

# Volunteering Mothers

## Engaging the Crisis in a Soup Kitchen of Northern Greece

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### Abstract

*The 'Bank of Love' is a soup kitchen administered by the Orthodox Church in the town of Xanthi, Northern Greece. Currently operating amidst economic crisis, the Bank of Love occupies approximately fifty volunteering women who cook and distribute 150 meals to the poor daily. Despite the widespread proliferation of the egalitarian and counter-hegemonic notion of 'solidarity', these female cooks do not subscribe to its values. Crucially, however, neither do they embrace the hierarchical idioms of 'philanthropy', often understood to occupy the other side of the spectrum. In an effort to depart from analytical dichotomies and designatory taxonomies, which might label the cook's work as acts of either solidarity or philanthropy, this article uses the multivalent and open-ended concept of 'engagement'. I pay particular attention to two radically different 'modalities of engagement'. The first modality is contingent on notions of domesticity and occupies these cooks through their identities as women, housemistresses, and mothers. The second modality appropriates the discourses of volunteerism to transform these women into autonomous agents who enter the public sphere in the name of a good cause. I argue that engaging with 'engagement' may not only facilitate an understanding of processes of social transformation vis-à-vis articulations of gender, space, and affect, but also offer insights into the construction of the very object(s) of engagement. The Bank of Love bespeaks of a crisis symbolically constructed through the nexus and obligations of kinship, and of a crisis that provides space for the performance of autonomy and empowerment.*

*Key Words: Food, poverty, gender, household, domesticity, solidarity, philanthropy.*

## Introduction

When I told my good friend Aris that I was conducting research at the 'Bank of Love'<sup>1</sup>, a soup kitchen administered by the Orthodox Church in Xanthi, a town of fifty thousand people in Northern Greece<sup>2</sup>, he was taken by surprise. 'Why did you choose to study philanthropy (philanthropia) at a time when solidarity (alilegii) is taking over the country?' he asked in genuine puzzlement. Treating Aris' question as naive, I dismissed it in September 2014, only to realise upon my return from the field in March 2015 that Aris' question deserved reflection. In the course of the post-2010 Greek economic and humanitarian crisis, 'solidarity' has enjoyed unprecedented prominence. Understood as an emergent mode of engagement with the politics and manifestations of austerity, 'solidarity' has found discursive and material expression in alternative currency movements and exchange networks, in clothing banks and social clinics<sup>3</sup>, in public space and in protests, to name a few. As Theodoros Rakopoulos notes, crises and 'solidarity' exist in a dialectical relationship, with the latter emerging amidst and against the former (2014a; see also Cabot 2016: 154). In short, the amplification of crisis-generated states of uncertainty, precariousness and deprivation coincided in Greece with the widespread proliferation of the discourses and practices of 'solidarity'. To use Aris' words, 'The crisis behoves solidarity'.

Yet, the approximately fifty volunteer women who sustained the operation of the Bank of Love did not once use the word 'solidarity' during the six months I volunteered alongside them, and neither did they subscribe to its rhetoric and politics. While frequently mobilising the interpretative framework of the crisis, these volunteering cooks seemed to be entirely uninterested in the visions of egalitarianism, horizontality, and counter-hegemony that often

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1 The 'Bank of Love' is a translation of the Greek 'Τράπεζα της Αγάπης' (Trapeza tis agapis), a name given to several other soup kitchens throughout the country. It is worth noting that originally, 'trapeza' meant table. Today, table is referred to as 'trapezi', while 'trapeza' means bank. Accompanied by the adjective 'holy' (ayia), 'trapeza' also means altar. Therefore, 'Trapeza tis Agapis' can be translated both as 'Bank of Love', as well as 'Table of Love'. I have chosen to use the former translation, as this is the most common understanding in colloquial Greek.

2 This material was gathered through ethnographic fieldwork conducted between February 2014 and March 2015.

3 'Social clinics', also known as 'solidarity clinics', refer to volunteer-operated grassroots initiatives providing healthcare to those unable to obtain it through conventional paths, such as the national healthcare system. Rozakou (2016) notes that the adjective 'social' (*koinoniko*) has been adopted by numerous actors and initiatives to denote crisis-engendered spheres of localised, informal, and subversive action.

feature in articulations of 'solidarity' and which have been cultivated in recent crisis-stricken years. In Aris' view then, my interest in the Church administered Bank of Love connoted a preoccupation with practices that were – or should be – obsolete. For unlike 'solidarity', which is commonly believed to entail a shift towards the values of equality, disinterestedness, and empowerment, the domain of 'philanthropy' is associated with dependency, social control, and the perpetuation of class hierarchies (Rozakou 2016; Theodossopoulos 2016). In short, not only was I neglecting the widespread emergence of the realm of 'solidarity', but I was also siding with the wrong party. However, the cooks of the Bank of Love had other preoccupations in mind. In fact, inasmuch as they were unmoved by the potent discourses of 'solidarity', they were also disenchanted by the rhetorics of 'philanthropy'. And yet, this did not hinder the operation of the soup kitchen in the least; prepared and distributed daily at the Bank of Love were 150 portions of food.

Food has comprised a pervasive theme in Greek ethnography. Whether as a terrain of synaesthetic experience, a vehicle of memory and belonging, a means of structuring everyday life, a mediator of religiosity, or the object of charitable networks operating before the onset of the crisis, the significance of food in Greek contexts has been shown to be diffuse (e.g. Du Boulay 1974; Dubisch 1986; Seremetakis 1994; Sutton 200; Bakalaki 2009; 2013). With recent findings suggesting that 13% of the Greek population and a staggering 47.7% of households below the poverty line are unable to meet weekly recommendations for meat, fish, and vegetable consumption (Hellenic Statistical Authority 2015), it is no wonder that food has received renewed interest. In recent ethnographic accounts of crisis-ridden Greece, food features as a trope of resistance against austerity and neoliberalism (Knight 2015), as a vehicle for political commentary and critique (Sutton et al. 2013), and as an epicentre of emergent distribution networks belonging to the sphere of 'solidarity economy' (Rakopoulos 2014a; 2014b). With its long history in the distribution of charitable meals, the contribution of the Greek Orthodox Church towards the alleviation of crisis-generated food deprivation has also received considerable attention (Makris and Bekridakis 2013; Kravva 2014). The mobilisation of religious institutions in recent years, culminating in a multitude of charitable networks and activities, is indeed noteworthy. However, the Church's politically uncritical stance, coupled with the perpetuation of structural inequalities through philanthropic practices, has long caused apprehension with regard to the ethics and efficacy of such initiatives.

Overseen by the local church of Xanthi, a town of fifty thousand people in the area of Thrace, the Bank of Love has been operating for nearly twenty years and does not constitute a recently developed response to the economic crisis. Likewise, it cannot readily be located within the sphere of 'solidarity economy', at least not when this is understood to entail a departure from the dependencies of philanthropy and a move towards public redistribution and egalitarian reciprocity (Laville 2010). Rather, the Bank of Love is exemplary of broader national shifts in the engagement of the Greek Orthodox Church with civic duty and crisis-generated states of material deprivation. Funded by the Church and churchgoers' donations and monthly subscriptions, the budget of the Bank of Love has allegedly become much tighter in recent years. However, the portions provided by the soup kitchen have more than tripled since 2009, the year that Greece was officially declared to be in crisis. Consisting of both Christians and Muslims<sup>4</sup>, the majority of the soup kitchen's 150 diners are victims of the rapid downsizing of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace's industrial sector, which has left thousands of people unemployed. In contrast to the concept of 'solidarity', that of 'philanthropy' is more relevant to the study of the soup kitchen. From a perspective that sees the Bank of Love as mediating relations between powerful donors and passive recipients, the operation of the soup kitchen attests to the hierarchies of the free, unreciprocated, and charitable gift. I suggest, however, that the analytical impositions latent in designatory uses of 'solidarity' may also manifest themselves in unproblematised employments of 'philanthropy'.

The majority of the approximately fifty volunteer cooks at the 'Bank of Love', ranging between forty and seventy-five years of age, belong to the middle and lower-middle classes, two of the socio-economic groups most heavily impacted by the politics of austerity. Tellingly, while prior to the onset of the crisis the soup kitchen mainly engaged housewives and pensioners, it now occupies significantly more redundant and unemployed women than before. Many of these jobless and job-seeking women reported difficulties paying bills, funding elders' healthcare and children's studies, and occasionally even purchasing food. In this capacity, the operation of the soup kitchen is not only indicative of the dramatic proliferation of food poverty, but also of the shifting landscape of 'philanthropy'. Being intricately linked

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4 The town of Xanthi is home to a large proportion of what is referred in Greek official terminology as the 'Muslim minority', consisting of Turkish, Roma and Pomak populations. The local Bishop, as well as the volunteers of the Bank of Love, frequently noted in my interviews with them that their treatment of Christians and Muslims was equitable, something which I found to be true, with the exception of sporadic occasions.

with the moralities and interests of the dominant classes (Loseke 1997), the operational hierarchies of 'philanthropy' are not immune to processes of transformation that unsettle or even collapse particular social, political, and economic orders. As Mrs Paraskevi<sup>5</sup>, one of the first volunteers of the Bank of Love, once told me, 'Perhaps, I was a philanthropist ten years ago. Now I am like them [the diners], I have no food to put on my table'. In short, rather than subscribing to the values and dictations of either the grand narrative of 'philanthropy' or that of 'solidarity', I argue that the cooks of the Bank of Love were enmeshed in different kinds of pursuits.

In this article, I approach the Bank of Love through the generative concept of 'engagement'. This concept, I suggest, departs from normative assumptions regarding what constitutes immersion within crisis or what qualifies as a response against crisis. In its singular form, 'engagement' invites an examination of social interaction through the prisms of involvement, participation, and interlocking, but also confrontation and conflict. In its plural form – modalities of engagement' – the concept directs attention to open-endedness, diversity, and variation. Additionally, it problematises the divergent obligations, entitlements, and reciprocities that operate in distinct pursuits. Hence, 'engaging' the crisis may assume forms as different as adjusting one's household budget to make ends meet or participating in networks of 'solidarity economy'. Likewise, it may materialise in religious benevolence or enactments of ideological critique and activist resistance. By deploying this concept, I seek to attend to the multivalent symbolic reservoirs, moral discourses, and material practices that emerge, perpetuate, or dissipate in the course of social transformation. Tracing ethnographic articulations of crisis-generated 'engagement' demands that we look into the practical, the quotidian, and the ordinary in addition to the domains of politics and anti-hegemonic discourse. From this perspective, the daily production and distribution of 150 portions of food bespeaks of yet another way of engaging the crisis. By extension, the soup kitchen transforms into another arena upon which the ruptures and continuities of the crisis materialise in practice, in sociality, in space, and affect.

In order to develop the concept of 'engagement', I attempt an exercise in 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). When applied to economic practices, thick description directs interpretative

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5 The names of my interlocutors have been changed throughout the text, to assure their anonymity.

attention 'to the nuances, affects, multiple modes of meaning, silences, jokes, parodies and so on that accompany them' (Gibson-Graham 2014:148). Hoping to attend to such subtleties, I pay ethnographic attention to two radically different 'modalities of engagement'. The first modality is contingent on domesticity that occupies these cooks through their interrelated identities as women, housemistresses<sup>6</sup>, and mothers. The second appropriates the discourses of volunteerism to transform these female cooks into autonomous and independent agents who enter the public sphere in the name of a good cause. I argue that while both modalities are symbolically and practically distant to the urban square and the major sites of political resistance, these modalities of engagement are no less political. Rather, these modalities challenge the assumption that engaged critique is solely produced through, and confined within, the public and politicised sphere. Likewise, they challenge the view that states of crisis necessarily entail extraordinary ruptures with the past. In contrast, the operation of the soup kitchen was largely based on the idioms of ordinariness and continuity, pursued through the symbolic framework of the household and epitomised in the archetypal figure of the mother. Crucially however, the invocation of continuity through the extraction and reproduction of domesticity into the public sphere signified rupture, for it coincided with the insertion of the public into the domestic. In other words, the symbolic reproduction of the household at the Bank of Love entailed creative revisions and inversions of actual domestic arrangements amidst crisis. Accordingly, the performance of domesticity in the public sphere imbued the household with emergent significance, possibilities, and prospects. Hence, the Bank of Love granted these 'volunteering mothers' both a symbolic return to an ideal household, and a crisis-generated entry into public space.

## **The Body and Labour of 'Housemistressing':**

### **Domesticating Extra-Domesticity**

The town of Xanthi comprises a bright example, for its citizens responded to the Church's calls with great zeal. This however, is not only evident now, during the

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<sup>6</sup> Housemistress is a translation of the Greek noikokyra, a composite of house (oikos) and mistress (kyra). The male equivalent is that of noikokyris, while the conjugal household and its maintenance is referred to as noikokyrio.

devastating times of crisis. The Bank of Love has been operating for nearly twenty years. Its aim is to make the deprived, but also the lonely, feel that they are not alone, but that they belong to a large family. The demand exceeds the 150 portions that are being offered daily, but unfortunately, the lack of necessary infrastructure and human resources renders the distribution of more portions impossible. The Bank of Love is based on the contribution of conscientious citizens, mainly women, who alongside cooking for their own households, also cook for the Bank of Love daily.

These words were spoken by the ultimate authority over the Bank of Love, the local Bishop of Xanthi, in a meeting we had in August 2014. Excited as I was to have received his blessing for my fieldwork, I did not consider these words at length at the time. When I returned to them a few months later, I realised that within them lay a number of ways of looking at the soup kitchen's cooks: as citizens, as a human resource, as conscientious volunteers, and as women who cooked not only for their own households, but also for those deprived of food, and those deprived of family. Latent in this latter possibility was the substance of 'domesticity', namely the household, family, and motherhood. Indeed, as I was to find out soon after meeting with the Bishop, most of what took place at the Bank of Love was contingent on constructions of womanhood and 'housemistressing'.

The six women who happened to be volunteering on my first visit to the soup kitchen greeted me with generosity, as well as a certain amusement stemming from my unfamiliarity with the 'kitchen'. As Mrs Xenia, a fellow volunteer in her early 60s observed, I was not a housemistress (*noikokyra*), like the rest of them. Katy, the head cook and only employee of the soup kitchen, concurred. Being in charge of task delegations, she decided to keep me away from cooking, for which I lacked the necessary skills, and from washing, which would harden my hands and damage my nails. This, she laughingly said, would make my chances of meeting my future husband slimmer because men like women with beautiful hands. Instead, she gave me the responsibilities of packing and distributing meals, as well as occasionally participating in food preparation, such as peeling, cutting and moulding. I occupied myself with these tasks daily for a period of six months, full of uncertainty and apprehension in the beginning and then almost effortlessly by March 2015, when my fieldwork came to an end. During these months, I realised that to be a housemistress one needs to do certain things in certain ways but still, to paraphrase Geertz (1973: 12), knowing how to do certain things in certain ways does not make you a housemistress. In addition to

being housemistresses because of their practices, the female volunteers at the Bank of Love were also housemistresses by virtue of their qualities, their bodies, and the relationships in which they partook. Being a single university student and lone newcomer to the town of Xanthi, I did not meet these criteria.

The day's work usually started at 10 am with greetings and chatter over coffee and cigarettes. A multitude of tasks needed to be performed each day, and while Katy made great efforts to plan ahead, unanticipated chores often emerged and had to be dealt with urgently. Notwithstanding Katy's indisputable leadership, the volunteers seemed to always know what needed to be done and so would often act on their own initiative. As a result, they were rarely left without a task with which to occupy themselves. In addition to the preparation and cooking of meals, there were always dishes available for washing, worktops to be tidied, and crumbs to be picked from the floor. While the cooking of meals was completed on the day of their distribution, their preparation would often start as early as four or five days in advance. This was particularly the case for time-consuming processes, such as peeling and cutting potatoes, moulding meatballs, and preparing fish. In engaging with such preparations, the cooks resembled delicate ballerinas, moving about effortlessly and accurately. The cooks seemed to also have ballerinas' stamina and tenacity, for during preparations hands were sunk into pots of boiling water, knives were used in whirlwind manners, and all sorts of heavy objects were lifted and moved around.

It became apparent to me, following several cuts and burns, that a housemistress's 'techniques of the body' (Mauss, 1973) were not easily replicable. Moreover, I realised that in lacking a housemistress' corporeal dispositions, I also lacked her mental and moral dispositions, which were just as mutually imbricated as for the boxer studied by Loïc Wacquant (2004). Through the daily use of their domestic bodies, techniques, and knowledge, these cooks related to the Bank of Love in ways similar to their homes. By extension, the soup kitchen emerged as a continuation of their homes by forming a setting in which these volunteers carried out their domestic duties. As Theodora, a regular volunteer, once told me, 'Those of us who come here are good housewives. What we do here, we also do at home.' Despite however, the frequently acknowledged dependence of the soup kitchen on domestic practices and dispositions, there was no doubt that the Bank of Love was not a home. The Bank of Love not only lacked certain defining attributes of Greek conceptions of domesticity, including those of privacy, autonomy, and kinship obligations, but it also required the collaboration of several people towards the accomplishment of tasks that are traditionally performed by a single person, namely the housemistress (Hirschon 1983).



Addressing the complex and continuous interactions between the house, body, and mind, Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones argue that the house cannot be reduced to its spatial and architectural qualities (1995). Rather, they emphasise the constant and complex interactions between the house, body, and mind and posit that being '[i]ntimately linked both physically and conceptually, the body and the house are the loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world' (1995: 3). Evthymios Papataxiarchis (2013: 218) argues that the Greek notion of the household (*noikokyrio*) comprises a 'normative regime' and 'ultimate ideal' that opens up three interpretative trajectories. First, *noikokyrio* refers to a domestic group defined by conjugality and nuclearity, which relates its members through gender segregation and complementarity, as well as through highly elaborate divisions between the private and the domestic. Second, *noikokyrio* comprises a 'horizon of action' (2013: 223), which rests on notions of order, safety, and happiness and grants its members a social standing within the wider community. Finally, *noikokyrio* entails a 'modality of action' (2013: 223), which culminates in the production of the self through the relational terms of domestic kinship and gender. In light of these analytical observations, the notion and materialities of the household are not restricted to the spatially demarcated space that hosts the nuclear and conjugal family. Rather, the household implicates and comes to be implicated in personhood, thought, and practice and therefore bears the capacity of organising one's dwellings outside the premises of the house and within the realms of the public sphere.

Understood as a deposit of spatial, affective and relational arrangements, the household served as an organising framework of the Bank of Love. In a similar vein, understood as an organising framework of perception, sociality, and action, domesticity served as a primary 'modality of engagement', thus guiding the practices and positionalities operating at the soup kitchen. Both men and women volunteered at the soup kitchen. Tellingly, however, men's participation in the processes of cooking was officially disapproved of, if not unofficially forbidden. This was because, as the Bishop once allegedly said, 'Men's position is not in the kitchen, and neither should married women and men blend, for all sorts of temptations might emerge'. As a result, a symbolic hierarchy operated at the Bank of Love, culminating in a highly pronounced sexual division of space and labour. The approximately fifty volunteer female 'cooks' (*magirisses*) were concerned with the preparation, cooking, and distribution of 150 meals daily, six days a week, but also on national, religious, and local holidays. The four volunteer men, on the other hand, were 'administrators' (*diachiristes*) dealing with the soup kitchen's resources and finances. The women worked long hours inside and below,

in the basement of a building with narrow windows which prevented almost any natural light from entering the large space. By contrast, the four volunteering men worked outside and above, in the streets of the town. Their visits to the Bank of Love tended to be rare, short, and of a supervisory nature. The women nurtured and dealt with produce and food, while the men provisioned and dealt with money and commodities. Indeed, omitting the otherwise defining question of universality, condensed at the Bank of Love were the very objects and dualisms of the feminist inquiries of the 1970s.

In the pivotal works of Michelle Rosaldo (1974) and Sherry Ortner (1974), women's relegation to the domestic sphere and their engagement with reproductive labour is understood to account for the universality of male dominance and female subordination. Unlike men, who are argued to 'develop most fully through a stance of civic responsibility and an orientation to the collective whole' (Rosaldo 1980: 398), women's participation in the public, political, and collective realms is restricted. The domestic sphere then, emerges as a solitary locus occupied by women and dedicated to the performance of nurturing, affection, and altruism. The public sphere, on the other hand, hosting production, rationality, and civic engagement, is mostly occupied by men. The relevance of the analytical divisions between the public and the domestic, nature and culture, and production and reproduction to the Bank of Love is astounding. As the feminists of the 1970s would have it, operating at the soup kitchen were those 'symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities' (Rosaldo 1974: 290). However, does a household where the wife cooks and the husband administers exist, and if so, what does it look like? As several revisions of the feminist literature of the 1970s have suggested, the conflation of gender symbolisms with ideal and normative conceptualisations and actual social roles can entail analytical dangers. Indeed, the symbolic household of the Bank of Love and the constructions of manhood and womanhood that featured within it were vastly different from the configurations that operated within volunteers' individual households. In this capacity, the secluding and circumscribing arrangements of the soup kitchen bespoke a series of discrepancies, inversions, and subversions.

To begin with, the Bank of Love was neither a conjugal nuclear setting nor a solitary one. Rather, my fellow volunteers often talked about the soup kitchen as offering an opportunity for extra-domestic sociality. 'My day only goes well when I come here,' said Mrs Eleni, a retired schoolteacher. 'What can one do when she completes her household chores? One needs to escape from her troubles from time to time, one needs to exchange a few

words with a fellow human,' said Christina, a fifty-year-old housewife. On other occasions, the female volunteers explicitly represented the Bank of Love as a means of escaping the confinement of the home, to which many of my fellow volunteers had retreated because of unemployment. 'I have no job to go to, but at least I have the Bank of Love to come to,' said Mrs Vaya, who had spent twenty years working as a secretary before entering a long period of unemployment. 'We are out of work, but we never stay without work here,' said Roula, another chronically unemployed regular volunteer. In these utterances, as well as in countless similar ones, the soup kitchen emerged not only as a locus of sociability, but also as an alternative to the greatly-missed routines of employment. The approximately ten regular volunteers who worked at the soup kitchen multiple times per week, if not daily, would always take time to exchange news, share intimate concerns, and engage in tearfully funny encounters. When talking about their husbands, many of whom had also been affected by the dire consequences of unemployment, these women conveyed a very different picture. These conversations created a picture of vulnerability and aimlessness. 'I don't know what to do with him. I come here, I find ways to occupy myself. He, on the other hand, stays at home and watches television all day,' complained Mrs Alexandra, a housemistress and wife of a lorry driver. 'The woman will find her ways. A bit of cooking, some cleaning, and before you notice it, the day is gone. But with men, things are different. They lose their order,' said Theodora, who was married to Mr Vassilis, a chronically unemployed seasonal worker.

In their study of men's shifting roles vis-à-vis processes of transformation in post-Soviet Russia, Sarah Ashwin and Tatiana Lytkina (2004) highlight the detrimental effects of economic collapse on gender roles and domestic affairs. They argue that while female unemployment deprived women of their worker-mother identities and confined them within the domestic sphere, men's inability to access the labour market entailed a double exclusion. Not only were these unemployed men unable to meet their breadwinning responsibilities, thus losing their economic, social, and political integration, but they were also struggling to position themselves within an estranged household which had emerged as inalienably feminine under the gender order of the Soviet Union. Hence, in addition to an employment redundancy, these men's retreat to the domestic sphere also amounted to a symbolic redundancy marked by demoralisation, and in certain cases, depression and alcoholism. In the utterances of the soup kitchen's cooks, men's inability to access the labour market was not only perceived to have significant implications for the economic maintenance of the family and the household, but was also understood to be disruptive to the domestic equilibrium. Theodora once said to a circle of regular volunteers who nodded in understanding, 'In

the past, he would bring the food and I would cook it. Now we don't know who is to do what'. Food in this case becomes an indicator of domestic order, the contravention of which speaks to both financial hardship and an unsettling of previous configurations of gender segregation and complementarity. In other words, the crisis-generated breach of food provisioning and consumptive paths coincides with a wider rupture in domestic roles, the relational performance of which can largely be traced back to the realm of the kitchen and its symbolisms (Dubisch 1986). In the absence of food, the kitchen can no longer host the provisioning practices of men, or the nurturing ones of women, and therefore leads to the collapse of the inseparable 'schemes of the sexual division of labour and of the division of sexual labour' (Bourdieu 1977:89).

Compared and contrasted, the discrepancies between the symbolic household of the Bank of Love and the state of its volunteers' households are vast. In this sense, two interesting and possibly subversive paradoxes operated at the soup kitchen. First, these women's engagement with the dire consequences of austerity was contingent on their domestic identities, practices, and socialities, although they occurred away from home and in public. The capacity of the Church to act as a feminine extra-domestic terrain has long been noted in Greek ethnography, as has the centrality of domestic idioms in women's religious undertakings (Dubisch, 1983). Overseen by the Church and operating amidst crisis, the soup kitchen provided an extra-domestic space for the performance of a certain kind of domesticity. Crucially however, this extra-domestic domesticity did not confine these women to the household. Rather, in becoming extracted into the public, domesticity provided a particular 'modality of engagement' through which the cooks at the Bank of Love could escape the home and enter the domain of civic responsibility.

Mediating these volunteers' simultaneous departure from their households and entry into another symbolic household was the realm of the kitchen and, more specifically, the relocation of the provisioning and nurturing positions occupied by men and women within it. Yet, the kitchen in the Bank of Love was radically different from those of individual households. Not only did it feature professional stoves and appliances, aimed at meeting the demands of 150 portions of food daily, but it also occupied the volunteers of the soup kitchen through rapidly dismantling domestic orders, the unsettling of which coincided with the proliferation of crisis-generated food deprivation. To put it differently, rather than being informed by the realities of the people who sustained its operation or those who made use of it, the soup kitchen appropriated the derivatives of normative and idealised

conceptions of the household, thus obverting the image and state of individual households amidst crisis. In short, if Theodora's assertion that, 'He would bring the food and I would cook it,' entailed a memory of the past, the Bank of Love offered a gateway to this rapidly disappearing past.

## **The Object of Motherhood: Domesticating Food Deprivation**

Masked under the organising 'archetype' of the household were a series of subversions of its very matter, for the Bank of Love was neither conjugal and nuclear, nor solitary and private. Missing from the model of domesticity enacted at the Bank of Love was also the very thing that is often understood to account for women's confinement within the domestic sphere and their association with nature: motherhood. Writing on the symbolic links between women and nature, Ortner (1974: 78) argues that, 'children are likely to be categorised with nature, and women's close association with children may compound her potential for being seen as closer to nature herself'. Writing about the links between women and domesticity, Rosaldo (1974: 23) notes that the 'domestic' refers to those 'minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organised around one or more mothers and their children', while the 'public' refers to 'activities, institutions and forms of association that link, organise or subsume particular mother child groups'. In short, another significant way in which the extra-domestic configurations of the Bank of Love challenged both the real and ideal substance of domesticity was through altering its very object. The recipients of these meals were not children, but the poor. Yet again, motherhood was all but absent in this unlikely and non-homely setting. Rather, I suggest that at the Bank of Love motherhood constituted a 'modality of engagement'.

Only seven of the diners had their meals at the dining tables in the Bank of Love. In exchange for extra portions of food, these diners would tidy the space, mop the floor, and take out the day's garbage. The rest of the 150 diners would only visit the soup kitchen in order to pick up their meals. They would arrive around noon carrying their food containers in plastic bags and would queue at the staircase by the soup kitchen's entrance. At 12 o'clock sharp, one of the volunteers would make her way to the door to collect the diners' plastic bags. The door would never open before noon, no matter how hard or persistently the diners knocked. When it finally did open, it would only open momentarily and would then be hastily closed again. Up to thirty people would queue at 12 o'clock, but arrivals

would gradually subside as time progressed to eventually cease at 2 pm. The diners' plastic bags would be taken inside and the food containers would be removed and placed on the kitchen worktop. Katy, the head cook of the soup kitchen for more than nine years, would know which container belonged to whom, even in the case of containers looking identical or containers belonging to new diners. She would fill them with whatever was on the meal schedule of the day, making sure to add the right number of portions depending on each recipient's family members. Then, two or three volunteers would form a 'chain'. The first link of the chain would ensure that the containers were firmly closed, the second would place them back in the plastic bags from which they had been removed, and the third link would add a proportionate number of bread portions and olives, cheese, dessert, or fruit, depending on the day. The plastic bags would then be returned to their owners who were waiting at the staircase all along, and if more diners arrived in the meantime, then their plastic bags would be collected too. This repetitive and demanding process, lasting for more than one hour, was known as distribution (dianome).

The Bishop, however, projected an interesting twist on this mundane sequence of events in a mass he performed for the volunteers and donors of the Bank of Love in January 2015. Following the completion of the service, the Bishop said that he felt the need to thank first, the volunteer 'administrators' of the soup kitchen, who did everything possible to ensure that there existed food on the dining table of the Bank of Love, just like a breadwinner does for his family. Next, he thanked the donors who sacrificed their earnings for the wellbeing of the poor. Finally, the Bishop turned to the female volunteers and noted that while Orthodox Christianity places more emphasis on the spirit, it does not neglect the body. Hence, female volunteers' attendance to the bodily needs of the poor testified to their religiosity. After all, he added, in the face of Jesus we not only see our saviour, but also the poor, the ill, and the unfortunate. By assisting them, we approximate Jesus and eternal salvation. And just when we thought the mass was over, the Bishop said he wanted to share a moving story with us. According to his story,

There is a widow and mother of four in the town, who takes food from the Bank of Love. When she returns home, she empties the contents of her food container in a casserole and puts it on the gas stove. She only uses gas, as she cannot afford electricity. Do any of you know why she does this? Let me tell you. She does this in order to avoid hurting her children. She pretends to be cooking the already cooked food, so that her children will not become aware of her inability to buy food and prepare it for them herself.

Despite having become familiar with most of the soup kitchen's diners by the time of this incident, I did not recognise this woman. I turned to Katy, who was sitting right next to me, to ask who she was. In a cynical tone, Katy told me she had no clue. We complicity smiled at one another, proud to have uncovered a story that did not sound true. When I turned, however, to observe my fellow volunteers' reactions, I realised that most of them were looking at the Bishop in awe and tears. Co-opting the voice of a widowed mother of four, the Bishop seemed to perceive a woman's ability to cook for her children to be a key quality of motherhood. Unable to do so, this mother could only counteract her shortcoming by pretending to cook the food that had already been cooked. In short, the all-important and motherly practice of cooking had been relocated, and rather than taking place in this woman's kitchen, it materialised in the kitchen of the Bank of Love. But, I wondered, did this turn the volunteers of the Bank of Love into mothers? 'Food is life-giving, urgent, ordinarily symbolic of hearth and home, if not of mother', writes Marshal Sahlins (1972: 215). I maintain that some of the regular volunteers were indeed mothers, for the seven diners who had their meals in the soup kitchen called them 'mothers'. 'Hello mummy', 'What are we eating today mum?', and 'I am not feeling well today mother', are some of the phrases that were spoken in a joking tone at the Bank of Love, but which were also extremely frequent to be dismissed as unimportant jokes. Upon hearing these remarks, the volunteers smiled warmly. Being the most common recipient of such utterances, Katy would sometimes respond by calling the diners 'sons and daughters'. Additionally, she would often turn to the rest of the volunteers to explain that 'They call me mother because I take good care of them'.

According to Heather Paxson (2003: 15), motherhood in Greece 'provides a stable signifier for the shifting terms of what it takes (according to a variety of sources) for a woman to realise and properly demonstrate her womanly nature', constituting 'at once an emblem of moral virtue, the validation of female adulthood, and a metonym of the means of human generation appropriated by the church and state'. In her ethnography of Athenian middle class procreational ideas and practices, Paxson explores constructions of motherhood vis-à-vis processes of social and cultural change. In particular, she documents the emergence of motherhood as an 'ethic of service' in the post-war era, its construction as an 'ethic of choice' in the socially and economically liberating 1980s, and its assembly as an 'ethic of wellbeing' reflecting the increasing medicalisation of pregnancy and childbirth accompanied by the proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies in the 2000s. Currently operating in the crisis-stricken 2010s, the Bank of Love indicates both a material impairment and a symbolic displacement of motherhood. On the one hand, the soup kitchen constituted

an alternative to the rapidly diminishing domestic orders that occupied women in the motherly practices of nurturing and care. On the other hand, it elevated motherhood into an operational and interpretative idiom, thus imbuing these women's voluntary labour with a particular symbolic significance. In short, at the Bank of Love motherhood emerged as a 'modality of engagement'. In this capacity, motherhood activated particular obligations and entitlements, while it connected the cooks and diners of the soup kitchen through the symbolic vocabulary of kinship.

Marshal Sahlins writes of 'the economic determination of home as the place where charity begins' (1972: 127), and argues that both expressions of charity and kinship dues are guided by expressions of 'generalised reciprocity', whereby 'failure to reciprocate does not make the giver of stuff to stop giving: the goods move one way, in the favour of have-not, for a very long period of time' (1972: 194). Indeed, one of the operational premises of the Bank of Love was that it only hosted giving and prohibited volunteers from taking. The Bishop was adamant that even those volunteers who were known to have financial difficulties should not take food from the soup kitchen. Ideally, the volunteers would only offer and take nothing in return, other than testimonies to their religiosity, altruism, and motherly dispositions. In becoming symbolic mothers, these volunteers' services were attributed to their feminine qualities and an innate nature waiting to be realised. Through the idiom of motherhood, these women emerged as enactors of altruism, as ideal conveyors of 'generalised reciprocity', and as archetypal donors of 'free gifts'. To paraphrase Paxson (2003: 15), at the Bank of Love motherhood did not constitute a 'signifier of what it takes [...] for a woman to realise and properly demonstrate her womanly nature'. Rather, it comprised a signifier of what it takes for a woman to realise and properly demonstrate her civic responsibilities in times of crisis. In short, positioned within the symbolic household of the Bank of Love, occupied in the nurturing and caring practice of cooking and serving the dispossessed, these women engaged the crisis through the nexus of domesticity and motherhood. In this capacity, they became ideal counter-actors to the politics and measures of austerity, for they enacted the rapidly dismantling social order of food production and consumption and their symbolisms.

### **The Obligations of Motherhood, the Freedom of Volunteerism**

The performance of kin work at the Bank of Love may be understood in terms of an extraction, relocation, and reproduction of domesticity away from home and into the public sphere. Crucially however, this arrangement was neither complete nor uncontested. For



inasmuch as it foregrounded familial and familiar notions and practices, it also relocated them, thus obverting the very substance of the domestic sphere. To put it differently, the Bank of Love was a home away from home and for this very reason, it was not a home. In fact, it was precisely when taken a step too far that the reproduction of domesticity at the soup kitchen collapsed. The volunteers' labour and obedience were often taken for granted at the soup kitchen, as they often were within their homes vis-à-vis their husbands and children. In addition to not being allowed to take food for themselves or their families, the volunteers were discouraged from taking breaks, smoking, or drinking coffee, and sometimes even from listening to music. The male administrators associated these behaviours with indolence and vice. These women's suitability, availability, and occasionally their willing complicity turned them into recipients of orders that were not even perceived as such by those who imposed them. However, unlike the altruism of domesticity and motherhood, which denotes obligation, the altruism of volunteerism denotes choice. In other words, volunteering entails different entitlements, obligations, and reciprocities than motherhood. The identities of mother and volunteer bespeak of radically different kinds of actors, socialities, and practices.

According to Katerina Rozakou (2016), the popularisation of narratives of civil society in Greece at the turn of the twenty-first century coincided with the proliferation of visions of modernisation and Europeanisation. Courtesy of top-down public discourses, policy implementations, and largely incomplete processes of institutionalisation, civil society emerged as a domain to be occupied by the modern, self-governed, and disinterested citizen. Discursively constructed as a civic ideal, volunteerism came to embody a new democratic terrain that "stood metonymically as a civilising mission aimed at Greek society" (Rozakou 2016: 94). The invention and crafting of the volunteer was heralded as a move away from previous forms of public sociality, most notably that of philanthropy, which were now deemed to be class-ridden and obsolete. By contrast, the volunteer was understood to culminate in a new kind of disinterested subjectivity, and to contribute to a new kind of society, marked by participatory democracy, public engagement, and active citizenship. Rozakou argues that this formalised model of volunteerism entailed a pioneer of the fluid, egalitarian, and lateral socialities that prevail today, and which are often denoted by 'solidarity'. Whether out of reluctance, unfamiliarity, politics, or disposition, the cooks of Bank of Love did not subscribe to the rhetorics of solidarity. On occasion, however, they did appropriate the discourses of volunteerism. It was precisely then that the Bank of Love escaped its domestic connotations and entered – anew – the sphere of public sociality.

Whenever faced with unreasonable requests and extreme dictates, these women would consistently respond by saying, 'We are volunteers!'. This phrase was uttered both in a rather conservative tone during encounters with authority figures and during heated conversations among themselves. Indeed, such declarations seemed to temporarily suspend criticisms and demands, as well as foster a sense of unity among the women. Being a volunteer connoted conscientiousness, free will, autonomy, and independence, and in certain cases these connotations were explicitly stated. In appropriating the identity of the volunteer, these women asked to be seen as individuals choosing to offer their labour, rather than being obliged to do so. In Theodora's words, 'We are volunteers, not slaves. We leave our homes and families to come here and help those in need. And we do it because we want to, not because we have to'. According to Katy, 'These women are volunteers. They come here on their own will to assist our fellow humans in crisis. No one can force them to do something they don't want to, and neither can anyone stop them from doing what they want. Or else, the Bank of Love will run out of women'.

Volunteerism, then, constituted a modality of engagement vastly different from those of housemisting and motherhood. Rather than occupying the domestic sphere, it materialised away from the home and into the public domain. Rather than being contingent on familial reciprocities and the binding obligations of 'generalised reciprocity', it was established on the ideas of agency and choice (Hyatt, 2001). When framed by the idioms of domesticity, cooking emerged as a quotidian practice embedded in kinship. By contrast, when framed by the ideas of volunteerism, cooking emerged as an indicator of altruistic commitment and civic participation. If domesticity engaged these women through the notions of duty and service, volunteerism engaged them through the notions of agentival freedom and self-governance. Ultimately, nothing is obligatory for the volunteer, unlike the housemistress and mother. Cooking for the victims of the crisis, therefore, came to be at once a means of alleviating food poverty, realising one's motherly and feminine nature, enacting patriarchal order, and claiming extra-domestic power. Accordingly, the crisis came both to reflect (broken) kin ties in need of (re)establishment, as well as to generate (public) space for the performance of a certain autonomy and empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

According to Susana Narotzky, the household constitutes the ultimate locus of personal consumption and highlights 'for most processes of consumption, a set of relationships – kin – and a core space' (1997: 115). And yet, the household is only one institutional framework, however central in scholarly discourse and popular imagination, enmeshed in consumptive

processes and practices. Other such institutions include 'religious congregations, boarding schools, military barracks, charity networks' (1997: 116). Operating at a time when previous locales and routes of provisioning are rapidly becoming inaccessible, it is no wonder that the Bank of Love came to resemble what had so far been the domain of food consumption. In substituting for the household, the soup kitchen acquired its material, symbolic and performative substance through the very domain it sought to replace. Acting as an 'archetype', the household and its conceptual derivatives came to be extracted and creatively reproduced in the public. The soup kitchen's operation was contingent on the separation between male and female roles, production and reproduction, the public and the domestic. In acting as a reservoir of sociality, the generative notion of the household came to embed the diners, cooks, and administrators of the Bank of Love in a web of kin relations. At the soup kitchen, the manifestations of the economic crisis were not principally confronted through the hierarchical rhetorics of 'philanthropy', and even less so through the egalitarian discourses of 'solidarity', but rather through the performance of domesticity and enactment of kin-work. Accordingly, the crisis came to be framed through the nexus of kinship; the soup kitchen came to simultaneously remove a cook from her household and to embed her within an emergent symbolic one.

Tracing the symbolic and material constitution of the household vis-à-vis processes of social, political, and economic change, Papataxiarchis (2013: 238) notes that the notion of *noikokyrio* has 'diachronically shown great resilience as the ultimate, most essential foundation of sociality and affective action. In this capacity it seems to go on providing the stable core of the dominant biopolitical regime in Greece'. In light of the ethnographic material presented here at a time of crisis, the household seems to lose none of its symbolic and material potency. The picture provided by the Bank of Love is one of both rupture and continuity, of both hindrances and possibilities. Perhaps it is also a picture of the intricacies, nuances, and divergences of crisis-generated and oriented processes of signification and engagement. The cooks at the Bank of Love did not subscribe to the designatory and normative values of grand narratives, and neither did they endorse the visions and practices of counter-hegemony that have been fostered in the course of the Greek economic crisis. Yet, 150 meals were cooked and distributed daily. I suggest that rather than confining these women to the invisibility of the domestic sphere, one should attempt to position them within the multiple, complex, and crosscutting domains that they occupy, sustain, reproduce, and subvert. Perhaps it is through the fluid, multivalent, and open-ended prism of 'engagement' that these women may escape the segregating and circumscribing forces that operate when political agency becomes a privilege of those occupying public space.

Immersed within, and responding to, the manifestations of the economic crisis, the Bank of Love belongs in the realms of politics. Accordingly, the 150 meals cooked and distributed daily constituted the product of a thoroughly engaged critique.

## **About the Author**

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am deeply indebted to my fellow cooks and friends at the Bank of Love for their generosity and care. I would also like to thank Michelle Obeid, Madeleine Reeves, Evthymios Papataxiarchis, Theodoros Kyriakides, Alexandra Bakalaki, and an anonymous reviewer for their constructive comments on previous drafts of this article. This research was funded by the President's Doctoral Scholar Award, granted by the University of Manchester.

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