



Crisis, Gender, Time

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Economic crises are especially hard on women (Bettio et al. 2013, Manganara 2014, Seguino 2009, UNICRI 2014, Walby 2009) and the Greek crisis is no exception (Athanasίου 2011, Avdela 2011, Kambouri 2013, Karamessini 2014, Lyberaki and Tinios. N.d., Vaiou 2014a, 2014b). The effects of lay-offs, wage and pension reductions and the collapse of social services are felt by practically everyone, but women have less to lose and they are losing it faster. Especially vulnerable are those under twenty five and over sixty five, single mothers and immigrants. With or without paid jobs, women are expected to care for small children that have to stay home due to the closing down of state nurseries, they have to look after older and sick family members who no longer have access to social services, and they have to exercise their homemaking skills so as to make the best of household resources. Being employed while married to a jobless husband often produces a sense of guilt, which women cope with by intensifying their commitment to housework and family care (Georgiadou 2014). Violence against women at home is on the rise (Davaki 2013:10, Svarna 2014). According to a recent study, prostitution has increased dramatically since the onset of the crisis and this is largely due to the fact that growing numbers of women turn to sex work in order to support themselves and their children (BHMAgazino 2015).

However, the gendered aspects of the “Greek crisis” draw little public attention and this can only exacerbate work and income inequalities between women and men (Federicci 2008).

In this short essay I try to situate this silence in the context of shifts concerning the meaning of gender and emergent conceptualizations of the relations between the present and the past. I also examine concerns over whether attending to gender and other differences undermines the solidarity bonds among those struggling against the crisis and more generally against



capitalism.

Greeks often compare the current crisis to past periods of poverty, violence, political oppression and national humiliation and especially to the country's German occupation during World War II (Knight 2013, 2015). While the idea that the crisis constitutes a regression or setback ("pisogýrisma") seems self-evidently convincing, analogies between the present as the future of past hardship and the future that this present will bring are hard to draw. School children still learn that the history of Greece consists of a long chain of ordeals from which the nation has always emerged victorious; however, *this* ordeal seems unprecedented. Like elsewhere, modernization in Greece has been conceptualized as a function of time going forward and, until recently, for most people, living in the present meant working toward a future that would be better than the past. Nowadays living in the present has come to mean coping with insecurity. The anomaly to which the current "pisogýrisma" amounts is often described as entailing a "feminization" of labor (Avdela 2011:14) and a sexual assault - "we are being / have been screwed" ("mas gamáne / éhounгамísei") - more specifically, as an act of sodomy (Knight 2015) robbing Greek breadwinners of their manhood and shaming them into pleading for dignity (Lyberaki and Tinios n.d). It follows that the plights of women are less worthy of concern.



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According to Efi Avdela (2011:15) "the current financial crisis constitutes a setback as to the way in which gender is conceptualized and politically deployed. This is largely due to the fact that the crisis tends to naturalize gender and to render it invisible".

Similarly, Athena Athanasiou (2012: 28-39) suggests that the state of exception to which the crisis is often said to amount is hardly exceptional insofar as the crisis



serves as opportunity for the renewal of the national imagined community's longstanding commitment to heterosexism and racism. The suggestion that the crisis entails a naturalization of gender implies that before the onset of the crisis the natural connotations of womanhood and manhood were less pronounced. The extent to which this is actually the case is difficult to assess as mainstream gender practices and conceptualizations in Greece remain understudied. Perhaps the idea that, before the onset of the crisis, the natural connotations of gender were steadily diminishing is retrospective modernist wishful thinking. As Kath Weston (2002: 94) observes, gender has constituted a "bastion of modernity" wherein beliefs in progress were reproduced.

According to Henrietta Moore (1999: 151) the only time we knew what sex and gender stood for was in the 1970s, when the realm of society and culture were assumed to be mutually exclusive. But "nature" and "sex" have turned fragile and "society", "culture" and "gender" seem less malleable than they were supposed to be. Thanks to developments in plastic surgery and biotechnology and the increased availability of all kinds of consumer products and services promising to enable people to become the bodies of their dreams, changing one's sexed body according to choice started to seem a more attractive option than waiting for gender stereotypes to change (Moore 1999, Weston 2002: 132). As Marilyn Strathern (1992 : 141-142) suggests, by the late twentieth century counting as a person had become dependent on one's ability to exercise choice.

Looking back at my years of teaching in the Greek University since 1988, I realize that as time moved on, the students' assumption that the concept of gender referred to matters of individual choice, became harder to dislodge. Heather Paxson (2004) has suggested that after the second world war Greek urban middle class women shifted from defining motherhood in terms of an ethic of sacrifice toward defining it in terms of an ethic of choice and exercise of reproductive rights and eventually an ethic of well being and self-care. With motherhood becoming optional, opting for motherhood came to index a woman's capacity to make choices, and hence, an index of her modernity.



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Six days before the national elections of January 25, 2015, Georgia Panopoulou, a deputy candidate running with the centrist *Potami* party [said](#) that the high rate of unemployment among women is not due to a shortage of jobs, but to the fact that, with social services collapsing, many women choose to stay home, to raise their children. Clearly, this is an example of neoliberal thinking. However, perhaps partly due to the influence of television commercials, describing one's actions as the outcome of choice has become quite common in spoken Greek. For example, saying "I chose to stay home" ("epélexa na míno spíti") instead of "I stayed home" ("émeina spíti") does not necessarily mean that one consciously identifies with neoliberalism or even knows what the term means. Rather, I think that it suggests that if anything is naturalized, it is the conceptualization of action (or even of lack thereof) as the outcome of conscious decision that weights costs and benefits (see Papagaroufali 2013). As one student put it in writing, "gender matters are by



definition matters of personal choice. The problem is that in many underdeveloped countries women are coerced into dressing in certain ways or marrying men they are not in love with". It follows that anything short of "coercion" counts as "personal choice".

But as the crisis deepened due to repeated austerity measures, people started talking more about actual and prospective losses rather than choices. It is as if much of what we thought we were or wanted to be has been erased by a new mode of existence described in terms of lack and loss – of income, job prospects, security, health benefits, the list is long. This state of deprivation is often glossed as regression to a distant "barbarous" past that is juxtaposed to the period preceding the onset of the crisis, which, at least by hindsight, seems marked by unprecedented affluence. While knowledge that this era has decidedly ended is painful, the recent past is also criticized as excessively individualistic, hedonistic, materialist and consumerist; perhaps there was too much choice. Although the majority of Greeks reject the scenario of the financial crisis as punishment for individual and collective indulgence, I think many feel that yes, to a certain extent, "we were carried away" ("eíhame xefýgei"), people were over-borrowing and overspending.

In Greece, like elsewhere, the tendency for excessive spending and the taste for luxuries is stereotyped as feminine (Vlahoutsikou 2000); hence, the implicit blame this attitude entails seems to be directed mainly against women.

However, the present regression to "underdevelopment" also provides the background against which a "structural nostalgia" (Herzfeld 1997: 22) for a putative pre-modern past becomes intensified. This past is marked by strong bonds within and between sustainable households and communities and by a hierarchy of values in which authentic, homemade goods and pleasures count more than things money can buy. This past is often described as a time of more hardship, but also more solidarity and humaneness (anthropiá). From this perspective, the value of solidarity and altruism lies in their potential deployment



as antidotes to egoism (Graeber 2007). So far at least, in the context of the solidarity movement solidarity is conceptualized as an empowering bond that may potentially unite all those who experience the crisis as an “inhuman condition” (“apánthropi katástasi”) regardless of gender or other differences (e.g. Rakopoulos 2014).



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If what unites crisis-ridden Greeks, but ultimately all oppressed people in solidarity is their universal survival needs and basic human rights, attention to differences among the oppressed might be divisive. In Greece, when one brings the gendered aspects of the crisis up, one is likely to hear something like, “we are talking about something that threatens *everybody*”, “this is no time to divide people into women and men”. Like the “unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism” of which Heidi Hartmann (1981) wrote many years ago, the relationship between feminist and solidarity politics is fraught and perhaps for similar reasons. But gender is not the only kind of difference that seems to endanger solidarity. On the back cover of renowned sociologist Constantinos Tsoukalas’s (2010) *The Invention of Alterity*, one reads: “The fact that ‘the right to difference’ seems to be disassociated from social justice and the right to [...] survival is no accident. As long as the idealization of free choice remains out of touch with the materiality of the survival needs of each and every victim of injustice, the dream of a better world remains incomplete” (my translation).

Cast as invented difference, gender is something that comes after, a bunch of attributes added on to a primary human defined by “survival needs”. It is true that the SYRIZA government, of which Tsoukalas is a deputy, is LGBT friendly. However, the policies into which this friendliness translates are conceptualized as extensions of basic human rights to those that have been deprived of them rather than as celebrations of difference. But, perhaps nowhere is the emphasis on the common “survival needs” as strong and clear – but also as self-evident – as in



claims for immigrant, refugee and asylum seeker rights. Clearly, cultural, linguistic or religious differences become trivial when set against the shared experience of life threatening precarity and exposure to racist aggression (Papataxiarchis 2014). But perhaps, the dilemma makes sense only insofar as “basic needs” may be abstracted from the lives and actions they are supposed to motivate. Likewise, the idea that bringing up gender inequalities endangers the prospects of solidarity makes sense as long as one can imagine the subjects of solidarity as generic humans – same and equal mortals in front of death (Argyrou 2002: 108-109, Bakalaki 2006: 401).

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