Empathy, as affective ethical technology
and transformative political praxis

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In this essay we re-assess some of the analytical potential of the concept of 'empathy', and in particular, the concept's ability to address the tension between a humanitarian ethos (seen as representative of normative, often conservative values) and grassroots political action, which is expressed as solidarity towards troubled Others. We invite the reader to join us in a journey that unites ideas from seemingly disparate thinkers—philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists—in an attempt to salvage empathy from the semantic nexus of pity, compassion, sympathy and related sentiments that form the basis of humanitarian antipolitics (Tiktin 2011). We argue that empathy, despite its mistaken association with neoliberalism, can be used as a politically nuanced analytical notion that has the potential to subvert power, and play a role as an affective, ethical technology of resistance.

One of our main aims is to stress the value of 'empathy' as a conceptual tool that can potentially evade typologies of humanitarian action conceived as either 'moral code' or 'moral agency' (see Fassin 2014). The empathetic point of view triggers an auto-didactic and transformative process of sharing—knowledge, perspectives, resources—that has the potential to destabilise fixed conceptualisations of social structure and subjectivity. Borrowing inspiration from Kastoriadis (2007), we entertain the possibility that the empathic capacity to *teach oneself* how to imagine the world from the Other's point of view can be seen as affirmative political praxis established in radical imagination.

In a recent monograph, Carolyn Pedwell has foregrounded empathy as a socio-political relation that arises within (but also reconstitutes) 'social and geo-political hierarchies and relations of power' (2014: xii). We share her concern with what we call—paraphrasing (Hannerz 2010)—the two faces of empathy: the happy and the worried one. The first can be seen as a self-congratulatory attitude on the part of the relatively privileged empathiser, while the second reflects distress about the asymmetries in humanitarianism and the practice of giving. Pedwell, for sure, goes at great length to highlight the neoliberal entanglements of empathy. For example, the manner in which empathy has been appropriated by Barack Obama's election campaign (Pedwell 2012a, 2014), or the de-politicisation it propagates in the context of international aid and development (Pedwell 2012b, 2014; see also, Fassin et al 2010; Fassin 2005, 2011a, 2011b; Ferguson 1994; Povinelli 2011; Cheliotis 2013; Rozakou 2012).

Such thoughts lead us to interrogate if empathy merely conveys the self-transformation of the privileged subject, the empathiser, or engenders the potential

of transformative political action (that challenges established asymmetries). To contemplate the second possibility, Pedwell (2014) uses the work of feminist and anti-racist theorists (Ahmed, Spelman). We draw instead our inspiration from philosophers (Nitzsche, Levinas, Deleuze, and Castoriadis) and anthropologists (Hollan, Throop, Fassin and Rosaldo). We also provide brief examples from the austerity and refugee crises in Greece, which indicate how empathy may encapsulate humanitarian perspectives that depart from neoliberal humanitarian ethnics.

Empathy as an anthropological concern

We should make visible from the start our intention to defend the usefulness of empathy as a political *tour de force* that will enrich the anthropological analytical vocabulary. The crisis of neoliberal capitalism, exemplified in the spread and escalation of international conflict, forced displacement and global hierarchies of power has intensified anthropological concern about humanitarian action, intervention and responsibility. We can see the emergence of a politico-ethical doctrine (see Kapferer this volume) whose relation to advanced capitalism does not seem to be a matter of pure of historical coincidence. The failures and distortions of advanced capitalism have been increasingly portrayed as 'crises'. The use of the term 'crisis' is itself a technology of governance that serves to solidify this politico-ethical doctrine through displacing accountability and through introducing multiple states of exception (cf. Agamben 2005) in modern political and economic systems. Successive financial crises for example are never discussed in terms of economic implosions and the proliferation of casino capitalism (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Instead, there is a systematic attempt to incriminate labour rights and the welfare state and to introduce 'exceptional' measures that involve the methodical modification of employment laws and the abolishment of welfare systems.

Forced displacement—another phenomenon that has been described as a 'crisis'—is being discursively divorced from military interventions (Kapferer 2004) and historical relations of economic violence that date back to colonial times. Artificial dichotomies between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants' attempt to establish multiple hierarchies of eligibility, states of exception and ideas about the radical difference between the 'ordered', 'advanced', 'secular' and democratic West and its troubled Others (cf. Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2016). In this political and—dare we say ideological—climate, we insist that empathy, the ability to imagine the world from the Other's point of view, may be a useful tool that has the potential to question the discursive and practical basis of this new politico-ethical doctrine, through inspiring actors to acknowledge the commonality of their political predicaments.

Seen within a broader context of humanitarian de-politicisation, empathy has been ignored (at best) by sociocultural anthropologists, or treated—along with other sympathy-related concepts—as representing complicity to the status quo. In political rhetoric, humanitarian aid directed towards displacement and austerity 'crises' has played an exonerating role, diverting attention from the foci of power and the violence of inequality (see Fassin & Pandolfi 2010). Neoliberal governance literally

depends on the idea that it is the responsibility of the third sector, and of ordinary citizens, to absorb the shock waves produced by "integrated world capitalism" (Guattari 2000). The political ramifications of certain "cultural tropes" such as engagement and participation (cf. Candea et.al. 2015) have led a number of scholars to closely scrutinise the foundations of the ethical modalities that underpin such concepts.

Standing in unison with voices that challenge the foundations and effects of conventional political praxis, and in line with the critical perspective introduced in this volume, we will focus on the semiological and ideological divide that separates empathy from other compassion-related concepts, and emphasise the role of empathy as an ethical technology. Empathy, we feel, can serve as a versatile and politically nuanced concept to aid analysis within the expanding fields of political anthropology of humanitarianism and moral anthropology. It is, in fact, quite surprising that anthropology, a comparative discipline deeply concerned with other points of view, has spent so little attention to it (Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011; Hollan 2008; Throop 2008). In our view, this inattention is related to a semantic confusion regarding the polysemy, cultural variation and specificity of the empathetic point view, which is, in turn, further conflated with the empathetic projections of the analyst, and the independent trajectory of empathy (as an analytical, philosophical and deeply political concept).

Hollan and Throop have made a significant contribution in advocating for the reinstatement of empathy within general contemporary anthropology. In their introductions to two collaborative projects (Hollan and Throop 2008, 2011) they recognise an anthropological ambivalence towards empathy, dated back to Boaz, and exacerbated by Geertz. The latter, in his famous essay 'From the Native's Point of View' caricatures the empathetic ethnographer—'the chameleon fieldworker … a walking miracle of empathy' (Geertz 1983: 56). His position represents a wider anthropological tradition that prioritises 'the structure and contextual meaning', over the thoughts of other people 'understood as psychological individuals' (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 416). For Geertz, ethnographic empathy is a mere projection, the presumptuous superimposition of the analyst's thoughts and experiences on the ethnographic subject. Instead of attempting to place the experience of others in empathetic terms defined by a Western perception of personhood, Geertz recommends that the ethnographer should interpret other experiences in their own culturally embedded terms (1983: 59).

Hollan (2008) compares Geertz's rejection of empathy with the deeply empathetic and experiential approach taken by Rosaldo (1989). In his essay 'Grief and a headhunter's rage' Rosaldo makes visible a fundamental dimension of empathy: to better understand another's predicament, you need to experience a similar predicament yourself. Here, Rosaldo's well-known anthropological narrative—of how he truly understood Ilongot rage and mourning after the tragic death of his wife—demonstrates that empathy relies 'on personal experiences that are homologous to the experiences we are attempting to understand' (Hollan 2008: 478-9).

Rosaldo's experiential position also highlights the role of emotion in the empathetic encounter: in order to understand another, you have to feel like

another; an argument that redirects attention to the double dimension of empathy as a feeling *and* a mode of thinking. Hollan[i] brings the two dimensions together by stressing how empathy 'is embedded in an intersubjective encounter that necessitates on-going dialogue for its accuracy' implicating 'the imaginative and emotional capacities' of the empathiser and the beneficiary of empathy (2008: 487). We consider Hollan's holistic view of empathy as a step in the right dimension, but we would like to add to the definitional properties of empathy two important, additional dimensions: first, the need to think of empathy not as simply rooted in homologous experiences, but as the result of the radical imagination; namely, of the ability of subjects to imagine the world from the Other's point of view, even if they cannot gain first-hand experience of this world. This understanding of empathy as the quality of the radical imagination prevents the Other from being simply collapsed onto the Self and safeguards difference. Second, we should not forget, as Pedwell (2014) has argued, that empathy is also a political relation.

Our primary aim in the remaining part of this essay is to examine empathy, not as a feeling, but as a capacity to feel, and learn how to see the world through the standpoint of Others. The empathic view entails the potentiality of transformative experience exemplified in the ability of social actors to create alternative value systems and resist normative moralities. Even if we accept that such alternative value systems are not fully developed or articulated, we feel compelled to highlight that empathy presents us with an analytical opportunity to renegotiate accountability and political causality. This opportunity emerges from separating the analytical implications of empathy from its semantic connotations and the moral baggage of sympathy and neoliberal humanitarianism.

From sympathy to empathy

Adam Smith is perhaps one of the earlier thinkers that discussed the phenomenon of sympathy as recognition of and identification with the feelings of others. Sympathy, according to Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is the result of a process of mirroring by which the Self is able to use her imagination in order to understand how the other is feeling in a given situation. Smith's understanding of sympathy is inspired by Hume's *Treatise* (1738), but also significantly departs from it, insofar as Smith recognises that we can never be at one with the feelings of other people. Sympathy as recognition is intimately connected to sociality, which opens the way for emplacing ethics in social relations. The problem with Smith, however, arises from his idea that morality is ultimately a private and individual project, a framework that effects a challenging separation of moral from political life, as he makes apparent in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Modern critics like Tiktin (2011, 2014) and Fassin (2005; 2007; 2011a; 2011b) draw our attention precisely to the separation of the moral from the political, which can been seen as a necessary step for launching a healthy critique on humanitarian antipolitics (cf. Tiktin 2011). Most of the poststructuralist tradition in fact has sought to reunite ethical and political concerns both in terms of their respective origins, and with regards to their joint effects (see for example, Foucault 2008; Arendt 1958,

1963; Agamben 1998; Deleuze 1994; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Derrida 2001; Levinas 1991, 1999; Braidotti 2012).

The driving intellectual force behind a number of poststructuralist works on the political implications of ethical doctrines has been undoubtedly the work of Nietzsche—most prominently exemplified in *Human All too Human*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *Thus Said Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's contribution to our understanding of ethics is of paramount importance with regards to three specific but interrelated points: (a) the relationship between ethics and morality, (b) the potentially problematic dimensions of moral sentiments, and (c) the role of imagination, creativity and transformation. For Nietzsche there is no such thing as universal morality. The Nietzschean subject is not constrained by established moral codes but is able to use her imagination in order to self-assertively create ethical values in a constant effort to transform negative emotions into a positive life force. Sentiments, such as pity, sympathy or compassion, are regarded by Nietzsche, not only as signs of weakness, but also, and perhaps most importantly, as profoundly self-driven and condescending. The foundations of compassion are to be found in feelings of superiority vis-à-vis the recipient, who is effectively denied the opportunity to exercise her agency and becomes locked in an asymmetrical power relationship. Nietzsche's suspicion towards compassion greatly resembles Marx's or Oscar Wilde's (2001) classic aversion towards philanthropy.[ii]

Even the most careful reading of Nietzsche, however, cannot resolve the semantic ambiguity that emerges from the translation of concepts addressing a concern for the predicament of others. When speaking of compassion Nietzsche employs the term *Mitleid*, which can be understood as compassion, sympathy or pity. The indeterminacy of translation here forces us to both accept Nietzsche's conclusions and to radically differentiate our perspective from his. The range of emotions that spring out of human sociality is diverse, and while we agree that *Mitleid* understood as sympathy and pity has depoliticising and denigrating qualities, we claim that Nietzsche's concept of *Mitleid* is radically different from our understanding of empathy, which stems from an eclectic synthesis of Levinas, Castoriadis and the explicitly Deleuzian tradition of nomadic ethics as epitomised in the work of Rosi Braidotti (2012).

The term empathy started its intellectual life as a mal-adaptation of the ancient Greek term *empathis* (εμπαθής, passionate). Lotze (1899) used the Greek word as a basis for the German term *Einfühlung*—'feeling into', originally coined by Lipps (1906; cf. Throop 2008: 403)—which was finally translated by Titchener (1909) into English as empathy (cf. Barrett-Lennard 1981; 1997; Vischer 1994; Mallgrave and Ikonomou 1994). Successive and unsuccessful translations have not helped clarify the differences between empathy, sympathy, compassion or pity. As Engelen and Röttger-Rössler note, pity and sympathy are most likely to occur toward persons one is related to or who belong to one's own ingroup, but less often towards outgroup members' who are perceived with suspicion (2012: 4). If we wanted to be absolutely clear about the difference between empathy and all other sympathy-related terms we would have to adopt additional terminological clarifications (drawing from Greek concepts, according to the philosophical tradition): perhaps, *enthymisis* (to partake to someone else's feelings), or *katanoisis* (which is more akin

to the English term understanding). Nevertheless, Okam's razor commands that we endeavour to salvage empathy, instead of adding on the perplexity of existing terms.

Let us therefore state once more that empathy is not about sympathy, and that it is radically different from pity or compassion. Strictly speaking, empathy is not a sentiment or emotion, but an affective capacity, more akin to Spinoza's *potentia* (Braidotti 2012: 183). With a node to Malinowski—as our concern here is to reformulate the concept for anthropological use—we conceptualise empathy as a process that entails a desire and the capacity to adopt another point of view. But in contrast to Geertz (1983), we don't see empathy as a mere exercise of interpretation (of another's view), but rather as an experiential concept (Rosaldo 1989), which 'emerges in an intersubjective field' (Hollan and Throop 2008: 393; Hollan 2008). The capacity to empathise with an Other is not single-handedly empirical, cognitive or affective, but encompasses all the aforementioned faculties, and is embedded in socio-political relationships (Pedwell 2014).

Empathy as immanent *potentia* can only be exhibited by a subject that is embodied and embedded in a rhizomatic web of relations (Deleuze and Guattari 1988; cf. Braidotti 2012: 174-175), by an agent-*cum*-patient (Carrithers 2005; cf. Lienhardt 1961) who affects as much as she is affected by human and non-human others. Materiality and embodiment are crucial in this process that is elegantly described by Levinas as an epiphany caused by the Other's face. Facing the Other creates responsibility, which is understood by Levinas as a form of recognition that is constitutive of social relationships (1991: xix). Unlike Levinas's understanding of the effects of this epiphany, however, the notion of empathy that we propose does not efface the difference between the Self and the Other. Furthermore, it does not only emerge in the context of pain and vulnerability, but often represents a wider predisposition in life—for example, a politically inspired position that attempts to subvert the asymmetry of the provider-beneficiary relationship.

Fifteen years ago, Vassos Argyrou (2002) produced a profoundly insightful post-colonial critique of the postmodern turn in anthropological practice. In *Anthropology and the Will to Meaning*, Argyrou (2002) demonstrates how the driving force of much ethnographic work had been an ethic of 'salvation' by which the Self and the Other were deemed to be equal, yet presented as being the same. To resolve the emerging paradox, we need at this point to take some inspiration from Levinas. Empathy implies responsibility and, as Levinas claims, a certain degree of accountability as well. For Levinas, identification with the Other holds the Self "hostage" and "accountable for what one did not do, accountable for the others before the others" (Levinas 1991: xxix).

Accountability—stemming out of the realisation of the profound inequalities between the anthropologist and many of his informants and the historical routes and dimensions of those inequalities (Wolf 1982)—led many postmodern ethnographers to resort to redemption tactics (Argyrou 2002). Argyrou explains how anthropological analysis systematically attempted to locate the Other in the Self, or the Self in the Other, until the two parties proved to share a soothing sameness. We believe that the notion of empathy provides us with an opportunity to ease, if not to resolve, this tension. As we will demonstrate in the following section, empathy entails the capacity of teaching ourselves how to relate to another's perspective, yet

without becoming the same as the Other. In this respect, the empathetic point of view destabilises the idea of radical alterity (cf. Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2016).

Empathy as radical imagination; or how to teach yourself the Other's experience

We have put forward the claim that empathy, as affirmative political praxis and as transformative, affective ethical technology can potentially subvert and has the possibility of deconstructing narratives of radical alterity, while still respecting difference. This claim poses a theoretical problem. If subjects are not under the illusion that are essentially the same, how is it possible to claim to understand how a given condition makes others feel? How can we avoid both moral and cognitive relativism, analytical projections, and a tantalising sense of incommensurability? We have partly answered this question already by claiming that the empathic subject is always in the process of becoming; an intersubjectively constituted part of relational rhizomes; 'in ongoing dialog' (Hollan 2008: 475) with others. The permeable, multiply composed subject who experiences life as an open-ended process does not allow enough room for incommensurability. The problem posed by other commensurable minds is an artificial one, if those other minds are not regarded as clearly delineated entities, but as parts of webs of relationships.

A processual, relational understanding of subjectivity however, does not preclude the importance of instances of asynchronicity; it does not entirely solve (or safeguard) the question of difference. Empathy as affective recognition of the Other's circumstances and feelings is difficult to explain if we conceive of subjects as socially and culturally constructed beings with different experiences, historicities and positionalities. How do we empathise with the Other without causing subjectivities to collapse onto each other, and how do we indeed empathise with others who nominally belong to the same community with us without relying on an essentialist conceptualisation of community? How can we understand empathy as an open ecology (Guattari 2000) of human relations to the non-human environment? In order to answer these significant questions, we draw inspiration from the work of Castoriadis, and more specifically from his book *Figures of the Thinkable* (2007).

Castoriadis (2007) is reading Sophocles' Antigone and specifically the excerpt known in the Anglo-Saxon world as *Ode to Man*. Ode is devoted to *Anthropos* (the human being), who is, according to Sophocles, the most formidable, amazing, achievement-capable entity. A number of characteristics and human accomplishments are listed in thirty-one verses praising human inventions and explaining the resourcefulness of *Anthropos* who knows only death as the limit of one's creativity. One particular verse, however, which describes how humans taught themselves to speak—creating thus, language—is especially perplexing. How can one teach (oneself) something she does not already know? *Anthropos*, Castoriadis argues, "creates himself as creator in a circle whose apparently vicious logic reveals its ontological primacy" (2007: 16). In order to deepen our understanding of empathy we will borrow from Castoriadis the emphasis on the capacity to be an autodidact, and the concept of *vis formandi*, the power of creation, the ability to create, to form, to imagine and to invent (2007).

According to Castoriadis' formulation, the subject's capacity for empathy rests upon (and attests to) the existence of *vis formandi*, expressed in this instance as the ability to imagine how the Other's world may feel like. The presence of the Other—her joy, bereavement, happiness or pain, strength or vulnerability, abundance or need—invites the Self to initiate a process of *autodidaxis*, that is, a process of teaching oneself how to cope (with new conditions, including the presence and predicament of the Other). We can therefore feel (and see, understand, experience) the world from the Other's point of view, not because the Self and the Other are fundamentally the same, but because they are uniquely capable of becoming autodidacts in each other's experiences, as well as learn from one another. This process of creating (instituting) and sharing knowledge makes empathy an equally cognitive *and* affective process between embodied subjects capable of transforming their world; or, creating by means of their imagination, where imagination is social practice (Appadurai 1996), –scapes of empathy.

Creativity, originality and invention emerge as effects of the radical imagination, the capacity to produce *de novo* (but not necessarily *ex nihilo*) original figurations (Kirtsoglou 2004; 2010; Braidotti 2002: 133; also see Bruner 1993, Hallam and Ingold 2007). Empathy cannot be understood separately from the faculty of radical imagination; not only because of the stumble of incommensurability, or the need to safeguard difference, but also, and perhaps most importantly, because

radical imagination allows us to understand how empathy establishes an open relationship between living things and their environments, and can be extended beyond the human community.

Empathy in times of crisis: an affective technology of resistance

It will be helpful at this point to provide two examples that illustrate the relevance of empathy as an analytical concept that motivates radical imagination from the grassroots. The two particular cases we briefly discuss provide us with an opportunity to reveal, reflexively, the circumstances that inspired us to reconsider the importance of empathy, and our insistence to separate the empathetic approach from other sympathy-related perspectives. Both examples emerged in austerity-ridden Greece. As a response to austerity policies—implemented as an alleged remedy to the financial 'crisis', post-2010—we have seen the emergence of spontaneous empathetic initiatives led by ordinary citizens, who engaged in acts of solidarity, aiming to alleviate the predicament of suddenly impoverished citizens, and more recently, forcibly displaced persons who attempt to enter the European Union.

Our first example takes us to the vibrant social context of the Greek anti-austerity solidarity movement. The term 'solidarity' (*allilegíi*)—which has roots in radical political thinking (Rakopoulos 2016)—has been widely adopted by left-leaning humanitarian initiatives, several of which emerged spontaneously at the local level, as groups of citizens came together to provide help to fellow-citizens afflicted by austerity. Since the first years of the crisis, spontaneous, informal groups of solidarians have worked together to provide dry, fresh or cooked food to impoverished families, but also psychological care and legal advice. Institutionalised sources of citizen-support—municipalities, NGOs, the church—complemented the local humanitarian landscape, by maintaining food-, cloth- and medicine-banks. Very interestingly, and as recent anthropological work has documented (Cabot 2014, 2016; Rozakou 2016a, 2016b; Theodossopoulos 2016), the overwhelming majority of participants to humanitarian initiatives[iii] maintain an aversion towards the notions of philanthropy and charity, and a clear preference for the term 'solidarity', a more politically-conscious alternative (Rakopoulos 2015, 2016; Theodossopoulos 2016), which resonates more closely with the empathetic approach.

A cynical observer could easily argue that the emphasis on the notion of 'solidarity' in the Greek context is merely rhetorical, a superficial replacement of the terms 'charity' and 'humanitarianism'. Yet, as an emerging body of ethnographic work has shown (Bakalaki 2008; Rozakou 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Cabot 2014, 2016; Rakopoulos 2014a, 2014b, 2015 2016), the choice of words here has a political significance; it captures the desire of situated local actors to resist austerity (Theodossopoulos 2016). Voluntary work dedicated to the provision of food for impoverished fellow citizens is seen by solidarity volunteers as a conscious political standpoint, which conveys a message of defiance towards austerity: 'we will not passively accept the imposition of austerity rules', have said some of the volunteers, 'we will not stay inert, when our neighbour next door is suffering'. As individual citizens come together to participate in humanitarian solidarity initiatives, they

reconstitute their local community, creating networks of support, which can be used as *loci* of political action beyond humanitarianism. Through working together in solidarity—explain many volunteers—we learn to rely on our fellow citizen (see Theodossopoulos 2016).

And here lies empathy's empowering and auto-didactic dimension. Through bonding in precarity—here caring for the fellow human—groups of solidarians realize the politically enabling dimension of cooperation: they learn from one another and from each other's experience. In a wider sense, they have taught themselves how to work together to help others, and through working together to defy the demoralising shadow of austerity. The political connotations of this rediscovery of 'Self and local community'—engendered through working with and learning from others (while attending the needs of the Other)—cannot be described in apolitical 'sympathy'-related terms. The deeper political message of the grass root, solidarity initiatives in Greece was one of the reasons that encouraged us to reconstitute—and in this process, de-neoliberalise—the notion of 'empathy' as an ethnical and political technology.

Words here, and their culturally or politically embedded meaning, are of importance. In as much as 'empathy' is not equal to 'sympathy', philanthropic activity is not the same as solidarity. Repeatedly, the asymmetrical implications of giving create a burden that local actors attempt to overcome. In Greece, the sociality of hospitality (see Herzfeld 1987, 1992; Papataxiarchis 2006, 2014; Rosakou 2012; Cabot 2014) is often contrasted to the inequality of gift giving, which establishes hierarchies (Herzfeld 1992; Hirschon 1992, 2000; Gkintidis 2014). In the everyday sociality of humanitarian activity, such semiological distinctions matter: they carry political weight, and help define one's position regarding the ethics of giving (see Theodossopoulos 2016).

Our second example shows that a short empathetic distance separates the demoralising and antisocial consequences of austerity—being yourself suddenly impoverished—from the fate of refugees/migrants who have been forcibly displaced from their homes either because of protracted war and conflict, or because of conditions of economic violence that results in a profound "loss of control over one's life situation" (Graeber 2014: 76).

A large number of Greek citizens experienced the arrival of displaced persons in their austerity-ridden country as a condition of multitemporality (cf. Knight 2013, 2015), where past and present experiences of wars, famines, destitution, and geopolitical dependence wove themselves in the same messy collective narrative (cf. Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2016). In particular, many Greek citizens saw the predicament of the refugees (who struggled to cross the Aegean sea) as mirroring the experience of their forcibly displaced grandparents who had crossed that same sea in 1922. *Prosfygiá* (refugeeness) as collective narrative (cf. Hirschon 1989; Tsimouris 1998) and transgenerational trauma (cf. Anastasiadis 2012) has become for a large part of Greek society a mechanism of *substitution*—in the way in which Levinas (1981) has talked about the process of putting oneself in the place of another. A number of people identified with the stranger as an*other* human being-in-need, here, conceived as similar to the Self. Encounters with refugees encouraged many Greek citizens to establish an empathetic connection that should not to be

confused with compassion, pity, or sympathy—any of which can effectively displace the recognition of social and political rights (Fassin 2005; Rozakou 2012).

Empathy, in most of its vernacular Greek articulations, related to the recognition that both the Self and the other Exist in similar conditions of precarity, alterity, and tantalizing ambiguity. One's subjective position—of *relative* safety— proved to be a matter of luck, rather than the effect of righteous choices (as the politico-ethical doctrine of capitalism would urge us to think). The realization that precarity affects both the Self and the Other constitutes perhaps the most important demystification that can take place in contemporary times. Empathy as identification can transform precariousness into an idiom of resistance, crashing the concept of 'radical alterity' as a foundation myth of capitalist modernity (cf. Kritsoglou and Tsimouris 2016).

Although no one can deny the existence of Nazi re-activism, nationalism, xenophobia, and racism in Greek public culture, an unprecedented number of Greek citizens reacted to the arrival of displaced persons expressing their conviction that "*today it is them* (who find themselves in this situation), *tomorrow it might be us*". The capacity to imagine circumstances of war, conflict, lack of safety and the ability to work and prosper in one's own country was facilitated by analogical thinking (cf. Sutton 1998) that led people to consider past historical events and to proclaim that "*we are all migrants*" and "*we are all refugees*". As Maria, a 45 year-old woman told us:

> When you see these people coming out of the boats, it feels like a thousand eyes are looking at you. Their eyes, the eyes of your dead grandparents, the eyes of your children, the eyes of the unborn who will be reading about these events one day in their history books. A thousand eyes, a million eyes, looking at you, asking you: "what are you going to do?" When I was learning about the Holocaust, or listening to my grandmother's story of being a refugee, I kept asking myself: What were other people doing? Why no one tried to do something? I cannot bear the thought of future generations thinking of us as having turned the other way. The sea has a thousand eyes and they all stare at us with a question: "what are you going to do?"

In an explicitly Levinasian fashion, Maria transforms the ethical into an explicitly political stance. The need to demonstrate solidarity towards the Other, does not come as a result of pity or sympathy, but as the effect of empathy as identification that bears two important realisations: first the understanding that *everyone and anyone* (regardless of race, colour, religion, historical timing, effort invested) can find themselves in conditions of precarity, uncertainty and need. Second, that *everyone and anyone* (as a result of the above) has a political duty to *act* towards the alleviation of the Other's predicament. In the scape of empathy the Self and the Other become connected in a non-hierarchical fashion, since all hierarchies prove to be fleeting and provisional. *Today it is you, tomorrow it might be me.*

Conclusion

We are concerned with—but also inspired by—the ambiguity generated by empathy. Its happy face is often taken for granted—for example as unquestionably good

(Pedwell 2012a: 281)—a moralising apology for neoliberalism's inequalities. Such an un-deconstructed view may encourage projections, the assumption that we act for the benefit of others, and that we know what is good for the Other. Here, the empathic projection may very well represent the wishes (or subject-position) of privileged parties—for example, the ethnographer (Geertz 1983), or the provider of aid (Pedwell 2014, Spelman 1997). We see this type of empathy as sympathy in disguise.

Our concern for the happy, un-deconstructed face of empathy encourages attention to the asymmetries generated (or, more often concealed) by humanitarian projects, and the neoliberal morality that often sustains them (de Waal 1997, Fassin & Pandolfi 2010, Fassin 2011a, Muehlebach 2012; Kapferer this volume). Critical engagement with such apolitical empathetic views, encourages us to acknowledge that empathy's happy and worried faces are two aspects of the same coin: it is unrealistic to assume that a complete break from neoliberal influences (and empathic self-justifications) may be, in fact, possible. The dichotomy between a good and a bad empathy, argues Pedwell (2012b: 174), is artificial. Nevertheless, we strongly feel, it is important to foreground this problematic: the dialectic between empathy's happy and worried face, inspires the re-politicisation of the concept. By making visible the neoliberal entanglements of empathy (for example, as humanitarian practice), we open the way for re-evaluating its role as a politically nuanced, anti-hierarchical and transformative notion, which addresses an emerging theoretical, but also, grass-root demand to differentiate humanitarianism from the neoliberal project.

In fact, empathy's emancipatory potential as a political project lies in its very distinction from humanitarian sympathy. Where sympathy is laden with asymmetrical connotations, empathy engenders the possibility of teaching ourselves how to connect with Others without subscribing to neoliberal morality. For example, many situated activists in crisis-afflicted Greece argue that philanthropy (inspired by sympathy) should not be equated to humanitarian solidarity initiatives (motivated by anti-hierarchical empathy) (see Cabot 2016, Rakopoulos 2016, Rozakou 2016, Theodossopoulos 2016). Empathy as identification is crucially antithetical to neoliberal values since it questions the idea that there is a way out of precarity based on one's hard work and righteous life-choices. It follows then, that it is also antithetical to philanthropy, which rests on the conceptualisation of the Self as being in a safely better position vis-à-vis the Other.

Our commitment to stress the political dimension of empathy—as a political relation (Pedwell 2014)—in addition to its intersubjective and affective dimensions (Holland & Throop 2008, 2011), has led us to Nietzsche and Castoriadis. Nietzsche's vision of existence as a continual becoming, and his circular treatment of time (Kapferer 2014) are at the core of an anti-normative, anti-hierarchical conceptualisation of empathy: the recognition that the pain of the Other can be—in a non-linear world of changing possibilities—your pain. While Castoriadis's transformative emphasis on our autodidactic potential can help us explain how we transcend, some times, the fundamental barrier of being Other, without projecting—as Geertz would have said—our experience on Otherness. The emancipatory

potential of empathy relies on our capacity, *not* to become Other, but to *teach ourselves* how to relate to each other's predicaments.

The question of difference—conceived in socio-cultural terms—is of crucial importance here. Empathy has the potential to challenge perceptions and representations of radical alterity, and this is precisely why it is an ethical-*cum*-political technology. In our capacity to feel the world from the Other's point of view, we are also capable of identifying our common political ground; we are capable of not just understanding, but also bonding in precarity. This process is drastically different from attempts to eradicate or downplay our differences. Identification with others does not happen at the level of persons—e.g. individual Vs dividual—but on the basis that different persons are sharing a common status; in fact, it is our shared status—primarily with respect to precarity—that produces an affective response.[iv] The face of the Other hold us accountable in the Levinasean sense. Additionally—and perhaps most importantly—it provides a cue to the Other's feelings vis-à-vis some given limitation and an insight to the Other's abilities to overcome these limitations.

Recognition of the predicament of the Others is thus revealed to be a complex, multifarious process that is not exhausted in the politics of compassion towards vulnerability. Being vulnerable—disenfranchised, in pain, exposed, or unjustly treated—are conditions that can happen to anyone (Rapport 2014). Vulnerability can be the predicament of the Other, but also the Self. This realisation—epitomised in our respondents in Greece saying 'today it is you, tomorrow it is me' (*símera esí, áurio egó*)—is deeply political in its denial of radical alterity. For, it views both strength and vulnerability as strictly provisional. The Other is not the object of pity for three reasons: first, because her status as vulnerable is only circumstantial; second, because under the same circumstances anyone would be vulnerable; and third, because the Other is as capable as the Self to fight these circumstances.

In all these possibilities, the Other is not lesser than the Self. Other and Self are both part of a "flat", non-hierarchical ontology (Braidotti 2012: 174). The provisionality of the Other's vulnerability—the realisation that we are all subjects of precarity—does *not* oblige subjects to act morally (although it urges them). It does, however, remove hierarchy from the equation. The absence of hierarchy that empathy is able to generate is further demonstrated in the fact that the presence of the Other encourages the Self to transform from an inward-looking entity to an outward looking subject who feels compelled to initiate a relationship. The introduction of the Other in the self-evaluation of a certain predicament[v] is forcing the Self to relate: to create and institute new relationships, to initiate new networks and rhizomes of affectivity. In a relationship constituted in empathy, it is difficult to distinguish the agent from the patient (Carrithers 2005; Lienhardt 1961; Kirtsoglou 2010). Both subjects are inter-subjectively constituted in their relationality, ultimately dissolving the boundaries between agency and patiency, attesting to the constraining and enabling nature of power (Foucault 1978). It is in such terms that empathy can be seen (and experienced) as transformative ethical technology of affirmative praxis: in the empathetic context subjectivity is an assemblage of forces, rather than a bound sovereign entity.

Notes

[i] Drawing inspiration from Jodi Halpern (2001), a professor of bioethics.

[ii] See, Marx and Engels 1998, Wilde 2001; and for a discussion of the particular problem, Theodossopoulos 2016.

[iii] These were primarily volunteers of spontaneous solidarity initiatives, but also a good number of employees of institutionalised humanitarian providers, including municipal employees (primarily social workers) and Red Cross volunteers (which is not, by all means, a left-leaning institution).

[iv] In this sense, our notion of empathy is much more inspired by queer politics than moral concerns.

[v] Or, in one's joy, since empathy is not limited only to negative contexts.

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