World Economics Association

Conferences, 2014

Greece and austerity policies.

Where next for its economy and society?

2014, n. 2: 20th October - 21st December, 2014

Understanding Narratives of Crisis in Contemporary Greece: History and the Illegitimacy of Austerity

Nicholas Manganas

Abstract

In this paper I argue that any future economic recovery in Greece will require a deep understanding of the fault lines of contemporary Greece and the long-standing historical narratives which sustain and fuel the modern Greek state. The tension between analysing the efficacy of economic policies on the one hand, and the human effects of those policies on the other is increasingly stark. The collection of poems *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis* published in 2014 provides a literary response to the Greek economic crisis, showing the human cost of fiscal contraction. As the blurb on the back cover of the book states: “unemployment is over 27%, the highest in the EU. Youth unemployment is 60%. One in three households now lives in poverty. In the last few years, the suicide rate has increased by more than 40%.” By discussing the collection of poems *Crisis* I hope to achieve a deeper understanding of the narratives circulating in Greek society about the economic crisis and how they intersect with long-standing historical narratives. In this paper I am interested in exploring two particular types of narratives. The first is the historical narrative of Greek victimization by the North, particularly by Germany. The second is the Greek response to the “living beyond one’s means” narrative. By exploring these two narratives my objective is to show Greek society’s complete rejection of the legitimacy of the economic crisis and start a conversation about where Greek society is heading in the post-austerity era.

Keywords

[Greece, crisis, history, narratives, austerity, poetry]

Author details

Dr. Nicholas Manganas. Independent Scholar. Nicholas.Manganas@gmail.com

Understanding Narratives of Crisis in Contemporary Greece:

History and the Illegitimacy of Austerity

> *The* Iliad *would not have been written if there hadn't been a crisis – a crisis caused by the capture of Helen by Paris. The same goes for the* Odyssey *– Odysseus was under the heavy spell of a ten-year crisis trying to return to Ithaca. Poets thrive through crises (Dinos Siotis 2014, 9)*
>
> *Besides comedy, Greeks love drama and they cannot live without it. In a single day, Greeks live many lives, simply because life in Greece is filled with complexities, paradoxes and surprises (Dinos Siotis 2014, 10)*

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Greek economic crisis, the austerity programme imposed on Greece by the so-called Troika[1] and implemented by the Greek Government, pensions have been cut 12 times between 2010 and 2012, successive VAT increases have brought the standard rate up to 23 per cent, the third highest in the EU, and there have been fuel tax hikes and extraordinary taxes on personal income and property (Palaiologos 2014, 51). As a result of austerity measures and mass unemployment, Greek society has been plagued by street riots, police brutality, strikes, the rise of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party and the leftist coalition Syriza. Austerity policies imposed by the "North" have left Greeks susceptible to extremist politics and the normalization of political violence. As Daniel M. Knight puts it, "the 'Greek crisis' highlights the complex relationship between global systems and local experience" (2013, 147). At the end of 2014 we need to ask the inevitable question: Where to now for Greece? Such a question is indeed difficult to answer and I do not claim to have the answer in this paper. Rather, my aim is to start a conversation about Greece's future by looking at its past. This may seem an odd proposition but my argument is that we first need to understand Greek history in order to understand the Greek response to the austerity programme. My argument is that we cannot begin to predict – where to now for Greece? – without first acquiring a deep understanding of the fault lines of contemporary Greece and the long-standing historical narratives which sustain and fuel the modern Greek state.

According to Stephanos Pezmazoglou, "the tyranny of national history […] is hard to shake off" (2014, 57). Greek national history informs and influences Greek perceptions, ideologies and understandings of economic policy, including the austerity programme. In this paper I am particularly interested in tracing two historical narratives that can help us understand why Greeks completely reject the austerity programme as illegitimate. As Knight argues, narratives of crisis are both representative of wider political processes and capture distinct local nuances (2012, 2). Economic evaluations of the crisis from the outside disguise "the intricacy of local circumstance and the multiple layers of socioeconomic relations and historical context" (2). The first historical narrative I explore is the narrative I call "Greek victimization by the North." Understanding why many Greeks choose to blame their economic woes on outsiders rather than as a consequence of their own corruption or economic mismanagement should not be dismissed as pettiness or childish blame games. In this paper I argue that economic crises inevitably intersect with long-standing historical

[11] The Troika refers to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB).

narratives that are both potent and consuming. Politicians and economists must be aware and understand these narratives in order to be able to implement economic policies effectively and avoid political unrest and violence. The second narrative I explore is the Greek response to the "living beyond one's means" narrative. By shifting the blame away from themselves Greeks do not accept the legitimacy of austerity policies and thus inevitably reject the narrative that Greeks were living beyond their means. In my discussion of these two narratives I do not mean to imply that they are all-encompassing and that every Greek citizen and political party share them equally. Rather, my argument is that these are potent narratives which circulate in Greek public discourse with the potential to affect the efficacy and implementation of government economic programmes. In order to explore these narratives I utilise the collection of poems *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis* published in 2014 as a means of achieving a deeper understanding of the narratives circulating in Greek society about the economic crisis and how they intersect with long-standing historical narratives.

The Tyranny of History

> *Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me (Seferis 1972, 99, 101 [1936]).*

In "Cultural Mismatches," Renée Hirschon states that when foreigners talk about Greeks they tend to ask: "Why do they not keep to deadlines / Why do they always run late / are unpunctual? Why can't they plan ahead / stick to plans? Why do they have violent reactions to external and internal political constraints? Why do they break the rules?" (2014, 155). This image of Greeks as "rebellious" has, since the onset of the economic crisis, tied in with European media characterizations of Greeks as "undisciplined," "unreliable," and "lazy" (154). When we talk about the "austerity programme" in Greece we are not just talking about a series of "cuts" in education, healthcare and pensions. Greece is being required by the Troika to undertake structural reform and to shed deeply-entrenched patterns of economic and social conduct. According to Hirschon, one of the key reason that Greeks "break the rules" is because attitudes to authority and to rules are bound up with the historical experience of the Ottoman period, and more recent twentieth century historical events (Nazi occupation, civil war, military rule) as well as with central cultural values regarding personal autonomy, and obligation (2014, 155).

Many historians and theorists have written about Greece's unique historical formation and how its historical trajectory helped make "Greece" what it is today (Woodhouse 1991; Clogg 2013; Koliopoulos and Veremis 2009 et al.). Some, like Hirschon, point out that Greece did not undergo the Enlightenment or the processes associated with the eighteenth century industrial revolution (2014, 155). A brief summary of the history of the Greek state pertinent to this paper is as follows: the Greek nation-state, which formed in the early nineteenth century came out of a long-established position as a subject people in the Ottoman Empire (153). Efforts to build a strong, centralized administration were stymied after the successful War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire in the 1820s. According to Palaiologos:

> Ioannis Capodistrias, the first governor of modern Greece, was assassinated in 1831 by members of a powerful Peloponnesian clan whose local clout was threatened by his attempt to create an effective central government modelled on the advanced states of Western Europe. Since then, despite considerable progress, family and local affiliations in Greece have remained unusually strong by European standards, giving rise to client-based politics which are still today at the heart of the country's political and administrative malaise. (2014, xi)

Greek voters have been treated like clients, kept loyal with public sector jobs, government contracts and targeted tax breaks. Greek history, moreover, has had a fierce factionalism often breaking out into open civil conflict: hostilities between leaders of the national revolution, civil war between nationalists and communists between 1944 and 1949, which ended in victory for the nationalists with the indispensable aid of the US (Palaiologos 2014, xii). In 1967, after anti-communist hysteria, endless political bickering and public agitation, a *coup d'état* led by Greek Colonels led to seven years of dictatorship cutting Greece off from the process of European integration. After initial support, the Colonels' abuses "soon depleted any public support… further deepening Greeks' suspicion of state power and turning them away from the authoritarian conservatism that had dominated Greek politics since the end of the civil war" (2014, xiii). The military junta fell in 1974 after a disastrous attempt to enforce the union (*Enosi*) of Greece and Cyprus which led to the Turkish invasion of the island. The return to democracy and the election of Constantine Karamanlis, head of centre-right New Democracy presided over the ratification of a new constitution, a referendum (69 percent voted in favour of a republic), and the legalization of the Greek Communist Party (KKK), the release of all political prisoners, and the ringleaders of the coup were given life sentences. With Greece becoming a two-party political system (PASOK assumed the role of official opposition and was elected into power in 1981), Greece joined the EEC, becoming its 10th member. Since the 1980s, both New Democracy and PASOK have tended to choose populism over good economics.

This brief historical outline is what Pezmazoglou partly was referring to when he suggested that "the tyranny of national history […] is hard to shake off" (2014, 57).[2] Yet if Greece's national history is a "tyranny," its relationship with Europe and the rest of the world can only be described as a ghostly presence which haunts the modern Greek state. In the collection *Europe in Modern Greek History*, Kevin Featherstone points out how "Europe" has set an agenda for Greece's own "modernity" and highlighted its failings and vulnerabilities. He states, "if a national mood can be […] characterized, when Greeks have looked towards 'Europe' the act has seemed to be to one of self-torture: leading to an exposure of domestic weaknesses, pointing to difficult adjustments required" (2014, 1). The decades long process of "Europeanization" is now exposing Greece as a failing state. According to Featherstone: "The very same countries that 'modernizing' Greece had sought to emulate for the last century or more were now the instigators of massive domestic austerity" (10).

This "self-torture" is complicated by the Greek tendency to self-define itself as the quintessential country of "civilisation and history" (Heraclides 2011, 18). According to Alexis Heraclides, the end result of this self-identity, "is a haughty cultural arrogance and megalomania that in fact conceals an 'existential insecurity' that breeds a defensive nationalism" (18-19). He argues:

> By having chosen to identify themselves with the venerable Ancient Greeks as well as with the other major European civilisations (the British, French, Germans, Italians and so on) instead of with peoples and countries of their own size (for instance the Danes, the Hungarians or the Bulgarians), the Greeks of today end up feeling miserable by comparison. This is combined with an acute feeling of being alone in the world, of being 'a brotherless nation', even though Greece is in the EU family (the EU may appear less of a family in recent years, but this Greek perception was already entrenched in the 1980s). Most Greeks feel that they are constantly threatened by outside forces, foremost of all by Turkey, which *inter alia* is seen as having set up a menacing 'Muslim Arc' in the Balkans against Greece. The other neighbours of Greece are barely less hostile most of the time (with the exception of Bulgaria in

[2] Due to the limitations of this paper I do not have the space to provide a complete outline of Greek modern history. Other key events such as the fall of Smyrna in 1922 and the end of the Great Idea on the Greek popular imagination have also played a significant role. See Woodhouse 1991; Clogg 2013; Koliopoulos and Veremis 2009 et al. for a more complete and rounded history of the modern Greek state.

> the last decades). And there are also various other ‘anti-Greeks’ (anthellines) to reckon with, ‘the scheming Americans, British and other western Europeans’ (today with Greece near bankruptcy the Germans have also joined the rank of anti-Greeks), presumably ‘constantly preoccupied with Greece’, day and night in the business of ‘conspiring to injure Hellenism’ (conspiracy theories abound even among intellectuals and academics). The injustice of it all – according to the great majority of Greeks – is that instead of being admired, cherished and always supported (by virtue of being ‘the descendants’ of the original civilisers) the opposite is the case. (Heraclides 2011, 18-19)

A key trope we can already pick up here, as Featherstone also argues, is how Greeks have often seen their fate as being disrupted by the interventions of foreign powers (2014, 3). In the period after the Colonel’s junta, the Greek belief that the US facilitated and then sustained the dictatorship (1967–74) became widespread (2014, 4). The “self-torture” that Featherstone describes is intertwined with Greek narratives of victimhood, where “outsiders” write Greek history almost always negatively and harmfully. These narratives act like ghostly presences that are hidden in Greek political discourse in the present day. To complicate matters, Greek pride is further hurt when Europe and the world now view Greece as an example of profligacy and an example not to follow. In his article “How the Case for Austerity has crumbled,” Paul Krugman writes:

> It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, and the Greek crisis was a godsend for anti-Keynesians. They had been warning about the dangers of deficit spending; the Greek debacle seemed to show just how dangerous fiscal profligacy can be. To this day, anyone arguing against fiscal austerity, let alone suggesting that we need another round of stimulus, can expect to be attacked as someone who will turn America (or Britain, as the case may be) into another Greece. (2013, 6)

Although all of the above reads as a damning verdict on the Greek state, which is, after all, a small Balkan country in the wider European Union, it is necessary to understand this context if we want to ask the initial question of this paper – Where to now for Greece? Bringing history into the discussion allows us to explore Greece’s fraught relationship with Germany and to understand how the politics of austerity affect Greeks’ attitudes towards the North. My aim is to achieve a deeper understanding of this oft-repeated trope: that austerity is illegitimately being imposed on Greece by Germany and as such risks destabilizing the Greek political system and society.

The Narrative of Greek Victimization by the North

In *The 13th Labour of Hercules*, a journalistic account of the Greek economic crisis, Palaiologos concludes:

> The German response to the euro crisis – austerity first, austerity everywhere, no transfer union, no debt mutualisation – has undermined structural reform in Greece and other Southern economies. The unwillingness of the surplus countries of the North to bear some of the burden of adjustment (through expansionary policies that would shrink their surpluses) has meant that all of it has had to come from the South, through internal devaluation and Depression. This is more than just bad economics. It exacerbates that policy is being made in the North and inflicted on the South. This has already led to a populist-nationalist backlash in the Southern countries against the ‘Germanization’ of Europe. Greece is the prime example. Devotion to Europe there, and elsewhere in the South, will not long survive economic stagnation and a sense *of being dictated to* (my emphasis). (2014, 244-245)

Palaiologos does not simply blame the “North” for the “South’s” economic crisis. In fact, his book reads like a grim dissection of the fault lines of the Greek economic system, carefully exploring the failure of the Greek state to reform during the “good times” so as to avoid what he calls the breakdown of the Greek state in areas such as taxation, education, immigration and energy policy. He calls for a more “European” rather than national solution, in order to

avoid deepening the North-South divide (245). In essence, what he is advocating is a North-South partnership, a collaboration between the rich North and the turbulent South, where countries like Greece do not feel as if they are being "dictated" to.

It is necessary to explore further this concept of being "dictated to." In Yiannis Dhallas's poem *Welcome* (2014) he writes:

> 'Welcome glorious German!...'
> Said an artisan who recognized you,
> 'German of the Third Reich back then,
> And now of the euro zone… Welcome
> To this fiefdom of yours, of the South
>
> In the year 2013, yes!... where the victim is obliged
> To declare the victimizer as benefactor
> With his body bleeding indebted and with his soul out resisting
> As a serf who raised his head
>
> Oh, the rage of the people, my soul, who holds you?

The ironic title "*Welcome*" is particularly telling as it frames the German interference in Greek society as an invasion and an occupation. Greece was invaded by the Axis Powers in April 1941 and was occupied by Germany, Italy and Bulgaria, an occupation which lasted until October 1944. The occupation brought about terrible hardships for the Greek civilian population. Over 40,000 civilians died in Athens alone from starvation, tens of thousands more died because of reprisals by Nazis and collaborators, and the country's economy was devastated (Mazower 2001, 155). The collective memory of these traumatic events lingers on in Greek historical discourses. In Dhallas's poem, the link between the German Third Reich and the Germany of Merkel and the Memorandum is clear. Dhallas decries how once again Greeks have to kowtow to the Germans. Greece, by belonging to the Eurozone, is now a German fiefdom, a direct parallel to the historical occupation of the 1940s. Greeks (the serfs), must stand by helplessly as historical agency is taken away from them.

At first glance, blaming the austerity programme on the Germans might seem an obvious displacement, a need to find a scapegoat for the current Greek predicament. But this blame narrative is a populism that is far-reaching. The former deputy prime minister Theodoros Pangalos infamously placed the blame for financial crisis on the Germans: "They (the Nazis) took away the Greek gold that was in the Bank of Greece, they took away the Greek money and they never gave it back … I don't say they have to give the money back necessarily but they have at least to say 'thanks.'" The former mayor of Athens, Nikitas Kaklamanis, also waded into the dispute: "You (Germany) owe us 70 billion euros for the ruins you left behind (in the war)" (BBC News, 15 February 2010). The narrative blame games were not just being played by Greek politicians. The popular German newspaper *Bild* suggested that the Greek government should ease its fiscal position by selling off a few islands or turning the Acropolis into a theme park for tourists (Guardian, 28 February 2010).

Such narrative blame games also circulate in public discourse among ordinary Greeks. According to Knight in his ethnographic research in Trikala, Central Greece, Trikalinoi direct blame toward the external Other, such as the European Union, the Troika and the United States, but are also critical of the Other within, "those who sell out the 'Greek people' to foreign demands" (2013, 150). In Knight's ethnographic study local arguments resonate strongly with notions of colonization, coloured with the local history of Ottoman *Ciftlikades* (landlords of great landed estates) and Turkish occupation (2013, 154). The theme of

colonization has recently widened to include Germany, as local people and public figures continue to draw on historical notions of occupation, often temporarily condensing the period of the *Ciftlikades* with German occupation. According to one interviewee:

> The Germans have capitalized upon the plight of all Greeks. They have bought our companies and held us to ransom. It is history repeating itself. The Germans do not want to compromise and will take everything they can from us. They caused us famine before; they will cause it again now. They treat Greece as their private *ciftlik*. I am told that if I can't sell my grain I can install photovoltaic panels on my land, but most of these companies are German-owned and using German products. It is another colonization, they are *Ciftlikades* and I don't want to just hand over all I own. (2013, 154-155)

According to Knight, German investors have significant interest in large and medium scale photovoltaic developments in Greece and have financed parts of the failing national energy company. Installing photovoltaic panels on agricultural land is viewed by locals as selling-off Greek assets to foreign free-market inspired programmes and the increased German presence is viewed with great suspicion (Knight 2012, 14). We can see here how current economic conditions are tied by ordinary Greeks to a long historical trajectory of occupation where Greece is a victim to outside powers. This time, however, Greeks are clear that the occupation is economic instead of military.

When the causes of a crisis, according to Daniel Miller, cannot be realistically traced to a single state or political body alone then blame can be transferred to numerous ambiguous sources where local and global historical narratives have merged (1995). In the case of the Greek economic crisis, blame is difficult to place when, as Knight argues, there is little chance of individuals being held accountable. Inevitably, then, the distinction between local and global forces and individual and collective responsibility is blurred (2013, 155). But the Greeks are not alone in directing all or some of the blame to their northern neighbours. In his article "Greece as Victim," Paul Krugman while acknowledging some of the failings of the Greek state, argues that the origins of the Greek disaster lie farther north, in Brussels, Frankfurt and Berlin where "officials created a deeply – perhaps fatally-flawed monetary system, then compounded the problems of that system by substituting moralizing for analysis" (2012). According to Krugman:

> So Greece, although not without sin, is mainly in trouble thanks to the arrogance of European officials, mostly from richer countries, who convinced themselves that they could make a single currency work without a single government. And these same officials have made the situation even worse by insisting, in the teeth of the evidence, that all the currency's troubles were caused by irresponsible behaviour on the part of those Southern Europeans, and that everything would work out if only people were willing to suffer some more. (2012)

But Greeks hardly want to continue their suffering. Some Greeks have participated in the "Can't pay, won't pay" movement which began in 2008 when drivers refused to pay tolls on the ill-maintained national highway between Corinth and Patras (Palaiologos 2014, 13). Others have been forced to immigrate to countries like Australia, while others still have turned to extremist political movements such as the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party. What is clear, however, is that historical narratives inform current, everyday politics. When Greek politicians, the media and ordinary people, blame Germany or the "North" more generally, it is not just Greeks refusing to take responsibility for their own actions. Rather, the historical legacy of the twentieth century lingers on in popular narratives. The tyranny of Greek history makes it difficult for the Greek political system to adapt to the reality of austerity and to undertake structural reform. In the next section I turn to what Euclid Tsakalotos argues is the dominant narrative of economic analysts: that Greece has been living for too long beyond its means, with consumption levels way out of sync with production possibilities (2014, 97).

The Narrative of Living beyond One's Means

> *It is a fact.*
> *Comedy in Greece is under crisis.*
> *There aren't any good actors anymore.*
> *All talents have been absorbed by politics. (Lambropoulos 2014, 53)*

When a Greek is told that he or she was living beyond his or her means, what does it mean? How is an ordinary Greek to know if he or she should borrow money to buy a car, a house, a holiday home, a trip to Switzerland? To what extent should an ordinary Greek be aware of the limitations of their national economy? According to Costas Douzinas, "The Greeks had no idea about the size of the debt or its significance until they were told one fine morning that they, the people, owe huge amounts although they had not borrowed and had no idea how the loans were used" (2013, 31). Douzinas asks: What does the debt desire? He argues that the narrative strategy works as follows: "Because Greece owes, the Greeks must destroy the old and adopt radical new economic, cultural and moral values. They must abandon their 'lying, lazy, cheating' ways in order to service the debt" (25). In this section I look at some of the narratives circulating in Greek public discourse about debt and responsibility in order to highlight how ordinary Greeks completely reject as illegitimate the narrative that they were "living beyond their means."

In Kyriakos Charalambidis's poem *Aphrodite on the New Economic Measures* (2013) austerity is inscribed on every part of the human body, leaving no part of Greek life unaffected:

> The high subsidies for breasts
> will be specifically taxed,
> my own left hand, the right foot,
> the alcoholic substance of my eyes and all
> tobacco products of the hair.
>
> As for my subsidiary concerns
> and the real estate portfolio
> those are included in the new package
> that Fate already has submitted at Olympus:
>
> Surcharge on all food items, on medicines, also
> on income from the accrued interest of love affairs,
> and finally application of the final stroke
> on further measures, for austerity
> and for energy savings.

Charalambidis's poem shows how austerity has seeped into all levels of the Greek economy as he facetiously suggests that even breasts, hands and feet will be "specifically taxed." If the effects of austerity are inscribed on the body of ordinary Greeks, then this process is branded as a war. In George Douatzis's *Fatherland of the Times* (2010) ordinary Greeks are being waged war by those in "grey suits" and "white collars":

> You did not think this was war
> for you couldn't see the blood, the wounded,
> […]

> War I say, war
> with no ammunition and gunfire
> generals,
> the grey suits and the white collars
> new aged computers used as heavy guns

It is telling that Douatzis uses “war” as a metaphor when we consider that the men in “grey suits” and “white collars” are purported to be those from the Troika, which are understood to be “German.” Where Greece was once invaded militarily by German soldiers, it is now being invaded economically by foreign technocrats. Returning to Knight’s ethnographic research in the central Greek town Trikala, an elderly farmer states:

> You cannot blame only the Americans or Germans, they know that they can get money out of us so they take advantage … our prime minister will slap them on the back and blow them a kiss … All Greek politicians are the same, as long as they fill their own pockets … they are responsible for the crisis yet none are prosecuted. (2013. 151)

Yet, when asked by Knight if everyday Greek people should take some of the responsibility for the economic crisis, he continues:

> This is how it is portrayed in Europe, but we, the little people (*laoutzikos*), are the ones with no money, the ones that suffer the consequences … Yes, some people participated in not declaring some of their income for tax, and other claimed pensions for deceased relatives, but really this is nothing to the amounts the politicians were concealing … But the ‘bad Greek people’ is emphasized by European politicians and newspapers …. We are well aware of what they think in northern Europe, including you in England. (You believe) (i)t is our fault, we are lazy, greedy, and we are corrupt … we enjoy the ‘good life’. Maybe there is a small truth in that – this is part of the system –, but we little people are now the *only* ones that are suffering from the austerity and financial punishments … the ‘elites’ are getting away free. (2013, 151)

The farmer in Knight’s study does not see the legitimacy of the austerity programme since as far as he is concerned ordinary Greeks were not responsible for the cause of the crisis. While he acknowledges that some Greeks participated in some illegal activities that may have contributed to the extent of the crisis, he dismisses this activity as “a drop in the ocean.” The sheer scale of the economic crisis means that the ordinary Greek cannot be held responsible. As Knight also argues, “the activities of the *laoutzikos* through thirty years of economic prosperity are not understood as blameworthy within the wider context of political accountability” (2013, 151). He adds: “The rhetoric emanating from northern Europe that ‘the people’ of Greece are responsible for the turmoil is acknowledged locally, but not accepted while there continues to be a noticeable lack of accountability at the top of government” (152).

In his poem ‘Keyboard,’ (2013) Thanasis Triaridis picks up on this theme that ordinary Greeks should not be blamed for something which they were not responsible for:

> ‘I’m sick and tired of your e-mails saying that it’s all our fault,
> that we have starved Africa and Asia,
> that we have killed immigrants,
> that we have pissed on war prisoners,
> that we are responsible for that old beggar who was found frozen to death.
> All this self-flagellation has become quite dull
> and completely hypocritical
> and if I may say – and I’m not blaming you – quite suspicious.
>
> But now let me talk about myself:
> I never killed nor starved nor humiliated nor destroyed anyone…
> It’s really interesting to drag around our so-called guilt’ […]

It is interesting that Triaridis uses the word "suspicious." If the modern Greek state has historically been a victim of outside powers it is logical to assume that there is something "suspicious" about laying the blame for the Greek economy on the ordinary Greek. As Triaridis says "I never killed nor starved nor humiliated nor destroyed anyone." It is thus logical to conclude that if the ordinary Greek never did anything wrong then they should not be forced to experience the harsh reality of the austerity programme.

Let us look into more detail at the dominant narrative that Greece is a prime example of a society far more interested "in distributing the pie rather than increasing its size" (Laskos & Tsakalotos 2013, 2). Greece's problem, the dominant narrative goes, was precisely a fiscal crisis resulting from government profligacy, creative statistics and populist politics (97). A telling example of the differences between Greek political parties' narrative strategy is between the centre-left PASOK and the leftist coalition SYRIZA. On September 21, 2010, the then deputy prime minister Theodoros Pangalos of PASOK said in a speech:

> The answer to the outcry that exists against the political personnel of the country, 'how did you eat up all that money?' as people ask, is this: We appointed you. We ate it all up together, in the context of relations of political clientelism, corruption, bribery and the abasement of the very concept of politics. (quoted in Palaiologos 2014, 17-18)

Palaiologos asks: "Did the politicians 'eat it all up' on their own, or had we, the people, participated willingly, each to the extent of his or her capacities, in the glorious feast that had come to such an inglorious end" (18)? Christos Laskos, economist and member of the political secretariat of SYRIZA, and Euclid Tsakalotos, Professor of Economics at the University of Athens and a Member of Parliament for SYRIZA, argue that it is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the narrative that all Greeks are responsible for the crisis. According to Laskos and Tsakalotos, "what we have […] is a version of Angela Merkel's Calvanist fable, in which the unrighteous need to be punished for their past failings – both for their own good and '*pour encourager les autres*'" (2013, 3). As for Pangalos's memorable phrase that "we [Greeks] all had our snouts in the trough," Laskos and Tsakalotos argue that Pangalos sought to implicate wide sections of the population that had benefited, even if in some cases in rather minor ways, from clientelist politics (3).

It is interesting to note the electoral fortunes of both PASOK and SYRIZA since Pangalos's speech in 2010. In the June 2012 national elections SYRIZA catapulted from the margins of parliament to the prominence of Official Opposition on the back of their ferocious rejection of austerity with 26.89% of the popular vote (Palaiologos 2014, 242). PASOK was decimated, falling to third place, with only 12.28% of the popular vote. SYRIZA was successful in rejecting government elites' exercise in creating collective guilt. Even after the election of Antonis Samaras as prime minister of a pro-austerity coalition government in June 2012, Knight argues that the grand narratives disseminated through mediascapes have failed to divert blame away from political elites (2013, 151).

In the Age of the Memorandum, the Greek people have had the "choice" of supporting SYRIZA's narrative that the ordinary Greek is not responsible for the crisis because they were "living beyond their means" or to support Pangalos and the pro-austerity coalition who tell Greeks the "truth" that they all had their "snouts in the trough." My aim here is not to support or lend credibility to either argument. Rather, my aim is to highlight this narrative impasse. After all, there is ample evidence that apart from its clientelist politics, Greece

before the crisis did have a bloated and inefficient state, large current account deficits and increasing net foreign debt. But Laskos and Tsakalotos also have a point when they posit that the anti-austerity coalition's narrative which put the blame on social democracy's traditional social base, and which offered no solution in terms of an agenda on jobs, wages and pensions, was unlikely to appeal to the Greek people (2013, 9). Austerity is all well and good when internal conditions can give such policies legitimacy. In the Greek case, the narratives circulating in mass-mediated discourse, by the official opposition, by its artists and ordinary people, were more narratively convincing. When implementing economic policy, especially when it is imposed from the outside, these narratives must be considered in order to avoid political destabilization, radical politics and even, in some cases, violence.

Conclusion: Where to now for Greece?

> 'Do you make money' they ask me 'from poetry?'
> 'Money?' I answer them, 'money?
> Does the lover ever make money?
> Only the pimp makes money.' (Yfantis 2014, 91)

"How different Europe looks today from some ten years ago," writes Costas Douzinas (2013, 198). It is difficult to predict Greece's future when even ten years ago the immensity of the current crisis could not have been imagined. Ten years ago, the Greeks were justifiably celebrating their hosting of the Olympic Games and their wins at the Euro Cup and Eurovision Song Contest. Ten years is indeed a very long time. The devastation that the Greek economic crisis has wrought in the country is well known. Over five years the Greek economy has experienced a 24% contraction (Douzinas 201, 23). Despite bailout funds made available to Greece, these funds are used mainly to repay previous loans. It is a case, Douzinas argues, of borrowing on the Visa to pay the Mastercard (2013, 28). As is generally true during economic crises, the poor are hurt the most. In his poem *Untitled* (2014), Nektarios Lambropoulos writes:

> The intellectuals
> In times of crisis
> never leave their country.
> Land
> is cheaper
> labor is free
> and finally blind people seem to be more than them;
> the one-eyed

In Dinos Siotis's collection of poems *Crisis*, Greek poets have provided the human face of the crisis. In his introduction to the collection, Siotis claims that the anthology is neither a protest movement nor a lesson in disobedience (2014, 10). But it is, he says, a warning of what is going to happen to other European countries. Greece as guinea pig; another familiar trope.

In this paper I have explored two key narratives which I argue must be understood in order to be able to consider the question – Where to now for Greece? The narrative of "Greek victimization by the North" highlights how popular Greek narratives have positioned Greece as a victim of outsiders. At the moment in the popular Greek imagination, it is the Germans

who are once again "dictating" to the Greeks and perpetuating their suffering. I then explored the narrative of "living beyond one's means." I argued that Greek elites have not been successful in convincing Greeks of their collective responsibility. Due to this failure, SYRIZA has been able to capitalize on their anti-austerity narrative, directing blame at elites and outsiders. What is clear is that economics and politics do not exist in a vacuum. Historical narratives must be considered when implementing economic policy and in any discussion about the future of Greece. Although narratives are not all-encompassing, they circulate in public discourse and become part of the mythology of the nation. My aim is to start the discussion – Where to now for Greece? – with these narratives in mind. If austerity is narratively illegitimate in Greece and if ordinary people refuse to take responsibility for their part in the crisis, then structural reform will inevitably encounter even greater resistance than what we have seen so far. Perhaps the popular narratives circulating in Greek public discourse need to be less about blame and collective responsibility and more about what kind of society Greece wants to become. Perhaps, moreover, Greek political discourse needs to look less at the past and more to the future. But in order to make that adjustment from past to future, it is necessary to first understand that past, situate it in its proper context, and prevent it from polarizing the country further. It is no easy task but it is our responsibility to start such a process. The Greeks have an endemic sense of holding "copyright" over much that is associated with the term "European": both its name and much of its cultural heritage (Featherstone 2014, 1). While it is true that we could not have imagined ten years ago how Europe looks today, we can also not imagine Europe ten years from now. When we ask the question – Where to now for Greece? – we are also asking, where to now for Europe? The future of Greece is the future of Europe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blanas, Y., 2014. 'Homeless 2013', *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. D. Connolly, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 14-15.

Brabant, M., 2010. 'Greece Angers Germany in Gold Row', *BBC News*, 15 February. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8536862.stm. [15 September 2014].

Charalambidis, K., 2014. 'Aphrodite on the New Economic Measures', *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. A. Sakkis, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 16-17.

Clogg, R., 2013. *A Concise History of Greece 3rd Ed*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dhallas, Y., 2014. 'Welcome', *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. I. Papakyriakou, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 26-27.

Douatzis, G., 2014. 'Fatherland of the Times', *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. Y. Kanakakis, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 32-35.

Douzinas, C., 2014. *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Feathestone, K., 2014. 'Introduction', *Europe in Modern Greek History*, K. Featherstone (ed), London: Hurst & Company, 1-15.

Heraclides, A., 2001. 'The Essence of the Greek-Turkish Rivalry: National Narrative and Identity', *GreeSE papers,* London: London School of Economic and Political Science, Hellenic Observatory, **51**.

Hirschon, R. 2014. 'Cultural Mismatches: Greek Concepts of Time, Personal Identity, and Authority in the Context of Europe', *Europe in Modern Greek History*, Featherstone (ed), London: Hurst & Company, 153-170.

Kaliopoulos, J. S. and Veremis, T. M., 2009. *Modern Greece. A History Since 1821*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.

Knight, D. 2012. 'Turn of the Screw: Narratives of History and Economy in the Greek Crisis', *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, **21** (1), 1-24.

Knight, D. 2013. 'The Greek Economic Crisis as Trope', *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, **65**, 147-159.

Krugman, P., 2012. 'Greece as Victim', *The New York Times* June 17. Available from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/18/opinion/krugman-greece-as-victim.html?_r=0. [15 September 2014].

Krugman, P., 2013. 'How the Case for Austerity has Crumbled', *The New York Review of Books* June 6. Available from: http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jun/06/how-case-austerity-has-crumbled/. [15 September 2014].

Lambropoulos, N., 2014. 'Untitled', *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. D. Siotis, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 52-55.

Laskos C., and Tsakalotos E., 2013. *Crucible of Resistance: Greece, the Eurozone & the World Economic Crisis*, London: Pluto Press.

Mazower, M., 2001. *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation. 1941-44*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Miller, D., 1995. *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*, London: Routledge.

Palaiologos, Y., 2014. *The 13th Labour of Hercules: Inside the Greek Crisis*, London: Portobello Books.

Pezmazoglou, S., 2014. ''Europe', 'Turkey' and Greek Self-Identity: Antinomic Mutual Perceptions', *Europe in Modern Greek History*, K. Featherstone (ed), London: Hurst & Company, 43-60.

Seferis, G., 1972. *Poems 8th Ed.*, G. P. Savvidis (ed), Athens: Ikaros. [in Greek]

Siotis, D., 2014. ‘Introduction’, *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 9-10.

Triaridis, T., 2014. ‘Keyboard’, *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. H. Syrou, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 80-81.

Tsakalatos, E., 2014. ‘Contesting Greek Exceptionalism within the European Crisis’, *Europe in Modern Greek History*, K. Featherstone (ed), London: Hurst & Company, 95-116.

Woodhouse, C. M. 1991. *Modern Greece: A Short History*, London: Faber & Faber.

Yfantis, Y., 2014. ‘Question and Answer at the Market Place’, *Crisis: Greek Poets on the Crisis*, trans. O. Yfanti, Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 90-91.