

## 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

\*two notes of caution

caveat #1

symptomatic ≠ συμπτωματικός

**Ευ. Βενιζέλος:** Οι κυβερνήσεις ποτέ και πουθενά σε μια δημοκρατία, δεν λειτουργούν από μόνες τους. Υπάρχουν απήματα, υπάρχουν υποσχέσεις, υπάρχουν πιέσεις, υπάρχει μια εκτίμηση των αναγκών η οποία γίνεται κατά περίπτωση. Αυτό όλο λειτουργεί μ' έναν τρόπο τελικά συμπτωματικό και τυχαίο. **Και η χώρα λειτουργώντας επί χρόνια συμπτωματικά και τυχαία, οδηγήθηκε εδώ που οδηγήθηκε.** Αυτό δε μπορεί να επαναληφθεί.

**symp-to-mat-ic** /,sɪm(p)teɪ'matɪk/ ⓘ

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

Synonyms: indicative

\*two notes of caution

caveat #2

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

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

# 1

Greece  
Populism, victimhood, disempowerment

## 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)



Photo by Dimitris Koulomichail

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

### 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**

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

# 2

The crisis beyond Greece...  
Globalisation, democracy, engagement

**Formula 1: Public Satisfaction with Government**

adapted from Orren (1997: 86).

$$\text{SATISFACTION} = \frac{\text{PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT}}{\text{CITIZENS' EXPECTATIONS}}$$

**Formula 2: Public Trust in Government**

$$\text{PUBLIC TRUST} = \frac{\text{EXECUTIVE CAPACITY}}{\text{POLITICAL RHETORIC}}$$

	NATIONAL	GLOBAL
GOVERNANCE	GOVERNMENT PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PUBLIC POLICY REGULATORS LAW-AND-ORDER	UNITED NATIONS WORLD BANK / IMF G8/G20 INTERNATIONAL ORGS INTERNATIONAL LAW
CITIZENSHIP	ELECTIONS POLITICAL PARTIES TRADE UNIONS CIVIL SOCIETY / NGOs NATIONAL MEDIA	INGOs GLOBAL MEDIA / INTERNET WEB MOVEMENTS (Avaaz.org)

profound **mismatch** between institutions and processes of **national** (19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup>) and **global** (20<sup>th</sup>) 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?

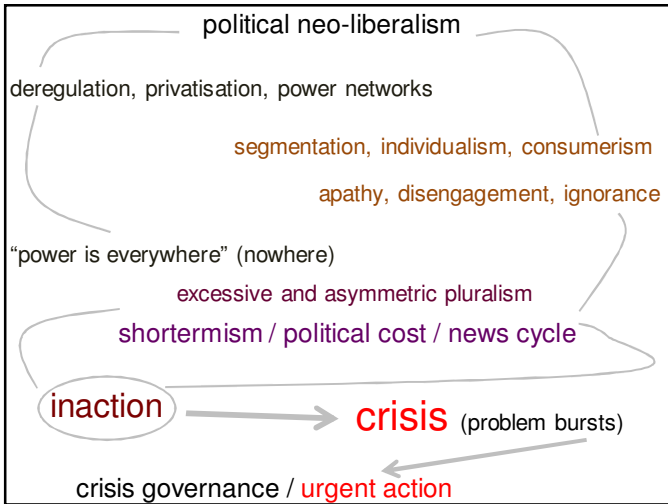
provided that it is...

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



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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

### 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

**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

= boosts efficacy

= 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

I always wondered why  
somebody doesn't do  
something about that.  
Then I realized I was  
somebody.

- Lily Tomlin