

## Resistance to economic reforms in Greece

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### Abstract

*This paper examines Greek protests against economic adjustment programs during the sovereign debt crisis by both the social and labor movements from a perspective of civil resistance theory.*

*While the movements were influential enough to shape the political landscape of the country, by toppling the governing party and helping a previously small party to be elected, they underestimated to what degree economic policy- and decision-making are shielded from democratic pressures and how forcefully its beneficiaries can assert their interests by economic means, for instance via the leverage of debt. Thus a 'people power' strategy to effectively challenge economic policies must be based on an analysis of pressure points and leverage affecting this economic regime.*

*After a brief description of the economic reforms that were protested, some central theoretical concepts of civil resistance are briefly presented, which are then applied to two examples of resistance, concluding with strategic considerations for research, analysis and action.*

**Keywords:** nonviolent action, civil resistance, civil disobedience, Greece, IMF, structural adjustment, labor movement, social movements, economic policies, European Union

### Crisis and resistance

In order to get financial assistance, following the sovereign debt crisis, the Greek government had to adjust its economic structures according to bailout deals with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission and the European Central Bank, and later the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) (Riedl et al. 2015, p.52). These measures were stipulated in three Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between the government and the international lender community involved.

Yet, these structural adjustment programs (SAPs) did not only address public spending. They also weakened labor rights by simultaneously promoting corporate privileges (Clauwaert and Schömann 2012, p.5). All these measures aim to eliminate existing barriers to profit and investment, even at the cost of workers and consumers.

From 2009 on, other European countries, like Ireland, Spain and Portugal, also struggled with debt crises (Riedl et al. 2015, p.53). Governments in these countries also tried to address the situation with austerity politics that were met

with widespread protests and resistance (Gerbaudo 2016). The movement in Greece, that initially became to be known in the media as the Indignants, (Aganaktismeni) showed many similarities with the Indignados movement in Spain or the Occupy movements in the US, as protestors established encampments, experimenting with direct democracy as in the form of assemblies, demanding change in official institutions and in the economic system (Simiti 2014, p.1). Notwithstanding, there were certainly also differences with regards to political goals, types of actions and developments.

The extensive changes in the private and public economy, the labor market and the welfare state led to a massive and sudden deterioration of working, living and housing conditions and public health, and to a decrease and loss of wages, thus resulting in amplified income inequality (Kennedy 2016, p.11). Certainly, a great part of the Greek population did not leave these new policies unanswered, but participated in massive rallies, strikes, actions, disobedience campaigns and occupations to protest, prevent or reverse their implementation (Leontidou 2012). I will give some examples of these methods of resistance toward the end of the article.

The movement and the events were influential enough to overthrow the governing party and bring to government a previously small left-wing coalition with the mandate to reverse adjustment programs. However, this new government did not carry out its mandate. Greek Prime minister Tsipras made a remarkable turn in the same direction as his predecessors just half a year after he and his party had been elected (Boukalas and Müller 2015, p.392, 400). Many people who had put their hope into this party thus underestimated to what degree economic policy- and decision-making is shielded from democratic pressures and how forcefully its beneficiaries can assert their interests by economic means, for instance via the leverage of debt<sup>1</sup>.

This case requires further analysis as it may be of interest for many activists in the Global Justice Movement. Finding ways to effectively shift power imbalances between people and financial corporations, thus how to control financial power, is a vital task in the context of growing corporate control and expanding legislation in many countries that favor corporate interests over workers' rights and protection, welfare and the environment (Gilens and Page 2014).

In the last 150 years, people have stood up time and again. By sticking together, they have nonviolently ousted dictators, military occupations and colonial empires. They have won rights and legislation for justice, freedom and equality. Yet at the same time as people have emancipated from their political rulers and

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<sup>1</sup> Eventually the most powerful leverage for neoliberal restructurings of economies has been worldwide the immense rise of public debt (Streeck 2013, p.6). The transition of a tax-based state to a debt-based state in almost all of the OECD-countries do correlate and can be both traced back to the 1970s (Ibid., p.2). In every instance of implementation of austerity measures, the main factor has been soaring public debt. External debt thus became an "efficient tool" (George 1990, p.143) of gaining access to cheap labor and infrastructure.

gained liberation, another form of power emerged, exploiting and abusing people and the planet. Private companies, especially banks and financial corporations, seem to have become the sovereigns of our times<sup>2</sup>. Would it be possible, similarly to political struggles for freedom, independence and against oppression and authoritarian regimes, to shift power once more vis a vis economic exploitation and oppression, to expand democracy?

Over the past century a field of study has emerged dedicated to examining how resistance works in asymmetrical power relations, based on which mechanisms bring about social change and what dynamics occur between the protesters and governments during such contentions (Sharp 1973). This field of research examines nonviolent action, also called 'civil resistance', as a social technique of contention, including methods such as strikes, boycotts or sit-ins. This set of nonviolent civil resistance methods works for political struggles and against coercion by military force, and as well for social struggles against coercion by economic means. There are also a few accounts of applying this framework to struggles targeting corporations (Chenoweth & Olsen 2016) or attempting to transform or oppose capitalism or imperialism (cf. Martin 2001; Martin et al. 2012; de Ligt 1937).

This framework of analysis has the potential to analyze the successes and failures of the Greek anti-neoliberal movement from a strategic perspective. The outcomes of certain methods and approaches can be better understood, by viewing them in the context of the power dynamics between protesters, the government and economic forces. The aim here is to examine what civil resistance studies can eventually contribute to the understanding of social movement dynamics in the context of economic struggles and to broaden the scope of civil resistance studies by applying its concepts not only to political struggles, but to economic ones as well. The question guiding this article is: How can civil resistance studies help to reflect about strategies of activists in the context of struggles that involve economic actors or economic reforms, like in the case of Greece? This is an attempt of cross-fertilization between civil resistance studies and general social movement research.

Some clarification of terms seems appropriate. A movement is here understood as a part of the population organizing and mobilizing around a shared cause or interest over time. Participants in the movement may educate and inform the public about the issue under critique, advocate for their cause in the public debate, or lobby politicians. They can also organize protest events, such as marches, rallies, actions or strikes addressing a common grievance, fighting for a similar goal, vision, demand or set of demands. These efforts do not need to be coordinated or orchestrated: they can be organized in parallel or independently from each other. The important point is that a movement is more than just one group, as it consists of different groups, networks and individuals, who may

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<sup>2</sup> An empirical quantitative mapping of power, that for the first time ranked entities according to their global control, suggests that a limited number of financial corporations are the most influential entities of our times (Vitali et al. 2011, p.32).

coordinate in coalitions or may act independently of each other. Sometimes different parts of the movement do not agree on targets, methods and the underlying theory of change.

A movement is also more than just one protest event. Often a movement exists for years or even decades, sometimes with intensity, participation, activity and visibility ebbing and flowing in waves. Even if in a literal sense, a protest is a method that can be used by movement supporters, in this article the term ‘protest’ is at times used as a synecdoche for the movement spawning the protest, primarily because in the case of Greece the main acts of the movement against the memoranda and austerity have been public protests (like rallies, marches or demonstrations).

After a brief overview of the economic reforms that were being protested, I will present some key concepts of civil resistance, and give some examples of resistance methods in Greece, namely of economic noncooperation, like strikes, and payment refusal, concluding with strategic considerations for research, analysis and action.

### **Economic reforms in Greece**

With the severe structural adjustment programs following the sovereign debt crisis of Greece, the whole country relinquished its ability to determine its own future in terms of political decisions. The bailout deals, the Memoranda of Understanding in 2010, 2012 and 2015, obliged the state, independently of the government in charge, to implement harsh economic measures, including flexibilization of labor markets, cuts in public expenditures and privatization of public assets. Credit arrangements thus pursue the explicit target of “internal devaluation” (European Commission 2012, p.2). Some researchers even claim that “Greece has completed one of the largest adjustments in the world” (Weisbrot et al. 2015, p.2). It is noteworthy that the austerity measures however did not lead to a reduction, but rather to an increase of indebtedness<sup>3</sup>.

Around 430.000 citizens left the country within just a few years (ELSTAT 2016), most likely due to high unemployment of over 50% for those under 25 years old (Markantonatou 2013, p.17). Especially young educated persons tried to find employment elsewhere contributing to a so-called “brain-drain” (Markantonatou 2013, p.17).

Those who stayed had to accept a severe deterioration of living and working conditions, due to austerity measures and repeated deregulations of labor rights. Wages and benefits were significantly reduced, collective and individual redundancies facilitated and the collective bargaining system drastically restricted (Kapsalis 2012, p.12-13). Although an increasing part of the working population was “underpaid, overworked and struggling to meet the rising costs

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<sup>3</sup> While in 2010 the debt-to-GDP-ratio of Greece stood at 146%, this value increased by 30 percentage points within four years, as in 2014 it stood at 176% (Riedl et al. 2015, p.60) and 176.6% in 2019 (Statista 2020).

of living long before the economic crisis of 2009–10” (Kretsos 2010, p.17), and although it is not proved that the crisis was a result of previous labor laws (Clauwaert and Schömann 2012, p.6), deregulation of labor markets was anyway implemented.

According to transnational labor studies, this economic “strategy shapes the Eurozone as a supply-side, export-oriented economy, and involves the creation of zones of cheap labor within the Eurozone” (Boukalas and Müller 2015, p.391).

Collective bargaining systems were decentralized and thus weakened by favoring (mostly worse) individual contracts (European Commission 2012, p.37). The remaining collective agreements tend to introduce wage cuts instead of guaranteeing income security (Daouli et al. 2013, p.4-11). Studies denote these developments as the destruction, abolition, illegalization or even death of the collective bargaining and collective agreement system in Greece (Kouzis et al. 2011, p.187). Moreover, Technocratic National Competitiveness Boards are being founded for intervention in collective bargaining, to guarantee that “regardless of electoral outcomes, no government will be able to chart a path away” from these types of policies (Kennedy 2016, p.13). Hence, institutional procedures to halt reforms are not available.

The results have been devastating for the population. According to a European report on consuming power, after the adjustment programs three out of four Greeks failed to pay their bills (Intrum 2016, p.22). In 2016, 53% of Greeks stated that their income is not enough to ensure them a decent living. 65% of people in Greece are worried that, after paying taxes, there is not enough money left to meet their needs, with the corresponding rate in Europe being 39% (Ibid.). In 2019, Greece even received the *lowest* ranks of all 24 measured European countries with regards to overall economic well-being of the population, including the ability to pay bills on time (Intrum 2019, p. 6). Moreover, after the labor reforms, around 125.000 employees received less than 100 € per month, according to the Greek ministry of labor (RLF, 2016). There are numerous additional social impacts of reforms including deterioration of public health (Karanikolos and Kentikelenis 2016), the rise of homelessness, and an unprecedented increase in the rate of suicides (Markantonatou 2013, p.17). In summary, “the impact of the austerity regime has been catastrophic” (Reynolds 2015).

In the following section a method of bottom-up struggle will be presented that has been used numerous times to put an end to unjust regimes, like dictatorships, racial segregation or external occupation in order to examine whether this technique of struggle may be useful to challenge exploitative economic regimes as well.

## Nonviolent action: the theory on civil resistance

The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society. If this knowledge were to penetrate to and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and would learn how to free themselves by means of nonviolence from the crushing inequalities.

Gandhi 1940<sup>4</sup>

Nonviolent action is a technique of struggle, an active response to a conflict with the aim to promote social or political change without using physical violence or the threat of violence<sup>5</sup>, such as beatings, torture or killings. It has been used by a wide range of movements worldwide. Some of the best-known examples are Gandhi's Independence movement of India and the civil rights movement against racial segregation, e.g. the campaigns led by Martin Luther King Jr., yet there are numerous other historical examples (Ackermann and DuVall, 2006).

While Gandhi (1869–1948) is well known for his leading role in the movement for independence of India from British rule, it is less known that with his technique of achieving social change, he envisioned to not only overcome political oppression, but also economic exploitation. Besides national liberation, Gandhi thus also emphasized social and economic justice and “he warned against substituting the rule of the British elite with the rule by an Indian elite” (Schock 2015, p.304). For him freedom in his country also signified the thriving of direct democracy and self-management as an important precondition of a development beyond poverty (Gandhi 1945; Martin 2001, p.11). He is one of the first in history to consciously experiment with what he called *satyagraha* or, in other words, civil resistance (cf. Gandhi 2007). Inspired by this example but also independently, many movements of civilians worldwide were able to successfully democratize authoritarian regimes, achieve more civil rights, or to oust foreign military occupations (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Gene Sharp is a political theorist who systematized the insights from those struggles and contributed to spreading and deepening the knowledge on this technique by inspiring new movements (Engler and Engler 2016, pp.76-77).

NVA is a conscious opposition to direct and structural violence, as well as confrontation (instead of mere de-escalation<sup>6</sup>) and direct action (Dudouet 2008,

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Sharp (1973, p. 47).

<sup>5</sup> Although violence is not always defined in the same way, most scholars of NVA agree that an action is violent, if it targets the body of a human being (e.g. displacement, homicide or captivation). It is contested though whether property destruction should be called violent or nonviolent (Conway 2003, p. 516).

<sup>6</sup> Escalation in this context does not refer to violent escalation of conflicts. A nonviolent conflict escalation means an increase in intensity without making use of violent means, while direct violence refers to a situation where the actor(s) “intentionally threaten or harm other human beings physically” (Sørensen and Johansen 2016, p.3).

p. 240). NVA is also a technique of control of political power, that, when applied strategically, can help people to redistribute centralized power, in order to regain self-determination of their lives.

At the heart of the NVA framework lies the consent theory of power. All regimes, whether democratic or autocratic, depend on the consent of the people, in form of active contributions, cooperation, obedience, carrying out orders and tasks. Sharp refers in his analysis to the 'ruler' on the one hand and to 'subjects' or the 'ruled' on the other hand. The term ruler can refer to an individual (like a dictator) but normally it is “a small elite or an oligarchy. Most of the time, however, it is a very large number of persons” (Sharp 1973, p.49) who occupy positions that allow them to take decisions that impact the entire society. By withdrawing consent or support, for example by not cooperating, not obeying anymore, the power of the ruler can be kept in check, influenced or even destroyed.

However, in order to really control political power by denying assistance and contributions to continuation of the status quo, “noncooperation and disobedience must be widespread and must be maintained in the face of repression” (Ibid., p.32) by the opponent (e.g. the state) intended at coercing the subjects to resume obedience.

There have been used hundreds of methods worldwide aimed at the nonviolent control of power by targeting the above-mentioned sources of power. Sharp (1973, pp. 357–435) described and documented numerous types of protest and persuasion, social, economic and political noncooperation such as boycotts or strikes, and psychological, physical, social, economic or political intervention, like the hunger strike, sit-ins, building alternative social institutions, nonviolent occupations or overloading administrative systems.

A successful nonviolent action campaign is characterized by specific elements, including for instance laying the groundwork by a thorough preparation, including selecting the right methods as tactics in an escalating pressure strategy, or awareness training on overcoming fear and maintaining nonviolent discipline in the face of repression. If this discipline is achieved, the violence used against the movement can even backfire against the opponent himself, what Sharp calls political jiu-jitsu (Ibid., p. 657). If protesters can resist provocation, violence on the part of the state will increasingly seem illegitimate, the ruler might lose backing and support both from the population and from third parties.

Curiously, the main field of research on social movements does not consider nonviolent action literature and concepts but deals with different frameworks and questions. Social movement studies tend to put a greater emphasis on structure, while nonviolent action researchers tend to focus more on agency (Nepstad 2015, p. 416; Schock 2015, p. 11). However, both perspectives could use this difference and this respective gap to learn from each other and to be enriched by each other. Structural aspects need to be taken into account when dealing with cases that try to intervene in the context of corporate globalization.

This paper attempts to contribute to the development of strategic theory in social movement literature, as “there has been surprisingly little attention to strategy within the field of collective action” (Nepstad 2015, p.416).

Mainstream social movement theories concentrate on four main elements: framing of a movement’s message; resource mobilization, thus professionalization of organizational structures, that enable use of resources; repertoire, that is the types of actions; and finally, opportunity structures (for an overview see della Porta & Diani 1999, and McAdam et al. 1996).

While the bulk of research literature is dedicated to movement characteristics (goals and organization), a much smaller part examines movement outcomes, namely the impact movements have on society, norms, laws, discourses and practices and the factors that lead to specific outcomes (Giugni 1998, p.371), in contrast to civil resistance studies in which scholars “have primarily examined outcomes, namely, the factors affecting whether movements achieved their goals” (Nepstad 2015, p.416). This prioritization of a movement’s characteristics over understanding and trying to explain outcomes and consequences has been criticized by social movement researchers themselves (e.g. Luders 2010, p.14). Civil resistance studies may offer some concepts and research findings to bridge this gap in social movement research. In that sense, a nonviolent action framework can be a lens for activists to strategize as well as for researchers to understand dynamics between protesters and the entity they address.

### **Civil resistance in Greece: shifting the balance of power?**

Since the outbreak of the crisis, many people in Greece<sup>7</sup> tried to resist economic adjustments in various ways. After a brief overview of anti-memoranda<sup>8</sup> protest developments, I will focus on methods of economic intervention, in the form of strikes and refusal to pay fees.

Though the movements did not intentionally use the approach or concepts of nonviolent action as an explicit framework, they did employ many methods of civil resistance and there were participants in favor of staying nonviolent. Thus, here the events and their analysis are framed from that perspective in order to show its potential usefulness for both activists and social movement researchers.

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<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that it is impossible to speak of ‘the’ movement as one coherent, uniform group of people with the same ideas, values, political backgrounds and demands, as in most cases of mass protest when a broader part of the population is involved. An indicator of fragmented identities of participants is the participation of people from the left and right. For further elaboration on the contradictions within the indignants’ movement in Greece, see Theodossopoulos (2014).

<sup>8</sup> I prefer the term ‘anti-memoranda’ over the more common ‘anti-austerity’ protests as it refers to all economic measures included in the Memoranda of Understanding, that go far beyond just austerity measures, as besides cuts in public expenditures, they also entail flexibilization of labor markets (e.g. deregulation of labor rights) and privatization of public goods.



While there are certainly also more violent elements in the political tradition of resistance in Greece<sup>9</sup>, these were not included in the given examples, as the emphasis here is on the contributions of civil resistance studies and the nonviolent action framework to strategy formulation and movement outcomes, and not on the comparison between violence and nonviolence. The strategic disadvantages of using violent means and the relation of nonviolent movements and violent elements have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan 2011: 8; Sharp 1973, 68; Satha-Anand 2015, 296; Howes 2009).

In 2010 mass demonstrations emerged and increased after the first MoU (Rüdiger and Karyotis 2014, p.487). During this stage the main methods involved protest and persuasion, although economic noncooperation had already begun in the form of strikes and refusal of compulsory payments. The following year participation in protests increased and additional methods, like the occupation of central squares inspired by protests in Spain, Tunisia and Egypt (Gerbaudo 2016, p.5) were added to the repertoire of resistance.

In late June 2011 activists encircled the parliament building with the aim of keeping politicians from entering. They also pressured them to vote against the conditions (Simiti 2014, p.12). Even if parliament finally did vote for the agreement, the pillar of public opinion could be still targeted and partially won over in the long run.

The movement also intervened by building up alternative institutions and structures. These included social medical centers where doctors treat poor patients pro bono, self-organized pharmacies, where donated medicines are issued, self-managed cafés, shops, one workers-led factory and other cooperatives. There are networks collecting and distributing food for the poor, and markets and alternative trade networks where agricultural goods are sold directly by the farmers without intermediaries. Solidarity networks of all kinds spread all over Greece, in which citizens took on responsibilities and initiated projects regarding anything that helps people not to face the results of the crisis alone (Solidarity for All 2016).

As public opinion had successfully shifted, in mid-2012 the focus of activism seemed to slightly move from demonstrations to an increased focus on mobilizing electoral support for Syriza<sup>10</sup>, a party which was widely perceived as an ally of the movement. Certainly, many movement participants remained critical and mistrustful of any political representation, while at the same time also the extreme right made gains in terms of support. The move of focusing efforts on Syriza was not an intentional one based on a shared strategy of the

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<sup>9</sup> An in-depth historical background of nonviolent action in Greece goes beyond the scope of this paper. It should be mentioned that in 1973 there was a student uprising against the dictatorship at that time, which displayed elements of civil disobedience and nonviolent action (Migkos 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Syriza was formed as political alliance of the new left in Greece in 2004 and emerged as a political party in 2012. It was co-founded and is seen as the successor of SYNASPISMOS, a new left political party that existed from 1991 to 2013 (SYN 2014).

movement, yet it was noticeable (Theodossopoulos 2014, p. 494). This projection of hopes of many movement participants on Syriza, even by many who had refused to vote for a long time, facilitated it to grow from a small party<sup>11</sup>, over the representation of the movement in the political arena, to the victor of parliamentary elections in 2015 (Karyotis and Rüdig. 2016, p.3).

In summary, the movement had managed to mobilize masses, publicly discuss democratic deficits of the implementation of the policies<sup>12</sup>, influence the public debate, radically alter the traditional political landscape by toppling the governing party and help a new one gain political power, with the clear mandate to reverse reforms.

However, in June 2015 shortly after the prime minister Tsipras asked the Greek population to decide upon an agreement with the lenders, Greece became the first developed country to default to the IMF. In order to be able to service the payment of €1.6 billion, the new government decided to totally alter its policy orientation and to accept a third bailout-deal even worse than the one rejected by the Greeks in the referendum (Harrison and Liakos 2015).

This might have led to resignation and disillusionment among activists and the general population, as all traditional means and strategies of resistance proved inadequate to challenge the power of finance.

Historically, labor had been able to sometimes challenge industrial corporations due to their mutual dependency. By withdrawing the workforce, corporations could be forced to give in. But where is the dependency relation that would allow for an equivalent challenge with regards to financial capital? Who is actually in a position endowed with the capacity to issue reversals and changes of economic policies? And how can this target be challenged?

The ruler-subject dichotomy in Sharp's conception seems too simplistic to be applied to struggles against such economic reforms<sup>13</sup>. In the context of a complex intertwined network promoting these types of restructurings in Europe and the world (ranging from think-tanks, foundations, institutions, associations, organizations, international meetings, agreements, and treaties) it is impossible to identify some single targets isolated from the rest that have the main responsibility for authorizing and enforcing SAPs and reforms, and whose

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<sup>11</sup> As explained in the previous footnote, this does not mean that Syriza was created by the movement. Yet, the movement and the widespread critical stance toward neoliberal restructuring surely were favorable conditions for it to gain parliamentary power.

<sup>12</sup> "In the Greek Square movement, protestors accused the existing political regime of being a phony democracy, violating citizens' rights" (Simiti 2014, p.21).

<sup>13</sup> Generally though, it is possible to apply this framework to economic struggles, when for way of example a targeted corporation is constructed in analogy to 'the ruler' in Sharps model, while 'the ruled' are workers, consumers or members of an affected community. Chenoweth and Olsen (2016) for instance conducted a quantitative study to identify core factors of success of civil resistance campaigns targeting corporate behavior in 840 cases.

neutralization of influence would be capable of bringing the entire process to a halt.

A revised approach to a transfer of Sharp's theoretical considerations to anti-austerity movements is required. NVA theory has commonly focused on how to use the technique to bring down authoritarian regimes. However, researchers in this field have presented various different conceptual advancements that are helpful for a better comprehension of social change in democracies as well (Engler and Engler 2014, 2016).

A theoretical refinement is the image of the pillars of support that sustain a regime (Helvey 2004, p.9). Those pillars can be coercive, exacting obedience by force, like the military, the police or courts. For example the police are used to enforce new laws related to the reforms and to suppress resistance against it, while the business community will certainly implement and try to make use of all the new regulations to reduce costs and increase revenues. The target or the oppressive system can also be supported by pillars that shape culture, common values and the public opinion, such as media, education and religion. Additional pillars might be the youth, civil society and NGOs, civil servants and so on (Ibid., pp.10-18). These are all elements, that in various ways, “provide a regime with the backing it needs to survive” (Engler and Engler 2014). Nonviolent action is the technique of addressing exactly this: One by one either winning over, neutralizing or bruising the pillars of support of the respective regime.

So how has the concept of pillars of support been used in social change struggles within democracies? According to activist authors and organizers Mark and Paul Engler, the struggle for same-sex marriage in the US was successful in 2014 because one after another the pillars supporting a hostile attitude towards the LGBT community, like media, entertainment, churches, education - all influencing in one way or another the public discourse - changed their views regarding same-sex marriage. By stating that “if social movements could win the battle over public opinion, the courts and the legislators would ultimately fall in line” (Engler and Engler 2016, p.89) they leave the impression that, in representative democracies, movements must only shape public discourse on many levels and social change will follow.

However, I would argue that the Englers' social-change scenario cannot be readily transferred to economic restructurings. The case of Greece makes clear that there are issues enforced by economic means of coercion via the pressure of debt and credits, which cannot be won in the arena of public discourse and opinion only. Public opinion was shifted to the maximum towards an anti-memorandum stand, including public servants, civil society, workers, the education system, politicians and the media. However, what forced Syriza to still accept the harsh conditions of the third bailout agreement was not that its rejection had not sufficient backing in society. Quite the contrary: a significant majority of 61% voted against the terms of the deal. What forced Syriza to bow to the will of financial capital were economic constraints and the uncertainty of whether the effects of exiting the Eurozone would be even harsher than accepting neoliberal adjustments. There was no feasible lever that could be

realistically pulled in order to coerce the creditors to step back from their demands.

The key is not whether an action is supported by the majority of the population, but whether it leads to sustained losses, damages and deficits. Only what threatens current income opportunities and earnings outlooks is indeed a challenge to corporations. This is consistent with findings by social movement researcher Luders (2010) who developed a persuading model to predict and understand social movement outcomes, that are rendered according to the level of concession and disruption costs. Put differently, a movement will likely be successful if granting the movements' demands will not be very costly for the target and if the costs imposed by disruptive actions of the movement are getting so high that the continuation of the status quo becomes increasingly unbearable for the targeted entity, be it a political or economic actor (Luders 2010, p.15). Concession costs also include loss of support among conventional constituencies of the target in case it would give in to movement demands.

Luders differentiates between economic and political targets (Luders 2010, p. 8). While political actors are assumed to be concerned with “the electoral consequences associated with both resisting and responding to movement demands” (ibid.), this fails to account for the behavior of politicians in Greece who both right and left were not able to satisfy the demands of the movement, despite the sanction of not being re-elected. Economic targets on the other hand “calculate their exposure [to disruption and concession costs] based on threats to current or anticipated profits” (ibid.). While the bulk of anti-austerity movements across different countries followed the logic of political disruption and concession costs, in the following two examples, nonviolent methods of resistance falling in the category of economic noncooperation will be given in order to give a glimpse into a possible alternative direction for movements to deal with economic struggles.

### **Economic noncooperation: two examples**

In his famous list of 198 methods of nonviolent action, Sharp not only collected political types of actions, but also economic methods of resistance which can be and were used also as one part of a broader arsenal of tactics against corporations as well. These include economic interventions (Sharp 1973, p. 401), various forms of boycotts (Sharp 1973, p.219) and many types of strikes (Sharp 1973, p.257). The rationale of noncooperation in the context of nonviolent action is to withdraw one's own cooperation from those in decision-making positions, in order to cut them off from the sources of power that sustain them. In the following the focus will be on strikes and on a special type of boycott. Strikes and boycotts mainly aim at depriving the opponent of material sources of power. According to Sharp “[e]conomic noncooperation consists of a suspension of or refusal to continue specific economic relationships” (Sharp 1973, p.219), be it the provision, the payment or buying of goods and services.

The two examples, that will be described in more detail in the following were not so much selected based on their importance or centrality from the perspective of activists, but their suitability to demonstrate and illustrate core mechanisms and key dynamics underlying nonviolent action. Thus, economic noncooperation may not be representative of the overall movement, which is more largely known for marches, rallies, or demonstrations and camps on the Syntagma square. Yet, the main purpose here is to better explain the ideas and concepts of nonviolent action theories and civil resistance studies. Strikes are a very classic method to withdraw one's contribution to the smooth continuation of the status-quo. However, in order to also give examples that go beyond the classical labor movement and that show how economic cooperation can look like for people that perhaps are unable to participate at strikes, like for instance the unemployed, this paper draws on the refusal of payments movement, in a variety of areas ranging from road tolls, to public transport tickets, electricity and water bills and even privatized beaches.

Information on these examples was found in publications by research institutes, academic papers, newspaper articles, activist websites, public (national and international) entities and reports by civil society actors (such as trade unions and organizations), and served primarily to obtain descriptive understanding of the methods applied and to give some brief contextual background. However, the analysis of the context and the description of the case is not exhaustive, as this would go beyond the scope of this paper. The information provided mainly serves to give a brief overview and an idea of the basic characteristics. This is a limitation of the present preliminary attempt to apply the nonviolent action framework to economic struggles. Further research is certainly needed, including for instance quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews or participatory observation, as well as a wider range of online data sources. Interviews were not conducted for this article because its main endeavor is a conceptual discussion in which the cases mainly function as examples. What follows is to show its usefulness and its complementarity for social movement research calling for further studies in this direction. I will first analyze economic noncooperation in form of strikes and then as refusal to pay fees, to finally conclude with some strategic considerations.

### **Exerting pressure by strikes and other labor actions**

According to Sharp, the strike is an economic means of noncooperation: it is a lever to shift power relations between conflicting groups (Sharp 1973, p.257). Strikes have the potential to directly address the heart of the nature of power. By refusing “to continue economic cooperation through work” (Ibid.) employees reveal the dependence of their employers on them. By making use of this dependency relation, workers can pressure employers to the degree that they give in to some demands<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> As such the logic of change underlying strikes can be fully subsumed under economic forms of nonviolent action. Certainly, labor actions sometime include violent elements. The strike

It is not surprising that employees in Greece tried to resist labor reforms and austerity measures by putting pressure on the state and the economy, thus on public and private employers, with the means of various industrial actions.

According to a survey conducted by the trade union research institute INE there were heightened occurrences of industrial actions in 2011 (Katsoridas and Lampousaki 2012). While the Ministry of Labor stopped recording strike activities in Greece in 1999, according to a report by the European Commission between June 2011 and April 2012 in Greece there were “838 strikes, including 46 general strikes, of which 30 were in the public sector” (European Commission 2013, p.152). Apart from regular work stoppages, most of them lasting 24 or 48 hours, a variety of forms of industrial actions were observed, like for instance 53 short and long-term occupations of workplaces, ministries and state institutions, resulting in several repeated temporal paralyses of the state mechanism (Ibid., p.99), as well as picketing in order to blockade the functioning of a company or evacuation of machines, and finally, nation-wide general strikes (Ibid.).

Reciprocal support was also shown with solidarity strikes among different groups of workers (Katsoridas and Lampousaki 2012, p.92). This would fall into Sharp's subcategory of “sympathetic strike” (Sharp 1973, p.267) in which workers withdraw their cooperation with employers in order to help other parts in society or other groups of workers by generating additional pressure upon the target.

Trade union struggles were also supported by activists and the general population. One example is the exceptional long-term strike of nine months<sup>15</sup> by the steelworkers of Greek Halyvourgia in Aspropyrgos that gained public support in the form of solidarity statements and visits from other workplaces and trade unions, to material and financial support for the workers and their families including food, medicines, money etc. (Katsoridas and Lampousaki 2012, p.98).

There are claims however, that country-wide strikes were not decided by the workers themselves, that they were not put in place strategically and had a negative psychological function (Karyoti 2012, p.167). The diagnosis of an apparent lack of a general consistent strategy of responding to the attacks on labor is the principal and over-riding conclusion of academic accounts of the situation of Greek trade unions<sup>16</sup> (Kapsalis 2012, p.16).

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however, as an ideal type, is not based on a matching of (physical) forces: its logic does not depend on the use or threat of physical violence, but on the withdrawal of consent and support – and the dependence of the target on these (missing) contributions. Thus, the strike is included in the repertoire of nonviolent methods, even if it may occasionally be accompanied by more violent tactics depending on the historical case and the context.

<sup>15</sup> The strike started on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2011 and ended on 28<sup>th</sup> of July 2012 (Kapsalis 2012, p.17).

<sup>16</sup> While trade unions are often the main drivers of labor actions, such as strikes, giving a background here on the role, organization and way of functioning of trade unions in Greece, goes beyond the scope of this paper. It can be noted however, that union density is much

The lack of strategy is seen in specific patterns of the general strikes. They were either announced months before, leaving sufficient time for the targets to prepare, or they were announced just one day before, thus leading to low participation rates, as there was not much time for unions to mobilize (Karyoti 2012, p.168). Sharp would refer to this specific form as the “protest strike” (Sharp 1973, p.257) which is temporally limited and pre-announced, normally used as a warning to the officials, showing that the workers possess the strength to take action even more effectively if their demands are not met. Yet, aside from a few exceptions, the Greek unions were in most instances not able to overcome this stage of token strikes of demonstrating discontent by extending actions until concessions are made.

In addition, general strikes usually took place the same day (or shortly before) new measures were taken in the parliament, so unions lacked time to really build up pressure, as the crucial decisions had already been taken when the strike took place (Karyoti 2012, p.168). Isolated short-time strikes, not embedded into any long-term strategy, were not capable of gradually building up escalating pressure leading to a specific goal. Rather than protesting symbolically every time new measures are announced, strikes could be used more strategically. However, even strategically sound collective actions could only have the aspired impact with widespread participation. According to union researchers, mass mobilization by traditional trade unions was a difficult undertaking in a climate not only critical of political leaders but also of trade union representatives (Vogiatzoglou 2014, p.363). Apart from the lack of public trust in trade unions and a lack of legitimacy, other identified reasons that explain their poor performance were a lack of experience, an organizational deficit, and political fragmentation (Vogiatzoglou 2014, p.363).

General strikes had the long-term effect of spreading a demotivating sense of futility, as participants repeatedly invested a great amount of energy in actions that did not seem to lead anywhere. As many workers doubted that these arbitrary strikes could lead to any form of concessions, they were often perceived as ineffective tactics, as mere “bulwarks against the general discontent” (Karyoti 2012, p.168), by giving the feeling of having done at least something about the situation.

In Greece, around 70% of public sector and around 15% of private sector workers are unionized (Kapsalis 2012, p.7). Assuming comparable participation rates in general strikes, they are mostly public sector strikes. They repeatedly brought state functions to a stand-still, in order to put pressure on the respective government not to pass or to reverse certain policies. The question is, did this indeed challenge or pressure the stakeholders of reforms to a sufficient degree? Deducing from the devastating results apparently not. But why is that so?

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stronger in the public sector and that leadership of unions and federations is fragmented in factions along the lines of political parties (Kapsalis 2012, p.18).

Imagine the situation as a chain of dependencies. The state depends on creditors. If the conditions of the creditors are not met, the state might not be able to financially survive. It has thus an existential interest in meeting the demands of the lenders. On the other hand, there are public servants on whom the state indeed depends for executing its functions daily, for example teachers and bus drivers. An announced, predictable and temporarily limited stand-still of some public services does not reduce pressure by (and thus dependence on) financial institutions and furthermore reduces one-off expenditures. Also, while creditors (or their representative institutions) put conditions on the money they lend, strikers in Greece did not put the granting of their demands “as a precondition of their resumption to work” (Sharp 1973, p.257). They resumed work in any case, whether reforms were stopped and reversed or not. The day after the strike, business as usual would continue. So why bother and make concessions? Strikes can be a very powerful tool of shifting relations in society, but in order to be effective and not only symbolic, the refusal to work must be maintained until demands are met.

### **Refusal of compulsory payments**

In this climate of a total collapse of the social contract between the government and the governed, citizens find it easy to declare that justice requires fiscal and civil disobedience. It does not begin as a political move. Non-payment is usually the result of a simple, sad inability to pay. But when the state reacts with aggression and unscrupulously, anger builds up which, spontaneously, takes the form of moral enthusiasm for defying a predator state.

Yannis Varoufakis<sup>17</sup> 2011

The logic behind refusing to contribute economically to a political or economic regime has historically not only been to demonstrate the lack of legitimacy of rulers and thus lack of consent of the subjects, but eventually in the long run to also undermine the opponent's financial sources and means – when this defiance of payment obligations is sustained over a larger period of time (Sharp 1973, p.237). Sharps subsumes refusing revenue to the government in form of taxes, fees and so on to the broader category of different forms of boycotts.

The I-don't-pay movement<sup>18</sup> (Kinima 2012) was a nonviolent campaign of noncooperation that emerged in 2009 in Greece initially encouraging citizens to refuse to pay road charges (Hemikoglou 2011). At times toll stations were occupied, or barrier bars at toll stations were lifted by activists and drivers were waved through without paying the toll (Kassimi et al. 2011; DMN 2011).

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<sup>17</sup> Varoufakis is a Greek economist and was the minister of finance of the country from January to July 2015. He was a member of Syriza from January to September 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Κίνημα Δεν πληρώνω (Kinima Den Plirono)



Drawing on the constitutional right of freedom of mobility, and facing enormous tax and price increases by a simultaneous reduction of wages and employment, travelers refused to support the huge increase in tickets and road fees – increments of more than 200% (Den Plirano 2011). According to an article published in the *Financial Times* within “four months, Den Plirano has grown from a one-off protest to a nationwide anti-austerity movement” (Hope 2011). As the campaign's name developed to 'I won't pay for their crisis' it later broadened its scope to include a general struggle against privatization of public goods (Karatziou 2011).

As it is an act of defiance of legal obligation, it can be categorized as a nonviolent action of civil disobedience<sup>19</sup> – a label actually used by media internationally (cf. *The Guardian* 2011). Although the I don't pay campaign informed participants about laws regarding fines, thus, the legal consequences their actions might have, this was apparently not an obstacle for a not insignificant part of the population to participate (Tzanavara 2011). It is estimated that during the peak of the campaign (2010 – 2011), two out of ten drivers just passed through the toll station without paying, while 40% of bus-riders were fare dodgers (DMN 2011). Admittedly a central reason why so many people participated in its heyday is that many of them were really not able to pay price increases. According to the online self-portrayal of the campaign it is an act of self-organization, a denial of the commercialization of commons and public property and a symbol of opposition to a logic that sacrifices the needs and rights of the population in favor of private revenues (Den Plirano 2011).

The actual result is ambiguous. On the one hand, within three years it broadened from a small initiative to a mass movement but then declined again. It was visible, perceived and taken as a serious threat by media, politicians and economic actors on the national and international level. The German MNC 'Hoch-Tief', which was one of the companies<sup>20</sup> that received the money collected at the toll stations in order to finance its investments in Greece, had announced dissatisfaction with the situation, as this would lead to huge economic losses and difficulties (Höhler 2011). Hence, the management of the company prompted the political level in order to manage the situation. The plan was to impose even higher taxes in other areas in order to compensate for the reduced income (DMN 2011). The offensive step against neoliberalism by the people hurt multinational corporations, which sought to redirect the burden to the Greek people. In sharp contrast to most of protest actions in the anti-austerity movement, this specific campaign apparently effectively addressed an

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<sup>19</sup> At the time many different forms of economic disobedience occurred, such as for instance collective expropriation, involving activists plundering supermarkets and handing out the items to people on the streets or in need (Pautz and Kominou 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Other shareholders of Greek highways and roads include the Spanish Cintra/Ferrovial (Ferrovial 2007) and Grupo ACS (cf. ACS 2006), the French Vinci, as well as Greek ones such as AVAX, Aktor AE or the Group Gek-Terna (cf. Olympia Odos 2020).

existing economic dependence relationship, as the shareholders of Greek roads depend on economic contributions by drivers.

In the course of reforms, the 'I-don't-pay'-campaign expanded to other areas of defiance of payment-obligations, such as electricity bills, tickets of public transport, housing rents and heating, as well as refusal of debt payment of private credits to banks (Linardou and Polychroniadis 2010). Privatized beaches were opened by activists (Karatziou 2011) and doctors refused to accept treatment fees (Kassimi et al. 2011). In the Athenian Metro, in trams and buses, ticket machines were covered with plastic bags or even dismantled entirely. Another method of disobedience in the payment of public transport tickets was to pass on a ticket to the next passenger as long as the 90 minutes duration of the ticket had not yet elapsed (Linardou and Polychroniadis 2010). The government reacted with new penal regulations against fare dodging and toll denial, deploying more ticket inspectors and police repression (*The Guardian* 2011).

In 2012 Den Plirano also founded a party and participated at elections in 2012, but votes remained below 1%.

The I-don't-pay-campaign continued organizing on the ground as the 'Front of Resistance and Reversal for Social Liberation' (METAA) supporting people against the consequences of non-payments, like evictions and cut-off from electricity and water. Members of the movement were illegally reconnecting hundreds of households to electricity that had been cut off due to inability to pay. The tactic of reconnection incrementally spread to other grassroots movements during the crisis, for instance the neighborhood assemblies that emerged throughout the country after the people's assemblies like those on Syntagma square. Among other things they also set up independent electricity reconnection committees and were very active and present on the local level (RT 2013).

What led to reconnection activities in the first place was the widespread inability to pay electricity bills. Besides the overall lack of economic well-being in the context of adjustment programs amidst the sovereign debt crisis, this inability to pay on the individual household level has been also a result of an obligatory tax that was levied on electricity bills. When it was first introduced the payment of the tax was part of the bill, so that refusal to pay the tax meant non-payment of the electricity bill. It can to a large extent be attributed to the reconnection committees and their impact within larger groups, such as the I-don't-pay movement or the neighborhood committees, that the tax was eventually removed from the electricity invoices, thus allowing at least those who could actually pay the bill (but eventually not the new additional tax) not to be denied electricity (Apostolakis 2013).

By 2016 though the mass-noncompliance movement had lost momentum and press coverage declined. The analysis of the reasons for the decline of participation on a mass scale would require additional research, which might look at factors like the consequences of sanctions and repression, an

improvement in the ability to pay bills and an overall decrease in protest activity also in other parts of the general anti-memorandum movement, perhaps related to a resistance fatigue. Yet eventually the main factor contributing to failure of the I-don't-pay campaign may have been a lack of strategy and clarity concerning the final objective of this tactic. To make a virtue out of necessity just to show discontent might not be a motive strong enough to sustain participation under severe consequences. In contrast, a detailed plan by which it could be ensured that the result of widespread and sustained non-compliance with payment obligations could put the opponent under sustained pressure might have provided a stronger reason to participate over a sustained period of time.

### **Concluding strategic considerations**

The civil resistance framework can help make sense of past experiences and develop long-term strategies for the future, some of which will be shared briefly in the following. Notwithstanding there also are some limitations that need to be mentioned, and that have been pointed out even by nonviolence researchers themselves (Nepstad 2015, p. 416). One such deficiency is the lack of structural components in the analysis (Martin 1989). When trying to explain the failure of social movements in Greece to fend off neoliberal reforms, nonviolent action is helpful to understand the agency part of it, thus what activists could do or could have done better (Schock 2015, p.11). However, it must be acknowledged that more often than not structural conditions in the national and global political economy are less than favorable for movements, as in the context of an indebted state existentially dependent on further credits.

The argument of this paper is that while structural conditions matter and can seriously constrain the ability of a movement to achieve its goal, constraints and opportunities can also be influenced by movements themselves. Yet the degree to which this is possible, and again, under which conditions is arguable and contested. This paper aspires to contribute to the agency-part of the explanatory narrative with some pieces of understanding, identified as somewhat missing from the overall debate in social sciences about these matters, while accepting the premise that the failure of social movements can to a large extent be explained by political and economic conditions and by emphasizing that these should not be underestimated by overly voluntarist theories of change.

Considering what has and has not been done so far, some observations regarding possible reasons of failure and accordingly the following strategic recommendations from the angle of nonviolent action can be made that fall into two main categories: mapping the pillars of support and based on that planning the tactics more strategically.

### *a) Pillars of Support*

A strategy of nonviolent resistance to neoliberalism in Greece should be based on extensive research and a thorough analysis of the concrete pillars of support that can be targeted and the possible opponents involved in the process of implementation of economic reforms in Greece.

Dependency relations and ways for the working and unemployed population, for civil servants and politicians to put under pressure other European governments, or multinational companies, as well as the European Commission or the IMF must be sorted out one by one.

Some exemplary starting points about how to make political use of leverages by socio-economic means could be orchestrated actions of noncooperation or intervention by dockworkers and airport employees, supported by outside activists. This could be powerful due to the structurally advantageous position in infrastructural intersections. It would be important to deploy such actions in well-thought-out points of time and that they are embedded in broader protests with more transformational aspirations than narrow trade union demands. These could potentially threaten MNCs investing in the Greek infrastructure, as important junctions of trade flows could eventually be brought to a standstill affecting transnational enterprises in tourism and trade. However, these approaches must be preceded by widespread training in which a general plan will be discussed and the logic of power and social change as well as the need to maintain nonviolent discipline, and the tactical implications and arising difficulties of using violence<sup>21</sup>, will be dealt with in detail.

Greek trade unions that have already challenged investors, such as the aviation union OSYPA protesting against the take-over of 14 airports by a German MNC (Kadritzke 2016; The Press Project 2016), could reach out for labor and social movement allies across Europe with the aim to strategically protest and strike against premises of this company in many different European countries simultaneously. In order to make use of the full potential of strikes, these should not be used only as a warning sign, or an expression of discontent, but should be assembled in a meaningful way, in order to increasingly build up pressure against a carefully pre-selected target with demands addressing the opponent's capacity to politically influence economic policies.

### *b) Nonviolent escalation*

The methods to be used must be carefully selected and arranged by forming tactics built upon each other in an escalating pressure strategy. This could mean

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<sup>21</sup> Although there was a general consensus among the demonstrators regarding the non-violent means of protests and the necessity to maintain this orientation (Simiti, 2014, p.10) there were violence-prone smaller groups renowned for attaching themselves to demonstrations to escalate them in terms of physical clashes with the authorities (U.S. Dep. of State 2015, p.20). Participants distanced themselves from these attacks and the contentions on this issue created repugnance between the movement and anarchist groups (Simiti 2014, p.10).

for instance, when a stated demand is not met until a set date, also called “the ultimatum” (Sharp 1973, p.510), the struggle is brought to the next level by increasing pressure on the target or one of its pillars. In this way over the course of contention, pressure is increasingly intensified by growing participant numbers and by turning from symbolic actions to direct means of noncooperation and intervention, that can harm the opponent or the pillars. Activists and grassroots organizers assume that besides intensity, pressure can also increase with a growing amount of support and participation on the one hand and more and more pillars being targeted, won over or neutralized in terms of influence on the other. People will then be able to measure, whether they “have reached a stated goal when they have succeeded in making people in power positions do things they would otherwise not have done” (Sørensen and Johansen 2016, p.7).

Finally, great efforts have to be put into public discourse intervention and addressing the pillars of public opinion with the long-term objective of boosting the willingness of politicians to potentially disobey bailout agreements and to accept and to deal with possible negative consequences of necessary noncooperation and intervention not only on the part of the people but also on the part of their elected representatives.

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