Is the Greek Crisis Symptomatic of EU Failure?

(In Defence of Institutions)

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Preview of my argument:

the crisis in Greece is symptomatic* of multiple failures at the domestic level (economic, political, administrative, cultural, social, civic)

but...

...it is also symptomatic* of broader tensions and challenges* facing liberal democracies across the EU and indeed the world

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*caveat #1

symptomatic ≠ συµπτωµατικός

I'm arguing that

the crisis we're witnessing

can be attributed (to some extent) to the failures of neo-liberalism

not in economic terms,
but in fundamentally political ones

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Adjective: 1. Suffering as a symptom or sign, esp. of something undesirable. 2. Exhibiting or involving symptoms.

Synonyms: indicative
preview of my talk:

1) Greece: state/governance failure and success of populist narratives due to widespread feelings of victimhood and delegitimisation of individual responsibility, civic duty, citizenship, institutions of representative democracy

2) The crisis beyond Greece: globalisation and the democratic deficit — fundamental challenge for liberal democracies / the EU ⇒ governance and citizenship at the national v. global levels ⇒ post-representational democracy?

3) In defence of institutions: repairing Europe’s civic culture, empowering citizens

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Populism

“an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté general of the people” (Mudde 2004: 562)
While it is important to acknowledge that peaceful strikes, mass demonstrations, and even the indignados / Syntagma Square movement, are different socio-political phenomena from the physical attacks against individual politicians and the continuing riots / arson / looting in central Athens…

…during the last 3 years, we have been witnessing the mainstreaming of extremism in Greece…

myth

the criminal/destructive riots are due to the austerity measures

reality

anomy (including regular criminal damage to buildings, public spaces, private property and people) developed (and was tolerated) well before the riots

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**Emotions**

Mass depression, self-hatred, cynicism, fear, rage, wrath, blame game, anger

Not just abstract anger…

…anger directed at authority

**Symptoms**

apathy, cynicism, lower voter turnout, mistrust, rejection of democratic institutions and processes, disgust at politicians, destruction of public and private property, resistance to authority, “I’m not paying” movement (tolls, tickets, fares, taxes), tolerance of violence and destruction = anomy

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A consistent narrative of victimhood ⇒ anger

Rhetorical construction of an imagined community of the victimised (“us”)

Rhetorical construction of a corrupt elite (bankers, politicians, system, society, “them”)

Blame avoidance and transfer of responsibility: no traces of reflection on own behaviour

Contradictions: guilty society/system, innocent people; (physical) “counter-violence” legitimised by various forms of state violence and oppression (including “economic violence”)

Assumptions and self-attributed messianic role

The Other = the State; the System; Democracy as we know it

Fundamentally disempowering and disenfranchising; patronising and manipulating
The crisis beyond Greece…
Globalisation, democracy, engagement

profound mismatch between institutions and processes of national (19th/20th) and global (20th) governance and citizenship

these are not abstract problems
they have real and everyday life consequences
monumental failure of academia

huge share of responsibility

we’re trapped in a self-gratifying trip of interpretive abstraction

often removed from the realities of people’s lives

can social science take a stance?

is it ethical?

provided that it is…

based on a robust and scholarly framework of analysis and data

open to challenge, criticism and dialogue (i.e. open to evolution and revision)

free of conflicts of interest

…then, it is unethical not to intervene

political neo-liberalism
deregulation, privatisation, power networks

segmentation, individualism, consumerism

apathy, disengagement, ignorance

“power is everywhere” (nowhere)

excessive and asymmetric pluralism

shorttermism / political cost / news cycle

inaction → crisis (problem bursts)

crisis governance / urgent action

central to this process of failure is

the crisis of civic culture

and the decline of the institutions of representative democracy
myth
the Papademos Government symbolises the
triumph of unelected technocrats over democratic
institutions and lacks legitimacy

reality
Greece is a parliamentary, not a presidential, democracy.
Constitution = popular legitimacy rests with Parliament – not
with the PM
General election = last resort, only if the political system fails
to come up with some form of government that commands a
parliamentary majority

crisis of democracy
= cultural collapse of political rituals, processes
and institutions of democratic power

extremism and cynicism are the dominant
ideologies of the 21st century

crisis of legitimacy
= power vacuum

Europe
monumental lack of ambition, vision, values

a true crisis of identity

whose responsibility is it to communicate the
problems we’re facing?

the alternative options we’ve got?

the pros and cons of these alternative options?

(reading newspapers v. shopping)

political participation shouldn’t be too easy
but it should be a little easier
system of everyday life

(both at the micro-social level of the individual citizen
and at the macro-social level of e.g. the EU)

not based on the definition of the economy* as “keeping the house in order”

but on a distorted concept of profit, consumption, greed, presentism

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ethical austerity

“Austerity is also an ethic. [...] You have to concentrate on the essentials... and you have to cut out the waste, you have to cut out the fripperies, you have to cut out the lack of seriousness in politics – it’s essentially a moral argument that austerity has to be about concentrating and support”. (Fintan O’Toole)

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In defence of institutions
Repairing Europe’s civic culture

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representative democracy under threat

rise of direct pseudo-democracy
(Indignados, Syntagma Sq.)

in which parallel universe does a random gathering of 10,000 or 100,000 people have the legitimacy to make decisions?
institutions are there to protect those who can’t protect themselves
those who don’t have a voice
those who don’t have the resources, the time or the ability to participate
not those who shout the loudest

civil society and participatory democracy have a crucial role to play
but to whom are all these actors accountable?
the alternative to representative democracy is not a utopian and anarchic Garden of Eden
chaos and the law of the jungle/powerful

there is something unique and definitive about a plenary assembly
– an institution that brings together delegates of all constituencies, communities, voices and interests of a democratic polity
(democracy requires in/out boundaries – e.g. geographical)

accountability, transparency, culpability, responsibility, scrutiny, regulation, welfare state, protection/safety nets, rule of law
all these fundamental principles of liberal democracies require institutions and processes
how do we renew institutions?

- acknowledge diversity of communities, interests and voices
- incorporate those into processes that safeguard equal civil rights and ensure minimum standards of transparency and accountability
  - (e.g. “Upper House” not based on geographical locations, but on key issues or spheres of human interest, bringing together the best minds)

no silver bullet

so much that can be done
  (e.g. women in politics)
  (e.g. public spaces that encourage real interaction)

simultaneous institution-building across the local, national, global

Moving Beyond the Crisis

how do you bring about a change of (civic) culture?

change of attitudes

= through reason and a new age of “enlightenment” – public intellectuals, cultural policy, quality of argumentation in public debates / speeches, state of the media, investigative journalism etc

Moving Beyond the Crisis

A political discourse that stresses civic responsibility and duty

= respects institutions and processes of representative democracy
= empowers citizens
= based on dignity and rationality
I don’t buy the “victim” label/theory

blaming others for our disengagement is tempting...

but it’s also very disempowering – actually, disenfranchising

anger, extremism, cynicism, self-pity, sterile rejection and protest = cop-outs

execution gallows in Syntagma Square, making fun of politicians, attacking public intellectuals = easy (and leads directly to tragedy)

difficult (but only effective) route = win the argument

our ability to speak out does not depend on the will of others