

Policing the Crisis: the Other Side of the Story

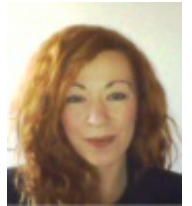
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By **Rosa Vasilaki**

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The paper looked at the views and experiences of police officers during the years of the recent economic and political crisis. The story of the protesters and those who have been resisting the austerity measures in Greece is well documented, however, the story of those who have been tasked to reinforce – via repression – the austerity reforms, remains to be told. The police have not been the object of sociological analysis yet and for a variety of reasons they are a taboo-subject, unless police misconduct or police violence is in question. The rejection, even hate against the police is associated with the political history and the structure of the political landscape in Greece. Since 2008, this relationship has further deteriorated, and the crisis which hit Greece in 2010 has seen an unprecedented use of the police, particularly the special forces, and this has exacerbated feelings of mistrust and rejection. A common explanation for such rejection and mistrust is the use of violence: the police are represented as an institution where violence is endemic – and indeed structural violence is part and parcel of the way police officers perform their duties but also of the way police hierarchy works. However, I argued that this is a partial explanation which does not allow us to discern the larger political stakes at play and the political use of the police by the State, especially during times of crisis of the political system.



Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork the paper aimed to shed light on the yet unexplored and under-analysed experiences of police officers in Greece during the years of the crisis. My findings demonstrate that police officers regard the protesters with sympathy and solidarity and even express their disappointment that demonstrations are less populous and less dynamic since 2012. Naturally, dealing with the paradox of having to suppress a protest with which one agrees, and may identify with, to the extent that the crisis has hit everyone in the lower and middle classes in Greece, is a difficult position to be. How have police officers dealt with this contradiction? The standard response is that they followed orders. Indeed, the strictly hierarchical nature of the institution does not allow for negotiation or criticism, but the arbitrariness of orders, especially the overuse of riot police for any kind of protesting and with no discrimination between types of demonstrators, was something that was largely commented upon. The dogma of ‘αστυνομοκρατία’ (omnipresence of the police) was largely criticised by police officers as both inefficient and unethical, but also as a strategy of the State or the government to use the police as a scapegoat: to use the police as its hard facet in order to systematically disorient public opinion and to direct anger away from those responsible for the economic crisis.

The relationship between Golden Dawn and the police was also addressed. On the one hand, the paper looked at the context which makes far right ideas appealing, as well as the reasons which make the police more vulnerable to them. On the other hand, it challenged the moral panic created by the media, it questioned the targeting and representation of the police as a far-right institution and it highlighted the political perils and analytical weaknesses of such an approach.

Rosa Vasilaki has gained her PhD in Sociology from the University of Bristol and her PhD in History from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Her research on social history focused on the transformation of gender and political identities in Greece throughout the interwar years, the Resistance and Civil War. Her research on sociology revolved around the challenge of religious identities and multiculturalism to secularism as political ethos and the

issues raised by postsecularism to critical social theory. Rosa's current research project is entitled 'Policing the Crisis: The Views and Experiences of Greek Police Officers in Times of Turmoil'.