



GRASSROOTS MEANINGS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF CRISIS IN CHALKIDA, GREECE

STAMATIS AMARIANAKIS

samarianakis@gmail.com

Grassroots Economics Project - Universitat de Barcelona

In this paper I analyze how the economic crisis prevailed in the Greek everyday reality and expose its grassroots meanings and understandings. My aim is to reveal and analyze the multiple definitions crisis acquires on the social ground and how people explain the seven-year socio-economic depression brought by the persisting economic crisis in Greece. Drawing from selected ethnographic cases from Chalkida, Greece, a mid-sized city at the periphery of Athens, I explore the multiple meanings crisis and austerity acquires in the social ground and expose the relatedness between economic activities and social life. To this extent, I examine the various grassroots economic practices, logics and established socio-economic patterns of diversely situated people.

1. Introduction

In this paper I focus on how Crisis has affected the everyday lives of people and how people make sense and understand the imposed restructurings and transformations of their everyday life drawing on ethnographic material I systematically collected in Chalkida, Greece. Since the beginning of the economic crisis, thirteen austerity packages have been implemented that have resulted in major shocks in the living arrangements of the lower and middle classes. During the past seven years, Greek salaried people and pensioners lost from 30 to 50 percent of their annual income while taxation on the lower incomes has increased by 337 percent according to a recent macro-economic research (Giannitsis & Zografakis, 2015). When I asked people to explain how they realized crisis in their own lives and how crisis is understood and explained, all, more or less, used similar patterns to describe the major reduce of their available income, be it civil servants, employees, self-employed businessmen, underemployed, informally employed or unemployed. Crisis de-crystallized in their discourses as the dispossession of their income through top-down austerity measures, either directly through cuts on salaries, benefits and pensions and low market demand for the self-employed, or indirectly through various types of taxation and provisioning cuts. In the following sections, I focus on selected ethnographic cases that provide insights on : 1) how has austerity affected the everyday life of individuals and households 2) How ordinary people explain and understand crisis and in this chaotic environment of socio-economic depression 3) What crisis means for particular individuals at the grassroots level.



2. Grassroots Explanations of Crisis

Crisis is usually understood as the outcome of top-down authoritative policies dictated by the IMF and the EU. Crisis is, in my informants' views is seen as a mode of an economic war, a neo-colonial practice aiming to maintain and enhance control over the Greek territory and the Greek public assets.

As an informant of mine have put it

“Greeks have never been an independent nation-state. From the very begging of the Greek Nation-State there were three political parties trying to rule Greece, the French, the English and the Russian. You see, we are in a very strategic location, we are at the croosroad of three continents and for that, everyone wants to control us. If the Greeks were united we could have achieved great things and overcome this crisis, as we have done many times in the past when we defeated the Persian hordes of Xerxes (sic). They do not want us united and that is what crisis is, it further divides us instead of uniting us” (Vassilis 60. Laid off Factory Worker - Few days after the Greek referendum. July 2015).

The 1821 revolution and the formation of the Greek Nation-State could not have happen without the support the above three superpowers that Vassilis accounts (see Daikin, 1972) which of course wanted to control and promote their interests afterwards. The Greek state has been a protectorate since then, and in Vasillis way of thinking, Greece remains a State which is under the supervision of foreign powers. He idealizes a distant glorious past and constructs an historical continuity since the times of Ancient Greece till today, an idea that was expressed by many scholars, Greeks and non Greeks and was and still is dominant in the philhellenic movement at the Age of the Enlightenment (Ricks, 2009). Lastly, the most important sentence for me is that crisis is alienating and dividing people further. For instance, during the pre-referendum period were there have been polemic tensions between the Yes/No Supporters. Voices from the extreme right have spoken about the reemergence of unsettled civil war differences such as the former minister of health¹ of the opposition party (Nea Dimokratia) were calling for a new civil war against the communists. Another interesting fact that stands out, is the re-emergence of a grassroots nationalism. A nationalistic soteriology which can be employed to tackle the crisis and the on going economic colonization of the country. A notion which many political parties incorporate in order to attract voters. Nation is indeed an imagined, ideal community (Smith, 1991) imagined not only in space, but also in time.

Another interesting explanation of crisis comes from Katerina 63 Housewife. When I asked about crisis she told me:

“I think all these Northners envy us. We may have never had much money, but yet we are in the best land plot of Europe. We have the Sun and the Sea, the climate is great and despite being poor we can easily find ways to have a good time. What do the Germans have?

¹ Such as the former minister of Health, Makis Voridis who had stated “ we are not going to hand in the country to the leftists. All those things that our grandfathers fought for and gained with weapons, (referring to the Greek Civil war) we won't just stand and hand it out to the communists. We need to do whatever is possible to prevent this” (see <http://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/boridis-den-tha-paradosoyme-ayto-poy-kerdisan-pappoydes-mas-me-ta-opla>).



In this quote we see how austerity and restructurings also have cultural definitions. Discourses such as the Greeks living above their means, or going out and wasting their money, the lazy Greeks as they have been called by EU officials and other cultural stereotypes that are widespread among European people's are present here. Crisis again is seen as a colonizing practice exercised by the Germans, while in many cases EU and Germany appear to be the same.

“Crisis is a way to conquer Greece. What the Germans did not manage to take by weapons, they are taking it now, with this economic crisis. They got OTE, the biggest telecommunication company in the Balkans. Imagine that! Then, the Aegean sea is full with petrol. That is why they say we have crisis. They want to own us, they want to buy us out cheap and tell us that we do not worth anything. And on top of that, they say it is our fault and few idiots believe it. How can a small country like Greece to be a threat for the global economy. But what can you do, especially when you have all these puppet politicians that we pay” said G.N. 43 informally underemployed, in a short conversation we had at the kafeneio² in the neighborhood I had been living.

In the above quote we can discern how privatization, a mode of accumulation by dispossession which Harvey (2003) accounts, is present in ordinary people's understanding of the global economy. Crisis is seen as a method to manipulate the masses by exercising economic control over national, public assets. Critical is the dissemination of responsibilities among ordinary people. The main discourse that EU officials have been reproducing is the standard stereotype of lazy Greek people who overspend money and live above their means. Statements and stereotypes like these outrage people, especially those who had been hard since they were teenagers.

To continue with, a re-emerging explanation of crisis is that Greeks have had incapable and corrupt politicians who only cared about their “chair” and their future re-election. They are the ones who are responsible of crisis and that is why in Greece, crisis still persists. Because of them and their inability and unwillingness to enforce the law and follow the constitution.

“They say this they say that, how can they say all these things when we know that they took the money from the insurance and pension fund and gambled with it at the stock market. All these corruption scandals and nobody is in jail. Bring the stolen money back.. but instead they cut poor people's welfare benefits and pensions to reduce the public debt. But on the other hand we are also responsible, we were applauding them several years ago, hoping that my children will find a good job at the public sector through them” said Vangelis 62 who is waiting stoically to receive his pension.

Here we can discern two levels of responsibility of crisis. First comes the upper scale of the elected politicians who were generally corrupt, a point which almost every voter of any political party would agree. These people have created and nurtured a system that protects corruption which makes and utilizes and interprets laws to serve itself and not

² Kafeneio is a tradition public space where people drink coffee, play cards and backgammon, watch Tv and the news and discuss about any imaginable topic. It is usually a male dominated space where very few women hang out. For more information see (Papataksiarhis 1998)



the common good. The lower scale of responsibility is a self-critique. Vangellis, traces responsibility to the self who had submitted to that corrupted system, had voted for corrupt politicians and most importantly had tried to achieve his own interests through it.

Another very popular grassroots discourse around crisis is that the EU and the Euro are mostly responsible for the crisis in Greece as well as the inability of the Greek economy to recover. There are many who believe that Greece should have never been part of the euro, a stance that has become popular at the aftermath of the persisting economic recession.

“Euro has destroyed the Greeks” said Nikos. 42, who operates a stall at Chalkida’s open air markets. “The Greeks do not know how to value the euro... For me, coins of 50 cents, 1 and 2 euros, should have been banknotes for the Greeks.” and puts a coin of each on his stall. “By the time we entered the euro (means Eurozone), all prices went up. I remember, oil prices in 2001 were around fifty to sixty drachmas, you know, my friend, how much is 60 drachmas in euros? Less than this” and shows me a coin of 20 cents. “Products that used to cost a thousand drachmas, when the euro arrived they automatically reached to cost five euros...” takes out a calculator and makes the calculation “you see five euros ! it is around a thousand seven hundred drachmas! The water at the kiosk, it was priced at 50 drachmas, now it costs 50cents ! That is, my friend the bubble of the euro. The “hiliariko” (a thousand drachmas) has become in a year five euros!”.

Through Nikos’s understanding of crisis, hinders a greater understanding of the economic models that have been dominant in Greece. He made explicit that through the euro, goods and services were overpriced and following his line of thought, that is what caused the current crisis, because Greeks have lost track of their micro-economics and the way they valued money.

So far I have presented quotes that could represent people from all over Greece, as they refer to the national and international scenery. Following, are some grassroots interpretations of crisis which refer to crisis and its grounding on the locality of Chalkida. According to Ntina, a fifty nine year old shop owner crisis is the result of the lack of capital circulation.

“You see there is a pyramid. Capital is on top, there are the owners of the factories that used to operate here in Chalkida. Because of the industries, Chalkida used to be a very rich city, and everyone wanted to have access to the local markets (referring to her suppliers). That was because money circulated from the top to the bottom, to the workers who would spend it at the local shops. Now, capital is accumulated on top, and stays there. That’s is why we have crisis, and that is why all the small shop owners suffer.” And continued “It makes me furious when I listen that the Greeks got loans and wasted their money and lived above their means. So, it is their money and they should do what ever they want. All those indebted people have lost their assets, houses which the bank asked as a mortgage. What about the banks? Banks have also went bankrupt but they never paid anything, they never lost anything, instead we pay for them. The State borrowed billions to save the banks”.

Ntina’s view is based on the local knowledge she has about the local market. She knows very well that the industries were the driving force for the local market, the industries brought money into the local market and in fact, the industries were the ones that made



possible for the local market to flourish. Also she was very critical towards the EU and the Euro. She believes that because of the euro many industries delocalized abroad, and that this thing has been planned. As she elaborated in an abrupt manner:

“Why do we need the EU and the Euro? To dictate us what to do, what to produce and not? We have lost many things since we entered the EU, what have we gained? I can tell you what we have lost, can you tell me what we have gained all these years? There was an elite that benefited for EU funds and had access to those funds, not ordinary people”.

Furthermore, crisis is very often viewed and explained through conspiracy theories which in many cases have proven to be partially true. These theories very often include fragments of truth that convince people (Rakopoulos, forthcoming). In times of crisis, people are eager to believe and incorporate in their discourses the presence of occult groups/elites that their goal is to control the whole world and they do so by exercising economic power. For instance, many people refer to an orchestrated attempt to dismantle the Greek industrial and agricultural production so that the national market will become import oriented. This is proven to be true if we examine the EU policies and directives regarding the Greek agricultural and industrial sector. This is a process that began in the 1980s and escalated in the 1990s with the financialization of the economy and production (Foster, 2010; Hudson, 1998, Marois, 2012). By the time, Greece entered the Eurozone, production costs have increased and many industries delocalized abroad following the neoliberal doctrine. Conspiracy theories provide better explanations about the movements of capital and the neoliberalization of the economy than mainstream economic models, and therefore are appealing to people who experience the imposed harsh austerity in their everyday lives.

Lastly, the banks and their role in the organization of the Greek society is very often accused for having caused the crisis Greeks experience. During the pre-crisis years and especially after Greece entered the Eurozone, the banks have aggressively advertised and sold any type of loan to unsuspected Greek citizens, taking advantage of people's vulnerabilities to fulfil their dreams and aspirations towards upwards mobility through consumption and possession of status symbols (Bourdieu, 1984). For instance, Giorgos 39, who has gotten a loan to build a house for his wife and a 3-year old child told me:

“We have been sleeping and the banks had been issuing loans to our names. Once I was having a siesta and a bank called, informing me that they have pre-approved a loan of 10.000 euros for me. The only thing I had to do was to go to the nearest branch, sign the papers and get the money”.

3. The Ground Effects of continuous Austerity on the Everyday Reality

The imposition of austerity produced multiple ruptures on the social and personal scale. Macro economic approaches through statistics depict a wider picture of a total collapse of a middle class and show in numbers the effects that austerity had on people's income. In 2008, 320.000 households had at least one unemployed member while in 2014 that number has increased to over a million (Gianitsis & Zografakis, 2015). The unemployed population is more than a million, one tenth of the whole Greek population and almost one third of the working population aged 18-65 while more than 70 percent of them face



long-term unemployment (Eurostat, 2015). In this section, I explore through ethnographic material the impact of crisis and austerity at the personal and social level by asking people to elaborate how crisis has affected their life and when did they realize crisis in their everyday reality. Through selected quotes, I examine the relatedness between social and economic spheres (Narotzky, 2007) while I expose the multi-scalar effects and ruptures crisis and austerity cause.

“I understood the extent of the crisis by the time Shelman (a heavy wood processing industry) closed in 2011 and there were rumours that the cement factory was going to close which I could not believe that could happen. Also when I saw that the local grocery shop had started to use “tefteri” in order to keep track of its customer’s debts”. Stamatis K. 44. Civil Servant.

Stamatis is well educated and has a steady job, and even though his salary has been reduced, crisis had not affected him and his family very much. His wife has a well-paid job as well, and they own the house they live in with their two kids. He employs a social rather than a personal understanding of crisis in order to emphasize the social impact of crisis. Stamatis’s view exposes various scales which crisis operates (Swyngedouw, 2004). The regional economic landmarks, these two heavy industries in Chalkida were closed down mostly because of the lack of demand brought by austerity in the national level. Another realization of crisis which this time, is more personal.

“When I could not cope with my monthly obligations and pay on time, also when I saw restaurants and taverns empty on a Saturday night”. Ntina, 59, Shopowner.

In Ntinas’ narrative, we see that both personal and social indices interplay. She has her own hierarchy and prioritizes her monthly payments according to a personal value system. Firstly, she tries to make sure to pay her rent to the owner of her shop since they have been knowing each other for more than 28 years and she knows that she needs that money for her son who studies abroad. She also prioritizes payments to her suppliers, the electricity and phone bills while she has stopped paying her social insurance fund since 2011. In Ntina’s prioritization of payments is entailed a moralization of economic activities, an issue which has historically concerned anthropology and anthropologists (Bloch & Parry, 1989, Hann 2010). She values more the interpersonal relationships at the local level than those at the national scale as she prefers to give her money to local people than to the state. Crisis have caused ruptures in socio-economic reproduction which in this case can be both a moral and an economic shock. She felt very uncomfortable when she could not keep up paying her insurance fund, but as the crisis escalated she feels anger rather than shame. Furthermore, in Ntina’s view, is obvious the relatedness between her social relationships and her economic activities (Narotzky, 2007). In fact, crisis brings forth the concept of embeddedness (Polanyi, 1957).

“Well two things, firstly, When I realized that my children, our children are not going to be better off than my generation. I have two kids one finished his studies and is unlikely to find any job. Secondly, When I realized that the clothes I have bought all these years were a far better investment than the Greek Bonds in which I have invested (Laughs out Loud)”. Tessy, 49. Administrative Employee at the Bank of Greece.



As Narotzky & Bresnier (2014) show, intergenerational aspirations and hopes for the future generations are intertwined with ordinary people's understandings about the economy and its importance. Crisis and the current socio-economic depression affects the way people think about the next generations' wellbeing. Moreover, we see how transformation of investment occurs in her personal level. She bought Greek bonds which is understood as a concrete investment of money that turned out to be garbage as the Greek economy declined, while, purchases (overstocking clothes) which she would have never considered them as an investment during the pre-crisis years, nowadays are identified as such. Moreover, the act of buying clothes that people did not actually need during the pre-crisis years, while nowadays buy only the necessary depicts the rupture which crisis caused in the clothing market.

“When I realized I did not have money left to give my grandchildren pocket money. Especially when we stopped receiving the 13th and 14th pay for Christmas and Easter”. Nikos, 79, pensioner.

The bitterness of not being able to give presents to his loved ones and especially to his grandchildren, is another aspect of the ruptures in an intergenerational perspective.

“When my husband could not find employment at the construction sector and I had to start cleaning houses”. Katerina, 37, Factory Worker.

A more personal approach to describe the economic crisis. Katerina has been struggling to provide for her household. Here is also present a rupture of established gender roles as her husband is unemployed and cannot play his part as being the main breadwinner.

“When massively new children were registered in our High School (Gymnasio) that was because whole families with children moved in their parental home”. Sonya, 59 Headteacher.

In this case crisis has provoked relocations of families that tried to capitalize on every asset they possess. In many cases they did so to avoid paying rent or to rent out the house they had been living because it was the only available income possibility since both parents had been unemployed and there was no potential of finding employment. Here there is also an exchange between generations. The older generations provide money and housing, while the unemployed care for the household and for the need of the elderly.

“When the retirement home for the elderly was emptied. Everyone took the elderly back home”. Christos, 45, Cement Factory Worker.

Similarly here, the younger generations capitalize on care of the elderly and their pension which was used to pay the fees for the retirement houses. People try to find and exploit any potential source of income within the family. This practice also serves to identify crisis, it is signals a backwards movements that resembles life of the past.

“Crisis... this is crisis, it is August and I have no wedding planned this week. My annual budget fell by 70% compared to 2008”. Kostas 53. Entrepreneur. Weddings Catering and Hosting.



Ruptures in this particular type of business show that people stopped to spend money on wedding feasts, or even stopped getting married. Again a rupture in social reproduction.

“I felt the impact of crisis after 2011. In 2010 I had a small reduction but 2011-2013, those years had been a disaster. 2014 and 2015 had been better. Now we struggle to go back to the 2010 standards”. Dimitris, 56, Entrepreneur.

The above quote exposes the periodization of crisis which while it is interesting to see the expectations and hopes for his business and the way people think about future. The future is contested with the past (Knight, 2016).

“When they cut my salary and I could not repay my debt. I was in a very bad mood, you can’t imagine I was about to lose my house, my car, everything I had struggled to create in my life”. Dimitris, 55, Civil Servant.

Indebtness and despair at the face of losing the hard-won possessions of a lifetime. Dimitris could not keep up paying his debt when they cut his salary. This has been a major problem for many people like Dimitris in Greece who had lend money from the banks a few years before the outburst of crisis and the imposed austerity. In his narrative, we see how crisis is embodied and causes psychological stress, anxiety and depression.

“Haha, crisis.. I have always been in crisis, I am thirty two years old and I have never had a stable job. And seems unlikely to find one here in Greece. I started to think seriously about migrating to Germany where my brother lives”. Dimitra, 32, Precarious Administrative employee at the social structures of Chalkida.

This is very common for the younger generations who sought to study professions with high rates of employment prospect. Dimitra has and M.A. in Migration studies since 2009. Since then she has been employed in various irrelevant and precarious job positions through EU and State funded workfare programmes that aim to tackle unemployment. Dimitra has been very critical with the organization and implementation of such programmes which are similar to what Jane Collins (2010 y 2008) has investigated in the US. It is just a short term solution with very little working rights, no working stamps. Nevertheless, Dimitra liked her jobs, it was the most stable job contract she has ever had, and along with her colleagues, they built from scratch the time bank in Chalkida while they also had to juggle with a very limited resource budget and had to find donors. That was a two-year job contract which was partial funded by the State and the EU to alleviate the impact of crisis, and therefore it has come to an end after getting several times short-term extensions. What troubles Dimitra more, apart from having to seek employment again, is that all her and her colleagues workand effort has gone wasted. Nobody has officially recognized and given them credit, while their contribution is going to be discontinued. As Dimitra put it:

“I really do not get, this is completely irrational. As a counselor of the minister of Employment told us unofficially, the EU does not want to recycle the same people so we will be technically excluded from any upcoming project since we will lack credits compared to those who have been unemployed. Our work, our effort and experience does not count. This is totally insane, totally irrational. We did all these and now we are going to be thrown away. Just like that. Our work does not matter to them”.



Lastly, I quote two more accounts on crisis and how people experienced it at the first place. The following quotes exposed how crisis affects the wider spectrum of market and society.

“I used to have three shops around the city, now I am only here (at the open air market). I used to have many wealthy customers, doctors, lawyers. Now I see their in-laws who do the shopping for them. They do not come to me, they all go to the supermarket to buy cheaper, lower quality cheese”. Nikos, 43, Cheese dealer at the open air market.

It seems that crisis have affected even the dynamic professions which in general gained good money. Local entrepreneurs such as Nikos have been vastly affected by crisis while big firms, such as supermarket chains that can provide cheaper products have been increasing their annual profits in times of crisis. Big firms benefit at the expense of local businesses which cannot operate compete at the scale economy (Bourdieu, 2005). Here we also see consumption patterns in order to maximize the use value that show how calculative reasoning has become dominant while consumption patterns trigger production and distribution which adapt to the new standards (Sahlins, 1976). Transformations of the economy probed by crisis target the market base of the economy which in turn affect the community base (Gudeman, 1990) and prompts subtle shifts within the other spheres of social reproduction and stratification (Doob, 2012; Gowdy, 2006).

“Crisis, wait I ll show you” takes out a notebook, “You see all these, these are the amounts that the laid-off workers from the factories that closed in the area around here own me, if you sum it up is more than 3000euros”. Giorgos, 41, Canteen-owner in Ritsona, Chalkida.

As Giorgos informed me about the numerous closures in the industrial area of Ritsona. When his customers were fired they never returned to pay their debts. The closure of a factory is not an isolated event. It affect a wide network of professions and service that rely upon it.

4. Conclusion

Crisis has produced various ruptures in people’s livelihoods, in the way the envision future, in their dreams and expectations, while it made social reproduction impossible. Through the quotes I cite above, we discern that economy is embedded within society which suffers from major shocks as well and is unable to reproduce. As austerity measures are constantly being implemented, crisis goes deeper affecting non-financialized aspects of everyday life such as care and socio-economic relationships. As Harvey (1990) puts it, the neoliberal doctrines expressed through austerity and reforms, imposed by authoritative economic models produce multiple crises, what appears to be the solution produces multiple problems in the process of its implementation (1990). So far, peoples’ everyday problems have not been taken into account by policy makers, while most of the imposed reforms have been oblivious of the wider social impact those reforms are going to cause and very often they produced greater crises. Policy makers and mainstream economists, treat economy as it can be disembedded from society and therefore are not able to solve



the social, cultural and environmental crisis that hinder behind the so called economic crisis, on the contrary they produce what they claim to solve. As Stamatis, the informant of mine I cite above have put it, “The worst impact that crisis has had in our society is that we have lost our social cohesion”.

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