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# **The Causal Powers of Social Change: the case of modern Greek society**

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# The Causal Powers of Social Change: the Case of Modern Greek Society

Athanasia Chalari<sup>#</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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This article provides an empirical exploration of social change, by assessing subjective experiences and evaluations in relation to social alterations in Modern Greek society. The investigation concerns whether change in everyday life deriving from the Greek crisis also involves an alteration in the ways that Greeks perceive and consider social reality and themselves within it. This article supports the view that social change is related to agency in terms of reflexivity and that Greeks have contributed to social change through the alteration in their ways of thinking and behaving. Participants reported that practices, norms and mentalities inherited by previous generations are no longer helpful. Customs (such as clientelism) and mentalities (such as prioritizing the personal over the collective interest) must now change and be reformed as the new reality demands different ways of thinking and rapid adaptation to a new way of living which has become economically restricted and politically unstable. In this sense, Greeks are becoming reflexive towards the present situation and themselves within it and critical towards the past and future, as they consider what part of the older generation's established mentalities to retain and what aspects of their way of living will alter.

Keywords: social change, reflexivity, crisis, recession, Modern Greek society

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# **The Causal Powers of Social Change: the Case of Modern Greek Society**

## **1. Introduction**

One of the central questions within modern sociology concerns social change. This study aims to contribute to the exploration of the on-going social theoretical questions: when and how do societies change? Why do different societies change in different ways? How do individuals respond to such changes? How do they contribute? From where does this change derive? The answers to such questions remain incomplete, despite the attempt of classic social theory to provide a variety of possible answers. What remains enigmatic is the power of individuals (or citizens) to contribute to social change and the degree of their influence. The proposed research aims to contribute additional views on the above-mentioned questions by empirically investigating and comparing the subjective experiences of Greek participants and by evaluating their perceptions and contributions in relation to the ways in which social reality alters.

More specifically, this study has multiple aims: a) to contribute to a wider sociological understanding of the connection between social change and agency; b) to provide a sociological explanation of the role of Greek people in the formation of the current social change in Greek society, and c) to become the starting point for further investigation of

social change in societies that are experiencing or may experience analogous circumstances due to the global depression.

### 1.1 Greek Society

Greek society (possibly like every society) had always suffered, for a variety of reasons, from certain dysfunctions such as those explained below. However, Modern Greek society currently (especially during the last two years) is undergoing additional complexities due to the global economic recession, which it has not been able to handle or control. For that reason, and as a member of the European Union, Greece has asked for the contribution of the EU and the IMF, which in turn have implemented a sequence of unprecedented austerity measures in their attempt to control the country's enormous debt. Such measures, however, have consequently caused analogously uncontrollable destabilization in Greek society and this has dramatically affected the everyday lives of Greeks. Since such measures have not been implemented before in any other EU country, the possible political and social consequences have not been effectively calculated or, in many respects, even anticipated. As recession expands to more European countries, this study may provide an initial overview of the possible social changes and difficulties that individuals have to confront in their everyday lives due to the consequences of the economic depression. As no provision is offered in terms of restoring social stability it is considered vital for social scientists to be able to assess the effect of such dramatic transformations on societies and individuals.

Modern Greek society and state have suffered ongoing discontinuities over a prolonged period, which has caused significant delays in terms of

social, political and economic development. A variety of views have been employed in order to evaluate and understand the reasons behind the inability of Greek society to become synchronized with fellow European societies and Western culture. Tsoukalas (2008) and Alexakis (2008), for instance, believe that the lack of rational organization of the Greek state allows the dysfunctional operation of Greek society, whereas Mouzelis and Pagoulatos (2003) emphasize the lack of solidarity and civil society. Mouzelis (2012) also believes that certain elements in the Greek mentality derive from the fact that Greece was under the occupation of the Ottoman Empire for over four hundred years and that therefore certain customs and patterns of behaviour have been inherited in the way Greek society and state operate (eg the word 'rousfeti'<sup>1</sup> is Turkish)<sup>2</sup>. Alexakis (2008) and Voulgaris (2006) explain that one of the main characteristics of the Greek mentality is the tendency of Greeks to act in an individualistic manner, investing in their own personal rather than in the collective interest; they maintain that such patterns may relate to the struggle of Greeks to protect themselves and their families during the 'dark' years of Ottoman occupation.

Panagiotopoulou (2008) further argues that it was extremely difficult for Greek society to follow the development and fully absorb the values, principles and ways of thinking of Western Europe, since it had been influenced by the Eastern (Ottoman) way of life during the time that Western Europe was evolving mentally, scientifically, politically and socially. Furthermore, the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century was extremely turbulent

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<sup>1</sup> 'Rousfeti': a word used very often in the Greek language and denoting clientelism.

<sup>2</sup> The first independent Greek state was formed in 1827. This means that, compared with most Northern European states, Greece is a relatively young state.

for Greece<sup>3</sup> in terms of political, social, economic and especially historical stability, which did not allow Greek society to be formed and organized freely and fully. Sotiropoulos (2004) adds that, after the fall of the Military Junta (1974), democracy in Greece was restored rapidly but not systematically and thoroughly. Also citing the above-mentioned reasons, Tsoukalas (2008) concludes that the Greek mentality of 'tzampatzis' ('free rider': those who are only concerned about their own personal benefit) is the main reason why Greek society remains dysfunctional and incapable of forming and maintaining a comprehensive and efficient state and effective political system.

Present: Greek society is currently experiencing significant economic, political and social crisis which is also perceived in terms of change. Much has been written and said about the economic and political challenges that Greek society has to confront. However, the aspect of social change in this particular society has not received equal or systematic attention. Greeks are now experiencing a different social reality (in relation to older generations) which is characterized, *inter alia*, by uncertainty, insecurity, mobility and the inability to produce specific projections for their future lives. The young generation in Greece, especially, has now realized that certain social anomalies inherited from older generations will no longer serve, as everyday living in Greece has become more complicated, demanding and challenging. Such social discontinuities relate to aspects of the Greek mentality which are no longer effective, such as the concept of 'volema' (to get into, or remain

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<sup>3</sup> The main historical episodes in Greece during the 20th century are the following: 1914-1918: 1st World War; 1940-1944: 2nd World War (German occupation); 1946-1949: civil war; 1950s and 1960s: massive migration waves; 1967-1974: military junta; 1974: restoration of Greek democracy.



in, a situation/position that works for oneself without considering others), 'meso' (the medium – usually a political figure – who helps to accomplish what needs to be accomplished), 'rousfeti' (clientalism), and 'ohaderfismos' (to 'get by' without caring about tomorrow).

As social, economic and political reality change, due to exhaustive austerity measures and political volatility, Greeks now have to confront a different way of living based on uncertainty, insecurity, disappointment and disorientation. They need to find their place within a new reality which consists of high rates of unemployment, increasing suicide rates (40 per cent increase during the last year), continuous lack of trust (in politicians and in one another), unprecedented austerity measures, and political and social instability. For Nesbit (1970: 328) “no substantial change in social group or organisation, or in the structure of any form of social behaviour, takes place except under the impact of events that cause crisis”. This new social reality that Greeks are experiencing requires an ability to adjust rapidly and an awareness of social transformations. In this sense, Greeks, and particularly the young generation, are now called upon to reform Greek society and also to be reformed by it. The way that this two-directional adaptation is taking place is the focus of this study. This on-going interplay between the formation of a new reality and the contribution of individuals to the emergence of such social change will be explored by employing the sociological concept of 'reflexivity'<sup>4</sup>. The aim of this research is to investigate the ways that Greeks as individuals contribute to and experience this social change and to examine whether such change can also be related to their agential powers and properties.

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<sup>4</sup> Further discussion follows.

## 1.2 Structure and Agency

As most sociologists would agree, social change derives from a variety of social, political, economic, historical or even circumstantial causes (Elder, 1974, 1994; Litter, 2005; Tarrow, 1994 Cohen and Felson, 1979; Nisbert, 1970). Without diminishing the significance of such factors, this articles aims to further argue for an additional element associated with social change: that of personal powers and properties (Silbereisen, 2005; May, 2011; Silbereisen, Best and Haase, 2007; Schoon, 2007; Stetsenko, 2007). If individuals are able to contribute to social change, then this means that they are able to contribute to the formation of society as a whole (regardless of change). In order to examine whether this approach may become fruitful, we first need to consider a fundamental social theoretical question concerning the relationship between structure (society) and agency (individual). In order to answer this question two schools of thought could be employed: a) one argues that structure and agency are two sides of the same coin (duality), e.g. Giddens (1984), while b) the other suggests that concepts of structure and agency are interrelated and interdependent, but do not coincide<sup>5</sup>, that they both have autonomous properties and therefore constitute separate entities (dualism), e.g. Archer (1982). If we follow the duality approach we shall conclude that structure and agency are inseparable and therefore agents will be perceived as social constructs. Thus social change influences and controls people, but it is not associated with any sort of agential powers, since only structural forces and forms are recognized.

However, if we follow the dualism approach, we may arrive at different conclusions. This latter approach perceives structure and agency as two

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<sup>5</sup> Elder-Vass (2010) attempts an approach combining the two schools of thought.

separate entities which interact constantly and influence one another. Certain perspectives (e.g. Archer (2010), Chalari, (2009), Mouzelis (2008)) suggest that if we were able to understand how structure and agency (social and personal worlds) relate, then it might be possible to understand the contribution of agency to the structural alteration of society. Therefore, in the case of social change, such a phenomenon is seen as directly connected to and influenced by social agents (individuals, the people), but at the same time agents are also recognized as possessing autonomous powers and properties. In this sense, social change can be approached as a distinct concept and social agents perceived as separate entities. In this way the relationship between them can be explored and the possibility of people's contribution to social change can be investigated. Current Greek society constitutes an excellent example of a society that is going through significant changes and offers an exceptional opportunity to investigate, on the one hand, a social phenomenon (social change) as it develops in real time and conditions, and, on the other, whether and how Greek people are contributing to the formation of a new social reality.

### 1.3 Social Change

The phenomenon of social change has been identified in a variety of ways, however the main idea remains that social change concerns “relatively lasting transformations of social features, such as structures and institutions, norms, values, cultural products and symbols” (Calhoun, 1992, cited in Silbereisen et al., 2007: 73); it may occur gradually or become the result of sudden and dramatic transformations of political, social and economic institutions (Pinquart and Silbereisen,

2004: 289). The case of Greek society falls into the second category since most of the economic and political alterations implemented are a result of rapid and dramatic transformations over the last two years. In current literature an interest has been displayed in the effect of social change on individuals. Although for Adams social change cannot be understood in its totality (Adams, 2007:1), according to Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004), social change affects social institutions as well as psychological development and they add that, in relation to social change, constraints on individuals are not stable. It thus seems that social change not only takes place on a collective/social level, but also touches upon individual aspects. It is also important to note that Greeks perceive the economic, political and social alterations in Greece in terms of 'crisis', rather than 'transformation' or 'restructuring'. Possibly the reason for this is, as Elder (1974:10) explains, that "crisis refers to the gap between the socioeconomic needs and the ability to satisfy them", which describes accurately the current situation in Greece.

Pinquart and Silbereisen et al. (2007: 76) further argue that the way individuals handle such changes depends on their resources and opportunities, whereas they are also constrained by these and by social transformations; they conclude that human agency is dramatically affected by structural forces. Elder (1999) maintains that human agency is limited by social, historic and economic change and Silbereisen (2005) adds that societal progress is related to 'agentic' development. Individuals are influenced by social change and this could be seen as an inevitable parameter; however the extent of such transformations and the manner in which they take place signals a significant area of exploration for seeking to understand how structure (social change)

affects agency (citizens<sup>6</sup>) and *vice versa*. Hughes explains that “some people come to the age of work when there is no work, others when there are wars...Such joining of a man’s life with events, large and small, are his unique career, and give him many of his personal problems” (Hughes, 1971: 124). The way each individual handles such significant events in life is what makes the difference. The Greek case offers an example of a society undergoing significant political and economic transformations that influence everyday life and peoples’ way of thinking, and, as Elder (1974: 10) explains, “crisis situations are a fruitful point at which to study change since they challenge customary interpretations of reality and undermine established routine”.

The manner in which individuals react to the Greek crisis offers an exceptional insight into the way(s) that Greek society is being reshaped since, as May (2011: 374) explains, people respond to social change in a “fragmentary fashion” and she clarifies that the way people are affected by social changes relates to the gradual alteration of their ways of thinking as well as to their habits and routines. May maintains that, as people behave and think differently or as they resist doing so, they actually contribute to further social transformations. Mouzelis (2008: 99) explains that, in order to understand social change, we should “focus on how actors handle contradictions, how conscious they are of incompatibilities between institutions, what they do in order to maintain or change the contradictory status quo”. Therefore, in order to examine how Greek society is changing, we need to explore whether and how Greeks have altered aspects of their habits, routines and ways of thinking or, in more general terms, the way they perceive social reality.

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<sup>6</sup> Further discussion follows.

To do this, the most appropriate sociological concept to use would be that of 'reflexivity'.

#### 1.4 Reflexivity

One of the most recent definitions of the relationship between structure and agency was given by Archer (2003, 2007), who used the term 'reflexivity', defined as the "regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and *vice versa*" (Archer, 2007: 4). For Archer reflexivity enables agents to become critical about themselves and their social environment and to do so they employ internal conversation<sup>7</sup>; subjectivity and objectivity are interrelated and interdependent, but they do not coincide. For Archer, reflexivity constitutes the link between structure and agency and, as she (2010) maintains, reflexivity may be the means to explore the reasons behind the emergence of social change.

Giddens and Beck (1994) (although following a different approach on reflexivity) acknowledge that modernity is understood in terms of reflexive modernization. May (2011) explains that for Giddens (1991), the self is becoming more reflexive as it leaves behind tradition; it becomes freer whilst facing more challenges and uncertainties, and she adds that Beck (1992) would also include the aspect of structural limitations. Referring to reflexivity, Giddens gives a specific meaning to modernity as he explains that "social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens, 1990:

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of their internal conversation, see Archer, 2003, 2007 and Chalari, 2009.

38) and he adds that "reflexivity of modernity extends into the core of the self" (1991: 32); by this he means that individuals start reflecting upon themselves and therefore they can possibly even change themselves. Beck, on the other hand, also uses the term 'reflexive modernity' in order to emphasize the fact that individuals become freer of structural constraints in the West, and he also adds that now individuals are able to recreate themselves and the social world (Beck, 1992). Thus, for both Giddens and Beck, reflexive modernity is associated with the more critical role of the individual and her/his ability to become reflexive. However, unlike Archer, both Giddens and Beck fail to provide a clear definition of what reflexivity actually means, and, as Heaphy (2007: 4), notes, "they fail to provide a convincing basis for reflexive sociology".

In any event, the above-mentioned theorists all agree that the role of reflexivity (although perceived in differing terms) is vital to understanding the modern social world. They all believe that individuals are now able to change themselves and also to change society, and that the role of the individual in the exploration of social structures is becoming more relevant than ever before. Therefore, such approaches may support the view that social change is indeed related to the ability of agents to critically evaluate themselves, social reality and their place within society. Giddens (1994), referring to reflexive modernity, even implies that individuals have the power to change the formation of social reality and Beck (1992) explains that even social relationships and networks are reflexively formed and renewed by individuals themselves. Archer (2010), even more categorically, maintains: "no reflexivity, no society", and by this she means that societies are organized and

structured according to some sort of agential reflexivity rather than solely by circumstantial causes. Therefore, the aspect of reflexivity constitutes the sociological conceptual bridge between structure and agency that enables the exploration of the connection between agency (in this case the perceptions of Greeks) and structural change (in this case the alteration of Greek social reality).

According to Chalari (2009) 'mediation' constitutes a specific model which explains possible ways in which individuals are connected to society. This model (i.e. mediation) can be perceived as a 'filter' that allows the individual to decide what part of her/his inner world will remain private and what part of this world will become public. Analogously, this filter enables the individual to decide what part of her/his social world will remain personal. Mediation is related to the sociological definition of 'reflexivity', which generally refers to the ability of the individual to consider themselves and society critically. The model of mediation does not coincide with reflexivity, but rather describes "the process that enables the individual to be reflexive, the process through which reflexivity is achieved" (Chalari, 2009: 133).

By combining the concept of reflexivity (the ability of people to consider themselves and the social environment) and mediation (the process through which people struggle to achieve a balance between themselves and society), it can be understood that agents (or citizens) are able to consider, critically evaluate and possibly respond to social expectations (or forms, structures, norms). Therefore, social agents are able to process and reflect upon social (or political, economic, historical) change, to consider themselves in relation to such change and even to



produce a response to it (personally or collectively). The question is how the individual contributes to social change. My aim in this article is to examine empirically whether and how Greek participants in social change have altered the way they consider themselves and the social world around them (reflexivity), in order to understand how social change (structural alteration) is related to agency (personal alteration).

### 1.5 Late or Reflexive Modernity and the New Millennium

A number of sociologists have tried to capture Modernity in terms of social change. 'Reflexive modernity', for Giddens and Beck, and the 'New Millennium', for Archer, introduce a new era in terms of how individuals live their lives and perceive their selves. Mouzelis (2008) uses the term 'late modernity' and refers to the significance of exploring the "structure-agency problematic (...) by bringing closer together modern/holistic and postmodern anti-holistic, anti-essentialist approaches" (2008: 5) Giddens and Beck, on the one hand, support the idea of 'individualism' (or 'institutionalized individualism' - Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), by which they refer to the liberation from traditional and cultural constraints that enables people to reflexively create themselves and society (Zinn, 2007; Mouzelis, 2008: 166). Giddens and Beck add that Modernity is a risk culture, not because there are more risks than before, but because the role of risk has become more fundamental to the way individuals organize their lives (Giddens, 1991: 3-4). In a globalized world, risks are produced to a great degree by wealth, as well as by industry, which also produces unsafe consequences for society (Ritzer, 2008). For Beck (1992), individuals become reflexive

even towards the risks they have to confront in their everyday lives<sup>8</sup>. Heaphy (2007), prefers to use the term 'reflexive modernity' and explains that the 'sociology of reflexivity' (derived from Giddens and Beck) fails to explain adequately the dynamics of modernity and he suggests that 'reflexive sociology' (also perceived as movement) may offer a more convincing account based on reconstruction rather than deconstruction. In 2006, Beck introduced the additional concept of 'cosmopolitanism', derived from the process of de-traditionalization and globalization, since people are not rooted in a specific nation, but rather adopt a 'hybrid' ability of continuous readjustment and relocation. Beck also refers to global politics where no boundaries apply and the concept of nation becomes less relevant.

On the other hand, Archer (2010) explains that de-routinization is a crucial element of the New Millennium (as she terms Late Modernity), since individuals are called upon to "re-locate, re-train and re-evaluate shifting modi vivendi" (2010:136). Socialization is no longer as helpful in terms of enabling coping strategies (Archer, 2010a). She explains that individuals are now called upon to become even more adaptive to new forms of technology, synthesized knowledge and new occupations, and therefore able to critically reflect upon the social environment and upon themselves. The new games of the New Millennium, for Archer, require deliberative approaches since they cannot be merely embodied. The reason for this is that cultural capital inherited by their parents is no longer as useful to the younger generation, since different skills are now needed in the job market. This means that the new generation cannot repeat routine actions of the previous generation, and cannot use the

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<sup>8</sup> Walkate and Mythen (2010) have tried to combine the aspects of risk and reflexivity.

cultural capital inherited from them, because such practices and ways of thinking are no longer as productive and rewarding , for example because of increased computerization (Archer, 2010a). Archer also explains that the concerns of the younger generation are now harder for their families to understand as these seem to be different from the concerns their parents used to have. Archer believes that reflexivity as shared “thought and talk” (2010: 139) between young people can be better understood among themselves than by older generations, since it is more familiar to them..

It is thus understood that the current epoch is characterized by circumstances distinct from those of the past because of globalization and modernization. The Greek case serves as an example of a society that is currently undergoing significant social, political and economic alterations reflected in the dramatic change in everyday living, thinking and acting. This study reveals the subjective experiences of its twenty participants as they observe how Greek society is changing, the impact of this change on them, whether and how they have contributed, and how they respond to it. In other words, the study employs the principles of reflexivity in relation to people’s ability to critically consider the social world and themselves within it, in order to explore how social change emerges.

## **2. Methods**

Participants and Procedure: Twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2008) took place in Greece during August and September 2011. The selection criteria of the participants included: age group: 25-

45 (young generation), average age: 35.5, five participants coming from each age sub-group (25-30, 30-35, 35-40, 40-45); as equal a distribution of gender as possible (8 male, 12 female); geographical allocation in terms of size and proximity to the capital.

Participants were in: Athens, the capital (population: around 5,000,000, Ermoupolis, a town on the island of Syros, as a relatively proximal, peripheral, medium-sized town (population 13,000, 77 nautical miles from the capital), and Eresos, a village on the island of Lesbos island, as a small village on a remote, peripheral island (population: 1,600, 190 nautical miles from the capital)<sup>9</sup>. Most participants came from a middle-class socio-economic background (12: medium, 6: upper, 2: lower class). Most were employed (17/20). Almost half were married (11/20), few were parents (4/20) and most had university degrees (16/20).

The interviews: The research questions addressed during interviews were informed by the research literature and were asked in an open-ended format (Kvale, 1996). Each interview, later transcribed and translated into English, lasted on average one hour. Questions were asked in broad terms to avoid bias. Themes emerged as part of participants' responses to the questions regarding their views on the way they lived their life in Greece in the present, past and future. Participants were encouraged to express their personal concerns and evaluations associated with social change by describing the reasons why they thought that the Greek politico-economic changes were occurring and whether and how, they believed they had contributed to this new

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<sup>9</sup> The empirical component of this study is inspired by the approaches of qualitative longitudinal studies (McLeod and Thomson, 2009: 60-69), which are based on the four-dimensional sociology of place-time-subjectivity-social).

social reality. The main target was the exploration of the ways Greeks express agency (personal concerns) in relation to structure (social change). Thematic analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) consisted of repeated readings of the translated transcripts of the interviews, focusing on meaningful and relevant categories and themes associated with present, past and future experiences and views on social change.

Trustworthiness and Sampling: All participants agreed to participate by signing a consent form stipulating confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed that they were not obliged to participate in the research and that they could stop at any time, refuse to answer a question or ask for clarifications. The recruitment strategy in Athens used 'snowballing' (Becker, 1963), with some of the participants introducing the researcher to others. 'Gatekeepers' (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2009) were used in both Syros and Lesbos, as a local 'mediator' was needed in order to secure trust between researcher and participants. The study focused on the exploration of subjective experiences of twenty participants and therefore a representative or random sample was impossible to achieve in statistical terms. It would therefore be more appropriate to refer to this study as an exploratory investigation (Hoaglin, Mosteller and Tukey, 1983) which revealed possible tendencies concerning the causal powers of social change. The participants were adults and were fully informed about the process; the questions did not raise any sensitive issues and therefore no ethical authorization had to be considered.

Limitations: a main issue raised during interviews relates to the possible bias that might have occurred by the researcher's subjective

interpretations regarding the interviewees' responses. The researcher's subjective evaluation and understanding is indeed one of the main limitations in qualitative research. However, in this case, the researcher's Greek origin and deep contextual understanding of Greek society (in terms of language, culture, social norms and mentalities) allowed the interpretation of the meaning of the participants' views as accurately as possible, as opposed to a researcher coming from a totally different culture. Possibly, an additional quantitative component of this study might have contributed more measurable and generalizable findings; nevertheless, this study as it presently stands, offers an initial, albeit indicative, analysis of the tendencies related to the causal powers of social change.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

The main frames of analysis were organized according to participants' experiences associated with: a) present, b) past, and c) future. The areas of focus were informed by the main aim of the research, namely to discover whether the changes in everyday life deriving from the crisis that Greeks are experiencing also involved an alteration in the ways that Greeks perceive and consider social reality and themselves within it (elements based on reflexivity).

#### **3.1 Present**

The main themes emerging from the interviews in relation to how Greeks perceive Greek society involve uncertainty, disappointment, pessimism, insecurity, fear, anger, negativism, pressure, anxiety and depression. More specifically, participants discussed the lack of trust

towards politicians and the disappointment they felt. Very characteristically, some of them said things like: “Nothing works, there is no meritocracy, nobody cares for our country’s interests” (Antonis, 29, Syros) or “I think that nobody is interested of those who govern this country” (Petros, 30, Syros). Participants perceived current Greek society in very pessimistic terms. They expressed negativity, pessimism and disorientation, particularly regarding any specific plan to improve their everyday lives: “We see our dreams get destroyed and our hopes for a better future disappear” (Emma, 27, Athens), “The way Greeks live their lives has now changed; now things are worse” (Amy, 38, Eresos), Most of them mentioned that the situation had always been difficult and unfair, but that now they had lost their hope for a better future. “The situation creates insecurity for everyone about the future” (Mina, 45, Eresos). They felt cornered and cross as they explained that they were trapped in a ‘system’ (referring to the way Greek government works) that was only concerned about maintaining its power without offering anything in return: “You can’t understand exactly what is happening or what the government wants to do. I can’t follow any more” (Maria, 37, Athens), “we lived part of our lives in a way we didn’t deserve, but the system [i.e. the Greek state] allowed us to do it. They didn’t stop us. They even encouraged us. So if the system works in a certain way you have no option but to follow” (Makis, 35, Syros).

Elder (1974: 10) explains that during periods of crisis, “control over situations becomes problematic when old ways are found lacking as means of dealing with social demands and satisfying basic needs or standards”. It now seems that Greeks feel that they are losing control as uncertainty and insecurity about the future prevent them from

producing concrete plans for the future. Especially the young generation experience enormous uncertainty and insecurity and they are trying to create their own mechanisms to cope with the unknown, especially regarding the working environment, as they also try to maintain their hope which will enable them to remain creative and productive in the present.

Regarding everyday life, participants explained that their way of living had changed dramatically and further difficulties were anticipated: “Professionally there is a constant feeling of insecurity. Not to get fired, to be good in my job, to get along with small salaries” (Emma, 27, Athens), “I have started thinking things that I wouldn’t have thought five years ago, like getting a job abroad” (Kety, 26, Athens). Participants explained that their main concern was how to make a living, not to lose their jobs, or how to get a job. They felt that they had to be grateful if they were still employed although the employment conditions were becoming more exploitative: “Professionally, I don’t know if I will have a job tomorrow and, personally, I have no desire to do anything joyful anymore. There is so much insecurity about everything” (Antonis, 29, Syros), “Psychologically it influences me a lot. If you see a society suffer and everyone in your environment suffer you can’t remain distant (Nicos, 35, Athens). According to Adams, the sense of self is likely to be troubled by the experience of uncertainty and lack of control over events (Adams, 2007: 13), and this seems to be exactly the case here. For May, the way people are affected by social change involves a gradual alteration in their ways of thinking as well as their habits and routines. As people behave and think differently, or as they resist doing so, they actually contribute to further social transformations (May, 2011: 374). It



is thus seen that participants experience social as well as personal change as they are forced to readjust their way of coping with difficulties and get used to new ways of living, although it is not necessarily their choice to do so: “I now try to control extensive consumerism” (Giorgos, 41, Eresos), “I have changed my financial plans and I have eliminated everyday needs” (Elias, 44, Athens), “I can’t save money any more” (Ira, 28, Athens), “I have to work more and I don’t have enough time to see my friends any more” (Emma, 27, Athens), “my personal life is influenced by my financial situation” (Grigoris, 34, Athens). For Adams, the impact of social change upon individuals and social groups depends on social structure and therefore is not predetermined (Adams, 2007: 139). As this empirical exploration shows, personal concerns are influenced by structural transformations (social/political/economic change), but each participant explains that this is happening in a different way as each of them is influenced distinctively. Still, all participants have been affected by the crisis to a greater or lesser extent. As will be further discussed, ways of coping and responding to these circumstances vary, as does the portion or extent of responsibility acknowledged by the participants.

### Responsibility

Although there is homogeneity to the answers concerning how difficult and challenging everyday life has become for Greeks, participants did not blame exclusively the impairment of the Greek political system, the incapability of Greek politicians to provide concrete solutions or the hostile attitude Greeks currently perceive from fellow European countries. Participants were coming to realise that they had contributed

(even if passively) to the formation of this new reality and they tried to explain their own share in responsibility: “I might have contributed through my tolerance” (Mina, 45), “yes, by doing nothing” (Petros, 30); “we all played a part” (Makis, 35); “we have all contributed” (Antonis, 29; Emma, 28; Melina, 32); “passively, yes” (Nicos, 35). This shows that, as Archer (2007) explains, agents do not perceive themselves as victims of the situation or as passive receivers of other peoples’ decisions, although they do feel insecure, uncertain, and are afraid of the future. Although there were repeated references to the lack of justice, the need for punishment, the inadequate health and educational systems, participants displayed a critical understanding of the current situation and of their own contribution and responsibility: “I tolerated a corrupted political system that buys votes” (Mina, 45, Eresos), “being silent means to consent” (Thodoris, 44). They even became more specific when they revealed how they had realised that certain social discontinuities and past practices<sup>10</sup> (eg the practices of ‘volema’ and ‘rousfeti’) had been harmful: “I found a job through someone I knew, through a ‘meso’, but I am not proud of it” (Ira, 38, Athens), “since everyone is using a ‘meso’, I have to do the same, it is inevitable” (Christiana, 36, Athens), “some people resist, but some others are ‘volemnoi’ and they don’t care. (...) I have asked for a ‘rousfeti’ in the past and this makes me responsible” (Antonis, 29, Syros), “there are times that I have avoided paying taxes. This means that I am part of the problem” (Grigoris, 34, Athens).

Archer (2007) refers to ‘reflexivity’ when she discusses the ability of individuals to consider themselves in relation to society (and *vice versa*); the responses discussed above display this exact ability, namely the fact

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<sup>10</sup> Definitions can be found at the section Greek society.

that agents have critically evaluated and deprecated established behaviours and practices which they have used repeatedly. They have come to realise what their part in responsibility is and, as will be further discussed, they seem willing to change old and harmful mentalities and practices that are no longer effective. However, it would be prejudicial to conclude that Greek citizens are willing to bear the whole responsibility for the inability of the Greek government to confront the dysfunctions and mutilation of Greek society. Participants were very critical towards Greek politicians and did not feel that they shared responsibility equally. On the contrary, there is an increasing demand for justice and for the punishment of those who are accountable for the prolonged downturn that Greece is going through.

### 3.2 Past

As has been discussed, New Modernity entails rapid changes which affect the older and younger generations as ways of living become more demanding, complicated and globalized. Beck and Giddens challenge tradition, among other social forces (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; Beck et al., 1994) by promoting the aspect of choice in agents' praxis. For instance, when participants were asked to compare the generation of their parents with their own, very characteristically they said: "things have changed in terms of technology and quality of life is now better" (Elias, 44, Athens), "we now consume much more compared to our parents" (Petros, 30, Syros), "things have changed, things were much more difficult for them" (Petros, 30, Syros), "our needs and demands are now more" (Melina, 32, Syros).

For both authors (Beck and Giddens), Risk Society is associated with the breakdown of social structures and the liberation of agents from these. For instance, as Amy (38, Eresos) explained, “the relationships of people are now freed. The way people meet and how they get married is now better and easier”, or “we are now more honest and open and thus more responsible in our relationships” (Mina, 45, Eresos). Archer (2010) refers to de-routinization when she explains that habitus or routine action is no longer enough, especially for younger generations, since employment, for instance, demands skills, techniques and adaptation to new knowledge and technologies that older generations did not even know about. Giorgos (41, Eresos) explained that “we now have the problem of finding a job. Most people are educated so they try to find a job related to their own area of expertise. In the past everybody had a job because people were willing to cover all sorts of labour needs, whereas now they are not willing to do that”, “competition was not such a big issue in the past” (Amy, 38, Eresos), “technology is now an important part of life” (Melina, 32, Syros), “professionally things have changed dramatically” (Kety, 26, Athens). Thus, as the new epoch becomes more challenging and stressful, individuals are called upon to find new ways of coping: “we can’t just repeat what our parents used to do, it is not helpful any more” (Melina, 32), “we need to change our way of voting, not to trust the politicians like our parents did” (Antonis, 29, Syros), “it’s better to learn to live with what we have right now, stop asking for more” (Petros, 30, Syros), “we now need to stand on our own feet, not to rely on our parents” (Kety, 26, Athens). The above responses indicate the participants’ awareness concerning the current situation and how things have changed in relation to the past generation. This

means that they have thought through and compared the differences between the two generations.

### Criticism

Participants displayed a rather critical approach regarding old practices, possibly because, as Archer (2010a: 297) explains, the cultural capital transmitted to children by the parents “is rapidly ceasing to be a capital good”. Such cultural capital refers to the ways of thinking and acting in a manner that actually works (or used to work) for the benefit of agents. Therefore, practices like those discussed above, inherited by the younger generation from the older, are no longer effective, since, as the participants explained, they realise that such ways of thinking and acting have now turned out to be negative and damaging: “It seems that our parents’ generation let the current political system fall apart in front of their eyes as all ‘voleftikan’ from this situation by asking for ‘rousfetiá’<sup>11</sup> (Emma 27, Athens), “we need to be more fair, not to ask for favours as our parent did to help their kids” (Lina, 27, Syros). At the same time the problems and concerns of the younger generation differ significantly in relation to the worries of the older generations. This means that the ‘traditional’ practices (or routine actions) of the older generations seem not to be helpful any more. In that sense the need for reflexivity is more relevant than ever before and this is possibly the reason why participants became increasingly critical towards the older generation: “unlike our parents, whenever we see something that is not proper we need to identify and report it and more importantly we need to stop being ‘volemnoi’ (Maria, 37, Athens). “It’s also our parents’ fault. Most

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<sup>11</sup> Translations of the terms in Greek can be found in the section on Greek Society.

have taught their children to look after themselves and their own interest” (Antonis, 29, Syros), “if the situation is as bad as it is, this means that they (our parents) did something wrong” (Amy, 38, Eresos), “maybe they were the generation who thought that everything will be done by somebody else and this is why we relied on others and we didn’t really try” (Makis, 35, Syros). Thus it now seems that the young generation has become more critical towards the older one, as they now realise that certain patterns rooted in past mentalities and needs have to be abandoned and replaced.

### Nostalgia

Although participants were primarily judgemental towards their parents’ attitudes and customs, they were also nostalgic for certain characteristics deriving from the past generation: “we need to capitalize on the heritage of our parents” (Georgia, 38, Eresos), “we should imitate their contribution”(Mina, 45, Eresos), “inevitably we follow similar patterns” (Melina, 32). Participants made repeated references to the values and principles inherited from their parents and the need to follow these. They also mentioned the importance of family and how their parents relied on this: “there are things from our parents’ generation that we should keep, like simplicity and family respect” (Eleni, 34, Athens), “friends and family were more important back then” (Grigoris, 34, Athens). Some even realised that there were things to learn from the past generation: “our parents lived during difficult periods and they should have passed the knowledge of coping with difficulties to the following generation” (Maro, 37, Athens), “we can use our knowledge to improve what our parents did in the past” (Georgia, 38, Eresos),

“possibly there are quite a few things that we can copy from them” (Grigoris, 34, Athens), “in the past people had less things but they were happier, whereas now we have more but we are more dissatisfied” (Lina, 27, Syros). According to Inkeles (1955: 14-15) “parents who have experienced extreme social change seek to raise their children differently from the way in which they were brought up, purposively adapting their child rearing practices to train children better suited to meet life in the changed world as the parents see it”. This perspective assumes a high degree of future awareness, rationality and choice in parental behaviour, and thus seems most applicable to situations in which family survival is not at stake (Elder, 1994)<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, although criticism was the main theme of the responses associated with the past, recognition and nostalgia for past generations’ values and principles were also involved, showing recognition of the past generation and their help and support for the new one.

### 3.3 Future

After discussing the views of participants regarding their disappointment about the present situation and their critical evaluations of the past, the inevitable question that emerged concerned their views about the future of Greek society. As has been indicated, participants were able to critically evaluate the current social reality; they discussed their part in responsibility and assessed (in a rather judgmental manner) the impact of the old generation in relation to the present circumstances. It becomes clear that everyday life has changed and that participants had

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<sup>12</sup> Most of the participants discussed the difficulties their parents had to go through as they grew up in turbulent political periods: during the years of poverty after the second World War, the civil war and then the Military junta (1967-1974). Greece started getting back on its feet after 1980.

been struggling to find a way to cope with the new reality as life had become extremely unpredictable. For Jordan and Pile, the sociology of social change investigates “the times and places when and where society becomes different ... [as] necessarily dealing with situations when things are strange, when the new and the old rub up against each other or evolve into another social form” (Jordan and Pile, 2002: xiv, quoted in Adams, 2007: ix). Participants’ narratives revealed a realisation of the alteration that they had experienced at a personal, professional, collective and even national level. What remains to be considered is how they want future Greek society to look and what are they going to do in order to see their hopes and dreams materialized.

### Change

Participants were asked to indicate how they would like Greek society to be in the future; responses revealed personal and collective concerns associated with the way they would like Greek society to look. Such concerns relate to fundamental and rather basic requirements that each citizen would request from the society h/she lives in. However the lack of these, and the need to fulfill such basic prerequisites, further supports participants’ ongoing disappointment and frustration regarding the impairment of Greek state and society. The most characteristic answers were as follows: “I would like a more organized society, with moral values and justice, able to protect citizens and the environment” (Giorgos, 41, Eresos), “I would like education and public health to be provided for everyone equally” (Amy, 38, Eresos), “meritocracy, transparency and respect” (Maro, 37, Athens), “to be able to make plans about the future” (Eleni, 34, Athens), “unemployment and suicide rates



must decrease, we can't afford any more misery and unhappiness" (Petros, 30, Syros), "I only want justice" (Elias, 44, Athens). Meritocracy, justice, transparency, a good educational and health system, a well-organized state: these are the themes that participants mentioned repeatedly. Furthermore, they also expressed the reasonable desire for feelings of uncertainty, disappointment and insecurity to cease. More specifically, they focused on certain areas for improvement: "I would destroy the mass media and promote education" (Eleni, 34, Athens), "I would like patriots to govern this country" (Melina, 32, Syros), "I would change the mentality of Greeks" (Grigoris, 34, Athens), "I would make the people who are responsible pay for what they have done" (Theodoris, 44, Eresos), "I would change our system of values and principles" (Mina, 44, Eresos). Most participants explained that the above-mentioned requests related to on-going problems that did not appear because of the crisis, although these were now magnified because they could not be hidden anymore and the necessity for these issues to be resolved was more relevant than ever. Therefore the inevitable question that emerged is how these problems could be resolved and, more importantly, what agents were going to do about them.

### How?

Participants became more specific when they were asked what they could do in order for things to change. Few referred to collective actions and others to personal improvements: "Through any form of resistance" (Elias, 44, Athens) "taking part in non-profit organisations, join demonstrations" (Ira, 38, Athens). However, personal involvement was

mentioned more often: “I would first consider what changes I could make to myself and in relation to others” (Ira, 38, Athens). “I try to change my habits, my way of living” (Giorgos, 41, Eresos), “in my everyday life I try to be as conscious as I can in my decisions” (Amy, 38, Eresos), “the most important thing is to be able to realise what is going on. And to be aware of my own responsibility. So just realising that is a way of changing things” (Christina, 36, Athens).

It is very interesting to note that, although some answers involved collective actions, most responses referred to means of personal improvement or support through the family: “To give an everyday example to my kids so that they will grow up according to certain principles” (Theodoris, 44, Eresos), “to be as good as I can in my job, pay my taxes and pass to my children the right values” (Lina, 27, Syros), “I try as friend, as mother, as wife to improve things on my own (...) as an individual there is not much that I can do, but as a mother I can do more” (Georgia, 38, Eresos). Such responses reveal the significance of reflexivity, as they constitute clear examples of individuals who consider themselves critically in relation to social reality and *vice versa*. Furthermore, there is a tendency to disrupt habitual ways of life (eg ‘volema’, ‘meso’ ‘ohaderfismos’); according to Elder, such disruption produces new stimuli which elicit attention and arouse consciousness of self and others (Elder, 1974:10). It is thus seen that participants became critical towards themselves and that they did not anticipate any sort of external resolution. On the contrary they confronted the difficulties by considering ways of personal improvement. It is also evident that resilience through the family does play a significant role in countering

the crisis, but personal reflexivity and critical evaluation of the situation enables individuals to become more prepared.

### What helps?

Lazarus (1998) perceives social change through the 'transactional stress theory', according to which individuals evaluate events as harmful, threatening or challenging, but then consider ways of coping with the situation. Thus, although participants perceived social reality as challenging, they also explained how they coped with the difficulties; some participants were trying to find their own means of dealing with their own concerns, whereas others shared their experiences with people close to them: "I tell myself that things will improve" (Amy, 38, Eresos), "I think that Greece has everything, they are jealous of us" (Makis, 35, Syros), "The more prepared I get, the better I feel" (Eleni, 34, Athens), "I dream" (Nicos, 35, Athens), "I offer my help to people who need it" (Theodoris, 44, Eresos), "I share my thoughts with those who feel the same way" (Antonis, 29, Syros), "I talk with my husband" (Georgia, 38, Eresos) "I try to get informed" (Kety, 26, Athens). Thus, priority is given to their personal everyday life and their own concerns. This indicates a tendency in the participants to rely primarily on personal and subjective means of support. It is interesting to note that they did not expect external aid or any governmental provision, which further supports the initial description of lack of trust and disappointment, as well as their ability to become reflexive about their lives and society.

### 3.4 Agency and Action

Following the completion of this project, the main question raised concerns the connection between agency and action. Although

participants displayed critical understanding and awareness of the current situation and seemed willing to disrupt the prolongation of damaging old mentalities, what remains unclear is how the statements of participants can potentially be transformed into action. Dietz and Burns (1992) explain that, in order for agency to be attributed to a social actor, four criteria must be met: a) the actor must have power and be able to make a difference (effective agency), b) her/his action must be intentional (intentional agency), c) the actor must operate within a certain degree of freedom, so that action will not necessarily be projected (unconstrained), d) agents must be reflexive, monitoring the effects of their actions, and use their knowledge to modify the basis of their actions (reflexive agency). Therefore, a combination of the above-mentioned criteria has to be synthesized in order for action to follow. What has been concluded in this study is that agents display the ability to become reflexive and also that they have expressed an intention to produce action. Furthermore, given that Greek democracy allows freedom of expression, unconstrained action may be perceived as possible and the aspect of power can be secured if agents (Greeks) begin acting in a collective rather than individualistic manner. However, as Dietz and Burns explain, agents are restricted in producing action due to structural constraints, or because actions may be seen as necessary or as impossible because of structural rules, or because agents' actions might be restricted by other agents. As the situation in Greece remains fluid and uncertain, agents may feel restricted in producing collective courses of action because they cannot operate on a stable basis. It seems that Greeks remain in a defensive mode as they anticipate further difficulties, and feel threatened and cornered by the prospect of additional

measures. Therefore, even if the conditions or the emergence of action may appear to be available, it seems that, as things stand, participants feel more confident in producing a different course of action at a personal and interpersonal level, rather than in organizing a collective form of reaction. They have already started altering established mentalities and embodied behaviours; collective action may follow. But what remains extremely significant is the tendency towards disruption of the habitual or routine actions inherited from older generations. Since agency is perceived as a continuum rather than a static entity, and circumstances remain fluid in Greece, any form of action may occur at any point in the near future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The main questions that this study has discussed concern: a) the investigation of the connection between social change and agency and b) the exploration of the role of Greek people in the formation of the current social change in Greek society. By answering the above questions, this article aims to initiate further sociological investigations regarding the social change that more societies may have to undergo as they experience analogous circumstances related to the global economic depression.

The answer to the first question offered by this article relates to reflexivity (the ability of individuals to consider themselves in relation to themselves and the social environment, Archer, 2007). In line with Archer's initial argument regarding this exact link and Giddens' and

Beck's emphasis on reflexivity in Modernity, it has been shown here that: I) regarding the present, participants were fully aware of the current situation, they were able to explain how much their everyday life had changed and displayed critical understanding towards the reasons behind the change. They also expressed critical awareness towards themselves as they recognized their own part in and degree of responsibility by outlining specific practices and harmful mentalities. II) In terms of the past, participants were capable of identifying damaging mentalities of the older generation and were conscious of what went wrong in the past. At the same time they were able to differentiate between the harmful and helpful elements inherited from the previous generation, whereas they became nostalgic regarding the morals and principles valued by their parents. III) Regarding the future, participants thoroughly evaluated the on-going dysfunction of Greek society and explained the aspects they believed should be resolved. Most promoted the importance of personal involvement and indicated ways of improving themselves and their own families. The above findings further support May's (2011) argument regarding the way people respond to social change, which is related with the gradual alteration in their way of thinking, in their habits and routines.

The ability of participants to become reflexive and to critically consider present, past and future circumstances further supports the view that social change is associated with agency in terms of reflexivity; participants were able to communicate (or externalize) their inner concerns and, as Chalari (2009) argues, by considering their inner and external worlds, they produced critical accounts of their own everyday lives. Such critical accounts indicated their awareness of the way society

is changing, but also of the fact that agents themselves actively contribute to such change as they realise the structural dysfunctions and contradictions as well as their own part in responsibility and willingness to contribute to changing things. In accordance with Mouzelis (2008), social change is thus understood through the ways actors handle contradictions and the ways they change or maintain the contradictory status quo.

The answer to the second question is related to the above discussion; participants were able to identify and disrupt harmful mentalities by means of reflexivity. In accordance to Archer's (2010a) view regarding the critical evaluation of older generations, the new generation were determined not to pass on previous and unhelpful ways of thinking to their children and were willing to change their own habits and patterns. This critical stance is further supported by the fact that attitudes like those of 'ohaderfismos', 'tzampatzis' or 'volema' were not reported or used in the interviews. Therefore, the role of Greeks themselves in the formation of social change is crucial, as their way of thinking seems to be changing, their everyday life is becoming significantly different and, more importantly, they have become more critical towards themselves and more conscious of their own contribution to the improvement of society. Therefore the way that Greeks contribute to change in Modern Greek society is related to their ability to consider the crisis in a reflexive and critical manner, rather than to passively receive social, political and economic transformations. Furthermore, participants reported a tendency towards personal improvement and subjective ways of handling difficulties, without diminishing collective actions. Therefore, social change actually effects institutional as well as psychological

development as Pinquart and Silbereisen (2004) support. Thus, it seems that participants have stopped anticipating that a solution to their problems will come from external factors (like the Greek state), and are trying to cope with the increasing everyday difficulties by changing themselves, their habits, their way of life and patterns and the way they raise their children.

Furthermore, it is important to note that participants provided primarily homogenous views which were not significantly affected by their age group, gender, social, economic or educational background, or geographical area of origin. This means that all participants were affected by the crisis, albeit in different ways and to different degrees. Furthermore, the projections of participants regarding future Greek society did not relate to excessive demands for an easy or luxurious life. On the contrary, what becomes clear from their narratives is that Greek society and the Greek state have suffered a prolonged period of dysfunctional operation. The current crisis brought to the surface impairments which could no longer remain hidden and the inability of Greek society and state to handle the crisis was fully revealed. Every society responds differently to such social phenomena and this is related (*inter alia*) to the history and culture of a society. As discussed, Modern Greek history distinguishes that country from Northern European nations, since during the periods when Europe enjoyed stability and progress Greeks had to resolve their own domestic political and social discontinuities. This is probably the reason why Greece is currently experiencing the economic crisis in such an intense manner and the why Greek society and way of living is altering so dramatically.



It may also be the case that Greece is signalling the beginning of a chain of social changes that may follow in Southern Europe. We need to pay particular attention to the Greek case and the social dimension of the crisis, precisely because it may enable us to encounter possible future 'metastases' of the politico-economic discontinuities associated with recession. The Greek case can be seen as an example of a society that is changing in real time for economic, political and circumstantial reasons and Greeks must be perceived as agents who are actively contributing to this change by altering their own ways of thinking and of evaluating social reality.

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