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## TURN OF THE SCREW: NARRATIVES OF HISTORY AND ECONOMY IN THE GREEK CRISIS

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The Greek crisis has become the most eminent example of neoliberal economic meltdown over the past five years. In towns across Greece people try to come to terms with drastic changes in their everyday lives and grapple with the complex mixture of politics, economy, history and culture that informs crisis experience.

This paper addresses recurring themes in crisis narratives from the town of Trikala, central Greece, within the context of local history and economy. Narratives condense historical experience, fashion forms of cultural proximity and facilitate polytemporality. As people recall the era of *ciftliks* (great estates), the Great Famine of 1941-43, and the stock market collapse they construct a sphere of collective suffering and solidarity based on adversity whilst simultaneously critiquing economic systems. Historical events significantly inform present crisis experience in Trikala, adding local nuances to national and global problems. Three prominent themes can be identified in daily narratives that help locals comprehend the socioeconomic hardship: famine, suicide and colonisation. These recurrent themes form the bases for collective suffering, encouraging solidarity in the face of socioeconomic turmoil. In narrative, actors move seamlessly from past to present, offering a critique of economic systems by means of historical embodiment.

### **Introduction: history, crisis, narrative**

“Well, at least it is some sort of meal”, proclaimed Maria as we sat down for Easter dinner. “It is not very impressive but they can’t take it *all* away from us. We don’t have famine ... yet”.

As Greece enters a fourth year of socioeconomic crisis, narratives of famine, suicide, migration, xenophobia (Herzfeld 2011), and remarkable fortitude allude to the indelible mark made upon a nation. Narratives are entwined with the history of socioeconomic crisis as the period of the *Ciftlikades* (great estate landlords), the Great Famine of the 1940s, war and colonisation are brought into temporal proximity by current events (Knight 2012).

Since 2003 I have engaged in ethnographic research in Trikala, Thessaly,

central Greece. The fieldwork spans a period of dynamic social change, as years of economic prosperity have given way to crisis and austerity. The town is a microcosm for the study of the Greek and wider European crisis as the often abstract consequences of global economic trends are played out within the context of a small, otherwise unremarkable town. People themselves critique neoliberal ideals through everyday practice, turning to history to comprehend changes in social relations and the dynamics of abstract economic systems. However, in their forthright appraisal of the consequences of crisis many actors are pressed into making strategic decisions based firmly within neoliberal rationale in order to postpone destitution. Local and global dimensions of capitalist relations are inscribed with historical experience, suggesting that meaning in history appears as the hinge between subjective experience and objective positions in neoliberal economic systems (Narotzky 1997: 94). Social and economic anxiety is rationalised by the proximity of past crises and primarily expressed through narrative, combining past and present in polytemporal embrace and assisting the negotiation of crisis experience (Sutton 2011, Knight 2012, Stewart 2012).

Narratives of crisis are both representative of wider political processes and capture distinct local nuances. At the grassroots the picture is not as monodimensional as portrayed through the mass media and in political rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> Images circulated internationally claim an objective critique of a monolithic event, 'the Greek crisis: a corruption of neoliberalism' (itself a paradox), disguising the intricacy of local circumstance and the multiple layers of socioeconomic relations and historical context. Regional distinctions of a wider crisis can be grounded in particular social, economic and historical conditions and further identified in localised relationships between industrialisation, modernisation and political change, what Narotzky terms regionalised 'dynamic and flexible economic structure(s)' (2006: 337, also Narotzky 1997: 111, Yanagisako 2002, Ballinger 2007: 59).<sup>2</sup>

Often narratives paint a contradictory picture of life during the crisis, capturing multiple forms of everyday experience (Gilsenan 1996: 57). Some are defiant, full of opportunism or even optimistic, others tell of destitution, death and hopelessness. Entrepreneurism inhabits niches, there are radical decisions, (ir)rational decisions, suicidal tendencies, anger at the government, at the 'system', and much historical reflection. Michael Gilsenan (1996: 59) emphasises that narratives are central to the negotiation of the realities of power and authority and the realisation of a rapidly changing social scene, constituting relations of contest and dominance. In narratives of turmoil the value of social relations endures in an altered state, resembling Georg Simmel's argument that value is situationally relative and never a static

inherent property, but rather a contextual judgement (Simmel 1978: 66–67, Appadurai 1986: 3–4). Through narrative, models of capitalism, patronage and nationalism are both relentless and exorcised. The primary way local people negotiate this complexity is through an embodied critique of past events, episodes themselves imbued with social, economic and political rhetoric. This paper will highlight three main narrative strands of how people come to understand the worst socioeconomic crisis of a lifetime and how they contextualise their experience in historical accounts. Narratives of famine, suicide, and colonisation form the bases for solidarity and collective suffering in a time of severe turmoil and are one medium to connect culturally proximate historical moments with a critique of present socioeconomic conditions.

Narratives are an important expressive tool for people negotiating periods of dramatic social change. Exchanged both in public and private spheres, narratives collectivise crisis experience around central shared themes through specific ‘story seeds’ (Carrithers 2007: 2) that condense historical experience into polytemporally meaningful moments. The public sphere is the *par-excellence* arena of socialisation in Trikala and provides highly visible and metaphorical modes of understanding contemporary socioeconomic conditions. It has become crucial as a space for narrative exchange during the current crisis as national events are played out in the public domain. Portrayed as adhering to rigid stereotypes of socialisation, political subjectivity and gender in what Roger Just calls ‘a series of open forums and tightly closed doors’, discussions of private and public spheres have been central to Mediterranean ethnography since the 1960s (Just 2000: 157, cf. Friedl 1962, Campbell 1964, Dubisch 1995).

Through narrative exchange in the public domain, people comprehend the moral underpinnings of political authority, status, and history, reflect on past events and critically postulate future concerns (Ku 1999:49). Exchanges are based on shared experience, thus intersecting cultural, historical and political imagery and potentially instigating collective mobilisation, identity construction, crisis negotiation, solidarity and collective suffering. Narratives have the distinctive ability to condense the ‘then’ and ‘now’ as narrators transcend temporal boundaries (Gilsenan 1996: 61).

In Trikala the topic of discussion is usually a cultural theme, social issue or political event. The relevance of the events to the particular narrator’s own experiences is paramount. The plot is a ‘temporal projection’ (Ku 1999: 53–57) and can lead to the symbolic embodiment of the theme by the narrator. Temporal projections differ from ‘linear historicism’ (Stewart 2012: 190), allowing narratives of the Great Famine or *ciftliks* (great estates)

to intertwine with current economic pessimism. Narratives therefore incorporate cognitive, affective and evaluative dimensions of individual and collective experience (Knight 2011, 2012).

Narratives rarely focus on the individual in a social and historical vacuum as decisions in times of crisis are inextricably part of wider contexts as protagonists are contributors to the market-economy and answerable to its laws (Layton 2000: 110). People consciously participate in sociohistorical systems not just respond to predetermined schemes; however, new strategies of adaptation are often derived from previous experience. Robert Layton notes that in eastern France the agricultural market economy is a product of rural depopulation that began in the mid-nineteenth century. In turn, the majority of economic change is related to shifts in state policy and the differentiation in livelihood strategies being mutually influential in a form of historical production (Layton 2000: 112, Narotzky 2004: 58). Social relations and decision making are therefore neither exclusively the outcome of an underlying structure nor are they purely the product of individual agency. As history informs cultural repertoire, contemporary strategic decisions are also products of historical embodiment as people draw on subjective preference to inform economic actions (Gudeman 2009: 5). There are multiple forms of persuasion influencing strategic economic decisions in times of uncertainty and actions in crisis situations alter the trajectory of social change. These decisions will feed future narratives and directly inform future strategies. Through narrative, people draw on history and project the future in complex polytemporality. Three collectivising topics prominent in everyday narratives among Trikalinoi are famine, suicide and colonisation. In narrating these themes actors move seamlessly from past to present, offering a critique of economic systems by means of historical embodiment.

### **‘We are hungry with the same famine’**

‘Famine is engrained on the Greek psyche’ I am told. ‘We do not want to return to those dark days our grandfathers experienced’. The Great Famine of 1941–1943 left an indelible mark on Greece and remains at the forefront of narratives of crisis (Hart 1996:29, Knight 2012). An estimated 300,000 people died in Athens alone during the famine, primarily caused by the systematic expropriation of food stuffs by occupying forces and Allied blockades in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Narratives of famine are predominant when discussing the current crisis and food hoarding is now commonplace. Although Trikalinoi did not suffer from the Great Famine on the scale of Athenians, through processes of nationalism the event has become a marker of collective

suffering, forming a narrative ‘history of traumatic past’ (Winichakul 2002: 245, Knight 2011, 2012). In contemporary Greece famine haunts the mind.

“I am scared. My grandfather told us stories of picking up stale pieces of bread in the street of his neighbourhood and how he would take this home to share with his family. We were taught about the famine in school, in books and plays, we saw the pictures of rows of dead bodies. Now, even in Trikala, the people are returning to times of famine. You see them in the rubbish bins looking for food, or things they can sell for food. I have heard of people catching cats or stray animals to satisfy their hunger, like they did in the War. I have seen people attacking the moorhens on the river in the centre of town. These things were once restricted to the poorest in Athens, but now it is everywhere ... We just worry that we will not have anything to eat tomorrow” (Kostas, 25, Trikala).

A startling development of the crisis has been the search for food and shelter in peripheral towns across Greece. In summer 2011 Trikala remained largely shielded from this due to self-sufficiency and reciprocity practiced among extended kin networks. Self-sufficiency is the systematic exploitation of a household’s resources and the clear preference of households to utilise such resources internally instead of buying readily available goods at market. The concept of self-sufficiency relates to the idea of self-interest, referring not to individuals but to whole households (Theodossopoulos 1997: 264). Self-interest also dictates the protection of a household’s economic prosperity and prestige.

By Easter 2012 narratives of the ruthless insufficiency of kin networks in providing for the household were widespread. In one case, after recently losing his job in Athens, a son visiting his elderly father in Trikala turned off the freezer and emptied its contents into the back of his car before returning to the city. He argued that he could no longer afford the electricity to run the appliance and that his hungry children were his foremost concern. In another account, a frenzied daughter slaughtered all her mother’s chickens to hoard for a time of famine. These stories are now ineffaceable parts of local mythologising, but there are rarely the ‘shadow presences’ of counter-arguments challenging their legitimacy (Gilsenan 1996: 59). The following accounts of being parsimonious are representative:

“My mother asks me, *why do you not eat?* I can not sit down for a meal without her telling me I am ungrateful. I thought it was just my family, but then I got talking to some friends. All their parents say the same, and with the same justification. They always talk about food and the fact we are lucky to have some ... and the fact we may soon go hungry. This is why everyone

is planting vegetables and fruit trees this year, rather than flowers ... We never throw any food away in our family as we know that our grandfathers suffered famine. Nobody forgets these times and now they feel closer than ever ... we are beginning to see people dying from their hunger ... or taking their lives due to the fear” (Giannis, 39, Kalampana).

“Now, at the supermarket I have to do things differently ... Instead of buying a pack of three 2 litre bottles of *coca-cola* for my husband per week I buy him one and tell him to make it last. I have to cut back on luxury items and the amounts we serve at mealtimes ... Instead of going to the bar three times a week, we go only once and have one less beer. We are lucky here to have family for childcare, to share food and help pay bills; some people no longer have that. All the frightening things we get told everyday from the media are bad, they are real problems, but they are scaring people into taking drastic measures, sometimes to suicide, and what for? We are scared of famine and financial destitution ... but people got through those past crises, they negotiated far worse, why can't we? If we listen only to what they say on television, we might as well give up now.” (Maro, 55, Trikala)

The current socioeconomic crisis is analysed by Trikalinoi in terms of the Great Famine in order to confront the extraordinary. Food and famine as historical symbols of deprivation have been notably discussed in a Greek context by Michael Herzfeld and David Sutton. Cretan shepherds, Herzfeld notes, employ the rhetoric of hunger in order to justify stealing livestock. They cite hunger under Turkish and later German occupation as a justification for stealing to avoid starvation. According to Herzfeld, a young Cretan ‘may still plausibly cite hunger as his motive for stealing several sheep in a night’s work’ (1985: 21). In the same way as hunger punctuates narratives of crisis in contemporary Trikala, it is the ideology of starvation that is pertinent here as employed to critique both past and present circumstance and to rationalise extraordinary actions. Two timeframes are brought into proximity through the notion of hunger and irrational action rationalised through polytemporal embodiment. Similar to Trikalinoi, Herzfeld’s Glendiots rarely experienced truly devastating famine, yet hunger expresses further notions of colonisation and deprivation. In this sense hunger is an ideological disposition that is entwined with polytemporal narratives of hardship and oppression. It is an idiom that has been nationalised and is now collectively felt, feared and narrated.<sup>4</sup>

I have argued elsewhere (Knight 2012: 367) that in the current crisis food has become a ‘context shifting marker’; a contextual indicator of change whereby food no longer stands for commensality or festivities but rather fear and deprivation. Narratives of famine also show that hardship

can be conquered and overcome, thus giving perspective to current circumstances. Sutton argues that food permeates memory resulting in a form of polytemporality between significant events (2001: 2, 2011). The historical reconstruction of the cultural significance of food can be deemed part of the deep rooted ‘ethics of hunger’ (Sutton 2001: 23, also Seremetakis 1994:10) passed down generationally through narratives and nationalised historical constructivism:

“My five year old child knows that I will never say ‘no’ to food. Even now when we have no money, she can request dolls or other toys when we go to the supermarket and I will refuse, but she knows that if she asks for food she will get it. I allow it without thinking. It is something that I believe all Greeks say to their children ... I cannot bear to think of my child not being able to have food or even me depriving her of it. It is something so strong that runs throughout the culture of the Greeks and I don’t even realise I am doing it until I stop and reflect and ask myself why ... She at five years old has heard the stories of the famine and I believe she now deliberately asks for food” (Popi, 36, Trikala).

The importance of food as an ideology facilitating paradoxical crisis negotiation transcends economic systems. On the one hand supermarket shelves are emptied and products left unstocked, on the other extended kinship networks are drained of supplies.<sup>5</sup> As will become apparent, food and famine are cited as central factors for opportunistic business activities, colonisation, and even suicide.

### **“He just shot himself”**

A taboo subject in central Greece, accounts of suicide are increasing. The previous spate of suicide narratives in Trikala pertain to the stock market crash of 1999–2000, a reference point akin to the Panic of 1907 or Great Depression of the 1930s (Hart and Ortiz 2008: 3, Mishara 2008). Suicides after the 1999–2000 crash hold particular resonance today and are infused with rumour, gossip, and even the supernatural. By placing suicide accounts in a historical context, people begin to come to terms with a highly stigmatised social issue. The publicity of suicides is paradoxical as such cases would usually be concealed to avoid social stigmatisation of the families involved, as today suicides can still be associated with accusations of paranormal activity, such as witchcraft and sorcery (cf. du Boulay 1974: 66, 142, Stewart 1991: 222, Just 2000: 101–102, Buck and Pipyrou Forthcoming).

Until the early 1980s the financial system in Greece was characterised



by institutional specialisation being required by law rather than informed by market performance. The regulation of the financial system was conducted through a complex matrix of credit rules in a predetermined administrative environment. The first stage of liberalisation came under the PASOK government of 1982 when the role of the Bank of Greece in controlling monetary policy was enhanced and a limit was set to government funding obtained from the National Bank (Hondroyiannis, Lolos and Papapetrou 2004). In 1990 the newly elected Nea Dimokratia government started to follow a liberal Thatcher-Reagan style of economic policy, dismantling the remaining state control of the market.

Reflecting the international trends of the mid and late 1990s, Greece experienced a stock market boom from 1992–1999. Between January 1998 and September 1999 stock prices increased by an average 332.69% (Caporale, Economou and Philippas 2008: 2). The boom was attributed to a combination of the newly liberal and deregulated economic environment and falling inflation and interest rates (Kyriazis and Diacogiannis 2008: 163). According to Forbes, Skerratt and Yiannopoulos (2006), investor protection in Greece was generally weak due to the conspiratorial culture of the trading on the national market based in Athens, where companies looked after each other's vested interests before the interests of their own shareholders.

In the 1990s 'playing the stock markets' became a national phenomenon. In Trikala almost everyone of legal age was involved in some way. There was no need for the investors to be keen economists or follow the market trends; the only thing that mattered was the public appetite to create money from nothing. Due to the unregulated nature of the Athens Stock Exchange, local, national and international organisations floated their companies—many of which were 'rogue'—without internal controls on investor security and auditing.

For most of 1999 the Greek stock market continued to prosper. The government continued to praise the market and refused to interfere to protect small scale investors. In September 1999 the Athens Stock Exchange suddenly went into free-fall. This particular crisis holds a prominent place in public imagery due to the sudden widespread consequences. From December 1999 to March 2003 the Athens Exchange had lost 77.88% of its value (Caporale, Economou and Philippas 2008: 3). Foreign investors sold their portfolios in an attempt to escape the rapidly deteriorating situation, but the small investors were worst affected. The majority of the general public held on to shares in anticipation of the market picking-up so they could repay their loans taken to finance original investments. It is estimated that during the 1999–2000 crisis over 100 billion euro were lost by small-scale investors.

Nikos is just one example of the many people in Trikala who lost their

life savings, their homes and businesses and went into overwhelming debt due to the crisis. He became suicidal. I was directed to his case in 2010 whilst discussing a recent ‘suspicious death’ in the town believed to be a suicide as a consequence of bankruptcy. A major land owner, Nikos’ shares had risen to 870,000,000 drachma by early 1999 (2,553,192 euros at the 2001 pre-single currency exchange rate). Nikos was waiting for his investments to reach the 1 billion mark before cashing in. The crash hit before he realised his objective and Nikos eventually lost two-thirds of his real estate in Trikala.

“We were very greedy. We thought that we would never work again. We said that once we reached X million drachma we would stop. Obviously we just kept setting the goal higher. People did not believe that this would ever end, it was free money, and we did not care. Once the markets started to drop we still paid little attention as we thought that this was just a phase. We did not take the money out, cash it in I mean, because we felt that we were losing money despite the fact that we were still well in profit compared to the initial investment ... People like me lost whole fortunes, land, houses, because they had sold property in order to invest in the market. I know some people who became suicidal after the crash ... indeed I became suicidal, but some people lost their lives, especially if they felt they could no longer support their family” (Nikos, 63, Trikala).

After this immense loss of capital, Nikos truly became suicidal and had to turn to family and friends in order to rebuild his life. This collective psychological support was vital as numerous family members were affected by the crash. Other investors with unpayable loans, including multiple mortgages, took their own lives and these accounts have become part of the local repertoire of crisis, stories now eerily entwined with contemporary tales of socioeconomic turmoil.

Suicide is again at the core of debates concerning financial ruin, highlighted further by a series of recent high-profile cases. Regularly suicide notes reveal the embodiment of culturally significant historical ideologies such as famine and debt. In April 2012 a 77-year-old man took his life publicly in front of the Greek parliament building in Athens. On a handwritten note he claimed he could not repay his loans and could not tolerate leaving his children with debt. He stated that he did not want to spend his life searching through rubbish bins for sustenance. The location of his death has since become an informal shrine. In May 2012 there was another widely publicised case of suicide when a mother and son jumped from a block of flats in Athens. In a web entry the night before his death the son cited serious

economic problems and the inability to purchase food as reasons for the decision. In July 2012 a doctor jumped from the fifth floor of a hospital in Lamia, central Greece, as family and friends looked on. Reports were unclear as to exact provocations, but some claimed he had not been paid his pension for six months and could no longer feed his family, others quoted long-term psychological instability.<sup>6</sup>

The New York Times reported that suicide rates in Greece increased by 24 per cent from 2007 to 2009, with 1,800 reported cases in the past two years compared to 700 in the two years pre-crisis. It is rumoured that these numbers have been reduced and the reality is far bleaker. In 2011 cases of suicide officially rose 40% on the previous year. These stories are public examples of local realities that no longer inhabit the realms of the extraordinary in Trikalinoi narrative (cf. Gilsenan 1996: 58).

“A man that lived in our village, he was a farmer, a simple person ... waited for his son to visit from Athens (who had just lost his job), sat down and had dinner and drank *tsipouro* together. When his son left, the man went out to the shed, picked up his shotgun, and just shot himself in the head. He could not cope with his own debt repayments and seeing his son so poor ... This was the second case I heard of in a week ... a relative of a fellow villager also committed suicide as she couldn't see any future in this financial ruin” (Eleuteria, 60, Trikala).

The cause of suicides is unanimously attributed to the economic crisis, the brutality of neoliberalism and the governmental response to structural problems. Partially overheard conversations of rumoured suicide spread quickly and ignite passionate debate in public spaces, such as supermarket queues. The frustration demonstrated by discussants centres on the lack of responsibility acknowledged by those in power, people who should be held accountable for lives and deaths during the turmoil. Other cases of suicides over the past fifty years punctuate everyday conversation more than ever before. Suicide is emphasised rather than concealed in narrative, and political and economic systems are widely held responsible. Precisely due to the marginal nature of suicide in Greek society, accountability must be located away from the Self. Facets of neoliberalism such as unsustainable loans, ruthless accumulation, clandestine political bargaining, consumerist pressure and the corruption of traditional socioeconomic morals are cited as primary causes for the current increase in suicides, and provoke the explicit temporal proximity of the 1999–2000 stock market crash.

### “Return of the *Ciftlikades*”

One narrative strand imbued with historical significance and teeming with accounts of famine and hardship pertains to blame and accountability for the crisis. Initially blame is directed towards the external Other, such as the European Union, the so-called ‘Troika’,<sup>7</sup> Germany and the United States of America. Blame is placed on those perceived as making ‘decisions of global consequence (that) shape the face of the world’ (Werbner 1995: 84, also Herzfeld 1992). Locals criticise ‘the Other within’, those who sell-out the ‘Greek people’ to foreign demands. Elisabeth Kirtsoglou and Dimitrios Theodossopoulos outline how Western interference breeds attitudes of anti-globalisation in Greece creating an ‘indigenous reaction to centres of power’ (2010: 85). The same opposition to centres of power informs how ‘Athens’ is viewed by the Greek periphery—as a political system based on a lethal combination of patronage, kin-based networks, and capitalist greed. Greek politicians are seen as legitimising the colonisation process by selling-off national assets to external bodies (Herzfeld 1992: 81, 2011). These accusations are based on historical lines and are associated with notions of colonisation and land ownership. Thessaly has been synonymous with vast tracts of agricultural land for over five-hundred years and the workers subject to a long list of occupations and appropriations. Sotiris, an elderly farmer from Trikala explains,

“Our own Prime Minister (then George Papandreou) doesn’t care about us. He does what the Americans and Germans say ... it is a colonisation, a return to the times of *ciftliks*; foreign owners of Greek soil, outsiders telling us what to do ... Do you know how many elderly women live alone in the mountain villages, they have no central heating and no running water, but the Prime Minister does not care if we starve as long as he gets money from the Americans and Europe? Our families have suffered to secure their own land first from Turkey, the *Ciftlikades*, and then Germany ... Our government is to blame as much as the foreigners ... All Greek politicians are the same; as long as they fill their own pockets with money ... they are the ones that comply with the foreigners ... We, the little people (*laoutzikos*), are the ones with no money, the ones that suffer the consequences. Nothing has changed in 100 years”<sup>8</sup> (Sotiris, 70, Trikala).

Originally land grants made by Ottoman sultans to Muslim settlers in Turkish-occupied lands, *ciftliks* were large landed estates operating in Thessaly from the sixteenth century. At the end of the seventeenth century, *ciftliks* became large private properties where the landlord held rights over whole

villages whose villagers became his tenants (*colligi*). During this period the peasant workers were contracted under Ottoman laws which gave them rights to a certain amount of their produce—usually either two-thirds or one-half. After the annexation of Thessaly to Greece in 1881 the *ciftliks* were purchased by Greek entrepreneurs of the diaspora and living conditions for the *colligi* deteriorated (Mouzelis 1978: 77, Knight 2011). The peasant farmers had been promised their own pieces of land after annexation despite the rights of the *Ciftlikades* (*ciftlik* owners) being transferred intact through the handover deal (Aroni-Tsichli 2005: 26).

The Greek entrepreneurs were enticed to invest in the old Ottoman *ciftliks* as a means to recuperate losses made during the fluctuating economic crises of the late 1800s, cumulating in the bankruptcy of the Ottoman government in 1875–1876. Their absentee status meant that the new owners employed stewards to manage the *ciftliks*. Any profit made by the *Ciftlikades* was invested abroad, thus the wider Greek economy was by no means benefiting directly from ‘foreign’ ownership.

Under the administration of the Greek *Ciftlikades* the *colligi* had no legal protection against their landlord who was capable of exercising the newly founded right of evicting his tenants whenever he pleased as *ciftliks* were no longer the property of the state (Mouzelis 1978: 77, Inalcik 1985: 106, Sant Cassia and Bada 1992: 24). The *colligi* were reduced to the role of share-croppers and landlords continued to demand a rent of either one-half or one-third of the gross product despite the contract of perpetual company being no longer enforceable. Juliet du Boulay (1974: 8) notes that in the village of Ambéli, Euboea, the villagers had to ‘beg their bread’ and thus took to harvesting and threshing grain in secrecy. Parallels are constantly drawn between this prominent historical era and current conditions in Thessaly.

“We are in the era of the new *Ciftlikades*. The collaboration between the Greek state and foreign investors is the same. We are given so many promises but we are being slowly invaded whilst our livelihoods deteriorate. Just like before, people are playing games and the workers of the land are left thinking of the past. The workers will have to rise up” (Dimitris, 62, Trikala).

“I researched my history. We are all descendents of the people who worked these plains. Now I can begin to understand what the *colligi* went through. It is exactly the same. Our fields are being ruled by outside forces, we have no protection and people are taking whatever they can ... our own government and Europe ... to make as much money whilst they have the opportunity. I have nowhere to sell my produce so must give my land over to them. They are the biggest *Ciftlikades* ever and Greece has become the *ciftlik* of Europe” (Michalis, 44, Kalampaka).

Although commentaries on accountability are ‘fragmented, multiple, contradictory and semantically vague’ (Kirtsoglou 2010: 168) fusing local, national and global discourses, Trikalinoi continue to direct their frustration both internally and externally, but always with historical reference. Politicians and *Ciftlikades* are stereotypes of the ‘heartless system’ (Herzfeld 1992: 80) that appeal to the collective imagery. These caricatures are a common thread in narratives of blame and resonate with accounts of famine, poverty and suppression.

The theme of colonisation has recently widened to include Germany, as local people and public figures continue to draw on historical notions of occupation, often temporally condensing the period of the *Ciftlikades* with German occupation. This is again closely linked to infliction of famine in the 1940s. In 2010 Former Deputy Prime Minister Theodoros Pangalos publicly stated:

‘They [the Nazis] took away the Greek gold that was in the Bank of Greece, they took away the Greek money and they never gave it back ... I don’t say they have to give back the money necessarily but they have at least to say “thanks”’ (BBC News, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2010, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8536862.stm>, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012).

The former Mayor of Athens, Nikitas Kaklamanis, also waded into the dispute:

‘You [Germany] owe us 70 billion euros for the ruins you left behind [in the war]’ (ibid.).

These narratives reflect growing public opinion that enforced austerity has become a foreign-led attempt at colonisation in the mould of the *Ciftlikades*.

“The Germans have capitalised upon the plight of all Greeks. They have bought our companies and held us to ransom. It is history repeating itself. The Germans do not want to compromise and will take everything they can from us. They caused us famine before; they will cause it again now. They treat Greece as their private *ciftlik*. I am told that if I can’t sell my grain I can install photovoltaic panels on my land, but most of these companies are German-owned and using German products. It is another colonisation, they are *Ciftlikades* and I don’t want to just hand over all I own” (Giannis, 47, Trikala).

The concept of colonisation has been taken a step further by a recent programme promoting photovoltaic installations on land possessed by

struggling agriculturalists. There is an uneasy relationship when social systems change and ‘men remain’ leaving actors with a multiplicity of criteria by which to measure their achievements and aspirations (Simmel 1978: 353). Such a multiplicity is present in contexts of land diversification. Since 2006–2007 a European Union supported initiative has encouraged Greek agriculturalists without a market for their crops to install photovoltaic panels on their land. The diversification programme has been met with mixed feelings as the necessity for stable income is balanced against the notion of returning to the era of *ciftliks*. Matters are complicated by the rich history of land tenure in the region, acute historical consciousness, and political issues of national food sufficiency stretching back over 200 years. German investors have significant interest in large and medium scale photovoltaic developments in Greece and have financed parts of the failing national energy company. Installing photovoltaic panels on agricultural land is viewed by locals as selling-off Greek assets to foreign free-market inspired programmes and the increased German presence is viewed with great suspicion. Notions of colonisation are exacerbated as installation companies advertise primarily German products as this rhetoric sells reliability and reassures the consumer of the quality of instalment.<sup>10</sup> On a local level, people are asked to make a rational choice between a purportedly stable monthly income and honouring history. Yet, outside of Greece solar energy is heralded as the economic saviour of a failing state. Renewable energy is viewed as a long-term solution to fiscal austerity, international dependency and European energy security and its adoption as a primary economic activity in central Greece raises questions of sustainability and colonialism.

The financial productivity of land is currently very low. Unable to secure markets for their produce, Trikalinoi agriculturalists face the daunting prospect that crop production is no longer a viable livelihood strategy beyond subsistence. Farmers are “growing photovoltaics” (*fitronoun fotovoltaika*) on their land as this is perceived as the only way to avoid certain famine (cf. Gilsenan 1996: 121). The average monthly income from selling the energy to the Greek power companies is greater than the revenue from crop production. The average loan required for a 100 kw/h photovoltaic development on agricultural land is 180,000 euro. These prices have decreased significantly from five years previous, when an average 100 kw/h field development cost 500,000 euro. Expenditure on photovoltaic installations on private agricultural land can reach 750,000 euro. Loans are advertised as returnable over 25 years ‘without repayments’—the repayments are automatically deducted from the monthly income provided by the panels as the energy is sold at a fixed 25-year rate to the national provider.<sup>11</sup> Many

companies advertise with guarantees that all loans will be cleared within five years which raises the issue of risk in such a turbulent socioeconomic environment (Knight and Bell 2012). As Petros, 56, explains:

“We are all doing it now (installing photovoltaic panels). It is the only chance we have when our government bickers and struggles for power, the people are suffering. I have no markets for my grain, my cereal; the land is lying there useless. I have started “growing photovoltaics” for a stable income and believe this is the only way we can escape the famine – by using the land not for food, but energy.”

The paradox lies in the general acknowledgement that a major cause of the current socio-economic crisis in Greece was the unregulated nature of unnecessary bank loans from 1981 to 2007. Many landholders comment they are prepared to take major loans even in a time of socioeconomic instability as they perceive this scheme to be the only financially productive programme currently running in central Greece. They live with the economic crisis 24/7 and thus cannot afford to ‘put their lives on hold’ and must continue ‘as if’ things are under control (Gilsenan 1996: 59). This is seen as a calculated risk, despite the fact that many people do not believe that the 25- or 50-year contracts to pay an agreed rate will be honoured.

Many Trikalinoi believe the economic risk involved with substantial loans and the uncertain future of Greek participation in the eurozone and European Union is outweighed as this is the only viable economic opportunity currently accessible in the region (Knight and Bell 2012). They acknowledge that a return to the drachma is a worrying prospect as not only would loans remain intact at euro-time levels, but repayments would likely be translated into drachma, as would the agreed purchase rate per kw/h. The contracts signed during the euro-era would potentially be deemed irrelevant. Furthermore, Greek companies would not be restricted by the austerity policies imposed by the European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank and a potential European Union exit would deem the programme politically extinct, calling into question the validity of existing contracts and potentially leaving vast areas of agricultural land obsolete. The rhetoric of market persuasion, coupled with overt historical consciousness on themes such as famine, legitimise the decision to diversify (cf. Gudeman 2009).<sup>12</sup>

The sustainability of this approach to diversification has to be interrogated in light of the long-term nature of the contracts. Once signed, contracts tie the land to between 25 and 50 years for the sole purpose of photovoltaic energy production. Due to the rapidly increasing popularity of the current



solar programme, much agricultural land—Thessaly has long been known as ‘the bread basket of Greece’—has been taken out of circulation. This raises questions for local and national self-sufficiency in grain and cereal vital to sustainable socioeconomic recovery. By encouraging energy security through the large-scale solar programme, locals concede that food security may be threatened, echoing similar problems throughout the agricultural history of modern Greece pre-dating the annexation of Thessaly from the Ottoman Empire in 1881. Nevertheless, people are persuaded to take rational decisions according to a European Union-advocated neoliberal market ideology despite overtones of colonisation based on historical reflection. The necessity imposed by crisis is a sufficient explanation for an exchange that would otherwise be non-equivalent (Gilsenan 1996: 121). As circumstance has transformed so has value, yet they recognise that the long-term rationale of ‘growing photovoltaics’ is unsustainable and their land may be turned into the ‘*ciftliks* of Europe’. As an struggling agriculturalist from Trikala states,

“The priority is to feed my children and pay my bills. For this, I can afford to look no further than tomorrow. I am scared of the famine my father experienced and thus I must do whatever I can ... now I must give my land to the *Ciftlikades* (in order) to survive” (Alexandros, 62).

As conditions have drastically shifted and ‘men remain’, the routes to negotiate crisis may not be historically appealing and are often based within the same economic rationale that brought about the turmoil—specifically elaborate loans and free-market prospecting. As Trikalinoi say, ‘life must go on’ as ‘people make their way toward some kind of livelihood while the currents they float on hurl them here and there’ (Narotzky and Smith 2006: 122).

### **‘Don’t talk about fight club’ or the ‘Theatre of the absurd’**

Three strongly linked narrative strands of crisis have been presented. All represent a microcosm for the analysis of national and global phenomena but also highlight the local nuances of neoliberal crisis experience, or what locals term ‘Fight Club’. History plays a significant role in crisis negotiation as people draw on critical events of cultural import to form a localised understanding of a global episode. Temporal moments are conflated to create a polytemporal interpretation of contemporary circumstances (Stewart 2012: 193). Suicide and the adoption of the photovoltaic programme are further critiques of economic futures based on historical reflection. The ‘Greek crisis’ is a trope that highlights the complex relationship between global systems and local experience. On a narrative level, accountability is

located in periods of history, political actors, and economic systems. The role of food and famine is prominent throughout, in accounts of death, colonisation, land appropriation, and as justifications for following short-term market rationales.

In all cases actors generate discourses of collective suffering that emphasise heroism and triumph alongside victimisation (Verdery 1996: 77, Ballinger 2003: 12). People repersonalise the crisis from being an abstract search for accountability amidst the dynamics of global politico-economics to something allowing for common purpose based on shared history and shared future, creating a spirit of solidarity through communal participation. Collective suffering provides actors with common narratives of pain and endurance, what Jill Dubisch terms ‘a community of pain . . . to protest against injustice’ (Dubisch 1995: 214, Pipyrrou 2012). Actors are able to find a common thread through which to provide mutual support and advice. In this case, suffering is an embodiment of history that transcends individual narrative to publicly express culturally specific experiences. Past socio-economic crises pertaining to famine, death and financial collapse serve as points of collective reference, a reminder that the current situation can be endured, can be overcome.

The current crisis will become part of historical experience, to be embodied as culturally integral sometime in the future (Goddard 2006: 268, 279). The themes of famine, suicide and colonisation are prominent in the cultural repertoire of Trikalinoi and will possibly be employed once again to critique political and economic situations. However, critiques of economic systems do not necessarily imply radical changes in practice. Despite overt historical consciousness, Trikalinoi feel obliged to follow short-term solutions based on the same neoliberal ideals that contributed to socioeconomic turmoil. In their overarching evaluation of the current crisis, locals trace the upheaval to the programme of unregulated liberalisation initiated by the governments of the early 1980s when Greece joined the European Union. A special place in local condemnation is reserved for the availability of excessive bank loans for unnecessary purposes during this period; ‘loans lead to unhappiness, they are a burden, and they change your personality. . . . When you cannot pay a loan they can repossess your house, destroy your life and your children will go hungry. . . It will drive you insane’. Nevertheless, such practices are often championed as solutions to hardship through specific programmes, such as photovoltaics.

Neoliberalism is concerned with the overall productivity of the polity in an internationally competitive world by outsourcing a major part of governance to the market.<sup>13</sup> Such dissemination of power requires regulation to prevent competition from illegitimate sources because ‘neoliberals are as afraid of

anarchy as anyone else' (Narotzky and Smith 2006: 23). The economic practices of the grassroots level are the enterprises of neoliberalism where people are empowered to believe they are making a decision outside of regulated market conditions, a belief reinforced by the promise of benefits in the resulting social system (Narotzky and Smith 2006: 23–25). Local and regional models of neoliberalism provide actors with modes of legitimisation based on shared historical and cultural convictions. Stephen Gudeman (1986) has notably argued that cultural models are scripts for economic processes, and Susana Narotzky further suggests that material relations are interlocked with local cultural contexts within a framework of wide-ranging capitalist forces and global hegemonic cultures. Local economic structures must be studied in their cultural and historical development since actors themselves are inscribed with historic processes of labour relations (Narotzky 1997: 190, 211).

The stock market collapse of 1999–2000 demonstrated that it is impossible to get money from nothing in an ambivalently regulated market, and in extreme cases attempts to do so led to suicide. The photovoltaic programme offers a 'stable' income in exchange for 'colonised' land and a substantial loan. The history of *ciftliks* has taught Trikalinoi that 'foreign' ownership of agricultural land provides no local benefits if the income is invested outside the region. Nevertheless, the enticement is considerable as people feel severely restricted by limited economic opportunities and the burden of a tangible history of famine. A cynic may suggest that the government is propagating unsustainable sustainability, but locals understand this as a licensed solution to avoiding their greatest fear—famine. Accounts of suicide and famine are not mere history; they are embodied daily and are in the public domain through constant media coverage. Through critical reflection on famine and suicide, value has been renegotiated and exchange re-rationalised. Famine, suicide and colonisation mediate an understanding of the roots of contemporary circumstance, help people come to terms with dramatic social change, and inform future strategic investment. Hunger is always cited as the foremost concern due to intense historical connotations, a prioritisation reflected in economic activity.

Diversification projects, such as photovoltaics, can destabilise efficient strategies for regulating market relations on the local level, exacerbated in times of extreme socioeconomic crisis. Local investment in neoliberal programmes in a collapsing market will significantly influence future economic trajectories in the region.<sup>14</sup> The tangled relationship between culturally and historically informed repertoires of economy and transnational market logic is emphasised in initial reluctance to adopt 'rational' neoliberal schemes.

Selection and rejection of (ir)rational economic routes is considered in direct relation to sociohistorical experience, with people highlighting the relationship between past events, present demands, and future trajectories. In this ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, complex forms of critical persuasion pull on the actor’s decision-making processes— notions of colonisation compete with the fear of famine, under the influence of market rhetoric and consumerist pressure. Actors manage to provide an emphatic critique of economic futures through the embodiment of historical moments.

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### **Notes**

1. The ‘Greek Economic Crisis’ has become a persuasive ‘trope’ for political change across Europe (cf. Fernandez 1986, 1993). International media coverage of the Greek crisis has created political opportunity on national stages as the event is appropriated by political bodies. Among European publics the ‘Greek crisis’ is synonymous with poor government, austerity measures, financial bail outs, civil unrest and economic turmoil. It has become a piece of political propaganda that successfully provokes fear, panic and movement for political change elsewhere. The Greek case is a metaphor of persuasion developed beyond the national borders of Greece to incite responses similar to those of the people experiencing the ‘Greek crisis’ firsthand. Such headlines as ‘Britain is facing its own Greek tragedy’ (BBC, 28 April 2010) and ‘We face going the same way as Greece (if there is no political change)’ are paramount to election campaigns across the continent.

2. Here Narotzky's definition of 'regional' is followed: 'the placeboundedness' of economic activities that incorporate specific local understandings of social capital and the wider economy (2006: 339).
3. Gilsenan encountered similar narratives of enforced famine in relation to conditions of Turkish occupation during the First World War. In this case, land was often exchanged for 36 kilos of grain (1996: 121–123).
4. In the context of the 2001–2002 economic crisis in Argentina, Goddard commented on the power of depictions of starvation and malnutrition to incite collective mobilisation. She contrasts these images with the national rhetoric of preservation and prosperity (2006: 277).
5. One example of multiplicity of economic systems can be found in the local management of multinational supermarket chains where despite official company policy employees obtain their jobs on a patron-client basis. If a person does not have a network of contacts that relate him/her with the local branch manager then there is little hope of obtaining a job, regardless of curriculum vitae, highlighting the complex relationship between state policy, unions, employers and employees in Greece (Featherstone 2008: 7). In practice, Trikalinoi often frequent these large chain stores only 'as a last resort' as they exist on the boundaries of local conceptual worlds. People would rather patronise smaller shops belonging to friends and family (Just 2000: 174–177). The visits to the multinational supermarkets are perceived as faceless market relations between isolated partners (*ibid.*:182). In cases of employment and consumer choice the instrumental weight of personal and affective relations are demonstrated (cf. Narotzky 2006: 340, Narotzky and Smith 2006, Knight 2011: 174, 282). Narotzky presents a similar example of the use of 'middle men' in restricting interaction between local producers and national markets (1997: 195).
6. Another high profile suicide was in the news at the time of this paper going to press. Former Deputy Interior Minister Leonidas Tzanis, 57, hung himself at his home in the town of Volos, Thessaly, on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2012. He was under investigation by the Financial Crimes Unit.
7. 'Troika' is the name given in Greece to the partnership between the European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank.
8. During the Argentine economic crisis of 1998–2002, the country had five presidents within two weeks (Page 2009: 1, Goddard 2010: 131–132). The persistent demands for a completely new government to be installed in Greece (even since the 2012 elections) echoes the Argentine case in 2001 when the slogan 'They must all go – not a single one should stay' was adopted by protesters (Goddard 2006: 271).
9. For a discussion of colonialism in the context of the current economic crisis see Herzfeld 2011.
10. In reality however often low-cost Chinese panels are installed without the knowledge of the consumer in order to provide further maintenance work in forthcoming years.

11. Energy generated by photovoltaic panels on agricultural land does not sustain any energy consumption in the investor's property.
12. William Milberg (2009) argues that economics is no longer a complete system of assurance but instead persuasion now negates uncertainty.
13. An interesting alternative theoretical angle on competing economic rationales can be found in post-socialist literature, especially given Chris Hann's (2007) call for 'history-sensitive anthropology'. Birgit Müller's (2007) account of transition to capitalism in East Germany outlines how competing economic systems at the time of the German *Wende* (turnaround) provided a plethora of possibilities for social relations based on historical consciousness. The road to democratisation and liberalisation also raised questions about the rationality of the market economy, power relations, and social control (2007: 2–3). Katherine Verdery (1993) argues that in times of crisis suffering can always be explained in relation to grand narratives of nation and economy, whilst Ina Dietzsch (2010) emphasises the persuasive rhetoric of modernity.

However, Greece is not a post-socialist nation. Furthermore, in applying this approach we must address the paradox that the most significant period of liberalisation in Greece was instigated by the socialist governments of the 1980s.

14. As Layton notes in France, 'households which have a similar composition and economic status at one moment may increasingly diverge in response to demographic variables or the accessibility of alternative employment' (2000: 107, 255, 358).

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