“Let Them Eat Stuffed Peppers”: An Argument of Images on the Role of Food in Understanding Neoliberal Austerity in Greece

Edited transcript of a talk given by David Sutton on March 16, 2016, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Abstract: This paper focuses on how discourses of food have shaped understandings of what is at stake in the Greek crisis. Drawing from Karl Polanyi’s concept of “embeddedness,” I argue that food is central to Greek interpretations of neoliberal policies and processes because of its centrality to Greek culture and identity. Food has also been a site of contested practices of “solidarity” and “charity” by which new social experiments are emerging in the wake of the breakdown of the welfare state. In arguing for food’s centrality in the reshaping of Greek sociability, I will suggest that food be thought of not simply as a “topic” for anthropological investigation, but as a master-concept on the level of “kinship,” “ritual,” or “exchange” in any anthropological analysis of contemporary life.

Keywords: solidarity, Greek crisis, Kalymnos, food studies, food metaphors, neoliberalism

Let me begin with an explanation of my title, because it is a long and perhaps unusual one. The “argument of images” is a phrase that I take from my mentor, James Fernandez, who used it to talk about the synesthetic aspects of ritual (Fernandez 1986), and which inspired me in some of my synesthetic ethnography. As for “the role of food in understanding neoliberal austerity in Greece,” this refers to the fact that Greece has been in an economic crisis—some might call it a financial crisis, while others might just call it a crisis—since 2009. Unlike other European Union countries, Greece has been subjected to a series of austerity programs that have been imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. There had been three loan agreements (memoranda in Greek) and corresponding austerity programs until 2015. Then in the summer of 2015 a fourth was proposed. Greece held a referendum on this fourth proposal, and the Greek people overwhelmingly rejected it by 62 to 38 percent. On the island of Kalymnos where I do my primary research, the number opposed was considerably higher. But the left-wing government known as Syriza went ahead and signed the new agreement about a week later.

As for “Let Them Eat Stuffed Peppers,” this refers to a statement from September 2015, on the eve of the reelection of the Syriza government. Members of the media were interviewing the deputy minister of social solidarity, asking her how the ministry planned to help those Greeks who have been suffering under these austerity programs. For example, Greece has had a youth unemployment rate of 50–60 percent for many years now. The deputy minister’s response can be translated roughly as follows: “We think that there exists the ability, if we economize and stretch things, as the Greek people have learned to do. The stuffed pepper, peppers are an invention of the Greek people. With nothing a whole family eats very cheaply. We’ll continue the same way of thinking.”

This statement provoked a lot of reaction—I will not reveal what it was just yet—but just to clarify a few things, the deputy minister is suggesting that her ministry, just like the Greek people, will be able to economize and stretch things, as the Greek people have learned to do. The stuffed pepper, peppers are an invention of the Greek people. With nothing a whole family eats very cheaply. We’ll continue the same way of thinking.”
with a combination of rice, meat if it is available, and various herbs and spices. It is baked in an oven, sometimes in an outdoor oven. It is very nice, very delicious. In some ways it was as though the deputy minister was suggesting a Greek version of Nail Broth or Stone Soup – the idea of making something from nothing.

During the period in which the crisis was unfolding I had been working on my research on everyday cooking on the island of Kalymnos (Sutton 2014). While I felt that my research did have wider implications, I was not thinking about politics with a capital “P.” But I began to hear resonances between food discourses and larger issues, which got my attention at the time. This actually harkened back to my initial PhD research on Kalymnos, when I was looking at how local practices could inform the understanding of much larger issues, such as how local Greek naming practices illuminated the controversy over the naming of Yugoslav Macedonia (Sutton 1997, 1998).

I used to joke that I originally got into anthropology so that I would not have to understand economics. But I realized at a certain point that I could not actually go on that way. Motivated by what was going on in Greece, I started to try and get my mind around the concept of neoliberalism. Of course neoliberalism is a big concept with many different perspectives on it. But the approaches that I was drawn to were largely inspired by the work of Karl Polanyi, the mid-twentieth-century economic anthropologist who wrote The Great Transformation (2001[1944]), which examined the transformation of European society around the eve of World War I. Polanyi was particularly interested in what he called the “disembedding” of economy from society, or the notion that economic transactions and behavior could be separated from kinship, community, and other aspects of social life. The idea was that “free markets” could lead to a disembedding of economy from social life, perhaps for the first time in history and inspired by what was at the time called “liberal” economics. Many people have found this concept useful to understand contemporary “neoliberalism,” which is in some ways promoting the same kind of purely market-based solutions, seeing education or health, or even decisions about family and children, as free-market-based transactions (Clark 2014; Hart 2008; Polanyi-Levitt 2013). Another of Polanyi’s important concepts was the “double movement.” This was his phrase for the idea that in response to the harmful effects caused by the free market and the disembedding of the economy from society, society “protected” itself. Polanyi noted that this protection could take both right-wing and left-wing forms. Anyone who has followed the elections in the United States in 2016 can see that Polanyi was very prophetic in that regard. But coming at this from my research on embodied aspects of cooking, one thing that struck me was that very few people who were talking about Karl Polanyi ever mentioned his brother, Michael Polanyi.3

Michael Polanyi was a mid-century philosopher best known for the concept of “tacit knowledge,” or the idea, as he put it, that “we know more than we can say” (M. Polanyi 1966). Michael Polanyi argued that all knowledge has tacit dimensions, even the most explicit, objective knowledge produced by scientists. Tacit knowledge, like situated knowledge or local knowledge, is a term that recognized the ways that knowledge is based in contexts. Given that I was interested in cooking knowledge, and what exactly is transmitted in cooking practices, these interrelated concepts all seemed relevant.

So when I invoke neoliberalism, I am focusing on the belief that markets and privatization provide greater efficiency and superior solutions to societal questions, along with the belief that one can apply market logic to ever-increasing areas of life. Further, that neoliberalism often involves processes that could be labeled “abstraction” after James Carrier (1998), like the kind of abstraction of knowledge from social contexts that appears in university assessment schemes and audit cultures. Or as Miller, paraphrasing Strathern, writes (1998: 203), “The pressure to make intellectual work visible, measurable and transferrable favours disembodied knowledge that attacks the very qualities of complexity and sensitivity that anthropologists are taught to value.” In terms of food I see a similar tendency in the notion that cooking knowledge and taste itself can be standardized and abstracted from social settings. This becomes apparent in all kinds of projects, from the journal Cooks Illustrated with its “test kitchen” promoting a kind of scientific culinary perfectionism, to many promoters of molecular gastronomy who want to remove tastes from the foods with which they are associated and recombine them (bacon and egg ice cream, anyone?), to the notion circulated last year that the Watson supercomputer will provide us with all kinds of previously untried but delicious ingredient combinations such as mushrooms with strawberries.

Let me contrast this briefly to what we know as anthropologists of food. For example, Anita von Poser, in her ethnography of foodways of the Bosum of Papua New Guinea, notes of their staple sago pudding that regardless of whether it appeared to her to have the right consistency or preparation, Bosum insisted that a sociable person cannot fail to produce tasty sago pudding (Von Poser 2013: 118). In my own work on Kalymnos, I showed that techniques such as cutting in the hand (i.e., with a knife) could not be abstracted from a total sociomaterial setting in which these techniques make sense as part of the flow of a particular cultural life (Sutton 2014: chap. 2). This is my context for beginning to...
make sense of the role of food as discourse and practice in people’s experience of the Greek crisis.

I first became aware that this might be an interesting issue when I was listening to various ministers talking about the causes of the 2008 crisis. I remember a documentary that featured interviews with government ministers from various European Union countries. The British chancellor said something to the effect that “We all benefited during the good times, now we all have to share the burden.” That was how he put it, very unmetaphorically. The Irish finance minister said something to the effect of “Well, you know, we all parted.” But the Greek minister, in this case the deputy prime minister, said, “nazi ta fagame,” which literally translates as “we ate it together,” but the implication is that “we all ate the money.” Greeks use the word “to eat” to mean many things, and this gives a bit of a sense of that range. It was not an unusual metaphor for the deputy prime minister to draw upon. But people reacted to it strongly. Their reactions, I think, are summed up in a cartoon that appeared in the Greek newspaper “To Pontiki” in late 2011. The cartoon depicts a picture of the “Troika,” which included the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund that were imposing the Austerity memorandum, cutting up a New Year’s cake. In Greece on New Year’s it is customary to cut up a cake and whoever has the piece with the coin in it is lucky for the next year. In this cartoon the members of the troika are cutting up a cake labeled “2012 Greece” and distributing the pieces: one piece for the European lenders, one piece for the Greek banks, one piece for Goldman-Sachs (because Goldman-Sachs played a role in the Greek crisis), one piece for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and one piece for Horst Reichenbach, the overseer of the Troika. In the background are disheveled and skinny Greek people saying, “And now they’ll tell us that we all ate the money together.”

This cartoon shows the debates over the limits of collective responsibility that were taking place in Greece. A more recent cartoon appearing in the Greek newspaper “Ta Nea” that picks up this theme in a somewhat different way shows a Greek man named Mr. Mitsos, a typical Greek name, naked except for a vine leaf, talking to Christine Lagarde, the head of the IMF. Mr. Mitsos says, “But why, Christine, why do you want my vine leaf?” Lagarde responds, “Stuffed grape leaves, Mr. Mitsos, I’m making Mediterranean cuisine!” The cartoon shows a picture of a pot on a stove in which Lagarde is cooking up something that includes “lowering of wages and pensions and raising of taxes.” This has, in fact, been a significant part of the austerity program. By way of example, one of my Kalymnian friends, who worked as the IT coordinator for the mayor’s office, saw his wages cut 48 percent in one day in 2012, while his taxes have gone up over 500 percent over the past six years. This cartoon raises an important concept, which is that when Greeks talk about the crisis, one of the words that they use frequently is “dignity” (aksiopre-pia). This cartoon plays on the idea of personal dignity. But aksiopreia refers to dignity in a much broader sense: it suggests the possibility to reproduce habits of life that make one a Greek person. It resonates with the idea of “moral economy” from E.P. Thompson (1971), because it suggests the idea that there is a problem with making profits on people’s suffering, a point that I will raise later.

Another food-related practice that struck me early on, which was very popular in 2011, is called “yogurting” (Vournelis 2013, Vournelis and Sutton 2012), or throwing yogurt at politicians and other authority figures. One of the striking things about yogurting was that it seemed to be accepted for a long time. People were not, to my knowledge, being thrown in jail for yogurting. In writing about this with my collaborator, Leonidas Vournelis, we asked the question, “Why yogurt? Did there just happen to be a lot of yogurt handy?” One of the claims that we suggested was that yoghurt is, in fact, one of the foods that has an identifiable Greekness to it. In fact, in an internet picture, Greek football fans at FIFA in 2014 came dressed in yogurt cups. I also had the very odd experience in the summer of 2015, when I was traveling through many international airports, of hearing almost the exact same discussion twice. This discussion involved non-Greek people talking about the Greek crisis—since Greece was very much in the news because of the referendum on the next austerity package, and there was the suggestion in the news that if the Greeks rejected the package they would be removed from the Eurozone, or from the EU entirely. In these two similar conversations someone said, “Greece is doing pretty badly, have you heard,” and the response was, “Oh, well, you know, what do they produce? They only produce yogurt. They have a yogurt economy.” As food scholars we know that food is always double-edged—it can be both an identifier and a slur. But Vournelis and I were arguing that what people were expressing by throwing yogurt was that the neoliberal austerity package (or memorandum) was in fact against Greekness. We argued that Greek people were covering their politicians in this substance that represented Greekness to remind them of their Greekness. This is one example of this notion of disembedding and re-embedding. The politicians are seen to have disembedded themselves from Greek culture by following neoliberal prescriptions that have devastated the social fabric in the service of economic statistics. The yogurt throwers are re-embedding them, metaphorically, by covering them in yogurt. This will become clearer as I discuss some of the subsequent examples.

The next two images that I will discuss go together. They are both photographs that were reproduced in Greek newspapers in 2011-2012. In some ways they look similar: one image shows people reaching for a bag of tomatoes, while the second
There was a lot of consternation expressed about whether Greek gists have begun to document (Agelopoulos 2013; Rakopoulos directly on a large scale. It has had some success, as anthropologists have begun to document (Agelopoulos 2013; Rakopoulos 2015). When the first picture of the tomatoes was published, there was a lot of consternation expressed about whether Greek society had become so frayed that people were, in fact, desperately reaching for a bag of tomatoes. In this case it was not solidarity that was being expressed, but the extent of the devastation of the Greek social fabric.

To me, however, there is a striking contrast in these two images when they are placed together. They remind me of a quote from Eduardo Galeano, who said: “I don’t believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.” In fact, much of the discussion in Greece about efforts to relieve people’s needs is phrased in terms of an opposition between charity and solidarity.

There are charity organizations in Greece that organize relief, including the Greek Orthodox Church, which is seen as “charity.” Many people, particularly those on the left, insist that they are engaged not in charity, but rather in solidarity. Of course there can be some fuzziness—it is not always cut and dried. But it is a distinction that is worth thinking about in what follows.

This next set of pictures that I will discuss (Figure 1) comes from one of the most successful movements to emerge from the crisis, known as the social kitchen movement. The particular organization involved in this movement that is depicted here is one of the most well known; it is called “The Other Human” (O Allos Anthropos). This organization started in Athens and has expanded all over Greece. They have been quite successful at gathering together at least once a week and cooking a meal in a public location with the idea that anyone who can should contribute whatever they can, and anyone who can not contribute should simply come (Figures 2 and 3). Members of the organization cook a meal and sit down and eat it together. The founder of the movement, Kostas Polychronopoulos, was explicit about the importance of sitting down together and sharing a dialogue along with sharing food.

As anthropologists I think it is very important that we contextualize this within Greek social practices, because on Kalymnos people are feeding each other all the time. It is extremely common for neighbors to make a little extra and bring it over to their neighbors. And then the other neighbor reciprocates. Nobody is keeping track, at least not in any carefully measured sense. It is a constant process that is done for multiple reasons, not especially out of need, although that sometimes factors in. Often a person is offering food to remember a dead relative. When a parent or child dies, a person may cook extra in order for other people to think of the dead person. There are also many other reasons for sharing food, embedded in the daily life of Kalymnos (Sutton 2001, 2014).

Now I do not want to suggest that food sharing does not contain many potential exclusions as well. For instance, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn has also held food distributions during the crisis. But their food distribution is pitched in hyper-nationalist terms: this is food by and for Greeks, and nobody else.

Another example of food solidarity practices is provided by the “suspended coffee” movement. The idea of suspended coffee began in Naples, Italy, and has spread throughout the world. It means buying in advance a coffee for someone—likely a stranger—who could not afford to pay for it and who will receive it in the future. There are different versions of this, and the differences are significant. In Greece people buy their own coffee, and if a person wants to buy a suspended coffee at a participating coffee shop, the person pays 70 percent of the cost of that coffee and the coffee shop covers the rest. As with the social kitchen movement, the Greek suspended coffee movement has been explicit about rejecting the idea of “charity” in favor of neighborhood cohesion. It is about allowing people to continue to participate in the daily rituals of life. As founder Christos Alefantou puts it, “There are so many people that just sit in their apartment and don’t go out, because they can’t afford a simple coffee. We want them to go out of the house, socialize and meet their neighbors. In one neighborhood we even had a group of women baking cakes which they gave to the cafes to serve with the coffee. So it really is a neighborhood initiative.”

Once again this needs to be seen in a broader cultural context, in this case a society in which coffee shop sociability has deep roots. Coffee shops used to be predominantly male social spaces, but for the last thirty years they have become coed social spaces (see, for example, Herszfeld 1985 and Cowan 1991). But a coffee shop is primarily a space for socializing. It is much more unusual for it to be used as a space for work—i.e., going to the coffee shop with a laptop. Especially during the crisis, people have talked about how important it is to be able to go out to coffee shops to feel that they are still able to engage in social relationships. As anthropologist Daniel Knight (2015) has described, this provoked some negative reactions on the part of some northern Europeans who react to the effect of: Look at those Greeks sitting in coffee...
shops; if they are sitting in coffee shops and buying coffee, clearly they must not be suffering enough.

The phrase “poverty requires good living” (I ftohia thelei kaloperasei) is helpful in elucidating the attitude expressed by Greeks here. It also refers back to what I mentioned previously about dignity. “Good living” does not mean “easy living.” It is meant in a more expansive way. It once again refers to the idea that you can imagine stretching your means so that you are able to reproduce identities and social relationships. In other words, you are not going to turn into an isolated individual (as Greeks imagine the lives of many northern Europeans). I heard many people talking about this on Kalymnos. People in coffee shops performed their coffee shop practices. They would say things like, Here we are in the coffee shop, it is the crisis, we may as well be gathering together enjoying our coffee. One Kalymnian told me that instead of the old phrase “poverty requires good living,” the expression has become “the crisis requires good living” (I krisi thelei kaloperasei). This could involve different practices, from going to the coffee shop and sitting for a couple of hours nursing a single coffee to staying home with friends and ordering a pizza rather than going out to a restaurant, or other ways of finding the means to stretch things so that people can still say that they are human beings who engage in social relations. Once again, this can be framed
in terms of Polanyi’s idea of disembedding. In this case it is the individual who is threatened with disembedding from society, or alienation, that is of concern.

Another food-related practice to which I would like to call attention is an art project put on by two Greek artists. They gathered bitter oranges, which grow in public places in Greek cities, from a number of different neighborhoods in Athens and Thessaloniki, and they made “spoon sweets” (glika tou koutaliou), a traditional Greek sweet. They made different batches from the oranges of the different neighborhoods, and they served them to people at food conferences in Greece, Germany, and the United Kingdom (see Figure 4).15 The artists wanted to provoke dialogue with the people at these different venues. Not surprisingly, that got very different reactions. The people at the conferences in the U.K. and Germany focused on the different flavors and how they reflected the different locations and varieties of the oranges. The people in Greece, however, thought this was an interesting strategy: maybe one could market these sweets. Or, maybe this is something that we Greeks need to be doing to help people so that they can enjoy this free resource. Now the Greeks who suggested this did not mean that these
sweets would be filling nutritional needs; since the sweets are constituted of orange peel and sugar, their benefits are minimal. But it is part of Greek coffee practices. You find these sweets occasionally in coffee shops (or bakery shops that sometimes serve coffee—zacharoplasteia), but more commonly when a person has someone over for coffee in their home. These sweets take part in this same reproduction of sociability. Indeed, I found some Kalymnians were making more of these spoon sweets from a variety of fruits and vegetables (they can be made from carrots and tomatoes, for example), as a relatively low-cost “treat” that could substitute for other, more expensive sweets as part of home consumption. One other interesting dimension of this particular project is the fact that these are flavored bitter-sweet, and, one might surmise, could represent the taste of the crisis, or as a way of thinking about the past and the present.

During the summer of 2015 a number of different food discourses and practices were developing. July of 2015 was the referendum, in which a “yes” vote meant acceptance of ongoing austerity programs, and a “no” vote meant their rejection. One photograph circulating on the internet shows a restaurant offering a “yes” burger, made of chickpea patties on a dry bun, and a “no” burger that was described as “Greek style with creamy Feta and sun-dried tomatoes,” quite a bit more appealing. While other protests have played with the symbolism of foreign food in Greece (Vournelis 2013), in this case these are both “Greek” foods, but chickpeas have an association with poverty or even wartime starvation (Panourgia 2009). Feta, on the other hand, symbolizes Greekness in, for the most part, much more positive terms (and certainly it typically does for the tourists to whom this display was presumably directed).

Another dimension of the summer of 2015 was the huge influx of refugees fleeing the Middle East and elsewhere and coming into Greece. This too was experienced importantly in terms of questions of food and solidarity. A photograph that received tremendous attention in Greece (and beyond) shows three older women; one is bottle-feeding the baby of a Syrian woman who looks on. This photograph was also singled out by the Greek prime minister, who said that “this is the image that we want to present of Europe, not a Europe of borders and fences.” Ordinary Greek people have been by and large tremendously generous in donating time, food, and clothing to help the refugees. Another internet-circulated photo shows a Greek baker who has been donating bread to feed the refugees, and it has been captioned with the word “honor” (philotimo). This has been the work of ordinary people (Greeks and foreigners who have come to Greece to volunteer) participating in solidarity networks, and often with the explicit opposition of the government, international institutions, and pressures from the neo-Nazi party (see Rozakou 2016). As one of the reviewers of this text summed it up: “Philotimo really means social responsibility, something that is much needed in times of crisis; part and parcel of a reaction against disembedded self-interest/economic interest.”

Why do Greeks seem so generous, despite their own hardships? One narrative says that it is because Greeks are generous, that it is part of their character going back to ancient times, part of legendary Greek hospitality (philoxenia). Here Greek generosity and hospitality is posed in nationalist terms in opposition to Greek perceptions that Turks and northern Europeans have not shown generosity to refugees. Note that one thing that anthropologists have extensively analyzed is the hierarchical nature of the concept of hospitality, something that, like charity, is seen in top-down terms (see Herzfeld 1985). But in talking with ordinary people, anthropologists and others have repeatedly shown that the relationship with refugees is often not one of feelings of hierarchy and charity, but rather feelings of identity. Myria Georgiou notes, for example, that when she was interviewing volunteers about the reasons for participation, she was told, “It could be me.” This resonates with Glick-Schiller’s work on what she calls “cosmopolitan sociability” (Glick-Schiller et al. 2011). As Glick-Schiller (2016: 7) puts it: “The welcome that some Europeans gave the refugees in the fall of 2015 was not an expression of tolerance to strangers, but an acknowledgement that we are all facing the consequences of a global warring, and the depredations and displacements of capital accumulation. In that sense, we are all refugees.” In an additional sense, many of those older Greeks who are donating so much . . . they were refugees. Either they were refugees during World War II, or their parents and grandparents were refugees during the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922 (Hirschon 1998; Doumanis 2012). They are speaking from personal knowledge.

There are tensions and conflicts here as well. In early March 2016, a protest was made at the Chamber of Commerce on Chios, one of the islands that has been a center for refugees. Apparently some merchants are not happy about solidarity with refugees because they do not want refugees to be getting free food; they want the refugees to be buying from them. The protest organized by the local social kitchen group on Chios demands that the Chamber of Commerce cease harassing them. What is notable is that they protest by bringing the meal that they cooked that day—cups of lentils—and distribute them to the members of the Chamber of Commerce. In this case food is being used to shame people who are putting profit and calculation before sociability and
solidarity. I later learned that several members of the Chamber of Commerce resigned in recognition of this protest. Note that in all of these examples I have discussed, food symbolizes sociability and a rejection of the abstractions entailed in a decontextualized focus on economics, money, and neoliberal accounting practices.

Let me return to my own ethnography and briefly mention how people on Kalymnos are surviving the crisis, and note some of the impacts on food practices. Kalymnos, in contrast to other parts of Greece, has certain advantages that have buffered the island somewhat from the worst of the crisis. These include a history of migration (which means that many Kalymnians have Australian or U.S. citizenship and migrate there for work), and a nautical tradition that allows Kalymnians to continue to find work in the merchant marines and other seafaring ventures. This, of course, means that much of the younger population has left the island over the past six years. In terms of food practices, I saw a number of impacts, but want to highlight two here as this is the subject of ongoing research.

First: snails. Snails had always been collected by some Kalymnians as a local delicacy for family consumption. In 2012, for the first time I saw one family collecting as many snails as they could (roughly forty-five pounds) and selling them to neighbors. In the past, extra snails would have been routed into ongoing gift exchanges, but in this case they were used to make roughly two days’ wages (see Sutton 2014). On the one hand, this seemed to imply a commercialization of tradition, with unknown implications at this point. On the other hand, it revived and made explicit certain aspects of local knowledge: it was the grandmother who, from her sickbed, directed the family on how to store the snails so they did

FIGURE 4: Counterclockwise from top: Detail of the installation of “Bitter Orange Sweet” in Amari Crete, July 2013; Offering the “spoon sweet” in the framework of the “Domestic Crisis” art exhibition at the Institut Für Alles Mögliche in Berlin, February 2013; Harvesting bitter oranges on Aristotelous Square in Thessaloniki, December 2012; Offering the “spoon sweet” in the framework of the 2nd Symposium of Greek Gastronomy: “Food, Memory and Identity in Greece and the Greek Diaspora” in Amari, Crete, July 2013.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF PERSEFONI MERTSOU AND INO VARVARITI © 2012, 2013
not go bad, and who reminded her daughter of various recipes for preparing snails.24

A second example was a dish called kavourmas, made from pork, or sometimes goat, cooked in its own fat and butter and lots of salt.25 This fat/salt mixture acted as a preservative so that kavourmas could be kept unrefrigerated for long periods of time. This was a dish that I have heard about many times over the past twenty-five years, as it was associated with the sponge-diving past of the island when the divers would prepare it to take on their long voyages. But I had never heard of anyone making it for their own consumption. In summer 2015 a number of families were making kavourmas and it was being served in one or two restaurants. When I queried one woman about it, she told me: “You never know when they might cut off our electricity, so it’s good to remember how to make kavourmas if we need it.”

This is part of a larger sense that I found on Kalymnos that local knowledge was one important way to “navigate” the crisis. So this is very much related to what that minister was saying about “stretching things” and drawing on Greek cultural knowledge to survive. But it also ties back to my discussion of the relation of Karl Polanyi and Michael Polanyi: that the response to the crisis through practices of resisting the disembedding of economy from society often draws upon tacit knowledge. It is the kind of tacit knowledge that is local and contextual, embedded in a particular socio-ecological place (one that includes knowledge of snails and of how to share—and sometimes sell—them, for example), that allows one to enjoy “good living” despite the strains of the crisis, by seeking out others, rather than by being pushed further into one’s own economic self-interest.

So to return to the beginning of my presentation: Why were people so upset with what the deputy minister for social solidarity had said? It is not that what she was saying was wrong. It is that this is not something that one shares publicly. And the deputy minister certainly did not have the right to be telling people to stretch things, since she, like other government ministers, was not suffering. She did not need to make stuffed peppers in order to maintain “good living.”

Annelise Riles (2013: 559) writes: “The compulsion toward reciprocity in exchange relations—the compulsion to create and continually rejuvenate relations based on debt and mutual obligation—is in fact the basis of all ethics and sociality, the source of our humanity, and what we can return to at points at which grand ideologies [neoliberalism] fail us.” This is what I have been discussing: the way that neoliberalism is not Greek is that it does not recognize that sociality is the basis of society. And that sociability (sociality’s more friendly cousin) calls on all kinds of local and tacit knowledge for its reproduction. While food can be used for neoliberal purposes, in Greece food tends to symbolize sociability and the embeddedness of knowledge in contrast to profit, abstraction, and calculation. And I would propose that there is something of comparative value in this ethnography. And that we will find similar meanings anywhere that a robust food culture—a “cuisine” in Sidney Mintz’s (1996) terms—still exists and thrives and is faced with the threat of neoliberal ideologies and practices.

Lastly, the more I study food, the more convinced I become that food studies needs to be at the very center of anthropology. Food is not only a window onto other domains of life. It is not only deeply woven into practices of kinship, exchange, and ritual; those domains that we have traditionally considered to be central to our anthropological project. Food itself is one such domain, absolutely critical to people’s daily reproduction of what matters to them about their lives. And as food scholars I think it is time that we own up to this. ő

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the sponsorship of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and to Gastronomica for sponsoring my lecture, and in particular Harry West, Jakob Klein, and Melissa Caldwell. I am also grateful to Lissa for her guidance and input in revising the paper, and the work of all the staff of Gastronomica, which has been much appreciated. Also, I appreciate the helpful comments of two anonymous reviewers. Thanks also for considerable input from my erstwhile collaborator, Leonidas Vournelis. Thanks also to Nafsika Papaharalambou for her numerous thoughts and last-minute succor. I am grateful to Persefoni Mrytsou, Ino Varvariti, and to “The Other Human” Social Kitchen collective for the use of photographs. As always, thanks to Peter Wogan for his editorial eye.

NOTES

1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNsM2AjjUl0.

2. Or at least attempts to disembed economy from society. Some of the recent literature focuses on the fact that economy can never be disembedded from society, but claims to disembedded economy from society can have ideological and material effects (Miller 1998; Krippner et al. 2004). An exception is Elyachar 2012, although she takes the connection between “eating the money” and Knight’s (2015) discussion on the metaphor of “eating the cucumber” and other food tropes in relation to the crisis.


REFERENCES


