



‘Exception’, solidarity, and conferral politics: crossroads of the ‘Greek’ crisis

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This short piece aims to touch on how our overview of the ‘Greek’ crisis can benefit from anthropological approaches, especially as the expected radical shift after the 25.1.15 elections renders its case more topical and underlines its international appeal. To this end, I shall briefly discuss and problematize ‘exception(-alism)’, terms often associated with the crisis in Greece. I shall then concisely suggest that what might invite further research from an anthropological point of view, are some interesting responses to the crisis’ configurations, rooted in Greece’s (history and) actuality of political radicalism.

An historical and global anthropology approach would have it that crises are part of broader configurations in capitalist processes. Their analyses then should be



decolonized: taken away from culturalisms and the tyranny of localised specificity. Contextualisation helps us decipher the particularities of a historical juncture in its geographical deployment. However, the danger of exhausting our analytical potentiality (and political commitments) in seeking 'uniqueness' in a crisis can arise; and it does arise in the case of Greece, often associated with 'exceptionalisms'. What should be stressed instead are the localised grassroots responses to crises, in this case conveyed through a burgeoning 'solidarity economy'.

Of Debt and 'Exception'

The discipline has a long engagement with critiquing the role, 'efficiency' and imperative discourse of institutions advocating 'development', of financial institutions at large, of the state, of high modernism. This discursive normativity has found its form in the harsh, almost punitive politics of austerity, in what Greeks call 'the Memoranda'. These loan agreements, signed with a Troika of international institutions (IMF/EU Commission/ECB), are normative discourses over how to restructure a country; it is agreed today that they have largely caused the current recession. These discourses concern not only policy-makers, but indeed academics - especially in the context where 'consensus politics' or 'technocracy' appeal to the academy all the more often.



The idea that Greece has been 'living beyond her means' formed the ideological basis for swift structural adjustment led by the fore-mentioned Troika imposing policies of austerity and fiscal discipline on the country via the regulations of the loans (aka: debt, as per Graeber 2011) Memoranda that Greece signed. The country has been experiencing austerity through the dubious means of legislative procedures (i.e. through Parliamentary procedures of voting the Memoranda in clusters of hundreds of articles in one Act). This 'fast-track' politics set a structural framework laid out in condensed historical time (Rakopoulos 2014b: 191) - having an impact on democracy in the country; not least because the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn has gained political currency.

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Institutional, political and academic claims, for a 'non-existent' Greek civil society, a weak (or broken) process towards modernity and, indeed, a gaping relation with the Enlightenment, are widespread in the country's hegemonic press, analysed thoroughly by pundits in TV shows and even pushed forward by some academic scholarship, especially in Economics and Political Science. They are often underpinned by a subtle sense of guilt and repentance for not living up to 'European' expectations. This line of thought is premised on an evolutionist modernisation thesis that claims modernity has been an 'unfinished' or even 'unattained' process. This thesis buttresses assertions about the country's 'exceptionality: the sense of it being a weak, orientalist link in the stable EU chain. This view, stemming from, but not exclusive to Economics, has been influential across the board. To underline how debatable this taken-for-granted idea is, an anthropological approach implies dropping Eurocentric claims to exceptionality and following a bottom up conceptualisation of what (if anything) is particularly 'Greek' about the Greek crisis. Rather than locating (and isolating) the weak link, this might imply reviewing the consistency of the chain overall.

Taking this step back can help illuminate the idea of 'exception', and 'state of exception'. The epistemological slippage between exception/exceptionalism/exceptionality and indeed emergency is largely due to the fact that we are hardly ever offered a working definition of the terms. This definition is urgently needed - and it cannot be reductionist either to economism or to corruption-ology. I shall not delve into the relevant debate within the social sciences and indeed anthropology here, as I have touched on it in quite some length elsewhere ([2014a](#): 190-195 and [2014b](#): 97-100). What could be repeated at this stage is that *if* the above terms are to be used, we should, at any point, be able to sharpen them methodologically by reflecting on their intellectual foundations. We can start by critically reviewing their analytical validity, rather than accepting them as passe-partout concepts encompassing, in a political flair, all relevant argumentation. A lack of sharpening the 'exception' analytical tool means that might fall victim to what it tries to deconstruct: this very thesis of



unfinished-modernisation and/or unattained-modernity.

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Claims to the crisis' exceptionality, for instance, are based on the fact that the 2010-15 'Greek' crisis is possibly the largest recession a European country has experienced since World War II (Lapavitsas 2012). The country's GDP has shrunk by 25% since the imposition of the troika's regulations. This point is debatable: the Greek GDP reduction is a catastrophe: but it is not more than the 'transitional recession' in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of socialism, possibly the most controversial modernist disaster in Europe: the Ukraine or Russia lost more of their economic ground in a few years and have only partially recovered, 25 years later (Kalb 2014). Therefore, the widespread media attention that the 'Greek' crisis has received, especially in 2011-12, might be rooted in ideas about the isolation of what is a structural problem of the Eurozone in the region's weak chain.

Moreover, Greece's condition is not unprecedented or exceptional if compared, for instance, with recent financial crises in the global 'periphery'. In fact, arguing for instance that Greece is 'not a normal country' (Kouvelakis 2013) is ingrained in broader assumptions about what is normality and what supposedly diverges from it. Arguing for Greek exceptionalism in general (Featherstone 2008) or that *this* crisis is a state of exception (Douzinas 2013: 100-101) because it is based on a divergence from law is not fully useful for social scientists either. One wonders what might be the canon from which the 'Greek exception' stems.



Recent scholarship has thoroughly contested claims to the Greek crisis' exceptionality (Laskos and Tsakalotos 2013: 2-4; Rakopoulos 2014c: 96). More broadly, historians like Kosseleck have doubted the idea that crises are exceptional breaches, as they bring to the fore social contradictions and deep tensions (2002: 243). Austerity policy has proven deleterious for any prospect of development and indeed has formulated the country's economic contraction (Stuckler and Basu 2013). As debt crises are normalised in historical narratives, in spite of their non-sustainability, fiscally austere policies are hardly challenged on the upper echelon of EU politics, with daunting results (euro-phobia reaching disturbing levels across the continent). In this context, the Greek case has received unexpected attention. I think one field where this attention could focus more is street-level politics that preceded the likely SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) triumph in the anti-austerity elections of January 25th - a ballot marked by anti-austerity sentiment.

Crisis from below: the solidarity economy and 'conferral politics'

One of the many alternative ways to look at austerity and crises is to examine the Polanyian double-movements to the aggressive market deregulation they instigate. Anthropology is well endowed to show how global crises register locally and how grassroots activism deployed within them draws from local specificities - from the social arrangements of the everyday life of crisis-ridden places. One form this debate is taking is to underline the rise of a novel social economy as a response to the crisis (Agelopoulos 2014).

Experimenting with alternatives to austerity, Greece is experiencing a vivid dissemination of widely understood, solidarity economy practices. For instance, a substantial amount of its population has benefited from the 'anti-middlemen'



movement, operated by unpaid participants who aim to coordinate initiatives, through grassroots co-ops, in a movement spreading across Greece. While a developed social and solidarity economy was absent in Greece until recently, today, for instance in the Pieria region, where the 'potato movement' (the first anti-middlemen foodstuff distributions) was instigated in 2011, many of the basic needs of local households are served via informal agrarian distribution. It is therefore reasonable, if not urgent for an anthropological approach, to correlate the crisis and the flourishing of the solidarity economy.



What the anti-middleman movement does is effectively simple. Groups of urban-based activists organise farmers' markets in the neighborhoods of Athens, Thessaloniki and other towns and cities country-wide. They come in contact with farmers in rural areas, often in the localised sense of the areas surrounding these cities, and liaise with them for long-term collaborations. The activists set up the impromptu markets in a periodic, if informal, fashion, in city squares, and farmers



come to distribute their agricultural produce for up to 50% below the retail price. With the broker's share out of the picture, the distribution is now costless, and this affects the final price. In Thessaloniki, at the heyday of the movement, during my fieldwork (latter part of 2013), there were around 10 such markets taking place around the city, every Sunday, from 8 in the morning till around 4pm, with thousands attending.

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Of course, there is a great range of forms and networks of the 'solidarity economy'. The anti-middleman movement is just part of a wide constellation of networks in which many of the same people are involved. This includes time-banks, social doctors, social pharmacies, the "can't pay won't pay" movement, to name but a few instances (mentioned, for instance, as a new social economy, in Laskos and Tsakalotos 2013: 142-143). As the prospect of cooperativisation, as well as the political audacity, does not seem to pertain to social doctors and time-banks *as much* as in the anti-middleman network, it should be stressed that the anti-middleman movement articulates with such other practices and often, as in its current (late autumn 2014-early 2015) hibernation, some of the practitioners' enthusiasm and commitment is channeled through these other practices.

Therefore, a number of these anti-middlemen groups are currently in a dormant state. There has been a period, which lasted from the late 2013 until the summer of 2014, where the practical mobilisation of the movement was accompanied by heated debate across and within the teams partaking in it, around two main



issues. The first concerned whether the development of the movement would follow routes of cooperativization and formalization or whether it would, instead, remain informal in nature (Rakopoulos 2014a: 23-24). The second considered whether, after considerable police prosecution (pursued by the authorities on a legalistic basis: the lack of licenses for the anti-middleman markets), the movement should attest to a period of quiescence, in order to wait for more favourable conditions of broader political administration (i.e., namely, a SYRIZA government, a realistic prospect in the last few months, and especially after the EU Parliament elections' victory of the party). Consequently, the movement's overall aims, and many groupings within it, have decided to withdraw from continuous activity, expecting a Left-leaning shift in government, which could accommodate their solidarity economy initiatives, as well as attest to the broader idea of social solidarity at large.

The idea of *anathesi*, a major native notion, but one that retains analytical force to comprehend the roll-up in the social mobilisation in Greece, can help us grasp this situation of the movement's recent staggering. It is related to SYRIZA's cliff-hanging rise to power as an ever-approaching prospect. I call this *conferral politics*: the idea that movements can confer, if momentarily, their prospect of development to the representational, parliamentary scene and therefore slow down their activity. How the higher echelons of Left politics will incorporate this dynamic is crucial. For the moment, the flirt with the social economy is a flip side to the 'need to overcome the humanitarian crisis', in SYRIZA's discourse. (A note in regard to this: as Burawoy (2013) has warned us on optimism and hyperbole, ascribing analytical potential to terms of political appeal is slippery. This is particularly true for the analytical use of 'humanitarian crisis', a notion providing very thin analysis to inquire into contemporary Greece but one popular with the Greek Left).



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Some voices from within the 'solidarity' movement (as per Polatsidis 2012), or theorists of it (Lieros 2012) have precluded this 'conferral' direction. However, in actual fact, the movement has receded, for a combination of reasons. These range from adopting, strategically, a dormant period as a segue to a prospective rise of the movement afresh, to inter-personal exhaustion and anticipation of SYRIZA's governance prospect. It is yet to be seen how this will evolve, and whether the movement, as many voices within it claim, will be incorporated in varied degrees within the alternative economics that the radical Left will endorse and enact. As is well known, the elections of January 25th will most likely give SYRIZA a landslide victory and social and solidarity economy has been central in the party's political programme since 2012. In fact, it could be said that it drives an aspect of its development agenda; a legal framework that endorses and promotes cooperatives will be put forward. It remains to be seen how it will play out on the ground.

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