



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Narotzky, S. (2020) Grassroots economies: living with austerity in Southern Europe

Vasile, M.

Citation

Vasile, M. (2022). Review of Narotzky, S. (2020) Grassroots economies: living with austerity in Southern Europe. *Interface: A Journal For And About Social Movements*, 13(2), 543-545. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3281324>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3281324>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**Review of Susana Narotzky's edited collection
*Grassroots Economies***

Review author: Maria Vasile

Susana Narotzky, 2020, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. London: Pluto Press (272 pp. paperback, £24.99).

Since 2008, Southern European countries have been greatly impacted by the economic recession and structural adjustment measures. Public spending cuts and welfare state retrenchment (also called austerity) have resulted in an increasing share of the population living and working in precarious conditions, and growing social inequalities (Knight and Stewart, 2016; Sarapioni and Hespanha, 2019).

The ten pieces gathered in Susana Narotzky's edited volume *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* explore, through ethnographic accounts and analyses, the contemporary socio-economic crisis as experienced by ordinary people in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Portugal.

The authors, who are anthropologists working together as part of the research project "Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood" (GRECO), use ethnography and comparison to analyse the impacts of austerity from the point of view of local populations' everyday lives, ways of making a living, needs and struggles.

In each chapter, the reader becomes acquainted with the life experiences of different people, such as Anna and Marco, two Italian small entrepreneurs who went bankrupt and are indebted and isolated (Loperfido); Maria, a market vendor in northern Portugal, who does not manage to meet municipal regulations and develops her own response (Leidereiter); and Thomas, a Greek miner working at a power plant, whose salary and benefits are cut as the energy company is being restructured (Vetta).

While each of these stories are contextualised and to be read within their specific historical, political, and economic contexts, their broader significance emerges through the authors' original analyses and the common framework through which they are approached and organised.

Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe begins with an introduction that addresses its theoretical concerns and overarching themes (Narotzky) and is further divided into three sections: "Making a living," "Social Reproduction," and "Experiencing and Embodying Austerity."

The reader learns not only about current transformations (in the ways in which people are impacted by, navigate and resist austerity), but most importantly how reading through daily practices is key to gain a deeper understanding of

what large economic phenomena translate into, for different people, in specific contexts.

A red thread throughout the volume is the “widespread acceptance of austerity” and the “continuous dispossession of the means of livelihood” (p. 13) that people experience while developing strategies for making a living. Central to these processes are what Narotzky calls “valuation struggles”:

Valuation is the process that creates social systems of categorisation that describe and evaluate social life... Valuation struggles are not only fought around “evaluation” (the process of ranking) but also over the framing system itself (what is defined as relevant). Most of the cases that we present in this book are struggles around the categories for valuing human worth (p.16).

The analyses presented in *Grassroots Economies* resonate with the issue of valuation, from various perspectives. Welfare, its transformation, and related changes in the definition and evaluation of people’s welfare entitlements, are discussed in chapters by Pusceddu, Homs and Matos. These authors discuss workfare schemes, the social economy’s welfare responsibilities (and subjection to the logics of capitalism) and the popular reconfiguration of social rights into needs, respectively.

Another set of authors illustrate how, as part of such transformations, people increasingly must rely on family support, finance, and assets (Palomera). Such dependency on family resources and care work entails tensions and anxiety. People face difficulties accepting their condition, which contrasts with hegemonic imaginaries of individual autonomy and success (Narotzky and Pusceddu).

Hegemonic imaginaries, approached in the book in terms of the neoliberal morality (see also Muehlebach, 2012) intermesh with and recast local understandings of labor, the economy, and the crisis (Vetta; Sarkis and Amarianakis). These ideals often also clash with how people decide to resist and to “refuse to silently accept the blame for austerity, to be pushed into low-wage labor or to buy into the narrative of austerity as exception” (Leidereiter, p. 89).

Such tensions and contradictions between neoliberal moral values and actual everyday life under austerity also have dramatic effects on people’s identity and sense of self and translate into embodied forms of oppression and resistance (Loperfido; Sarkis and Matos).

Overall, *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe* provides important and fresh insights into neoliberalism and austerity as an encounter between restructuring processes at different scales and everyday life experiences in Southern Europe (and beyond).

Importantly, all authors developed rich pieces, pointing to the complexity, paradoxes, and ambiguities of “living with austerity,” sometimes resulting in forms of dispossession and resistance at once. Their focus on the working class

and women particularly allows one to grasp these tensions, while the overall effects of neoliberal policies, like poverty, precarity, downward mobility, institutional void, depoliticization of rights, domestication of alternative political and economic practices, oppression, also remain central to the discussion.

Grassroots Economies raises questions about the future of welfare, employment and livelihoods, social fragmentation, people's sense of self and, more generally, citizenship. Though this last concept is not particularly at the forefront nor explicitly theorised, all contributions highlight aspects of contemporary redefinitions of citizenship rights, related moralities and people's ways of understanding and reacting to their (new) conditions.

All these queries and research directions could not be more important today, as the COVID-19 crisis increases livelihood instability and vulnerability. While a variety of grassroots solidarity and mutual aid initiatives have emerged (see for example Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar, 2020), it remains an open question whether people's mobilisation and institutional responses will challenge the reproduction of social inequalities and processes of dispossession examined in this book.

References

GRECO project: <http://www.ub.edu/grassrootseconomics/> (accessed 23.04.2021)

Knight, M. Daniel, and Charles Stewart, eds. 2016. "Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe". Special issue *History and Anthropology* 27 (1).

<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ghan20/27/1?nav=tocList>

Muehlebach, Andrea. 2012. *The moral neoliberal: welfare and citizenship in Italy*. University of Chicago Press.

Serapioni, Mauro, and Pedro Hespanha. 2019. "Crisis and Austerity in Southern Europe: Impact on Economies and Societies." *E-cadernos CES* 31.

<https://journals.openedition.org/eces/4068> (accessed on 8/12/2021)

Sitrin, Martina and Colectiva Sembrar, eds. 2020. *Pandemic solidarity. Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis*. Pluto Press.

About the review author

Maria Vasile is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University (The Netherlands). She is part of the ERC Consolidator Project "Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scales."