CONCEPT
The Journal of Contemporary Community Education Practice Theory

Vol. 15, No. 2, Autumn 2024

Uniting threads: The dual dimension of Mutual Aid: Perspectives from Greece

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Introduction

This article draws inspiration from the ongoing debate on mutual aid, particularly its emergence as a community-based and led response during the Covid-19 pandemic. One perspective views mutual aid as a positive collective practice, effective for immediate, small-scale needs but inadequate for addressing large-scale systemic inequalities. Advocates of this view propose that mutual aid should operate under state guidance to complement centrally orchestrated responses to systemic issues. In contrast, the opposing side challenges this view, asserting that mutual aid is inherently an emancipatory practice. It aligns with the core principles of anarchism, including anti-capitalism, anti-statism, and anti-authoritarianism. Owing to this ideological alignment, these proponents argue that mutual aid should not be supplementary to the state; doing so would risk transforming it into a form of charity.

This article aims to enrich the broader dialogue on mutual aid by introducing a dichotomous framework for its understanding. This framework categorises mutual aid into two distinct types:

Organic mutual aid, which arises 'naturally' from immediate communal needs but lacks the political impetus to confront hierarchical power structures.

Political mutual aid, born out of political motivation with the objective of challenging both official and unofficial hierarchical power structures.

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To elucidate the necessity of this dichotomous framework in grasping mutual aid's dual dimension, I will delve into both recent and past experiences of mutual aid in Greece. However, before advancing this proposal, it is essential to examine the underlying reasoning behind the two perspectives in this debate.

Mutual Aid: Integration vs Autonomy

The Integration Approach

Wuest (2022) articulates the significant role mutual aid played in the USA during the COVID-19 pandemic, becoming a crucial support mechanism amidst widespread economic difficulties. Wuest recognises the value of mutual aid in providing immediate assistance and fostering unity within communities. Yet, she contends that mutual aid, in isolation, is inadequate for addressing the profound systemic issues exacerbated by the pandemic. The article underscores that mutual aid, whilst indispensable, requires augmentation through broader structural reforms. Crucially, Wuest argues that the community-centric efforts of mutual aid must be complemented by state involvement and systemic demands for social and economic justice to effectively tackle the root causes of the broad challenges presented during the pandemic.

Mayo's article (2021) similarly highlights the expansion of mutual aid as a notable response to the pandemic, contesting neoliberal individualism through the global surge in mutual aid networks. This article emphasises mutual aid's promotion of mutuality, cooperation, and care, particularly amidst economic recession and cuts to welfare states. Mayo also explores the broader implications and lessons from mutual aid practices, albeit recognising their limitations within the larger context of social justice movements. Both articles converge on the idea that mutual aid, while effective in promoting community action and solidarity, requires systemic and structural enhancements, notably state participation, to address broader issues such as economic downturns, increasing inequalities, and the persistent impacts of neoliberalism. They

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posit that mutual aid, in contributing to immediate needs and fostering collective understanding, is a component of a more extensive social change ecosystem that necessitates collaboration among voluntary sectors, public services, and wider social justice movements.

The Autonomy Approach

Hough at al (2021) critique Wuest's analysis for its insufficient engagement with the principles and historical ties of mutual aid to anarchism. They emphasise the long history of mutual aid, notably its detailed exposition by anarchist theorist Piotr Kropotkin, as a form of communal cooperation counter to state centralisation. Their critique extends to Wuest's oversight of mutual aid's roles before the modern state and its contrast with the state's negative impact on community initiatives. Furthermore, they challenge Wuest's portrayal of mutual aid as a state-supportive measure, arguing that it inherently aims to circumvent state systems. They criticise her for mistakenly equating mutual aid with charity, failing to recognise its unique nature as a reciprocal communal practice, distinct from one-way charity.

Campbell (2023), responding to Mayo, accentuates the historical and current relevance of mutual aid practices. They highlight its role as a political tool for community care and social relationship building, distinguishing it from charity. Furthermore, Campbell points to mutual aid as a countermeasure to disasters and the crises of capitalism, linking it back to Kropotkin's works. Critiquing Mayo's reformist stance, Campbell argues that it leads to short-lived solutions and unintended exclusions. They emphasise mutual aid's roots in anti-capitalist, anarchist ideologies as a challenge to the belief in inherent human selfishness and competitiveness. Additionally, Campbell criticises government systems for their hierarchical and paternalistic nature, explores mutual aid's role in addressing systemic failures, and cautions against the governmental co-optation of social movements, underscoring the importance of remembering mutual aid's radical history to prevent repeating past mistakes.

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This divergence in views and the subsequent debate over the essence of mutual aid led me to reflect on the 'self-organised' solidarity movement that arose in response to Greece's 2008 financial crisis, a predominantly social and political crisis. This reflection brought me to the Greek term αλληλεγγύη (allileggíi), translating to 'solidarity' in English. Derived from ἄλλος (állos), meaning 'another', and ἔγγυος (éngyos), meaning 'guarantor', αλληλεγγύη signifies mutual support or a pledge of support to one another, closely aligning with the concept of mutual aid in the Greek context.

As noted by Cabot (2016), αλληλεγγύη was adopted by a diverse range of groups in Greece, including grassroots left-wing and anarchist initiatives, the Greek Orthodox Church, the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party, large state-owned corporations like OTE, and the conservative New Democracy government under Karamanlis, which established the Ministry of Health and Social Solidarity. This widespread adoption across traditionally adversarial entities indicates the deep-rooted significance of αλληλεγγύη in Greek social history.

Loizos's insights in 'The Greek Gift: Politics in a Cypriot Village' (1975) about mutual aid being fundamental to Greek-speaking rural life are substantiated by Megas's observations (1936) on Greece's rural life. In his observations, Megas documented eight distinct mutual aid practices in rural Greece, encompassing a range of activities from constructing communal buildings like churches and schools, assisting neighbouring families in agricultural tasks, to participating in communal activities like removing shells from almonds during religious festivals.

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In this section, I present examples of mutual aid practices in Greece to lay the groundwork for discussing the dual dimension of mutual aid. The examples are divided into the two distinct categories mentioned in the introduction to this article.

Examples of Organic Mutual Aid

Καραέτι (Karaéti), originating from the Greek Cretan dialect and deriving from the Turkish word 'gayret' which translates to 'effort', signified the Cretan tradition of helping one another. It was best exemplified by acts like ξαρρωστικά (xarostiká) – meaning 'until one overcomes their illness' – where neighbouring women would step in to manage household chores or look after the children when a mother fell ill. When the man of the house was unwell, the neighbouring men, adhering to the same gender-based and patently sexist division of labour, would take on the ill man's agricultural work. This spirit extended to communal projects like constructing schools or churches, where villagers united selflessly, driven by a sense of duty and communal pride. It was seen as a cherished νάμι (námi)[1], passed down through generations, flourishing not only in times of hardship but also during joyous events like weddings, where the entire village actively participated (SPEIRA, 2013).

In the Dodecanese islands of Kasos and Karpathos, αργαδιά (argadiá) goes beyond its literal meaning of *work*; it embodies communal solidarity. An elaborate description of this practice on Karpathos reveals its significance:

> *"To plant a vineyard, the head of the household organizes an αργαδιά [...] that is, he invites all the men (usually young and middle-aged) of the village to come for a day to*

[1] Námi is the Cretan word for legacy. In the Cretan context, one's personal legacy was intertwined with their family's or village's legacy.

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> *work for free, to dig the field and prepare it for the planting of the vines. [...] Up to 30 or 40 men may attend the αργαδιά and in return, for their meal and dinner, they receive plentiful food and wine, which, from time to time, during the vine pruning, the young women of the village, relatives, and family of the head of the household serve, along with Karpathian sweets (baklava, xerotigana, etc.) and other seasonal treats. In the evening, when the work and the meal are finished [...], the time for dancing arrives". (Michailidis-Nuaros, 1934, p.59)*

Today, αργαδιά remains a vital part of local culture in the Dodecanese islands, encompassing a wide range of activities from reconstructing dry-stone walls used by local shepherds to prepare sweets for special occasions (Rodiaki, 2021; Dimellas, 2023).

Moving to the Peloponnese, ξέλαση (xélasi) introduces another facet of mutual aid. This tradition involves collective community efforts in various agricultural activities, including field cultivation, crop harvesting, grape picking, olive gathering, timber transportation, and wool processing (Preface of the Greek edition of the Handbook on Cooperatives for use by Workers' Organizations, 2007). When assistance is needed, villagers gather at local spots like the village's main square, church courtyard, or local kafenio to initiate a ξέλαση. The community collectively provides labour, tools, and animals, with the initiator ensuring food for the volunteers. This practice, known by various names such as σεμπριές (sebriés), περκαλεσιά (perklasiá), and δανικαρές (danikarés) in different regions, extends to traditionally communal activities like wool shearing and threshing. These mutual aid traditions, deeply ingrained in Greece's various local cultures, emphasise the significance of communal support and shared responsibility in daily life (SPEIRA, 2013).

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Examples of Political Mutual Aid

Amidst the backdrop of economic turmoil, Βιο.Με (Vio.Mé) stands as a compelling embodiment of contemporary mutual aid in Greece. This worker-controlled factory, located in Thessaloniki, embarked on its journey when its parent company, Philkeram-Johnson SA, declared bankruptcy and ceased paying its employees. In response, the Βιο.Με workers took a transformative step by forming an independent workers' union, diverging from the conventional bureaucratic and often party-dependent union structures. With the invaluable support of the Solidarity Initiative, a community-driven, horizontally organised group, the workers assumed control of the factory. This pivotal move not only secured the factory's future but also integrated the broader community into Βιο.Με, evolving it from a mere source of income into a community-centric endeavour (Georgiades, 2020).

The role of the Solidarity Initiative cannot be overstated. By mobilising militant anarchists, leftists, and, most significantly, local, often barely politicised, communities across the country, this initiative empowered Βιο.Με to produce and distribute cruelty-free and all-natural cleaning products, serving both households and various professional settings such as hospitals, restaurants, and hotels (Georgiades, 2020). However, Βιο.Με's commitment to communal welfare extended further. In 2016, they established a healthcare centre staffed by volunteer doctors, nurses, and psychotherapists within their occupied factory. The factory is more than just a place for production; it's a dynamic space where work and everyday life come together, welcoming the larger community. As a result, the factory becomes like a small version of the city, creating a place where people can connect and engage beyond just industrial activities (Daskalaki and Kokkinidis, 2017).

In the heart of Athens' Exarcheia neighbourhood, Νοταρά 26 (Notará 26) stands as a squat dedicated to housing refugees and migrants. Emerging in response to the 2015 refugee crisis,

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this squat espouses a 'no border' philosophy, openly opposing nationalism, patriotism, hierarchies, borders, and xenophobia (Positions Proposal Framework of Antiauthoritarian Movement, 2018). Νοταρά 26's mission extends beyond merely offering shelter; it creates an environment where refugees and migrants can empower themselves while being treated with dignity, countering the dehumanising conditions often found in state-run camps funded by the EU (Raimondi, 2019). Here, mutual aid transcends the provision of basic necessities to foster the restoration of agency among individuals disempowered by their circumstances (Raimondi, 2019).

Through direct-democratic assemblies, residents, alongside solidarians, collectively make decisions about the squat's governance. This participatory approach nurtures a sense of community and self-worth. In contrast, impersonal top-down managed state camps often witness protests by refugees and migrants against the harrowing living conditions imposed upon them, conditions that frequently cost lives (Smith, 2019). In the squat, refugees and migrants actively engage in shaping their environment, utilising their skills and assuming responsibilities. This process plays a pivotal role in helping them regain control of their lives and reintegrate into some semblance of normalcy. Notably, squats like Νοταρά 26 have been key hubs of advocacy for refugee and migrant rights, although some have faced evictions by the left-wing and progressive government of SYRIZA and by the right-wing conservative government of New Democracy (Malamidis, 2023). As of January 2024, Νοταρά 26 continues to operate as a symbol of resilience and mutual aid.

The dual dimension of Mutual Aid

Mutual aid in Greece, as seen in the examples of both organic and political mutual aid practices, showcases a complex interplay between immediate community response and the deliberate

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challenge to existing social structures. While both forms are grounded in the principle of mutual support, their implications and outcomes significantly diverge.

Organic Mutual Aid

Organic mutual aid in Greece is exemplified by practices like Καραέτι, Αργαδιά, and Ξέλαση. These practices are characterised by their organic emergence within rural communities as a communal response to immediate needs, often bypassing the state's role. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that while these practices enable communities to address their needs based on mutuality, they do not challenge the status quo. Originating spontaneously from shared hardships, organic mutual aid embodies a natural human tendency towards communal support. Motivated by empathy and a shared community ethos, encapsulated in the Greek proverb 'we all boil in the same pot', these practices focus on immediate, practical needs but lack a long-term structural approach. While distinct from charity, they are often intertwined with existing prevailing religious, sexist, and hierarchical norms, hindering their ability to challenge and transform deeper societal structures.

Political Mutual Aid

Political Mutual Aid in Greece is characterised by a deliberate and strategic approach aimed at fostering prefigurative politics, signifying its forward-looking perspective and unwavering commitment to reshaping future societal possibilities. These practices, exemplified by initiatives like Βιο.Με and Νοταρά 26, originate from ideologically driven groups and operate with precision and organisation. They possess a clear and well-defined vision for systemic transformation, firmly rooted in anti-capitalism, anti-statism, and a broader transformative agenda. Unlike their organic counterparts, political mutual aid practices extend their focus beyond immediate relief, emphasising the construction of sustainable networks and

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infrastructures. Their goal is to provide enduring support and foster resistance against oppressive systems.

Moreover, these practices are characterised by their inclusivity, encompassing marginalised and vulnerable groups, including the impoverished, refugees, workers, and LGBTQ+ communities[2]. By doing so, they challenge conventional boundaries, including private ownership, and legal norms that leave refugees without identification documents (Refugee Support Aegean, 2022). They not only advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society but also realise it materially. In summary, political mutual aid practices in Greece represent a purposeful and calculated approach to mutual support, driven by a desire to forge new societal pathways. They confront oppressive structures with intentionality and seek to establish lasting alternatives, making them a vital force in the landscape of mutual aid within the country.

The dual dimension of mutual aid in Greece presents a vivid contrast between the organic, instinctual responses to immediate community needs and the politically motivated efforts to enact systemic change. While organic mutual aid practices like Karaéti, Argadiá, and Xélasi play a vital role in providing immediate support based on shared values and empathy, they operate within existing societal norms and do not challenge entrenched systemic issues. On the other hand, politically driven practices like those by Vio.Me and Notara 26 represent a conscious effort to challenge and redefine societal structures, advocating for a more inclusive and equitable future. This dichotomy underscores the complexity and diversity of mutual aid as a concept and practice, highlighting its potential both as a response to immediate needs and as a tool for broader social transformation.

[2] I.e Βιο.Με opened its premises to host events for Thessaloniki's LGBTQI+ community, and in those premises the local LGBTQI+ community organised the first self-organised Pride march in 2017. (Avramidis, 2023; Polykarpou, 2022)

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Conclusion

As we contemplate the dual dimension of mutual aid within contemporary Greece, it becomes crucial to critically reassess the integrationist approach. The SYRIZA government's experiences, initially perceived as progressive, poignantly highlight the limitations of state mechanisms in nurturing mutual aid, despite their emancipatory rhetoric. SYRIZA's eventual opposition to mutual aid groups (ROAR Collective, 2015; Malamidis, 2023) underscores a core conflict: the state's tendency to preserve existing power dynamics clashes with the self-organised, almost anti-statist, nature of mutual aid.

This realisation necessitates a departure from the integrationist method, which aims to blend organic mutual aid with state intervention. It becomes clear that mutual aid's true potential lies in its operation outside, and often against, established state frameworks. However, the Greek examples of organic mutual aid challenge the autonomous approach's assumption that mutual aid is intrinsically transformative. While these practices establish a foundation of empathy and solidarity, they don't consistently confront systemic structures. Nonetheless, they foster a societal ethos of mutual support, interconnectedness, and communal responsibility—essential elements for nurturing caring, inclusive, and equitable communities.

Hence, the imperative for Community Learning and Development practitioners, researchers, and academics—especially those committed to dismantling oppressive structures, not only in advancing their careers—is to cultivate the communal spirit and solidarity found in organic mutual aid, steering it towards political mutual aid practices that directly address inequality and injustice. In doing so, mutual aid transitions from being a response to crises, offering temporary relief, to a transformative movement envisioning an equitable and just society. This approach doesn't undermine organic mutual aid's value; instead, it views it as the initial step in

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a broader journey towards societal change. By evolving from organic to political mutual aid, communities can develop sustainable support models that challenge and ultimately transform prevailing social and economic paradigms.

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