



Poignant Pasts and Uncertain Futures in the Greek Crisis: Ethnographic Snippets from ATM Queues

written by Daniel Knight
July, 2015



July 2nd 2015, it is 4.30pm and the temperature is touching 40°C. I am standing in a queue of some twenty-five people outside Ethniki Bank in central Trikala, a mid-sized town on the Plain of Thessaly, central Greece, waiting to withdraw money from the ATM. Since the announcement of a snap referendum on a new bailout package, Greek citizens have been restricted to withdrawing 60 euros per day,



per card, due to capital controls introduced when negotiations between the Greek government and their European creditors broke down and the European Central Bank withdrew their Emergency Liquidity Assistance; foreigners have unlimited access to their money, assuming the machine has not run dry. Scenes of queuing strike an emotive chord with my research participants in Trikala (where I have worked since 2003), as people recall queues for petrol during the 2010 haulage strikes that lasted for over a week and left hospitals and airports without fuel (see Knight 2012).

To go deeper into the vaults of history, the scenes resonate with queuing for rations during World War Two. In the queue today people seem almost afraid to speak, muttering in hushed tones to those beside them, fearing being overheard – the yes/no vote on a new austerity package has divided a society already under extreme stress. This composure in Trikala is at odds with scenes of rage scattered across the mass media as throughout the country pensioners queue from before dawn to withdraw their designated 120 euro pension payment. There are also pictures of scuffles that have erupted in Athens and Thessaloniki as tensions fray in cash machine queues. Here in Trikala, one of the most striking observations is that a group of taxi drivers with no customers has taken to pruning the overgrown trees in the central square opposite, from where hangs a large poster promoting a “no” vote against the proposed austerity package.

After an hour of delays – many of the elderly in the queue seem never to have used an ATM before – it is my turn to withdraw enough money to cover some outstanding medical expenses and my bus ticket to Thessaloniki airport, from where I fly in two weeks’ time. I way-up the idea of taking above the 60 euro allowance imposed on Greek bank accounts (I could take 1000, but that would increase the risk of the machine running dry for the people behind me), and finally decide on 100 – just enough to cover immediate concerns. I console myself with the notion that at least my cash will go straight back into circulation. As I approach the machine I find myself shaking and I don’t know why, for surely this is just the latest episode in a saga that has run for nearly six years, with austerity packages negotiated between successive Greek governments and “Troika”



(European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) having devastating social consequences.

When reaching to take my receipt from the machine the two fifty-euro notes can be seen in my hand, momentarily, by the gentleman behind, provoking him to remark “he must be English, foreigners can take whatever they want” – perhaps a comment with a deliberately ironic double-meaning considering the blame-game being played between all Greek political parties where the “foreigner” is often portrayed as an opportunistic beast preying on the misfortunes of Greeks.

Back in the house the television plays all day long, Tsipras, Varoufakis, Samaras, and various figures from the Eurogroup, sell their versions of referendum politics and frame their stories of social suffering and material poverty according to their own particular agendas. These top-down narratives are interspersed with sound-bites from ‘everyday people’ voicing concerns over the closed banks, unpaid wages, and fears of possible hunger somewhere in the near future. An 87-year-old man tells a news reporter that he has lived through many crises, including World War Two, and he cannot remember a more painful time of suffering and uncertainty. A man claiming to be 103 says that he lived through two world wars and fought the Italians on the Albanian border in the 1940s. He now fears for his grandchildren’s lives in a country pummelled into the ground by a mixture of poor economic strategy and political ineptitude on all sides. The 1946-49 civil war fought between nationalists and communists (put somewhat simplistically), as well as the 1973-74 polytechnic uprising and resultant toppling of the junta, and the historic “Oxi (no) Day” ([Vereni 2015](#)) when in 1940 Greek dictator Ioannis Metaxas rejected an ultimatum issued by Benito Mussolini demanding Axis forces be allowed to enter Greece, are all historical events regularly referenced in media discussions and among locals. The past, it seems, is very much in the air once again as people grapple to contextualise the deteriorating situation.



I have written at length about the significance of the past and collective memory in the way my research participants experience the current economic turmoil. You can call it historical consciousness, polytemporality, historicity, or, as I argue in my recent book, *History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece* (2015), the cultural and temporal “proximity” of selective moments of the past helping people understand dramatic social change. The referendum and wider problem of ‘saving the Greek economy’ is being billed as a choice based on both interpretations of the past and expectations of the future. People find themselves in what Rebecca Bryant (2014:682) calls the “uncanny present”, an elongated moment of increased consciousness where the familiar becomes paradoxically somehow unfamiliar yet also very close, a feeling especially prevalent in moments of angst. For Bryant, belonging and temporality are mutually implicated in inextricable ways, making moments of the past “familiar to us, history accepted as ours, or, conversely, what makes it uncanny” (2014:691). Upon these notions of familiar pasts, elongated presents and emergent futures do the Greek public go to vote on what has been widely (perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly) termed a decision between Europe or the East, the Euro or the Drachma, Germany or Russia, suffocating crisis or risky policies towards fiscal growth.



Yet so much of the recent analysis of the Greek economic crisis that has rumbled on since late 2009 lacks substantial historical contextualisation. Over the past six years of crisis, people in Trikala have drawn on past moments of social and economic turmoil to help explain increasing social suffering and material poverty.



By embodying moments of the past, locals discuss their fears of returning to past epochs of hardship while drawing courage that even the worst crises can be overcome. The perceived proximity of the current economic crisis with specific culturally meaningful past events informs local understandings of social change and turmoil. The fear of returning to times of hunger as experienced during World War Two is a common thread in crisis discourse, while a European Union scheme aimed at decreasing national debt by placing solar panels on agricultural land is locally perceived as a return to an era of German or Ottoman occupation. Also, the moments of the past that remain dormant, that are not recalled, are equally important for they tell us something else about the socio-political history of the region. An example of this is how accounts of the divisive events of the Greek civil war (1946-49) are not so prominent in how people in Trikala experience the current economic crisis, yet with a 40-minute drive into the Pindos Mountains, the topology of the past changes completely and the civil war becomes the main event around which people frame their narratives of crisis and suffering.

On this topic, renowned historian Mark Mazower wrote an [interesting piece about the referendum in the New York Times](#), citing how particular historical contexts have shaped popular perspectives on both internal and international political relations). Likening the referendum and a potential Grexit to “the collective suicide” of “Greeks who blew themselves up rather than surrendering to Turkish forces two centuries ago”, Mazower also supposed that the Greek government may be playing on people’s obsession with civil war resistance heroes, prevalent in popular culture and the education curriculum since the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. While Mazower’s insights take a distinctive political tone (he is open in his support for the ‘Yes’ campaign), he is correct in focusing on the wider point that moments of the past have practically and affectively helped form how Greek voters now perceive their present struggle with fiscal austerity and their visions of the future. This fits well with Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart’s thesis on ‘historicity’, which “describes a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future ... assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions” giving credence to



“the relevant ways in which (social) pasts and futures are implicated in present circumstances” (Hirsch and Stewart 2005:262-63).



It is the day of the referendum, Sunday 5th July, and I am back in an ATM queue. At midday I go to Alpha Bank but they have just run out of money. I cross the street to Attiki Bank, where the machine asks me to “come back another day”. I decide that it will have to be Ethniki again, despite the 50-person-long queue. One of the two ATMs at Ethniki is already empty. At this time of day the bank takes the full heat of the midday sun, not an inch of shade in sight. I notice that the queue at EuroBank opposite is slightly shorter so my partner – who has just cast her vote – and I decide to split-up and join both queues. The line in-front of the EuroBank cash machine is very slow moving, but people seem calm and talkative.



An elderly man, Giorgos, asks where I am from and I tell him that I am English; he says that I am very lucky as I can take as much money as I please from the ATM. I tell him I intend to take 60 euros, the same as any Greek. Giorgos, a 72-year-old salesman, believes that foreigners are to blame for the closure of the banks and creating the economic crisis to suit their own needs. Repeating a common line, he tells me that greedy Germans have put Greece into a state of “occupation” that he compares with World War Two. He blames the commercialism of countries such as the US and the UK and wonders why other nations feel the need to interfere in Greek life.

Although his two grandchildren were educated in London and now live abroad, he says that life in England is too easy and I should be ashamed to take home my, supposedly, inflated wage packet when Greeks are being driven into the ground, “the people are going hungry, we don’t know where we will get food to eat” he says.

At this point, as my arms are quickly burning to a crisp, another elderly gentleman, vocally supported by a young lady behind him, airs his disagreement with Giorgos; “the foreigners do well to try to tidy-up this country. Look at our public sector, our corrupt politicians. This is no way to live”. Kostas, a 77-year-old retired plumber, says that he has travelled from his village 35 kilometres away in order to cast his vote and withdraw some cash. Having lived in Frankfurt, Germany, for four years during the 1980s, he says he understands the frustrations of the local people, but does not believe that they are well informed as to the social, economic and historical circumstances of the current crisis. Kostas has just had a triple by-pass and is afraid that his tablets would not be available if a new Troika agreement cannot be found. He says that he has an idea about cutting his doses – taking only half a tablet a day – but he thinks his doctor will disapprove. Over the next twenty minutes Kostas talks about the current crisis through history, taking me through disparate, seemingly unconnected moments of the past – Ottoman landlords in the mid-1800s, Eleftherios Venizelos’s attempts to realise the “Megali Idea”, the Asia Minor catastrophe, the World War Two Axis



occupation and Great Famine, Civil War, 1967-74 dictatorship and socio-political divides during debates around Greece's 1981 European Union accession.



This “bouncing around through the past” is employed by Kostas to explain such things as the current anti-foreigner sentiments, the fear of going hungry, the rise and fall of Greek nationalism, class wars, the social injustice of international markets, and the refugee crisis facing southern Europe (see Cabot 2014, also Cabot's AllegraLab thread). It is quite a tour de force of Modern Greek history, told through personal experiences, collective and intergenerational memories and “official” institutionalised narratives of the past. Overhearing our conversations, Giorgos cuts back in, asking to see my sunglasses. I invite him to join in our conversations but he wants to change the topic - how did I manage to get a job at a university when these places are in such short supply? Who did I pay-off, he inquires quite angrily? The lady behind me notes that he has jumped the queue, going forward some ten places. Multiple voices call for him to get to the back of the queue.

Ninety minutes of waiting and the queue is slowly but surely moving forward. So many people do not know how to use the machine. My partner has just come back from the Ethniki queue. She is bright red and says she feels dizzy. The ATM at Ethniki has run out of money just as she got towards the front. An entrepreneurial fellow has pulled up on a bicycle and is selling ice cream to people in the ATM



queue – ironically stationed outside a shop called “Lafazanis Electrics” (Panagiotis Lafazanis, probably no relation, is the current Minister of Productive Reconstruction, Environment and Energy in the SYRIZA government). The ice cream man seems to be doing a good trade. The young lady behind me, who works in a cafeteria in the centre of town, is discussing the fact that her shop is doing well from the queuing this week, “our delivery orders have doubled this week. People are ordering cold coffees to be delivered while they are queuing”. After two-and-a-half hours we reach the ATM, which by now is only dispensing 50 euro notes.

The referendum returned a landslide victory for the “No” campaign, gaining 61.31% of the overall vote. In Trikala, “No” also prevailed with 58.67%. The queues at the cash machines continue.

I have no doubt that the events of these days will leave an indelible mark, sedimented in mind and body, to be discussed in future times of pain, poverty, and suffering.

References

Bryant, R. 2014. History’s Reminders: On Time and Objects after Conflict in Cyprus. *American Ethnologist*, Volume 41, Number 4, pp: 681–697.

Cabot, H. 2014. *On the Doorstep of Europe Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Hirsch, E. and C. Stewart. 2005. Introduction: Ethnographies of Historicity. *History and Anthropology*, Volume 16, Number 3, pp: 261–274.

Knight, D. M. 2012. Cultural Proximity: Crisis, Time and Social Memory in Central Greece. *History and Anthropology*, Volume 23, Issue 3, pp: 349–374.

Knight, D. M. 2015. *History, Time, and Economic Crisis*. New York: Palgrave



Macmillan.