fact that this level of indigence is something my respondents had never experienced—or thought would never experience again—came as a powerful shock compounded by the inability to effectively protect family members from hardship.

In sum, family and charities provided key resources my informants drew on. The shelter, food and services secured through these channels were generally understood as means for survival. As the default safety net, familial resources were stretched to provide for more members, resulting in tense interpersonal relations that were kept at bay by the lack of alternatives. Charity-provided services came to be much appreciated by those relying on them, but they were not spaces of positive integration where people could socialize and form bonds that they could draw on at a later stage to respond to various day-to-day challenges.

The combination of securing a bare minimum of material resources through familial ties or charities and the inability to find work was experienced as a shameful loss of independence and dignity (Shklar, 1991, p. 22; Somers, 2008; Thompson *et al.*, 2017). Nonetheless, these survival strategies aided my informants to escape abject poverty and homelessness, and served as background conditions motivating and underpinning collective responses to marketization and commodification (see below). That is, understanding survival strategies is a necessary analytical element for explaining the nature of countermovements that emerge, as these are parallel and interlinked (see Webster *et al.*, 2008).

5.2 Reconfiguring social relations

Two main patterns of social transformation emerged during my fieldwork: the erosion of social networks and dynamic (if nascent) attempts at social mobilization, each examined in turn.

In contrast to the tension-fraught coming together of the family, my respondents overwhelmingly attested to the erosion of their social networks, including friendships, extended family, and former co-workers. Most interviewees linked this development to everyone's changed financial situation. Social interactions could become dreaded: 'You sit around a table and everyone says: "This happened to me," "This happened to me," "This happened to me"... Everyone says the same thing. Something happened to all of us. This drowns me, it

depresses me. I don't wanna hear it' (Katerina, 50, divorced, municipality worker unemployed since 2010).

In addition, the manifest inability to perform social obligations associated with friendships could become a discouragement from seeking them. As Maria (48, married homemaker, husband unemployed since 2010) put it:

'We knew differently: when we go to somebody's home we have to bring some sweets, something ... Now we don't even celebrate birthdays and such things ... We've become isolated. We were different. We had friends. My sister-in-law used to come over and we'd put out some wine and olives and our night would pass. That's all gone ... We just sit at home, indoors. Only. Television. Or we'll sleep. But sleep is by now a luxury. My husband takes [sleeping] pills. I walk around the flat.'

The pervasive erosion of social ties and the increased strains on households limited people's capabilities to cope with adversity, as the networks they could rely on for support in the past no longer existed. During my fieldwork, I identified a local-level attempt at reconstructing the fractured solidarities of years past and empowering members of the community to respond to the changed socio-economic conditions.

Founded in 2011, following a wave of popular protests in central Athens, the 'Open Assembly of Perama' (henceforth, Assembly) quickly expanded its membership and activities, and was primarily composed of people who lost their job after the onset of the crisis. At first, the Assembly lobbied the local social centre for the elderly to be allowed to use that building's basement for meetings, and—as they grew—they moved into larger premises funded by donations. Some banners—formerly used in protests—decorated the Assembly declaring 'solidarity to the unemployed' and similar messages.

Assembly members took pride in having a non-hierarchical structure ('I learned all about direct democracy in my 50s', one member commented), and—while no statement of principles was drafted at the time of my fieldwork—loaded concepts such as fairness/justice [*dikaiosyne*], equality/equity [*isotita*] and resistance [*antitasi*] were often referred to. Talking to various members, a few key themes emerged, all construed in juxtaposition to what they articulated as factors threatening their community.

First, a clear objective was to counter the dependence on charities and focus on bringing out empowering and creative forces in the community. This took two forms. On the one hand, the Assembly organized the provision of member-to-member services, training and information, as well as food. Numerous activities fell under this heading. Volunteer teachers organized free after-school support classes for local children.¹⁰ Volunteer lawyers held information sessions on dealing with debt to banks or the state, and discussed eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits and how to overcome bureaucratic hurdles. After someone donated a sewing machine, sewing lessons were organized to endow those taking them with a skill they could use to earn some income. Food was distributed according to strict rules that had been intensely debated; households with no one employed and young children received highest priority, others followed.

10 Private, after-school tutoring in Greece is widespread, linked to the perceived low-quality public education system (Kassotakis and Verdis, 2013).

On the other hand, the focus on creation and empowerment entailed embedding outward-facing Assembly activities—especially those that depended on the support or cooperation of others—in an ethos of reciprocity. For example, one interviewee explained:

‘We used to go to the open-air market [for fruit and vegetables], towards closing time, and ask [sellers] to donate some of the goods they hadn’t sold. They did and [then] we would redistribute them. But this did not feel right. Then we thought, “they’re working class people, we’re working class people, there must be something we can do for them.” And, you know, they have these long benches for their stuff and umbrellas, and they sometimes break or need repairs. So, we thought, we have all these tools lying around [from our previous work]. Why don’t we put them to good use? So now we help them by repairing whatever we can. It’s a bit more equal like this.’ (Pavlos, 53, married, port worker unemployed since 2009)

Second, rooting their actions in, and attempting to build up, the spirit of solidarity was a common response, seen in contrast to the prevailing alienation in the area. By alienation, my informants understood the erosion of social networks described above, as well as past political demobilization. In a group discussion, one informant commented: ‘in the old days, people were close, this was a working-class neighbourhood, they used to support each other’. Another one jumped in: ‘You know, what we do here is on the basis of solidarity. And it is not hard for someone whose access to electricity was cut off [due to unpaid bills] to enter this logic: if you don’t have electricity, you help the guy who still has it, not to lose his.’

Third, almost everyone from the community was welcome, including immigrants. As many interviewees attested, they did not know most other members before getting involved in the Assembly, and various activities aimed to foster a sense of community. Membership was open to the neighbourhood’s residents, and no application form or other approval was necessary. Upon enquiry, interested newcomers were informed of the only criteria: ‘No fascists, no racists, no Golden Dawn members. Everyone else is welcome, but without carrying their party flags’, as Sofia (50, married, office worker unemployed since 2010), a leading figure, put it. Membership grew from circa 10 initially to more than 150 by end-2012, and to circa 270 by end-2013. Given the lack of rigid membership structure (designed to maximize access), the exact number is hard to estimate and this refers only to people with hands-on engagement with the Assembly. Participation in the social activities (like open-air film screenings) was open to all and advertised, thus reaching a wider audience (and contributing to membership growth). Such activities attracted crowds larger than the membership, thus also a sign of the wider acceptance of the Assembly by the community.

Last, while the politics of the Assembly were left-leaning, everyone I talked to emphasized that they were not affiliated to any political party and did not want to be. One member was clear: ‘I left my party identity in the drawer (I used to be a communist) with the intention to offer [to the community]. It was clear that no solution was going to come from above and that we had to take things in our own hands.’ When asked about the efficacy of resistance, few of my informants had illusions. A leading figure commented: ‘I know we cannot change everything. But we can put a brake on some things, change people’s conscience . . . Some people think of how they can get back to 2008. That’s not going to happen. What matters is how we can fight to achieve a better future, and not a worse one. Things are not going to go back.’

This two-pronged social transformation—erosion of social ties and emergence of mobilization attempts—was a direct outcome of dynamics unleashed by the crisis. The

reconfiguration of social relations became necessary for an alternative form of incorporation into the community: not through consumption and leisure activities, but through activities having the goal of social and political transformation. Old social networks were partly replaced by new ones, with the common experience of unemployment acting as a powerful bond.

Emergent forms of social mobilization aimed at increasing social connectedness and provided spaces for the integration of many newly-unemployed. Importantly, these attempts were shaped by the institutional context. The retreat of trade unions left a vacuum in determining how social mobilization efforts would emerge and manifest. Similarly, the retreat of the welfare state—another institutional factor affecting the form of countermovements—motivated collective responses. These responses were not based on top-down state-directed redistribution, but on lateral, peer-to-peer, solidarity-grounded actions. Furthermore, these emergent attempts had clear political underpinnings and ambitions, yet they were not *party*-political: even though left-leaning, my informants emphasized their independence from political parties (see discussion section and Kokkinidis (2015a,b)). This was understood as necessary for remaining inclusive and to avoid being branded as party instruments, as this would threaten their legitimacy. In this sense, the unflinchingly local character of their actions—and associated local-level objectives—can be interpreted not as lack of national-level ambitions, but as an understanding that local-level social transformation and political (re)awakening was a necessary precondition of future national-level political transformation.

A changing social landscape is an integral element of a Polanyian countermovement-in-action: some forms of connectedness wither, while others become activated in response to unmediated exposure to market forces (cf. Burawoy, 2003). As noted above, national-level social transformation ambitions may manifest as *prima facie* local-level actions. Consequently, harnessing local potential and tailoring responses to the specificities of different communities are integral elements of attempts to secure the Polanyian objective of social protection. The latter understood not only as state-provided welfare services, but also as multi-faceted, localized, and empowering movements towards securing social livelihoods, independent of people's position in the labour market (Fraser, 2011; 2013).

5.3 Reconstructing cultural repertoires

Turning to the symbolic resources available to the community, I encountered an active attempt to construct a new socio-spatial imaginary centred around Perama as the locus of industry and its inhabitants as hard workers earning a 'decent living'.¹¹ A social imaginary refers to the symbolic dimensions of collective life through which individuals give meanings to their life; it is the 'unceasing and essentially *undetermined* (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images' (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 3, emphasis in original). The concept of a socio-spatial imaginary proposed here builds on these ideas, and highlights intersubjective and emergent properties: imaginaries are in permanent interaction with social-historical configurations, and can be found at different levels of aggregation—from specific classes or groups to society as a whole. The present analysis is concerned with highlighting the dynamic, mutable and mutating aspects of such imaginaries (see Thompson, 1984, pp. 16–41).

11 Geographers identify processes whereby social actors 'construct and mobilize place as a vital part of their efforts to promote community well-being' as place-framing (Martin, 2003; Larsen, 2004, p. 944).

My interviews suggest that whether as individuals or collectively (e.g., via the Assembly), people were engaged in an active process of reconstructing myths to underpin collective imaginaries. In particular, those myths highlighted the specificities of the area rather than more general frameworks like national identity. As noted above, the neighbourhood was built up primarily between the 1940s and 1970s by port workers who appropriated the land. The area's history reflected a struggle against the state (that often tore down illegal homes during that period) by many of my interviewees' parents or grandparents in pursuit of a common goal: to stably settle in the area. The current economic crisis and associated policy measures were experienced as another struggle against a state that eroded resources available to people to cope with socioeconomic change.

Various respondents independently used words like 'paradise' and 'land of wonders' to describe the neighbourhood in the old days. 'Now you cannot listen to the sound of a hammer if you look for it' (Panos, 55, married, port worker unemployed since 2009). The area was consistently described as a land of opportunity, and interviewees often highlighted their capacity to work hard in tough and often dangerous jobs in shipyards or construction sites (the area has frequent fatal industrial accidents; see [Spyridakis \(2016\)](#)). My informants recognized that this identity was lost in 'the years of affluence', and were now trying to reconstruct it. Commonly, this happened by looking down on the past two consumption-focused decades (including themselves engaged in consumption rather than production), and deriving value out of having belonged to this group of hard workers.

This process of reconstruction was more explicit in the Assembly. For instance, they set up an exhibition with old pictures of Perama, and organized film nights, screening black-and-white movies shot in the area that highlight its working-class character and strong social bonds. Once, an elderly man recognized himself pictured working on a public infrastructure worksite, and this provided impetus for group discussion on how the area—and social relations within it—had changed over the decades.

Such stimuli did evoke group 'dreaming' of what a different society could look like and what would be the steps to achieve it: forming workers' collectives, taking control of the means of production, or engaging in socialized forms of agricultural activity. For example, at the time of my fieldwork, members of the Assembly were in dialogue with a nearby monastery about being permitted to cultivate some of its land. In group discussions, members of the Assembly collectively imagined how gaining access to this piece of land would bring out empowering forces and how members could contribute according to their resources or skills (for example, by providing labour, seeds or livestock).

Articulating these dreams and constructing a new socio-spatial imaginary were active processes of intellectual creation in a social context, endowing people with optimism—and, thereby, emotional resources—when this would not normally be justified when examining macro-structural constraints (cf. [Rancière, 2012](#)). These processes were integral elements to formulating potential courses of action for the future; action that would be guided by principles of solidarity, empowerment and redistribution. For instance, I was occasionally asked about the experience of workers' collectives in Argentina after the 1998–2002 crisis, and about the hurdles encountered by workers there.

The symbolic reconstruction of community—and the associated collective imagining of alternatives—were core elements of the Polanyian countermovement against being solely determined by one's relationship to the market; in this case, by (un)employment status. The cultural processes have wider applicability than the community under study. For example,

recent research on workers' collectives in Greece has emphasized the cultural construction of 'spaces of possibilities' for challenging market-determined forms of economic and social organization (Kokkinidis, 2015a,b). These processes transcend short-term, proximate goals of responding to economic shocks, and seek to 'drive and shape social transformation by creating alternative material articulations and ontological struggles' (Kokkinidis, 2015b, p. 429). In other words, these responses seek to alter collective cultural 'toolkits' that determine what possibilities for action are available (Swidler, 1986).

These cultural dynamics are indispensable components of Polanyian analyses of countermovements. Indeed, Polanyi (2001, p. 302) emphasized that social catastrophes were inextricably linked to crumbling cultural environments. Consequently, reconfiguring myths and constructing new collective imaginaries generate cultural resources that feed into attempts to secure social protection. These myths and imaginaries can hold together social groups in hard times, and endow people with emotional resources (a sense of worth and belonging) at a time when both state and market fail to provide such validation (see Bouchard, 2009; Hall and Lamont, 2013a; Lamont *et al.*, 2016).

6. Concluding discussion

Economic disasters have deep and lasting impact on societies, and the present study sought to document how one social group—those formerly in stable employment in a working-class community in Greece—responded to rapid socio-economic change. Since the onset of the crisis, my informants became excluded from both market-derived income and state-provided welfare services, thereby experiencing a simultaneous drop in living standards, loss of social status, and debasement of their symbolic construction of reality. To respond to these pressures, they relied on a combination of material survival strategies, the reconfiguration of social resources, and the reconstruction of cultural imaginaries.

Building on the work of Karl Polanyi, these findings are integrated into a holistic account of 'countermovements' to marketization and commodification. This approach weaves together many dynamic—and potentially contradictory—social processes into an analytical framework that explores 'the much larger question of the social integration of society' (Beckert, 2009, p. 51). The task of Polanyian analyses, then, is to trace people's economic, social, political and cultural responses, and integrate them within a broader societal and institutional context (including international-economic constraints). This holistic approach has important implications for the study of countermovements, and I argued in favour of a three-point clarification of Polanyi's analytical framework: augmenting the definition of countermovements to capture local (rather than solely national) responses, emphasizing cultural aspects of social protection, and tracing the micro-foundations of countermovements that are nonetheless shaped by the macro-institutional context shaping action.

Can inferences based on the study of community be generalized? While my field site demonstrates the highly-localized and contingent form that countermovements can take, the underlying processes of developing material, social and symbolic responses to commodification and marketization has wider relevance. For example, recent Polanyi-inspired research on countermovements has examined as diverse topics as anti-dispossession movements in India (Levien, 2013), rural workfare in Hungary (Hann, 2016), the rise of the solidarity economy in Greece (Rakopoulos, 2014), and commercial countermovements for alternative energy provision in Germany and the US (Ergen, 2016). Elements of material, social and symbolic

processes are present in these accounts, and explicitly tracing their links and contradictions can provide a unifying framework for analysing emerging countermovements.

Even though countermovements may start off locally and modestly, ultimately they need to achieve state-level changes. In the case of Greece, after I ended my fieldwork, SYRIZA—a newly-powerful radical-left party—won the national elections in January 2015 promising a radical break with past policies (the party received 42% of the votes in the broader electoral district of Perama, compared to 36% nation-wide). The party successfully tapped into different dimensions of these countermovements to increase its electoral appeal.

Yet, countermovements and organized political institutions should not be equated: political parties, trade unions or civil society organizations can become the agents of countermovements, but the latter have broader bases and a life of their own. Society, once ‘activated’ (Burawoy, 2003), does not exhaust its social, political and economic transformation potential in one particular organizational manifestation. For example, alternative work practices or new collective imaginaries can extend beyond the successes or failures of a political manifestation of the countermovement (Hall and Lamont, 2013b; Kokkinidis, 2015a). In the case of Greece, the apparent failure of the SYRIZA government to deliver on its promises ushered in a period of ‘no expectations’, marked by ‘electoral fatigue, social despair and disaffection with political parties’ (Rori, 2017). Nonetheless, local-level countermovements have managed to expand and deepen their activities, and open possibilities for building links with national and transnational struggles against austerity (Arampatzi, 2017).

Furthermore, as Polanyi understood well, multiple countermovements may emerge in response to the same shocks: some may be progressive and emancipatory, but others can be reactionary, nationalist or fascist (see Burawoy, 2010; Fraser, 2011; 2013; Block and Somers, 2014). In Greece, the rise of neo-Nazi Golden Dawn can be interpreted as a response to the social dislocations emanating from the economic crisis: among other, sinister aims, the party sought to offer an unambiguous sense of social incorporation to its members (mainly, unemployed young Greek men) (Ellinas, 2013).

A corollary of the analysis advanced here is the deliberate silence over whether emerging countermovements will ultimately be successful in achieving social protection. Instead of adjudicating on the effectiveness of fragile social orders, analyses of countermovements are better suited to trace the conditions of possibility for a shift from marketization and commodification to social protection. To this end, the present can only be treated as ‘a point of departure [rather than] a point of arrival’ (Burawoy, 2013, p. 533).

Future research can push the frontiers of Polanyi-inspired scholarship by examining different types of countermovements, and tracing the conditions under which they emerge. Uncovering the institutional and social bases for the emergence of countermovements across time and space will illuminate multifaceted responses to exposure to unmediated free-market forces, and highlight the conditions of possibility for achieving social protection in its different manifestations and through different mechanisms. Following Polanyi’s holistic approach, subsequent work can examine these processes by integrating different levels of analysis (local, national and global), and loci of action (social, political, economic and cultural). The toolbox offered by action-centred institutionalist analysis—exploring the interstices between constraining structures and transformative agency (Streeck, 2012)—can be fruitfully employed to analyses of countermovements at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. In short, this research agenda will entail identifying and explaining the ‘varieties of countermovements’.

The future of communities, like Perama, multiply affected by unmediated exposure to the free market is far from certain. What is clear is that the ground is shifting, and imaginative alternatives are springing up. These responses should not become exalted as effective ‘weapons of the weak’; the dispossession experienced on the ground is real and profound (cf. Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 533; Scott, 1985; Thompson et al., 2017). After all, as Polanyi explained, market forces—if unconstrained—may yield devastating social dislocations before the ‘activated society’ manages to hold these forces in check.

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