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VITAL TOPICS FORUM: What happened to social facts?

Title: Austerity lives in Southern Europe: Experience, knowledge, evidence and social facts.

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We are immersed in a political struggle that appeals to pluralism not only in the interpretation of facts and how to deal with them (what used to be called ideology, linked to a political project), but in the actual co-existence of parallel realities of ‘alternative facts’. The widespread use of internet technologies has created immediacy, proliferation and saturation of information of many kinds, apparently democratizing an older hierarchic system that newspapers, fact checkers, professional journalists, and academic experts had created: The alleged fourth pillar of democracy. Time compression effects and unregulated platform access have made individual experience (presented as unmediated testimony of reality) and the circulation of images (presented as unassailable visual evidence) an important component of our ‘social facts’.

Fragments of experience, immediately shared, are circulated widely creating communities of ‘likes’ and ‘trending’, engaging in anonymous comments and diluting responsibility in the collective ‘social media’, while at the same time creating ‘cyber tribes’ of likeminded people nurturing their particular truth through ‘alternative facts’ (Tett, 2017). Simultaneously, ‘expert’ knowledge, losing ground in popular respect, is simplified in order to compete in the same virtual spaces (e.g. TED talks, YouTube

snippets). I will not explore the use of IT further. Instead, I will try to explain the geometries of knowledge relevance that express scalar power differences by using the case of the political events that happened in Greece in July 2015.¹ During that critical period the radical left government of Syriza who had been voted into power in January on an anti-austerity program, under pressure by the Eurogroup² to accept strict structural adjustment measures, called for a referendum to take place on 5th July 2015 over accepting (YES / NAI) or refusing (NO / OXI) the conditions set for receiving financial support. Results of the referendum gave a resounding victory to those opposed to austerity (38.6% YES against 61.3% NO, with a turnout of 62.5%). Nevertheless, before the end of the month, and after an internal crisis, the government was forced by the European Commission to accept a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) requiring ‘rationalization’ of public services, VAT increase, pension reform, as well as privatization of public assets, in exchange for obtaining a loan needed to cover vital public expenses and sovereign debt interests. Financial assistance was conditional on the implementation of austerity, and explicitly subsumed the Greek government’s political authority to ‘technical assistance’ based on the knowledge of ‘international experts’, ‘international organizations’, ‘independent consultants’, and ‘best practices in the EU’ based on ‘parametric’ measurable truths (European Commission 2015).³ This Greek moment reveals the tension of different forms of knowledge that are confronted in a political struggle for truth. On the one hand, the experience that people have of everyday harshness under austerity. On the other hand, the parameters and models that experts present as evidence for the need of structural adjustment and which become the argument for policy.

In this contribution I ask what kinds of knowledge does experience produce and how might we engage with it as anthropologists trying to understand what social facts are

and the value they have as evidence in political argument and struggle. In order to accomplish this I will address the tensions between experience, knowledge, and evidence in their connection with the production and challenge of particular fields of inequality.

A project and a historical event

The research project *Grassroots economics*,⁴ which I have been coordinating since 2013, tries to discover the tension between ‘expert’ and ‘lay’ understandings of economic realities and their effects on livelihood opportunities and on macro-economic processes. It addresses the present-day austerity conjuncture in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece and its consequences for increasingly precarized sectors of the population and for the distribution of resources more generally. A team of ten researchers undertook fieldwork in the four selected countries of Southern Europe in order to observe the livelihood practices and gather discursive arguments on the causes and effects of, and the solutions to the ‘crisis’.⁵ We asked, what are the meanings and practices held by ‘ordinary’ people when they go about trying to make a living and to have a life worth living? (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) In their everyday lives, these understandings and the actions attached to them contribute to explaining the world and participate in its transformation. However, they relate in various ways (often through practice) to explanatory discourses, policy memorandums, decisions and implementations provided by ‘experts’, powerful actors, the media, the government and its agents. What is the truth value of these different understandings that often overlap in incongruous ways? How do they refer to particular experiences? Are they in some way indexes of something else? Do they constitute evidence, and hence refer to something beyond interpretation to be used in an argument about truth, and about how this truth can be mobilized to reproduce or change the world as we know it?

These questions seem important because Southern Europe's latest recession has had significant political outcomes that rest their force on alleged factual explanations of different kinds. Those sectors of the population who had acquired expectations of security and stability that are now faltering use their experience of declining material wellbeing and social worth as an argument for claiming radical political transformations. Some support authoritarian, xenophobic, nationalist populisms such as Golden Dawn in Greece, or Lega Nord in Italy, while others engage in progressive, social forms of populism such as Podemos in Spain. Experiences of loss of material and symbolic resources that have followed the impacts of structural adjustment also have become the background to practices of solidarity expressing forms of mobilization that rest on diverse and contradictory definitions of deservingness, creating bounded spaces of privilege. In many informants' discourses 'politicians', those in government, are pictured as out of touch with ordinary people's everyday reality (i.e. with their experience of deprivation and loss of entitlements): to them, it is clear that an 'elite' in power is following a personal agenda made evident through collusion and corruption linking high-ranking agents of government, financial institutions, and 'the rich'. Likewise, economic neoliberal 'expert' knowledge, with its insistence on deficit control and the benefits of austerity, is perceived by an increasingly precarized population as obviously wrong (i.e. incongruous with their real life experience), even as it retains enough technical knowledge authority to have the state impose its destructive solutions against all evidence. States appear to be hostage to a dominant school of academic thought (glossed as neoliberal) that privileges some interests over others (e.g. tax breaks and sweet deals for large firms vs. increased taxation for the self-employed, petty commerce, small enterprises, and consumers) and results in widening the gap of inequality.

At the same time, the struggle over sovereignty and privilege (over control and status) is replayed at the scale of nations in the arena of a European project (sponsored by the European Commission) that has explicitly abandoned the aim of ‘convergence’ and replaced it by the evidence of ‘divergence’ and the discourse of a multi-speed integration defining –on technical grounds—a group of ‘core’ nations capable of a fuller and stronger co-operation. One of the oldest proponents of multi-speed integration in 1994, while the Maastricht Treaty was being negotiated, was Germany’s finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble (Ghironi 2015, *The Economist* 03-25-2017). This is the same Schäuble who became in 2015 the symbol of his country’s public harassment of Greece’s Syriza anti-austerity government. The result was a ‘nationalization’ of economic conflict that referred people back to memories and testimonies of past experiences (of the Nazi occupation during World War II, of a colonial past) and placed identity (national, cultural) at the center of the production of inequalities.

In Greece, the forcing of the first Syriza government to abandon its own ‘expert’ knowledge and anti-austerity policies (reflected in the works and deeds of, for example, Finance Minister Varoufakis, an academic economist, or Energy Minister, Lafazanis, a senior politician of the Left Platform) by the infamous troika (European Central Banc, International Monetary Fund, European Commission), was interpreted in different ways as the July 2015 referendum very crudely expressed. As mentioned above, the results were roughly 39% in favor of the proposed restructuring conditionalities and 61% against. Some regions such as Crete had more than 70% NO, with older people and pensioners more prone to vote YES, which was often explained as their fear of Greece exiting the eurozone and resulting in a loss of value of their life savings.⁶ Nevertheless, most of the people we talked to, whatever their vote, agreed that the series of events leading to the signature of the third MoU pointed to a breakdown of the state as

representing popular will and sovereignty. Indeed, after earning 36.3% of the votes in the 25 January 2015 elections and forming a radical left government (in coalition with the nationalist ANEL party who had 4.8% votes)⁷ Syriza vowed not to pursue austerity and was hailed as the hope for re-embedding the economy, putting people before profit in a “return of the political” (Karatsioli 2015). As negotiations for a third bailout package proceeded and the Greek government tried to avert further austerity measures while averting bankruptcy, default, and exit from the eurozone, negotiations with the European Commission and the members of the Eurogroup became entrenched and aggressive (Kouvelakis 2015).⁸ Prime Minister Tsipras announced a referendum on the conditionalities of the bailout on 27 June. The government had to impose capital controls and a bank holiday on 28 June and the menace of Grexit was everywhere in the media. The victory of the NO / OXI in the referendum, seemed to be a democratic expression of people’s sovereign will to end austerity and support the Syriza government’s position in the negotiations. Grassroots Syriza members, some of whom held positions in the new social departments of the government, as well as members of other leftist groups and small parties, were in shock when, a short week after the NO / OXI vote, interpreted as evidence of popular opposition to the troika’s demands of structural adjustment (aka Austerity), the government accepted to sign the new MoU spelling more cuts to welfare, social services, civil servant’s salaries and pensions (Kouvelakis and Budgen 2015). People in towns all over Greece watched the Members of Parliament debate and vote until dawn on large TV screens set in coffee shops, restaurants, and taverns. The popular vote of the majority was being disrespected, even if people acknowledged that those who voted NO were not a homogeneous bloc but might hold different views of the causes of the crisis, its effects, or its remedies, (e.g. nationalists of the ANEL party, radical leftists of Syriza, revolutionaries of

ANTARSYA or even fascists of Golden Dawn, all where supporters of the NO vote) (Jurado et al. 2015, Rakopoulos 2015).⁹ So, what sovereignty was left to the Greek state? Whom did the Parliament represent? This was a crisis of representation, but what kind of crisis? What representation? What evidence was presented in the arguments for following the Eurogroup's policy?

For those we spoke to, the evidence that the new Finance Minister, Euclid Tsakalotos, and Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, were presenting was about the future. It was based on an assessment of future events and was a self-defense argument (see Kelman 1994): i.e., austerity would be worse if implemented by a right wing government. But, as Kelman explains, evidence about future danger is based on factual uncertainty and mostly rests on collective social consensus about probable harm. While assessment of past experience renders factual future evidence questionable, what is put in the balance in self-defense arguments is the consequence of making an error of judgment, the 'error cost' of misjudging future danger for a particular group of people by not regarding knowledge based on specific but widely shared experience as *social facts*¹⁰ (Kelman 1994). Most people did not believe in the new Syriza government's argument as constituting justifiable 'evidence' because their 'experience' of the present was projected into the future as becoming worse through more austerity (in particular, repeal of the law providing safety against repossession of first residence, cuts to pension, total destruction of public healthcare and education, etc.). Their experience and the negative expectations it projected was the truth that should guide policy, rather than the abstract calculations of a well-meaning government following international technical experts and institutional powers. To disregard people's experience as the core evidence of truth arguments pointed to a crass error of judgment by governing powers and their advisers. The fact that the Syriza government submitted and signed the MoU after the OXI vote

was also a reality check for Greek people: what was the knowledge value of people's everyday experience of increased vulnerability and deprivation?

A challenge of method

All these questions pushed us to be cautious and reflexive, but at the same time to hear and value the knowledge of those that were not given credit by those in powerful positions. How was the struggle for knowledge authority being reconfigured after the crisis? And what was being constituted as the basis of the authority and legitimacy of knowledge by different social actors? Indeed, we wished to value a form of knowledge that was marginalized by models of economic processes and behavior (macro and micro, mainstream and heterodox, neo-liberal, neo-keynesian and neo-marxian alike). We were inspired by Bourdieu's reflexivity framework (Bourdieu 2003), by Foucauldian power-knowledge insights (Foucault 1980), the sociologies of absence and relevance (Santos 2001a, 2001b) or 'knowledges otherwise' (Escobar 2007), but still held strongly to a historical realism position (Narotzky and Smith 2006). We did not pretend to disallow or supersede the work of scholars or 'expert' knowledges, however, not least because their arguments often became entangled in lay reasoning. Indeed we sought to make them equally relevant to our search for historical and social processes that would connect individual experiences with the production of difference that had material effects in the life opportunities of people. Understanding what kinds of logical connections people make to explain their situation (i.e. how they produce *knowledge* from their *experience*) and the practices they consider reasonable to pursue in the present conjuncture, would also provide *evidence* that would enable a robust critique of hegemonic economic models, policy arguments, and alleged counter-hegemonic proposals. It would provide us with a different modality of knowledge, experientially

grounded, constructing social facts that we could critically engage with, eventually leading to stronger arguments, and hopefully better judgment for theory building and for political action. This kind of truth was validated through shared embodied experience and reasonable practice in a particular social context that expressed multiple scales of power and struggle, rather than through statistical data sets and abstract theories of rational (or irrational) individual actors' behavior. The truth we were seeking was not that of an experienced objective reality, nor that of the ordinary people's logics and narratives, but the evidence that emerged from the dialectical confrontation between the practices and knowledges of differently situated people in a coeval world (Fabian 1983). Evidence is always of something else; it refers to a reality beyond discourse where individual and collective experience are relationally produced in the struggle for the material and immaterial resources that make social life. Evidence is a will to assert, ground, and legitimate right from wrong: it is presented as proof leading to the correct decision. As such, it is also a struggle for power, often a moral power that might reasonably ground a particular project of society. Evidence, cast in its juridical meaning, refers both to structure (coherence of logical connections) and to materiality (empirical proof).

The three aspects of our anthropological exploration—experience, knowledge, and evidence—pointed us to geometries of relevance, authority, and truth that were set in social fields of power differentials. By addressing them as a methodological challenge, we hoped these dimensions of reality would contribute to the production of social facts, albeit in an environment of factual uncertainty, that of the future consequences of human actions (including categorical definitions, measuring devices, and theoretical models).

This research program seems now particularly relevant, as nationalistic support for

exclusionary policies (against immigrants, refugees, and other groups defined as ‘undeserving’) has grown in the real world of austerity cuts to welfare benefits and social services. Entitlement to livelihood and social protection is redefined in cultural, moral, and identity (national, ethnic, religious) terms rather than social ones, producing confrontation and hierarchy among claimants to resources (jobs, benefits, social services) that have similar needs. At the same time, and often within the same sectors of the population, mistrust and anger against the ‘establishment’ (defined as an elite in government tied to large financial and corporate interests) undermine state legitimacy and challenge established democratic institutions and its representatives. Loss of previously held entitlements and failed expectations of future wellbeing have transformed the realm of factual uncertainty into a collective consensus of negative social facts predicting probable harm. Testimonies of these experiences are shared in everyday life interaction and provide legitimacy and credence to the logical explanations that result, some of which have a tinge of ‘conspiracy theory’ often backed by alternative media sources or counter-hegemonic scholarly interpretations (of different ideological hues). The alternative knowledge that emerges, however, is not akin to alternative facts. It does not refer to parallel factual realities but to a struggle to make a particular kind of social facts and knowledge relevant for the transformation of society.

This is not unproblematic. In Europe and elsewhere, we are witnessing the dangers of making the testimonies of individual experience the bedrock of evidence of social reality, a re-embodiment of social facts. So-called ‘populist’ political leaders (right and left) and the media rest much of their arguments in this type of testimonial fact.

Historians (Portelli 1988, Guinzburg 1997 [1991], Scott 1996) have alerted us to the complex relationship that testimonies have with reality and to their uncritical use as

unique evidence. This volatile position of personal experience as a testimony of reality is often strongly felt by participants in historical events who try to support their account with other more 'objective' information (Narotzky 2007). Experience, indeed, is not an autonomous unmediated fact expressing an immanent reality. Rather it is relationally constituted in a social field of forces and embodies power differentials that it helps reproduce (Bourdieu 1982).

Conclusion: what happens to social facts

By trying to deal in an un-hierarchical manner with knowledges produced in a strongly differentiated power field are we not distorting the evidence of unequal processes? Are we not unnecessarily proliferating social facts? In so doing, do we not misrepresent or mask the actual processes that cause the lack of knowledge authority of relatively powerless people? From a political economy perspective, facts of power aimed at systemic social reproduction explain the lack of social relevance of some life experiences and conceptual logics about livelihood, wealth accumulation, and domination processes. These powerless voices, then, often get 'translated' (by unions, left wing intellectuals, progressive associations, and NGOs) into some authoritative 'expert' model (possibly a counter-hegemonic project) and co-opted as raw (natural) facts within its realm of authority. Alternatively, they are crushed under the intellectual arrogance of the conceptual models of those in power.

Moreover, the fact that the Grassroots Economics project seeks to acknowledge the equal relevance of lay and expert knowledge, may force lay models into abstraction, the hierarchical apex of knowledge authority: Structures of feeling need to become structures of reason (Williams 1977, Narotzky 2014). Is it possible to escape this dilemma by using different knowledges as a method of reciprocally unsettling 'evidence' through bringing embodied 'experience' back into the factual relevance of

social facts while retaining the factual relevance of wider social processes that can be empirically assessed often quantitatively? As anthropologists, we are aware that evidence is constructed by using particular devices, defining significant categories, and by the constraint of institutions and powerful actors. However, we still seek to understand how this happens: what kinds of relationships exist between individual lives, collective beliefs, material forces, and the construction of hegemonic evidentiary frameworks.

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¹ During the month of July 2015 I conducted a field trip that took me around Greece, visiting the field sites where researchers of the Grassroots Economics project [GRECO] were developing their ethnographic research and meeting many of their interlocutors. I completed several field notebooks, attended some meetings, and even talked with a few members of left-leaning parties. I arrived in Greece on the 5th of July and stayed until the 31st and visited the following places in company of at least one of the permanent researchers: Chania, Athens, Piraeus, Chalkida, Thessaloniki, and Kozani. GRECO researchers that accompanied me in the tour, translating when necessary, where: Stamatis Amarianakis, Dr. Olga Lafazani, and Dr. Theodora Vetta.

² Eurogroup definition <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/eurogroup/>, accessed 20 June 2017

³ - President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker’s Press conference on 29 June 2015 after the Greek Syriza government was announced on 27 June 2015 http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-15-5274_en.htm
 - Greek referendum on bailout conditions took place on July 5 2015, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_bailout_referendum,_2015
 - Statement by European Commission following referendum results http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-15-5314_en.htm

- Eurosummit agreement July 12 2015, annotated by Yanis Varoufakis, Syriza Finance Minister:

<http://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu/2015/07/15/the-euro-summit-agreement-on-greece-annotated-by-yanis-varoufakis/> access 20 June 2017

- Third economic adjustment program for Greece

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/financial-assistance-eurozone-members/greece-programme/>

- MoU between European Commission and Greece 19 August 2015

https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/memorandum-understanding-greece-19-08-2015_en

- Opposition to MoU within Syriza and government

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/aug/14/greek-parliament-still-thrashing-out-rescue-deal-vote>

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⁶ Jurado, I.; Konstantinidis, N.; Walter, S. 2015. Why Greeks voted the way they did in the bailout referendum <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/07/20/why-greeks-voted-the-way-they-did-in-the-bailout-referendum/>

⁷ Election results, <http://www.electionresources.org/gr/vouli.php?election=2015>

⁸ Financial assistance to Greece https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-financial-assistance/which-eu-countries-have-received-assistance/financial-assistance-greece_en

⁹ Jurado, I.; Konstantinidis, N.; Walter, S. 2015. Why Greeks voted the way they did in the bailout referendum <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/07/20/why-greeks-voted-the-way-they-did-in-the-bailout-referendum/> accessed 22 July 2017

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¹⁰ The experience is unique to a particular individual, when shared by many it becomes a social fact: e.g. a woman’s rape is a unique, specific experience, when put in common with that of other’s who have undergone a similar experience it can become a social fact and stresses the commonality and social aspect of the event.