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# Austerity governance and bifurcated civil society: The changing matrices of urban politics in Athens

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the shift from government to governance in local affairs is viewed through the “rescaling” lens and the changing relations between state and civil society via a scalable interpretation of the Gramscian notion of the “integral state.” The case in point is Athens, in which formal and informal collaborative vehicles for decision making were explored. At the city hall level, we show how the rescaling of the local state and the politics of austerity is influencing the recomposition of civil society, shaping a new form of “elite pluralism” based on the power and influence of third-sector multinationals. At the civil society level, we investigate the variety of grassroots collaborative initiatives that have sprung recently up, underscoring their firm avoidance of austerity-related agents, policies, and institutions. Austerity is changing the matrices of Athens’s urban governance. It is bifurcating civil society into an elite sector partnering with the city and a grassroots element that positions itself outside the austerity machine.

## Introduction

The shift from government to governance in the regulation of urban affairs has held the attention of researchers since the late 1980s, fruitfully informed ever since by novel networking efforts that surface in response to changing socioeconomic realities and political preoccupations (Törfling, Peters, Pierre, & Sörensen, 2012). In broad terms, it refers to the devolution of duties to local authorities, supported by a decentralization narrative that underscores the benefits of decision making at levels closer to citizens. Primarily, though, it is associated with the “opening up” of local authority policymaking structures to a wider range of actors, setting in motion a governing mode that aims to reach “beyond the state” (Blanco, 2013). The mobilization of local stakeholders, and their engagement in purportedly nonhierarchical decision-making structures, is promoted as the means to ameliorate exclusionary processes, foster collaboration, and increase the availability of resources to be put into mutually defined policy goals (Stone, 2015).

In this article, we underscore the catalytic role of austerity policies in enacting the governance shift in local affairs. Austerity is discussed in relation to scarcity of resources and cuts in public spending, imposed on the local level by higher tiers of political power. It is also approached as an underlying shift in local budgetary stances, endured and implemented by the very local authorities it afflicts, as lean state finances define access to funding (Peck, 2012). The governance repercussions of austerity are explored in Greece, the institutional matrix of which has been characterized as rigid and hierarchical (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001). In Greece, our attention rests on the local (municipal) level, the subject of successive rescaling waves since the early 1980s. The most far-reaching of these attempts was launched in 2010, following the latest austerity wave amidst a long-lasting and ongoing sovereign debt crisis. In this frame, municipalities

were asked to create “action spaces,” assuming a key responsibility for local social and developmental prospects in collaboration with “civil society” (Chorianopoulos, 2012). They also had to follow particularly rigid forms of technocratic financial discipline, “debt brakes,” and monitoring, elevating fiscal restraint to a leading policy principle. The impact of this rescaling attempt on local political realities and collaborative dynamics was researched in Athens, centering on an extensive fieldwork exercise that took place in the 2015–2016 period. In Athens, examination focused on both the local authority and the civil society realms. As part of the international project “Collaborative Governance Under Austerity,” discussed in detail in this issue, Athens features as the European “capital” of austerity, a city severely affected by spending cuts and marked by popular struggles against the austerity dogma.

Approaching the local authority as an object of inquiry centered on investigating the traits of shifting municipal policies under austerity. Defining civil society and looking at its responses to austerity and municipal collaboration, however, was not as straightforward an exercise as the dominant political narrative on diffused local governance assumes. Civil society is the sum total of a wide range of social actors that operate outside the realm of the state apparatus and the private market, such as trade unions, voluntary associations, grassroots initiatives, interest groups, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), employers’ associations, the church, and even far-right militia organizations (Edwards, 2014). In order to align and position our research in relation to this heterogeneous domain of associations, we drew from the Gramscian standpoint, adopting a scalable interpretation of the *integral state* notion. In this frame, the local state is approached as a terrain of struggle for political rule and civil society is explored with respect to its stances to the changing matrices of Athenian governance (Gramsci, 1971).

The imposition of austerity policies in Athens, it is argued, triggered a rescaling process that demarcated the local sociopolitical milieu. By reason of reduced revenue-raising capacities, funding cutbacks, and inescapable budgetary management dilemmas, the City of Athens turned to the private sector and NGOs, creating a wide range of joint schemes that exist by virtue of their ability to generate or attract resources. The compliant role of the city in administering austerity policies is evident in the selective incorporation of civil society perspectives and actors in the respective collaborative efforts, foreclosing alternative political viewpoints. This stance was politically contested. A series of diffuse oppositional voices emerged and asserted their presence in the civil society realm, in the form of grassroots solidarity networks. The anti-austerity origins of this incipient social movement acted as a political barrier, arresting any form of communication with the city. In Athens, local state rescaling and the politics of austerity is influencing the recomposition of civil society, shaping a new form of governance based on NGOs and supported by supranational organizations and third-sector multinationals. Such a process bifurcates the local associational realm. It also underscores the limited potential of networking governance initiatives to remake politics along inclusive lines (Davies & Blanco, 2017; Nash, 2013).

The article is organized in four parts. In the first part, we discuss the relevance of the integral state notion in exploring local rescaling dynamics. Subsequently we offer an account of the context in which the local state and civil society were called to address current rescaling and austerity challenges. We then focus on Athens, discussing the collaborative shift in municipal policies. In light of the absence of grassroots schemes from municipal collaborative efforts, the fourth part centers on the informal associational realm, marking the traits of enhanced collective mobilization. In the concluding section, we return to the state–civil society nexus, commenting on the governance divide that has sprung up in the city as a result of austerity.

### **Rescaling as a hegemonic project**

The notion of *scale* and the associated debate on *rescaling* consist of an attempt to approach and understand the spatial and regulatory changes noted at the local level during the last decades. As an analytical category, scale has a subtle spatial reference, one that directs attention to the perceived

hierarchy of established political–territorial entities. At the nation-state level, for instance, national, regional, and local authorities are seen as nested spatial and scalar expressions of the institutional matrix that frames the articulation of politics and policy (Jessop, 2005). From this viewpoint, the debate on scale aims to shed light on the interplay between a particular state spatial form and the specific policy goals that are promoted through it (Swyngedouw, 2004). Changing policy objectives, however, and interaction among different tiers of power constantly influence and reorient scalar intents and practices, underscoring the provisional qualities of state scalar configurations (Herod, 2011). Rescaling shifts the analytical focus to moments of change, aiming to grasp the realignment of political–territorial entities toward new policy roles and priorities (Gualini, 2006).

According to the neo-Marxist strand of this debate, during the last decades a neoliberal rescaling process has been forcefully unfolding, driven by purposefully launched state spatial restructuring initiatives. The respective reorganization of state structures and goals is viewed as an attempt to displace crisis tendencies and address globalization-related regulatory challenges via welfare state refashioning and market liberalism (Brenner, 2004). State efforts to pin down the global economy are noted in the privileging of supranational territorial institutions, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union (EU). They are also directed at the subnational level, via the encouragement of development-oriented and self-reliant local governance schemes (Keil & Mahon, 2009). At this level, a series of territorial restructuring experimentations attempted to equip the new local scales with the appropriate political–jurisdictional spectrum to perform their role (Pelkonen, 2013). The example of the abolishment and subsequent reconstitution of regional (metropolitan) authorities along new policy modes in Spain, Denmark, the UK, and the Netherlands during the 1980s and the 1990s elucidates the relevance of the spatial and the relational dimensions in scalar formation endeavors (Brenner, 2009).

Centering on cities, reductions in central government funding to local authorities and enhanced budgetary discipline are associated in the literature with national states' fiscal preoccupations with lean public finances. Fiscal austerity, in this respect, consists of concerted efforts to constraint or reduce fiscal deficits, appeasing credit rating agencies' assessments and facilitating access to global financial markets (Peck, 2018). In the process, national authorities cast gradually away the redistributive views that informed spatial planning targets in the postwar years and devolve key socio-economic duties to cities, forcing local authorities to fend increasingly for themselves (Armondi, 2017; Souliotis & Alexandri, 2016). Credit rating agencies, however, also set the tone for local authority borrowing costs, triggering a quest for creditworthiness via fiscal purges at the local states' own initiatives. Austerity priorities, therefore, delineate central–local relations and decisively influence local authority policy stances, shaping an era of “austerity urbanism” (Peck & Whiteside, 2016).

The quest for changing the strategic orientation of scales is manifest in the launch of novel initiatives and policies that alter existing sociospatial arrangements. Rescaling, though, does not occur without impediment. It is dependent upon the extent to which local actors are repositioned along the new governance modes, enabling the reconstitution of policy spaces. Particularly so since state funding to cities is increasing channeled to collaborative schemes, impelling local authorities to make up for revenue losses by forging partnerships with local actors and stakeholders (Davies, 2011). This particular interpretation of rescaling directs analysis to relationship between state and civil society, approached here via a critical engagement with the Gramscian understanding of the integral state.

Gramsci (1971) defined the state in its inclusive sense as “political society + civil society” (p. 263) in which political and civil society are distinguished methodologically, not organically (Thomas, 2009). Gramscian analysis, in other words, perceives the state as a complex web of relations and, more important, as a site of struggles that occur through attempts to lay claims to overriding political positionalities (Nash, 2013). In that vein, political society is considered as the sum of governmental and legal apparatuses, practices, and institutions, entangled in the production of consent through state and civil society. Accordingly, *political hegemony* refers to effective social leadership, an ongoing attempt to create alliances and present particular interests as common (Davies, 2011). In the Gramscian sense, the quest for political rule is seen as exercised not only through state power

and command but also through networks, partnerships, clientelism, corruption, and appeals to solidarity. Hegemony modalities, in turn, range from inclusive efforts aiming at attaining the active consent of civil society to piecemeal concessions and selective incorporation of civil demands, resorting only exceptionally to sheer forms of coercion, although force is ever present in the technologies of rule (Davies, 2014; Jessop, 2016).

Gramsci-influenced accounts in radical geography and critical urban studies are increasingly approaching the local state as a historically and geographically specific terrain of struggle for political rule (Kipfer & Keil, 2002). Depicting the integral state as scalable to cities reflects current rescaling trajectories and the associated enhanced political and developmental role assigned to urban areas as regulatory nodes in the globalizing economy. In the case of the urban governance shift, the neo-Gramscian approach puts the analytical spotlight on the political dynamics that unfold when local state actors reach out to the associational realm, in an attempt to engage civil society in concerted efforts. Concurrently, it explores civil society's responses to rescaling endeavors, reflecting on the role of cities as settings of resistance, a viewpoint recently informed by the urban traits of the anti-austerity mobilizations noted in southern Europe.

Seeing the local state in its inclusive sense encourages reflections on urban hegemony (Jessop, 1997). From the neo-Gramscian perspective, rescaling denotes more than a political reform of the state apparatus and, therefore, it has to be addressed in terms of the processes through which political unity is created. Such an analysis underscores the relevance of the spatiality and the historicity of the local state as a social relation, "protected by the armour of coercion" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263; Jessop, 2005). Applying this theoretical lens, the following section looks at the particularity of the political and the civil society relations in Greece since the postwar years, discussing the quest for hegemony at the local regulatory scale.

### Reflecting on the local authority-civil society nexus

Greek local authorities present limited regulatory experiences and underdeveloped local relational dynamics, mainly with respect to their interaction with the associational sphere (Mouzelis, 2002). In accounting for this trait, we revisit the authoritarian political realities of the postwar years, defined chronologically by the civil war (1944–1949) and the military dictatorship (1967–1973). In this frame, and in an attempt to arrest the emergence of dissident political voices, national authorities formed, and were sustained by, a strongly centralized state spatial contour. During this time, regions were not established and prefectures were an administrative arm of the state apparatus. Additionally, municipalities were fragmented in a high number of approximately 6,000 units, stripped of any substantial capacity to intervene in the local economy and society. The direct appointment of mayors by the national authorities underscores the extent to which political repression impaired the political attributes of local governance, ensuring the controlling role of the national level in all decision-making tiers (Hlepas, 1997).

In a manner similar to the arbitrary power exercised by the regime over local authorities, civil society was subjected to strict political command pressures. All formal public-, private-, and voluntary-sector associations, for instance, were politically censored and "licensed" to operate by the national authorities, provided that their actions complied with the regime's goals. A case in point is trade union representation, co-opted by the national authorities throughout this time and banned during the years of outright dictatorial rule (1967–1974; Lavdas, 2005).

This historically specific pattern of governance was by no means stable and uncontested. During the postwar years of rapid urbanization, the absence of a housing policy capable of meeting emerging housing needs triggered a spontaneous grassroots mobilization in Greek cities in the form of squatting for shelter. *Spontaneity* is defined here in the Gramscian sense, approached as a politically leaderless and unmediated process of popular mobilization (Leontidou, 2012). The proliferation of illegal self-built shacks on the urban fringe is seen in the literature as a popular initiative claiming urban space, a social movement that defied official norms and planning bylaws, contesting state

authority. The popular colonization of peri-urban land is a key feature of the Mediterranean city thesis, also noted in Spain and Portugal during the same time period. In the Greek case, coercive state tactics in the form of housing demolition threats and simultaneous legalization promises upon the electoral victory of the establishment's parties co-opted the movement, which faded gradually away during the 1970s (Leontidou, 1990).

The fall of the authoritarian political order in 1974 was the result of both exogenous factors (the Cyprus dispute) and a combination of inner tensions, economic inefficiencies, and political resistance (Tsoukalas, 1981). Decades of suppressed political and associational freedoms, however, left local actors with limited collaborative governance references. Authoritarianism also tainted relations with institutions, fostering a distinctly contentious perspective in collective mobilizations.

### ***The postdictatorial era***

Following developments from the local authority standpoint, since the mid-1970s the relational qualities of the local sociopolitical milieu have been influenced by two parallel pathways. The first regards the clientelistic tactics developed by the national political parties in an attempt to establish and expand their electoral base. In light of the void left by the dictatorial regime at all subnational tiers of administration, national parties overshadowed the local political scene (Bratsis, 2010). The subsequent exploitation of local-level resources for the advantageous treatment of party supporters led to inward-looking and unyielding policy regimes. Scalar arrangements in this era supported and facilitated the emergence of vertical networks of political patronage by perpetuating the dependent state of local authorities in terms of both finances and duties (Petraikos & Psycharis, 2016).

The second course of events shaping local authority traits was the changing development priorities of the EU, which Greece joined in 1981. The establishment of a European regional policy in 1986 and the promotion of urban initiatives some years later (in 1994) could not be accommodated in the existing national scalar configuration. Thus, a series of state spatial restructuring attempts began in the mid-1980s, geared toward adjusting the respective structures accordingly.<sup>1</sup> Alongside, a range of new public acts encouraged the development of collaborative ventures in regions and cities, promoting the diffused governance and localized financial reliance objectives (Chorianopoulos, 2012). As a result, a new NGO scene emerged during the 1990s, participating in joint ventures with regional and national authorities (Frangonikolopoulos, 2014). Similar developments were not noted at the local political level. It seems that at this scale, the reform wave was haphazardly initiated and, overall, it fell short in triggering local authority synergies with civil society and the private sector (Kyvelou & Karaiskou, 2006). The act enabling municipalities to set up public-private partnership<sup>2</sup>, for instance, was introduced as late as 2005 (Greek Government Newspaper (GGN), 2005). Likewise, looser types of joined ventures, engaging the local economy and society in integrated urban interventions, were formally introduced in 1999. Throughout the 2000s, however, no such schemes were launched by Greek municipalities (Chorianopoulos, 2010). Local municipal authorities, in other words, responded half-heartedly to a series of ill-prepared attempts at state rescaling, perpetuating hierarchical scalar features. Civil society, in turn, in both its formal and informal scopes, had a narrow local presence. Local authority collaborative ventures with NGOs, for instance, were underdeveloped (Getimis & Grigoriadou, 2004), and grassroots mobilization centered on particularistic issues, failing to form a strong oppositional force against the local political society (Arampatzi & Nicholls, 2012). The seemingly distant stance assumed by the informal associational realm from developments in the city, however, does not suggest detachment and apathy.

The spatiality and the historicity of the local state in Athens puts forward a turbulent relation with the grassroots. Hegemony was attained coercively in the postwar years when authoritarian and centralized regimes exploited the issue of housing shortages. Clientelism, in turn, was the hegemonic modality noted at the local state level since the return to democracy in the mid-1970s. During this time, the local state appears as a subaltern scale; its peripheral role in the national socioeconomic realities mitigated the surfacing of counterhegemonic voices and struggles at this level. Grassroots

mobilizations were directed toward the national authorities, approaching the city mistrustfully, as a mediator of central command. Examples of this stance include both the social movement against the (2004) Summer Olympics in Athens and the subsequent uprising against police brutality (2008). Though both mobilizations had a distinct urban spatiality (Stavridis, 2010), protesters' attention was not directed at the local authority realm (Kavoulakos, 2008). The austerity wave that scarred the country during the last decade, and the associated rescaling attempt, changed perceptions about the centrality of local state's regulatory role (Maloutas, 2014).

## Austerity and rescaling

The recessionary impact of the 2008 global financial crisis on national economic performance indicators was severe. The current account deficit reached 14.7% of gross domestic product in 2008 and, the following year, the already troublesome debt-to-gross domestic product ratio rose to 126.8%. In light of a solvency crisis, the government agreed a series of bailout loans with the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), dependent upon the implementation of market liberalization, privatizations, and stringent austerity measures, centering on public spending cuts (Bank of Greece, 2016).

Focusing on the local level, structural reforms consisted of a combined endeavor to reduce local authority expenditures and to render municipalities more responsible for local prospects. Thus, the Municipal Amalgamations Act was introduced in 2010, merging local authorities from 1,034 to 325 units in an attempt to attain scale economies in service provision. Concurrently, significant social welfare and developmental duties were devolved locally, and municipalities were obliged to set up two new participatory platforms, facilitating interaction with a broad range of local stakeholders and interest groups<sup>3</sup>(Ministry of Interior, Decentralization and E-Government, 2010). The devolution of duties, however, took place when the socioeconomic impact of austerity policies came to light, bringing local authorities in front of unprecedented challenges. Cities, and particularly Athens, feature in the literature as disproportionately affected by the crisis in terms of rising poverty and unemployment levels (Leventi & Matsaganis, 2016).

During the first years of the crisis (2007–2011), the urban region of Athens recorded the largest fall in household disposable income across the EU (Ballas, Dorling, & Hennig, 2017). Poverty indicators in the city, however, surpass the regional average, registering a total of 26.1% of the population living below the poverty threshold and a further 8.1% experiencing severe material deprivation (Petraki & Ifantopoulos, 2014). Additionally, the majority of the various (municipal or grassroots) “street work” initiatives focusing on the region's homeless population is taking place in Athens's city center, in the same place where major anti-austerity rallies are concentrated, influencing perceptions about this area as the focal point of crisis-related repercussions and counteractions (Arapoglou & Gounis, 2017). The reaction of the city to sustained socioeconomic downturn was explored locally, a research exercise that approached both the political and civil society strands of the Athenian integral state.

Fieldwork in Athens involved 31 semistructured interviews conducted in three phases in the 2015–2016 period. Research started at the municipal level involving interviews with councilors and local authority officials in an attempt to explore the city's stance toward austerity and collaboration. The main municipal collaborative governance schemes were examined and municipal partners identified and approached. Subsequently, our attention focused on the grassroots, exploring a range of schemes launched in the informal association realm since the onset of austerity. Where interviews are directly drawn upon, they are referenced according to actor code and gender.<sup>4</sup> In addition to interviews, direct observations were undertaken in key sites of interest, such as local authority council meetings, community assemblies, and grassroots social solidarity gatherings. Starting from the municipal level, respondents underscored the double challenge of a dilapidating local socioeconomic reality, in light of a declining municipal capacity to intervene and address it.

## The city's collaborative response

One in three stores in the city closed down during the crisis and has remained shut ever since, while our soup kitchens serve twice as many as they did before. We're talking about 20,000 portions of food every day. This is what we have to deal with. (Athens-EP-M)

As the impact of austerity trickled gradually down in both socioeconomic and spatial terms, the city was faced with the neoliberal rescaling repercussions of devolved budgetary repression and workforce trimming. National government grants, for instance, shrank by approximately 60% during the last 7 years and the overall municipal budget was reduced by 20% (City of Athens, 2017). In addition, as a consequence of employment terminations and early retirement choices, the number of people employed by the municipality was reduced by almost half, reaching 7,000 in 2015. Because the city is not allowed to hire new personnel,<sup>5</sup> eroded human capacity was added to municipal quandaries (Athens-UP-M).

The municipality, trapped at the crossroads of enhanced responsibilization and restrictive budgeting, succumbed to the localized financial reliance narrative put forward by the latest rescaling endeavor. To begin with, it reorganized municipal administrative structures and services in an attempt to cut down on costs. The application of strict cost and revenue controls is manifest in the adoption of the city's debt elimination scheme, expected to settle almost all municipal liabilities by 2019 via steadily increasing budget surpluses and identifying new sources of income (City of Athens, 2016). Successively, emerging policy fronts were dealt with by way of partnerships with the private sector and civil society. [Table 1](#) outlines the traits of eight collaborative schemes launched by the city during austerity, underscoring the wide range of actors involved and the external sources of funding that drive them.

### *Collaboration as a vehicle for austerity management*

What is initially noted in [Table 1](#) is the plurality of fields and areas that have been viewed by the city through the collaborative lens. Partnerships were instigated in urban regeneration, economic development, and social policy, indicating the high degree of municipal policy reliance on collaboration. What is also observed in [Table 1](#) is the wide range of partners engaged in the organization and implementation of these schemes, including national authorities, local NGOs, major transnational corporations (such as Aegean Airlines and Samsung), or third-sector multinationals (such as Onassis Public Benefit Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors). In terms of financing, however, the picture gets narrower. Nonlocal philanthrocapitalists (Edwards, 2008), together with the European Economic Area and the EU, appear as sole policy funders, suggesting a form of engagement in local initiatives with direct access to policymaking. Global philanthrocapitalism is influencing even the way in which the city plans for the future. Athens bid successfully for participation in the 100 Resilient Cities global network—sponsored by Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors—in an attempt to gain access to experts and resources to address the crisis. The city's "roadmap to resilience" has been shaped in a public event involving 120 local stakeholders. What is unfolding in Athens, in other words, is a rescaling process: the urban policy space has been "unbounded," actors aligned to new governance forms, and formal state powers reconstituted (Gualini, 2006). After decades of national and EU-level attempts to incite the rationales of self-reliance and networking in urban affairs, rescaling and collaboration are making ground locally via austerity policies. In the process, the new local political society appears receptive to hybridized and associational governance forms. As stated by a local politician: "This governance tier should become less intrusive and invasive and more enabling; creating links and letting things happen. . . . It should function as a monitoring and facilitating institution (Athens-EP-F)."

Similarly, local authority views on administrative and financial self-reliance strongly echo the rescaling rhetoric. City hall interviewees, for instance, called for an alternative local tax system, enabling "creative flexibility to raise our revenue locally" (Athens-EP-M). In this line, the city has already succeeded in becoming a "managing authority" in handling EU structural funds, the first





**Table 1.** Municipal collaborative schemes (2010–2017).

Title	Development		Resilience		Grassroots		Social policy	
	Innovathens (2013)	Athens Tourism Partnership (2016)	Resilient Athens (2014)	synAthina (2014)	Solidarity Hub (2014)	Family Solidarity (2012)	Athens Solidarity capital (2015)	
Goal	Public-private consortium focusing on the tech sector and supporting startups	Joint venture aiming to promote Athens as a city-break destination	Defining and addressing key local environmental and socioeconomic challenges	Facilitating community groups to communicate and implement their activities	Supporting over 1,000 citizens in need in a purposefully redesigned venue	Supporting in-kind (food and clothing) and offering counseling to families for a 6-month period	Social inclusion measures and material assistance to the most deprived	
Key members	<p>Rethink &amp; Reactivate (2010)</p> <p>Physical intervention in the inner city</p> <p>Participatory research project</p> <p>National ministries</p> <p>City of Athens</p> <p>Region of Attica</p> <p>Other state organizations</p> <p>Onassis Public Benefit Foundation</p>	<p>Municipality of Athens</p> <p>Athens International Airport</p> <p>Aegean Airlines</p>	<p>City Unit for Urban Sustainability</p> <p>120 Local stakeholders</p> <p>100 Resilient Cities network</p>	<p>synAthina team</p> <p>A network of sponsors and citizens' groups</p>	<p>Municipal social services</p> <p>Solidarity Now</p> <p>leading a scheme of five NGOs</p> <p>Private enterprises</p>	<p>Municipal social services</p> <p>Cosmote</p>	<p>Municipal social services</p> <p>The church and 17 nongovernmental organizations</p>	
Funding	<p>EU Structural Funds</p> <p>Samsung Electronics</p>	<p>Athens International Airport</p> <p>Aegean Airlines</p> <p>The Hellenic Initiative (on behalf of the city)</p>	<p>Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors</p>	<p>Bloomberg Philanthropies</p>	<p>European Economic Area grants</p> <p>Private-sector sponsors</p>	<p>Cosmote</p> <p>DEPA</p> <p>CSR Hellas</p>	<p>EU Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived</p>	

municipality in the EU to achieve such a role (Athens Development and Destination Management Agency, 2017, p. 18). “If we hadn’t done that, we might have had access to more funds via the regional NSRF program. But the thing is that we set up a structure that gives us independence and self-sufficiency(Athens-UP-M).” Austerity as a catalyst for local governance change was put in force by the country’s bailout agreements, implemented by the national authorities and monitored by the EU and the IMF. In addition to the specificities of externally imposed emergency measures, however, austerity is present as an overriding reality constraining local authorities’ perceptions of alternative political choices. Following the neoliberal narrative of global capital markets’ preponderance over state finances, credit rating agencies surveil and assess cities’ fiscal and political profiles, tacitly enforcing a logic of financial discipline into municipal priorities (Peck & Whiteside, 2016). Moody’s, for instance, has already “rewarded” Athens with a positive rating, reflecting “the continued commitment of the city administration to prudent budgetary policy” (Moody’s Public Sector Europe, 2018). Because such ratings influence local authority borrowing costs and business investment decisions, the local political society is incentivized to renarrate and absorb lean state discipline into its operational matrix. In this light, though collaboration appears as a way out to emergent and underfunded policy challenges, its traits are necessarily defined by austerity. In the case of Athens, the relationship between the municipality and its newly found partners was built around the city’s conformity to austerity.

Yes, it’s because of cuts in public spending that we turned to the private sector. But it wasn’t only up to us. During the mayor’s first term in office, his attempts to tackle corruption and streamline the budget attracted the attention of the private sector. In the past they [the private sector] were hesitant in getting involved. Now there’re very many offers from private companies and sponsors on the table, and that’s new! (Athens, EP-F).

Over and above NGOs and the private sector, the city also opened up avenues of communication with citizens’ groups and informal voluntary networks. Reference is made here to the “synAthina” online platform, set up in 2012 by the Office of the Vice Mayor for Civil Society and Municipality Decentralization.

### ***The synAthina bridge to the grassroots***

As stated in the synAthina documents, by “citizens’ groups” we mean NGOs, non-profit civil partnerships, unofficial groups or even individual initiatives, dealing with solutions and actions for their neighborhood’s and city’s welfare” (synAthina, 2015). Groups register and post the dates, times, and locations of their events on the synAthina website, as well as other relevant information. During the last 3 years, approximately 200 different groups have uploaded a total of 960 actions and events in the synAthina platform.

Since 2014, the program has been backed by Bloomberg Philanthropies, as it won one of the five Mayors Challenge awards in an international competition launched by this institution (Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2014). Bloomberg funds support the day-to-day operations of synAthina, including employees’ costs. Proposals uploaded to the site, however, are not backed by the grant. Instead, funding is sought outside city hall, in a network of associated private companies, a choice that further supports the argument of a change in the municipality’s regulatory role.

The municipality’s attempt to get through to the informal associational realm appeared at a time when grassroots’ presence in the city was acquiring particular political characteristics. This is the civil society’s strand that has sprung up in response to unmet social need and in opposition to austerity (Arampatzi, 2017). From this perspective, synAthina entails an inclusive effort, a hegemony modality aiming at creating alliances and engulfing differences, forming a common political front. However, though high participation numbers suggest a positive reception of synAthina from the grassroots, interaction between the two realms remains minimal and detached, triggering tensions and not easing them off. At the same time, grassroots mobilization is prominent.

## The proliferation of grassroots initiatives

Athens' compliance with austerity has spawned new forms of resistance. The city was the focal point of mass anti-austerity struggles in Europe for several years after 2010, centered on the organizing power of the trade unions and the political dynamism of Syriza, then an upcoming opposition party of the radical left. However, this antagonistic movement has lost much—though not all—of its momentum. Trade unions were deeply affected by austerity as high unemployment reduced their membership and undermined their organizing capacity.<sup>6</sup> As commented, “During the last years we organized more than 40 general strikes and . . . I personally think that because of the crisis, unionism suffered a strategic defeat; we couldn't offer an alternative to austerity, a way out (Athens-TU-F).” Disillusionment prevailed when Syriza took office and the new government adopted austerity in July 2015. Since then, the solidarity networks that burgeoned in the city during the crisis have asserted themselves in the social and political landscape, positioning their actions against the local state.

The impact of economic instability and change on civil society traits, reactions, and leanings has been commented upon. Economic crisis, in particular, whether in the form of a cyclical contraction or a severe long-lasting recession, is seen as triggering particular civil society responses, driven by welfare need. According to the literature, when economic growth decelerates and problems of poverty, exclusion, and deprivation do not find satisfactory solutions in the “institutionalized field,” new social forces and solidarity networks develop, giving rise to alternative redistribution mechanisms (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, and Hamdouch, 2014, p. 2). In other words, “the failure - for at least some sections of society - of established systems (technology, markets, policy, governance etc.) to deliver well-being and economic prosperity” sets off the emergence of new forms of civic engagement, aiming to address prominent dimensions of material and political exclusion (Nicholls, Simon, and Gabriel, 2015, p.6). Such mobilization, in turn, is perceived as an incipient social movement to the extent that it involves a campaign that extends beyond any single event and a collective effort that frames key issues and claims alternative worldviews (Nicholls et al., 2015 Tilly & Wood, 2013). According to the literature, more than 2,500 grassroots schemes have emerged in Greek cities during the crisis, signifying the emergence of a discernable mobilization with a prominent presence in Athens (Kantzara, 2014). For the Omikron Project, an informal group of 40 volunteers mapping grassroots initiatives in an attempt to address the stereotypes of “idleness” and “helplessness” projected to the country,

During the last three years [2013–2016], grassroots initiatives in Athens more than doubled, while a total of 70% of the networks that existed prior to 2013, do remain active. These are groups that operate informally on principle, and only a few turn into NGOs. They don't want to have any dealings with the state or with handling funds. They just want to offer a way out to the crisis. That means a lot as we see a different civil society emerging; different from the one that surfaced in the 1990s because of EU funds. (Athens CA-F)

The goals and practices of Athenian grassroots initiatives are particularly varied, ranging from networks that gather and distribute basic goods, to solidarity structures that experiment with nonmonetary and collectivist type of approaches to issues at hand<sup>7</sup>(Arampatzi, 2017). Diversity notwithstanding, a number of common traits were noted, referring primarily to their informal features and their suspicion toward prescribed structures and institutions associated with austerity.

### *Informality and horizontalism in practice*

Informality in the Athenian grassroots realm is underscored by the absence of any legal status in the majority of cases we explored and by the self-organized nature of their activities. The examples of the two community kitchens we talked to is illustrative. Parea is a small team of five people with daily jobs in the private sector. They get together on a weekly basis to cook free meals in open-air sites (refugee camps and parks) and to offer clothing, blankets, and other necessities to homeless people, distressed families, and refugees.<sup>8</sup> As stated:

We organize everything through Facebook. At the moment approximately 4,500 people follow us there. So, what we do is this: First we decide on the particular activity we're going to do, as well as the place where we're going to cook. Then, we upload a list of items (cutlery, ingredients, whatever) on our Facebook page. . . . People check particular items in the list and commit themselves to bring them at the cooking spot and cook with us. . . . There're no offices or anything, just a meeting point. (Athens CA-F)

The second community kitchen, a group called The Different Person, elucidates the reasons behind the alternative organizational route followed by the grassroots. Informality appears as a purposeful stance, defined in relation to the shortfalls of bureaucratic structures in addressing the multifaceted privation types that have surfaced in Athens: "In the city, you have to go with a portfolio of eligibility papers in order to claim assistance. Same thing with NGOs. If the documents are not good enough—unemployment cards, tax certificates—then you come to us (Athens CA-F)." Groups that acquired a legal form also operate along self-organized and nonhierarchical lines. For instance, Athens has witnessed a proliferation of social cooperative enterprises (Kavoulakos & Gritzias, 2015), reflecting a desire to "pursue collective solutions to daily survival problems" (Athens SB/PA-F). All such initiatives approached for the purposes of this study (such as publishing companies, bookstores, and cafés) are owned and self-managed by the workers' assembly, a collective type of decision-making body that meets on a weekly basis. Pay is equal for all members and if profits emerge, the respective surplus is used to support other cooperative initiatives of a similar logic and prospects. More important, the Athens Network of Collective Initiatives was set up in 2012, fostering cooperation among social cooperative enterprises in the city, enabling their political presence at the urban level (Athens SB/PA-F). By the same token, other groups explored, such as Ithaca, a mobile laundry service for the homeless, or The Bridge, engaging in social street work with the homeless, are run solely by volunteer activists. Both groups decided to become legal entities in order get involved in activities, such as training, that would not have otherwise been possible (Athens VSE-M).

Citizens' engagement is facilitated by social media and the presence of dedicated web platforms that communicate grassroots activities and requests to an increasingly receptive public.<sup>9</sup> Shared labor complements informality as a distinct quality in grassroots mobilization, shaping a contentious political approach that draws from a growing frustration with formal structures and institutions (Chatterton & Hodkinson, 2007). In this respect, shared labor is perceived as "a form of resistance . . . a statement, exposing the absence of the authorities from where they are needed . . . a way to show and deal with the problems the city is facing" (Athens VSE-F).

The ethics behind participation in grassroots initiatives diverge markedly from charitable and affective responses to poverty that reproduce relations of power. Instead, grassroots mobilization comes across as a political praxis, a collective social practice promoting a rapture in the normalization of the sociopolitical realities of austerity (Kaika, 2017). The active engagement of citizens in grassroots solidarity activities suggests a quest for shared experiences, forged in common among participants (Arampatzi, 2017).

The reason we don't receive donations or money is that it's easy for anyone to say, "Here is twenty euros for whatever." That's not our goal, however. . . . We want to motivate you to get up and go out, buy the stuff and come to the event, meet people, listen to what they have to say. . . . (Athens CA-F)

The second common feature that grassroots initiatives share is their opposition to austerity, depicted as the key reason behind their mobilization. In this light, agents, policies, and institutions related to austerity are kept at least at a distance.

### **Relations with the city**

*Collaboration* in the Athenian grassroots realm refers to a noticeably different process than the one observed at city hall. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that relations between grassroots organizations and the City of Athens are virtually nonexistent.

The views of grassroots networks regarding the collaborative governance policies launched by the city range from the guarded to the outright contentious. In the first case, we see grassroots networks that employ municipal resources in order to promote their goals. Reference is made here to grassroots schemes that use, for instance, the synAthina web platform and venue in an attempt to offer a concerted range of services to the homeless population.<sup>10</sup> None of the groups involved in this initiative, however, is willing to invest further in any type of relations with city.

No, we don't collaborate with any state institutions. Yes, we're an NGO, but we don't want to be seen as yet another organization that's funded by the state to return a fraction of what it gets to the people in difficulty. This view might not do justice to many NGOs, but it's a strong one and we hear it all the time: "Ah, you're there, so you get a piece of the pie as well." (Athens VSE-F)

The more outspoken and radical grassroots' viewpoints reject outright any association with the city. Contention draws from the city's bureaucratic bearing in delivering social assistance, excluding a significant share of people in need from even approaching formal support mechanisms. First and foremost, however, grassroots' antagonism reflects the city's endorsement of austerity logics. Municipal efforts to achieve a surplus budget amidst local socioeconomic despair is perceived as part of a broader attempt by the local state to "depoliticize austerity and normalize the prudent financial management narrative that accompanies fiscal retrenchment" (Athens CA-M). The culmination of an already thorny relation appears to be the 2015 national referendum. Voters were asked whether to approve the austerity-laden bailout conditions in the country's government debt crisis proposed jointly by the EC, IMF, and ECB. The mayor's leading role in the national campaign for accepting the proposal broke any remaining links even with the less radical of grassroots networks. As stated:

The referendum wasn't about the Euro or Grexit. It was about austerity. You can't stand out as the main proponent of the "yes" vote, as the mayor did, knowing that what we stand for is negated by the "yes" vote. That's why very many solidarity networks have pulled out from synAthina ever since. The networks don't trust the city any more. (Athens CA-F)

Grassroots' discordance with the city echoes frustration with politics that remain enframed within established institutions and structures. The decisive role played by the international lending troika (EU, IMF, and ECB) in the sovereign debt crisis, imposing market-disciplinary regulatory arrangements within national and subnational political arenas (Brenner, Peck, & Theodore, 2010), shook perceptions about the capacity of formal political responses to contest austerity and its plights. In this respect, self-management and informality reflect a process of an emerging political subjectification, constructed spontaneously at the urban level (Karaliotas, 2017). As in the postwar years of the housing social movement, current activism in Athens is also defined by the growing distance between the grassroots strand of the associational sphere and the local political society.

There's this growing realization that we're on our own, under no protective umbrella of any formal authority or institution. Not only that, but that we're actually against them. Hence the shift towards self-organization. ... The election of Syriza and the great disappointment that followed it, shattered any remaining illusions that there's a chance for a way out via formal politics and institutions. (Athens CBO-F).

## Conclusions

Civil society is approached in the neo-Gramscian perspective as a dynamic area of associations and, in contextually defined circumstances, as an observable reality that upholds or challenges the existing distribution of power (Kohn, 2002). As argued, a notable correspondence in standpoints, objectives, and interests between the political society and a prominent coalition of forces within civil society enhances the ideological legitimacy of the state, enabling hegemony. On the contrary, governance challenges arise when civil society aims and goals are either overlooked, ignored, or suppressed by state agencies (Swyngedouw, 2009). In the latter instance, the surfacing of a shared perspective from a discernible section of this otherwise variegated social terrain is appreciated as capable of contesting policy choices and alignments, bringing the political legitimacy of state and government into

question (Della Porta & Diani, 2011). In both cases, the targets pursued and the social movements that emanate from civil society at given points in time are seen as being strongly conditioned by the actions or inactions of the political society in a range of fields, including the regulation of the economy and the protection of social rights (Ekiert & Kubik, 2014). The emergence of an incipient social movement in Athens is defined with respect to the municipality, disapproving and antagonizing the positions of the later institution on austerity and collaboration.

Austerity was enforced on the City of Athens by way of extralocal discipline, following a scalar rearticulation path that elevated the role of supranational authorities (the EU) and leading players in the international financial system (credit rating agencies) in monitoring and shaping the traits of public finances in the county. The national authorities, in turn, a key agent in such an institutional remaking, succumbed to the bailout pressures of the sovereign debt crisis and projected socio-economic burdens to cities (Chorianopoulos & Tselepi, 2017). What we witness in Athens, in other words, is a form of scalar dumping reflecting the mitigated position of cities as political actors in the reconstituted formations of state space (Peck, 2012).

Since austerity, Athens has been confronted with unprecedented challenges, a turn of events that occurred amidst the withdrawal of the national authorities from key socioeconomic duties. In response, the local political leadership turned to nonpolitical hands of support, attempting to rearticulate the state–civil society nexus. Being largely compliant with budget cutbacks and the cultivation of entrepreneurial rationalities, the emerging type of collaboration promoted by the city is based on an alliance between the municipality and NGOs, supported financially by supranational organizations and third-sector philanthrocapitalist multinationals. In this frame, the quest for social consent assumed a call to local society for a shared effort to address austerity symptoms. Collaboration, however, as part of the new integral state's attempt to reinforce hegemony, could not accommodate voices that viewed austerity as the root cause of local troubles. As a result, in Athens as elsewhere (Davies & Pill, 2012; Nash, 2013), dissident activists were tacitly excluded from the networking governance process, a policy closure underscored by the absence of any trust-based deliberation attempts. The case of Athens highlights the narrow potential of networking governance to mobilize support by blurring competing perspectives. It thus foregrounds the limitations of the civic engagement discourse, which absorbs and overshadows the grassroots into a uniform and unvarying civil society realm, placing it by the state (Mayer, 2006).

What we are witnessing in Athens is the emergence of an elite pluralist regime, an institutional arrangement triggered by austerity and shaped by resource dependency between the city and partner bodies (Coen, 2007). Its policymaking traits of emergency and project-driven responses to issues at hand prohibit public deliberation and shape contested political landscapes (Arapoglou & Gounis, 2017). In the process, civil society is bifurcated into an elite sector partnering with the city and a grassroots element that positions itself outside the austerity machine.

In contextualizing Athenian sociopolitical dynamics via the integral state lens, analysis underscored the catalytic role of austerity in redefining relations between the city and the grassroots. The instigation by the city of strict fiscal discipline and self-reliance governance logics rendered visible the role of the local authority in administering austerity. The city-centric challenging stances emanating from the grassroots realm mark a stark difference from what the city has witnessed in the past, pointing to the rescaling trajectories set locally in motion. In Athens, the local political scale has emerged as an enhanced regulatory sphere and a site of grassroots resistance that refuses to legitimize the austerian governance shift. Such developments manifest struggles over urban space. The extent to which the incipient social movement noted in Athens carries the potential to articulate a counterhegemonic stance for imagining alternatives outside austerity remains open to investigation.

## Notes

1. Reference is made here to the introduction of the regional tier of administration (1986), the transformation of prefectures into political authorities (1994), and the amalgamation of municipalities (1997) into 1,034 units.

2. Public-private partnership as formally defined and encouraged by the EU (see Commission of the European Communities, 2004).
3. The Migrants Integration Council is an advice-giving body in the form of a forum that bridges the municipality with city-based third-country national organizations. Likewise, the municipal Deliberation Committee engages the local authority, local businesses, and civil society in goal-setting efforts. In an attempt to involve as wide a range of local voices as possible, a quarter of its members are randomly recruited individual citizens (Chorianopoulos, 2012).
4. Actor codes used in this article are as follows: EP = elected politician; UP = unelected politician; LO = local authority official; TU = trade union official; VSE = voluntary-sector employer or employee; SB = small business employee/owner; CA = community activist; CBO = community-based organization; PA political activist. Gender codes are M, F, or other.
5. The bailout agreement (2010) introduced quantitative restrictions on employment policy in the public sector (Ministry of Finance, 2014).
6. According to figures provided by the Centre of Athens Labour Unions (2017), between 2013 and 2017 a total of 23,497 workers stopped participating in their unions' electoral processes, representing approximately 20% of the unionized labor force in the region.
7. An indication of the variety of these initiatives and their alternative political-economic orientation is provided by Kavoulakos and Gritzas (2015), recording in Athens a total of 68 social medical centers, 84 alternative currency initiatives, 71 education collectives, 58 "no middlemen" markets, and 140 cooperative enterprises.
8. During 2015 the team served more than 10,000 portions of food in various areas.
9. Examples of such web platforms include "volunteer4Greece" and "solidarity4all."
10. The "One Stop" initiative is such an example. Two semiformal NGOs (the Bridge and Ithaca Laundry), together with Parea, one activist group (The Unseen) and a number of individuals gather twice a week in the synAthina venue, offering food and a variety of services (legal advice, first aid, laundry, haircuts, showers, etc.) to the homeless population.

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