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The Cradle of Democracy and the *Longue Durée* of a Crisis

Some Thoughts from the Perspective of Historical Sociology

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Editor's Note: This essay is largely based on a talk give by the author at the conference Crash Culture: Humanities Engagements with Economic Crisis held at the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University in April 2016.

We feel humiliated and we understand that things cannot remain the same as they were before ... but we gave the world democracy, and we expect the European Union to support us.¹

In 2008, when economic crisis broke out in Greece as a result of the wider economic and fiscal crisis in the United States and the greater part of Europe, a fierce debate over who was to blame began within the Greek public sphere and the international media. This brought to the surface a series of unsettled cultural questions. After lengthy discussions and biting debates, and once the dust kicked up by thousands of protesters and the smoke and teargas in the streets of Athens settled, the question “why Greece?” may still haunt imaginations for some time to come.

Inevitably, the case of Greece and the issue of crisis more broadly have been taken up by various academic disciplines, which, with the

help of the tools available in their field, have tried to address them. In the context of the year-long discussion in the Comparative and Historical Sociology Section about whether comparative historical sociology can save the world and, in turn, potentially reinvigorate the subfield by attuning it to ongoing contemporary events, one could ask: “what can comparative historical sociology do for the Greek crisis,” and further “what the Greek crisis can do for comparative historical sociology?”

I argue that in order to make better sense of the current dilemmas and contradictions, it is important that we situate the present in long social processes, and to identify patterns in the relationship of Greece with Europe and the West in general in search of recurrent structures and sequences across time and space. My main interest, which has also informed my dissertation research, is in opening up a window to what is in essence a study of the dynamic relationship between Greece and the West – the United States, more specifically – and the set of attitudes that underlie it, seeking not only the origins and genealogies of beliefs that have for long sustained this relationship, but also unraveling the ways these inform political and social action today.

Crises are opportune moments for historians as well as sociologists with a penchant for historical thinking. “Crisis” denotes difficulty, trouble, or danger, or a turning point in time, as the Oxford dictionary suggests, but also disruption and discontinuity. Considering the etymology of the word – from the Greek “krinein” – periods of crisis are times when careful judgment has to be exercised and important decisions must be made. “Crises” beg for critical thinking since they potentially

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constitute transitional phases between established and emerging orders. They further constitute opportune moments to reflect, among other things, on the state of our different fields of knowledge. Social struggles take place not only in the streets and inside the various movements but also inside the sciences. This can only be a dialectic relationship. Over the past few decades alone, social movements have completely reshaped academic disciplines – think, for instance of gender or feminist studies, black and African-American studies – while in turn categories such as gender, race, colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial reshaped and still today inform the direction our academic work and research takes.

A crisis constitutes what in history and historical sociology is understood as an “event” – these “relatively rare subclasses of happenings that significantly transform

structures. An eventful conception of temporality, therefore, is one that takes into account the transformation of structures by events” (Sewell 1996, 262). An event – often listed as a synonym of crisis – is a mechanism linking past and future and its importance is primarily established in terms of its location in time and space and in relation to a series of other events. Time and sequence, therefore, are paramount in our efforts to understand events such as revolutions, wars, or markets’ collapse. There is little one can understand about the current crisis unless it is placed in a historical perspective and explained as a constellation of factors and contingencies, as a series of social interactions impinging on each other in space and time. We are in need of a *longue durée* approach not in the traditional Braudelian sense, however, emphasizing solely the analytical primacy of long-term structural trends but also the analytical importance of specific historical contingencies from which longer-term historical developments and trends can be identified alongside individual actions and social agency.

The crisis, hardly an economic one alone, brought to the surface a series of unsettled cultural questions, as I have already suggested. A war of words in the international and local press created a rhetorical situation reminiscent of the disillusionment of the first Western travelers to Greece back in the 19th century. The modern people of Greece were seen as indolent and cunning, sharing little with their sophisticated and industrious ancestors or the “civilized,” urban, industrial and secular Europe of the time. Similarly, the Greeks of the 21st century did not live up to the expectations that the European Union had set for its member states. Some parts of the Western world expressed their discontent with a vengeance, while others showed solidarity with the Greeks. The Greek public has also been divided in its reactions. Many people have accepted and internalized the accusations and seek

explanations in the primordial ills of the national culture, which they strive to renounce. Others have found recourse in various expressions of good old-fashioned nationalism, xenophobic outbursts, or outright fascism. And while this is only a very schematic picture of a much more complicated situation, it reflects nonetheless recognizable behaviors and old, all too familiar identity patterns.

The relationship between modern Greece and the West has always been a complex and tortuous one. Greece as “the cradle of democracy” – a construct at the intersection of western modernity’s political imaginary and Greek national identity – a terribly familiar and powerful cliché which to a great extent, still today, informs our imagination and politics has been at the heart of this relationship. It is rather a truism to suggest that democracy lies at the political core of the civilization that the West insists offering to the rest of the world, yet we tend to forget that this is a rather recent development. Understood today as the key to the distinctiveness of modern political experience and as a metonym for political legitimacy, the word emerged almost two and a half thousand years ago to denote a specific form of government, then fell into oblivion and re-emerged in the midst of the struggle for American independence, largely as an example of a political form of organization to be avoided. Its popularity, not merely as a form of government but mostly as a political value, rose slowly – often out of incredible violence and bloodshed – and finally triumphed in the second half of the twentieth century in the form of bourgeois capitalist democracy and as the ultimate signifier for Western civilization (Dunn 2005).

How did democracy, however, become part of the ‘we-images’ and ‘we-feelings’ of the modern Greek identity? How did our self-conception as progenitors of western

democracy come into place? How does this set of ideas tying Greece with the West and Europe enable or constrain political action today? And finally, how did the economic crisis deal such a hard blow to what appeared to be the strongest and most primordial of all imaginary relationships?

In February 2010, and while the prospect of a “Grexit” was looming large, at Syntagma Square in front of the Parliament and in the midst of an anti-austerity demonstration a protester, a Greek civil servant, was reported in *The New York Times* saying: “We feel humiliated and we understand that things cannot remain the same as they were before ... but we gave the world democracy, and we expect the European Union to support us.” Statements of this kind suggest the deeply embedded nature of beliefs that have become second nature and operate beneath the level of consciousness. Trying to understand how these internal steering mechanisms develop, function and inform action should become a priority if we mean to get a better grasp of the social, political and cultural complexities of what we keep referring to as a “crisis.” Statements of this kind hold the key to many current, pressing issues such as the popularity of the euro, for instance. For Greece, similarly as for Spain and Portugal, joining the EU meant accessing political and economic modernity. After decades of military dictatorships, civil war and authoritarianism, the EU pledged to safeguard democratic institutions and propel the ravaged societies of the European South to prosperity as well as social and economic equality. European economic integration would only constitute the culmination of that process and the common currency would be instrumental. Sharing the same currency with the stronger European economies carried a powerful symbolic value for the Greek people who until recently could hardly see themselves and identify as Europeans.

The struggle for democracy defined the twentieth century while democratic frameworks were really secured only in the wake of the Second World War. In Greece, the civil war that followed *en suite* and the heated cold war that eventually led to the seven-year dictatorship (1967-1974) would further delay any deep democratization. Yet, there was nothing natural or inevitable about democracy in Europe, or anywhere else for that matter, as Eley (2002) explains. It did take conflict and violent confrontations. It was not the result of any natural process or economic prosperity, nor the “inevitable byproduct of individualism or the

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market” (Eley 2002, 4) It was certainly not the result of some peaceful and rational negotiation process, in a Habermasian sense. It was rather the outcome of collective and mass mobilizations on a trans-national scale. The two world wars triggered large-scale socioeconomic mobilizations that radically changed the societal context for the advancement of democratic politics. In Greece, in the midst of the Second World War there emerged a mass popular movement (the National Liberation Front, EAM) that could be understood as the culmination of a series of social struggles that had taken place throughout the first half of the century. It further developed structures that

could provide the blueprints for the articulation of a strong civil society. Nevertheless, there was something inevitable about democracy in Greece. The British military intervention against EAM in favor of the old regime, the subsequent heavy-handed American political and economic interference and, later on, the admittance into the European family were events directly related to broader socioeconomic and geopolitical configurations which, however, carried a strong ideological imprint; the cradle of western civilization and democracy could not be abandoned to communism or the influence of a semi-European culture.

While self-determination and equality were the basis of the republican strand in Greek nationalism, democracy nevertheless was not prominently featured in the state’s representational agenda until after the end of the Second World War while the struggle between the old political establishment and the communist insurgency was still raging. The monarchy and the dictatorships of the twentieth century cast a long shadow on the fragmented history of the Hellenic Republic – constituted on three distinct periods, 1822-1832, 1924-1935 and since 1974, after the fall of the Colonels’ regime. Post-civil war Greece scarcely constituted a model democracy. The term itself, a rather empty signifier at the time, became a rallying cry against communism and the left more broadly. It was employed to discipline the dissidents with any means possible: exile, incarceration, torture, or mere intimidation. The American military and economic intervention in Greece, the site of the first proxy war of the Cold War era, left no room for any alternatives. In the process, Hellenism – an expression of the long and convoluted relationship between Modern Greece and the West – was further employed to shape new ontological and epistemological distinctions between the Democratic West and the Communist East, normalizing the postwar

political and economic status quo and offering legitimacy first to the American hegemony and later on to the European integration project. Postwar Greece as the “cradle of democracy” had to be secured and propelled into modernity. A state-sustained capitalist system was offered as a bulwark against totalitarianism and guarantor of democracy and modernization – a process of urbanization, industrialization and overarching rationalization. Under the threat of communism, modernization was promoted with great urgency emphasizing the need for economic development, which would rely on tourism and the rationalization of the country’s cultural heritage management while fostering the immutable values and ideals of Hellenism.

Following the end of the seven-year dictatorship and after almost three decades when a complex network of legal, military and paramilitary mechanisms reigned supreme

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sustaining the formal state apparatus, it was largely understood that the process of democratic consolidation would only be secured through European integration. While the reasons were largely economic and directly related to geopolitical considerations, in public discussions, however, the emphasis was placed on the need to protect and strengthen the newly re-established democratic institutions. An

unspoken assumption, also, underlying many Greeks’ enthusiasm for Europe was that membership would legitimize the country’s somewhat uncertain European identity. On the other side, in Europe, objections over Greece’s economic preparedness were curbed by emphasizing the symbolic dimensions of the accession at a time that the EEC itself was also in search of its own identity. As the US had overstayed its welcome in Europe following the war, and with anti-Americanism on the rise, the newly formed European Community was called to pick up the baton and safeguard democracy in the face of the radical political changes in the European South. The collapse of dictatorships in Greece, Portugal, and Spain as well as the rise of the left in Italy around the same time had created a rather unpredictable political environment.

The limitations – perceived and real – to national sovereignty that the union with the EC would impose caused collective anxiety in Greece. Engaged in a political and economic unequal relationship, old and familiar behavior patterns reemerged. The need for self-assertion found expression where the nation felt most confident: in the cultural field. The celebration of Athens as the first Cultural Capital of Europe in 1985 – probably the most enduring institutional contribution of Greece to the EU – the campaign for the return of the Elgin Marbles in the 1980s or the struggles over the name of Macedonia in the early 1990s are only some examples of the resurgence of a new nationalism which strived to assert the country’s cultural uniqueness within the Union while also solidifying its membership. Time and again the EU was reminded of its indebtedness to ancient Greek culture while the Greek state, as protector and treasurer of the cultural capital of the nation, routinely exerted its symbolic power to consolidate its political power and secure doxic submission to the established order.

State-building and state-formation are long-term processes most commonly associated with the monopolization of the legitimate use of violence over a territory. Elias (1937) for instance, convincingly showed how the various “civilizing processes” in Europe since Medieval times led to the pacification of warrior elites, making violence the monopoly of the state. Most interestingly, however, he showed how the changing moral economies of violence were embodied in different historical habitus; by placing a premium on self-control and self-repression, antagonisms between social groups and social struggles found expression in venues other than physical violence. And even though forms of non-physical violence always co-existed with physical force, according to Elias, today these are “separated from the latter; they persist in a changed form internally within the more pacified societies. They are most visible so far as the standard thinking of our time is concerned as types of economic violence,” and yet “there is a whole set of means whose monopolization can enable men as groups or as individuals to enforce their will upon others” (Elias 1937, 447).

Elias hints here at what Bourdieu identified as “symbolic violence,” the tacit, almost unconscious modes of cultural and social domination occurring within the every-day social habits often employed to legitimize and sustain other forms of violence. Impervious, insidious and invisible, symbolic violence is essential in the production and reproduction of power and domination – social, political or economic. Austerity Europe would not have been possible without a set of narratives capitalizing on misrecognized cultural cleavages between the European North and South and invented, long internalized genealogies. In the case of Greece, the charter myth of Hellenism has been re-deployed as a legitimizing ideology for the bourgeois Greek state as well as the western European establishment steering, once again, Greek democracy’s course.

By 2012, the prospect of Greece becoming the first European country to be forced out of the EU, a process for which the union had no legal provision in place, lay bare the challenges facing European economic, political and cultural integration. It exposed the weakest

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connections of a union that was never as strong or as comprehensive as it asserted, and served as a reminder that Greece had always occupied that culturally ambivalent place at the southeastern corner of the Western geographical imagination. The prospect of a “Grexit” – a portmanteau term combining the words “Greek” and “exit” to refer to the possibility of Greece leaving the Eurozone – was avoided out of fear of a world economic Armageddon. Yet, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s famous statement that “Europe without Greece is like a child without a birth certificate,” in one way or another, weighed on many people’s minds, further complicating the ontological visions, ideological premises and symbolic dimensions of the EU.

To this day, “the cradle of democracy” – an expression of instrumental rationality, cultural commodification and liberal democracy, a Cold War construct which carries the imprints of modernization theory and European hegemonic social hierarchies – conditions our cultural

dispositions and political imagination. The social and political significations invested in Hellenism have developed into internalized structures of domination, coherent identities which, combined with these social hierarchies they perpetuate durable inequality (Tilly 1997). The inability to perceive alternative modes of political and social organization beyond the

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onslaughts of neoliberalism under the mantle of European integration are intrinsically connected and closely intertwined with identities which are far from immanent or as primordial as they appear. They are, instead, socially and historically grounded on configurations and events following the Second World War; they constitute responses to the European Cold War order, fierce anti-communism, transatlantic militarism and free market economy – albeit moderated by a welfare state destined to succumb to the onslaughts of neoliberal capitalism.

Sociology returned to historical explanation in the 1960s and 1970s when it became obvious that pressing political, economic and cultural issues could not be explained with the available statistical tools and techniques of the mid-twentieth century. Today again, state and private agents and organizations show a strong preference for applied sociology and

quantifiable results. Social sciences at large as well as the humanities are under increasing pressure to constantly demonstrate their social impact and direct their attention towards applied and policy-oriented work. Yet the political imperative for historical sociology is not to provide us with direct answers to private or state-administrative queries but with rich-in-detail analyses and interpretation, causal explanations from a macro point of view and parallel investigations and comparisons. If the objective is to intervene and fight the crisis that appears to disrupt long-established social structures, institutions and organizations or, for that matter, to *change* those structures, it is imperative that we have a deeper understanding of the complex social processes on which this crisis is embedded. In the process, engagement with its various perspectives in the European periphery might lead to methodological innovation and a historical sociology that is both richer in theory and empirical evidence.

Endnotes

1. This quote, from a Greek civil servant, was reported by *The New York Times* (Bilefsky and Kitsantonis 2010)

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