

Unsafe Texts: Interiority and Knowledge in the Time of Crisis

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8:25 pm

We arrive at the Athens airport. My nephew can't pick us up because he is working until late. We take two taxis to bring us home. On the way the driver is quiet, barely responds when I apologize for having taken him out to the countryside at night, but at least, I tell him, he will be rewarded as we will drive by the seaside. "After five hours at the airport, seeing the sea is a real reward" is his response. I ask him if he really waited for five hours to pick up a ride. Yes, he did. He can't leave the airport without a ride, he tells me, because the cost of gas and tolls will eat up the day's earnings.

10:13 pm

My nephew has returned from work and the two of us go out to buy gyro sandwiches. We buy three, along with three small shish kebabs. We pay €13 (\$17.00), the extra pita is on the house. On the way there my nephew tells me that he picks up day employment—today installing awnings, other times installing aluminum doors and frames. He works eight to ten hours at the awnings, ten to twelve hours at the aluminum job. He makes €25 (\$33.00) and €30 (\$40.00) a day, respectively, and pays €12 (\$16.00) for gas. His girlfriend works close to the house at a café, eight- to ten-hour shifts, makes €25 a day, but

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doesn't get paid if the café has no customers. On Tuesday she will attend the commencement ceremony at the University of Athens, receiving her master's degree in the history and philosophy of science. My nephew has forgotten by now that he is a university graduate, too.

SATURDAY, MAY 24, 2014

8:30 am

We take our car to the repair shop, and the talk with the mechanic revolves around next day's Euro- and (repeat) municipal and local administrative elections. The neighborhood where the shop is located used to be full of car repair shops and garages but now shows the effects of the crisis—most of them have closed and sit empty. A lowbrow restaurant across from the garage is being refurbished: the owner burned it in order to collect the insurance money, we learn from the mechanic, and now a contractor and his team are busy painting it and replacing doors and windows. The mechanic points at them: "Not one Greek worker," he says. "The contractor is Albanian and the workers are from up there [which can mean anything from Albania to Russia, Romania, and the Ukraine]." Keeping in mind the daily wages that I have heard about last night, we all wonder why there are no Greeks working there. The mechanic offers no explanation but tells us about his two sons. The elder (a university graduate who did graduate work in the United Kingdom) works at a bank on eight-month contracts for a salary that has been slashed five times in four years; he makes €920 (\$1,242.00) a month. The younger son is the regional manager for one of the European multinational retail companies; he works twelve-hour days and his salary has been dropped to €780 (\$1053.00) per month.

9:30 am

Waiting for the car to be fixed, we make our way downtown. Jet lag hits and we need to have some breakfast. We sit at one of the new cafés that have opened on the periphery of Syntagma Square.¹ Two glasses of fresh orange juice and two filtered coffees come to €19.90 (\$27.00). It stings badly. Athens is almost empty because of the elections. I go to my favorite bookstore to buy books for my nephew and his girlfriend—books are on sale, and I buy one of the recent novels that have come out in Greece since Christmas, Auguste Corteau's *The Book of Catherine*, for €7.50 (\$10.00). I go to the hairdresser's—one of the oldest in Athens—where every single employee worries whether they will have a job come Monday, or in a week's time, or next month. I order a ham sandwich with mustard; it comes and I pay €2.30 (\$3.00).

4:30 pm

On the way back home I stand on a platform waiting for the metro to come. I am approached by a tall, lithe, well-dressed African man who asks me if this is the right metro to the airport. I tell him that it is. At the transfer station we exit together. We've just missed the transfer train, we wonder when the next train will come, and he asks me if I am Greek. He starts telling me that he is in Greece because his brother was on the boat that was carrying seventy immigrants, mainly from Somalia, Eritrea, and Syria, that capsized on May 6.² His brother hasn't been located yet. He tells me that he works for a

¹ See Neni Panourgía, "The Squared Constitution of Dissent," <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/252-the-squared-constitution-of-dissent>, in Penelope Papailias, "Beyond the 'Greek Crisis': Histories, Rhetorics, Politics," *Field Sites—Hotspots, Cultural Anthropology Online*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.culanth.org/fieldsites/243-beyond-the-greek-crisis-histories-rhetorics-politics>.

² See Barbara Miller, "Migrants Drown after Boats Capsize off Greek Islands," *ABC News*, May 6, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-06/migrants-drown-after-boats-capsized-off-greek-island/5432498>.

migrant organization in Malmö, Sweden, and asks me why Greeks are so glum and unfriendly. I try to talk to him about *The Crisis*, the sudden loss of everything, especially the sudden loss of any prospect for the future, in addition to the loss of quotidian livelihood. I catch myself, realizing that I am talking to a Somali, and I say so. He tells me that precisely because he is a Somali he can tell me that Greeks should be more cheerful, that things will look up eventually. He thinks for a while until he decides that this crisis is a different thing from the one he knows in Somalia. "How so?" I ask. "Our crisis is long term, endemic, systemic," he says—he pauses for a moment—"and we continue to smile through it."

SUNDAY, MAY 25, 2014

5:00 pm

I am meeting an old friend for coffee at the Athens Hilton. We both decide to have fresh orange juice instead of more caffeine. My younger nephew joins us toward the end. He is famished. He asks for a club sandwich. It arrives, a large plate that includes a sandwich of immense proportions, salad, and freshly made French fries. Our two juices cost €19.00 (\$25.00) with tip; his sandwich, the same.

6:30 pm

I go to the polling place to vote. Cutoff time is 7:00 pm. There is a line and my nephew and I wait in it. The place is very familiar to me; it's my old high school. I map the place out for him: this is where I trained for gymnastics; I am voting in my old classroom (first grade of gymnasium); the big sheets of metal that block the view from and to the outside were installed in 1971 on the behest of my mother, who taught at the school, so that we, a girls' school, wouldn't flirt with the boys from the boys' school. As I am in the booth voting, I hear the Court Observer call out, "Please be quick. There are other people waiting to vote." I walk out of the voting booth and I remind her that her comments are highly irregular, indeed illegal, because they can be taken as voter intimidation. We go back and forth for a few minutes until I go in again to vote on the municipal elections. As I am voting, something hits me on the head, and I realize that someone has crumpled up all the ballots that he didn't use and has tossed them straight onto my head. I exit the booth just in time to see him walk away.

MONDAY, MAY 26, 2014

2:30 am

It is plainly clear by now that the Coalition of Leftist Forces, SYRIZA, has won the Eurovote with 26.7 percent of the vote. In sum, the anti-austerity, anti-Troika parties have won 11 of the 21 Europarliament seats. Adding the 3 seats won by the neo-Nazis, the anti-Troika, anti-austerity forces have won overwhelmingly. The government coalition of the Right (New Democracy) and Center-Socialists (PASOK, which entered the race as Elia) have scraped together 7 seats. The government spokesman tries to spin the unspinnable, but the truth remains that whether from the left or from the criminal extreme right, voters have positioned themselves squarely against the discourses of debt and the pragmatics of austerity.

THERE IS A LONG-STANDING COMMITMENT that anthropology has to an ideal form of its subject. While the subject itself, ontologically, is never the same (in the sense that even the iconic “Nuer” are ontologically boundless), it is always an already fixed epistemological object, an exercise in the dialectical dance of otherness initiated and effectuated by the anthropologist. In this short essay I want to explore the process and to push the boundaries of the production of anthropological knowledge in cases where the distance between the anthropologist and that epistemological subject is minimized as the latter, simultaneously, challenges the proxemics of that distance. I will argue that this tension—not inevitably inherent in that relationship—is particularly salient and becomes apparent when viewed through the challenges presented when research takes place under conditions of crisis, such as the recent political and economic meltdown in Greece. The specificity of these circumstances produces a constellation of methodological and epistemological queries, and depends on multi-sited research (through various media, locations, discourses, and epistemic structures, as George Marcus has delineated it), as it demands the ethnographic richness that can be attained only through long-term, in-depth engagement with the object of study. It treads on dangerous and unsafe grounds, as its object—“the crisis”—has an embodied materiality (witnessed on the bodies of the citizens) while it is being wished away as soon as possible. What knowledges, then, become possible under circumstances of crisis, especially a crisis that is itself the object of objections and suspicion as to what exactly it comprises and what exactly it constitutes?

I considered writing about something relatively minor; for instance, at the beginning of the current crisis in Greece, in the summer of 2011, while I was having dinner at a restaurant in the old part of Athens my bag was stolen (something that carried a weight of its own, as my bag contained items that had belonged to my late parents). And a month later our summer house was burglarized, and a CD player and speakers that did not work were taken. I contemplated telling what I thought was really funny, the story of a group of Romanian burglars who had burglarized some Albanian households in the area, and at one of those houses, the family dog had grabbed the burglar by the foot as he was entering the house and had taken his slipper (I thought at the time, “burglars go to work in slippers?”), while in another instance the Albanian tenant took a whiff of the burglar and yelled at him in Greek.

But now, as hard as I try, it is impossible for me to find one instance that can bring some mirth to this situation that is called The Greek Crisis. Analyses are inadequate. Taking a position on this or the other side appears to be propelled by an internal need of the speaker to speak, but without the ability (for anyone) to conceptualize or articulate the immense complex that has brought the country to this catastrophe. Every morning I wake up in agony for the future of the youth and deeply grateful that our elders—parents, grandparents, and other ascending kin—died before this unraveling.

The country used to have a certain level of manufacturing and production—nothing too grand, but of appropriate size. In 1980, upon entering the then European Economic Community, the country was self-sufficient in sugar as in most of its food production. Its tourism was manageable, as was its consumerism—meaning that then one would not see (the equivalent of) three Porsche Cayennes parked on the main thoroughfare of our small, seaside vacation village. Schools were teaching us words and subjects and ideas that we could use and that enriched us, even in the haphazard, idiosyncratic, and antipedagogical manner that they did, and they were handing us books from the previous years that we couldn’t destroy when we were finished with

them, as the practice has been for at least twenty years now. Christmas shopping and the Saturday night outing stood their ground because they didn't happen every day. All this, though, was (as always) the result of a society that understands the dialectic between obligation and right—the right to a pleasant, if not always easy, quotidian life and the obligation to the social whole and the upcoming generations.

Every single stone that my father set upon another, anything that he built, made, or produced, was “for the girls” (for us, his daughters). The thought never crossed his mind to sell anything off in order to invest the money in speculation or hedge funds or take a vacation or buy a new car. What he could buy in cash he did; what he could not remained in other people's possession. He never oiled any part of the state machine in order to expedite anything, to acquire something that was not legal, to find jobs for his children. And a few other million fathers and mothers were just the same. But they were not enough, and when the world capital balked and society became a commodity the world over, we hit a snag.

And I am thinking, let's just say that the country starts anew, declares bankruptcy officially, and we start with new processual principles, new structures that index both interpersonal relations and the relationship of the citizen to the state. I am thinking, let's just say that something like this is possible despite everything that anthropology and sociology and political science have told us all along, that it is impossible. Let's play along and say that all this can be done. Debt write-off: no obliteration of the future generations, no more suicides of senior citizens who cannot feed themselves or take care of their spouses or their grown children, no more violent neo-Nazis. Will all those other millions of tax evaders whose evasion made them millions upon millions of euros start paying taxes? Will those who have built illegally in burned forests, paying the requisite *bakshish* (bribe, compensation, kickback) to policemen, building inspectors, civil engineers, and urban planners, accept the demolition of their illegal buildings for the good of the country? The corrupt politicians who ever since the restoration of democracy in 1974 (and a half-ass democracy at that) caressed and encouraged and goaded soccer as the language of the national psyche exactly the way that the junta had done prior to them, so that they allowed hooliganism to spill out of all bounds and to contaminate all aspects of political and social life to the point where slogans such as “burn that whore the parliament” and “prime minister, son of a whore” came to be considered legitimate and truthful, all these politicians who have spent their political lives making money and turning citizens into compliant and complicit snitches instead of active citizens—will they put the gun in their mouths?

CRISIS

Reinhart Koselleck has afforded to “crisis” a “diagnostic and predictive meaning,” a meaning that allows crisis to become “the indicator of a new awareness,” an awareness that comes to philosophers of history who can correctly see “the turning point” when it happens in the circularity of history, something that, Koselleck argues, eludes the philosophers of the state who believe in progress and, hence, cannot recognize crisis as such.³ But what progress can be borne out of a crisis that is experientially split between the state and the citizens, where the two are positioned at the diametrically opposite ends of its event? Where can any sense of stability be located in the spectrum that constitutes this experience? And how to write about it?

³ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Boston: MIT Press, 1988), 161.

THERE IS NO END TO MOURNING

For the first time in my life I find myself unable to say anything, anything that might be of any help to anyone, that would help to elucidate anything, that would extend a hand of recognition, understanding, explanation. Analysis fails me daily, or I fail analysis. “There is no end to mourning in Athens,” my nephew’s girlfriend wrote to me in 2012, as Athens was burning once again by still another demonstration turned violent by the hooligans of soccer who coincide with the hooligans of politics who coincide with the neo-Nazis who infiltrate demonstrations in Greece and who manage to disorient a youth that is politically innocent—no, not just innocent but also ignorant, easily manipulated, a youth that is handed an expedient way to scream its desperation without being given a means to organize its anger. That is precisely what one of these demonstrators asked for: a way to organize his anger. Stones get picked up and thrown at “powers that be”—whatever they be: the police, the special forces, politicians; the marble steps of Constitution Square and the surrounding luxury hotels are broken into pieces, dislodged, and hurled. The graffiti on them, two summers ago, read: “No more luxuries (τέρμα στα λούσα).” Now graffiti reads: “We are the last generation that saw the radiators working.” Education and employment—the motors that integrate youth into society—have been dismantled, thus evacuating the social space of any signification. How can this desperation, this anger, be organized? Who will organize it? Who will narrate it, when it stubbornly resists any narration? “Cultural silence,” Renato Rosaldo has said.⁴ Cultural silence—when nothing can be said anymore, nothing can be articulated, nothing that could drown out the lies that are being said, give a hand to desperation, offer even a patched-up *logos*, a patched-up way of seeing.

Therefore, right now, in this crisis that is not “becoming,” is not “progressive,” a crisis that came from the specificity of hypervalue and hypercommodification, of a crude capitalism the likes of which we have not seen since the days of Manchester at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in this crisis which does not take us anywhere, which does not carry us out of anything into anything, in this crisis, who has replaced “the most remotely occluded and transparently mediating figure” that Gayatri Spivak identified as “woman,”⁵ now that this figure has become the migrant, the refugee, the student, the pensioner, the university graduate, the precariat, the daily worker? Who is now the “woman” whom Spivak describes as remotely occluded and transparently mediating? The 63 percent of the youth who are unemployed? The 27.5 percent of the unemployed in the general population? Maybe those who commit suicide: in 2010 there was a 40 percent hike in the rate of suicide over all previously recorded years in the history of the country. In 2011 there was a 40 percent hike over that of 2010.⁶ The biopower that is being exercised by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the European Central Bank proceeds from the molar to the molecular in ways that become visible only when

⁴ Renato Rosaldo, “From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 77–98.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” in “Marx after Derrida,” special issue, *Diacritics* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 73–93.

⁶ On crisis-related suicides, see M. Economou, M. Madianos, C. Theleritis, L. E. Peppou, and C. N. Stefanis, “Increased Suicidality amid Economic Crisis in Greece,” *Lancet* 378, no. 9801 (October 2011): 14–59; Marina Karanikolos, Philipa Mladovsky, et al., “Financial Crisis, Austerity, and Health in Europe,” *Lancet* 381, no. 9874 (April 2013): 1323–31; *ELSTAT Annual Report, 2011*, http://www.statistics.gr/portal/page/portal/ESYE/BUCKET/General/A12_ETHSIA_EKTHESH_AXIOLOGSHS_STAT_PROGRAMMATOS_en.pdf.

we consider Joan Scott’s “evidence of the experience” on the microlevel of what is invisible on the surface,⁷ a poverty that doesn’t “show” yet. Let me explain what I mean:

At the small village where we spend our summers there is a family that has always been of limited means—the father was a tailor, the mother a greengrocer. When the children grew up, the son acquired a job as a municipal employee, collecting the garbage, servicing the equipment for the water treatment plant, and being the occasional handyman for the vacation homes in the area. The daughter married a bank teller and moved twelve miles away and, speaking English and French, worked as a concierge in a hotel in Delphi. The father died many years ago, and the mother had already closed the greengrocery and was living on her husband’s pension with some support from her unmarried son. The family’s clothes were always clean and well made even if not fancy or extraordinary; food was always on their table, plentiful but not wasted; the daughter’s children had extra tutoring in English and in French, and the mother chipped in to augment her own mother’s meager pension. When the crisis struck and the bottom fell out of everything and public sector salaries and pensions were slashed, and slashed again, and then again, and once more—four times in the course of eighteen months—the mother’s pension was brought down to €400 (\$540.00) a month; the son’s salary was cut from €1,400 (\$1,890.00) to €1,200 (\$1,600.00), then to €800 (\$1,080.00), then to €600 (\$800.00) per month; the daughter lost her job and her husband lost all his bonuses. This extended family of four adults and two children subsist on €1,800 (\$2,400.00) a month. But this is a poverty that doesn’t show on the outside. The family—precisely because of the social structures that have made Greece Greece—owns their homes. They own a plot of land with a small olive grove on it from which they source their olive oil. The son goes hunting for boar and migratory birds, and the mother has entered into the barter economy that sprang up the moment that the IMF walked in—just as in Argentina and other places before that. She gathers wild greens from the forest and collects the oranges and lemons from the trees in our garden and exchanges them for fish or a chicken or flour. She expertly mends the family’s clothes, meticulously shines their shoes, and puts less, much less, food on the table.

Or consider the food kitchen at Kolonaki, the very affluent, old neighborhood of Athens where, only in 2009, apartments were being sold for millions of euros, where a year’s rent for the stores would be in the millions. Old residents there, most of them from the old-moneyed families, live in smart, modernist, art deco buildings that remain cold and unheated in the winter because the residents cannot scrape together the necessary funds to buy fuel. Elderly women and men, very well dressed in their old but well-kept cashmere and lambswool sweaters, in their hats and wearing their dangling gold watch chains, line up at the food kitchen. Outside that line, when seen in the streets of Athens, they would never cause anyone to think that the crisis has touched them.

These are modalities of survival well known to Greeks who enjoyed financial amplitude only during the last thirty years. But that’s what they are: modalities of survival. At the 2010 American Anthropology Association meeting, I was speaking about the Intensive Care Units in Athens, where my new research has taken me since 2007. These units don’t exist any longer because the first sector that the “crisis” hit (meaning the first sector where the “Troika” of the European Commission, IMF, and European Central Bank demanded cuts) was precisely this: the sector that makes the social welfare state possible. Not because the Troika (and the local Greek

⁷ Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97.

politicians who support them) don't think that such services are needed. But because they want these services to be turned over to the private sector.⁸

So the haptic question is, how do we write about this when the unsafety of the ethnographic ground bleeds into and contaminates the safety of our text? How can we produce a safe text, one that can be read with a certain degree of certainty, that can produce an intelligible and legible narrative, a text that can create some of the comfort that is expected from the act of reading? And I won't even pose the question (as a student of mine did) of the possibility of creating a "timeless" (as she put it) text, a work that will be timeless because it will be telling the truth.

Here is what I propose. First of all, create a cartography of the visuality of the crisis:⁹ what does it really look like on the ground? Include not just the structural changes and damages that it has incurred but actual descriptions of its appearance. Such descriptions will challenge and interrogate the concept of the "debt" that has caused this crisis by suturing it to the debt owed to the immanent and coming society—the children, the elderly, the working, and the jobless.¹⁰ Second, produce a radical genealogy of the crisis, maybe even an archaeology of it, in the sense in which Foucault has given us the concept. In this way we can effectuate a new definition of it, a definition that will disjoin the crisis (a crisis that is spawned by and lives in a discourse that is self-uncritical, punitive, and moralistic, without a shred of ethics in it) from the conceptualization of capital that engenders the articulation of "debt." And then maybe we can start writing about it in infinitely unsafe texts, texts that will not allow us to be lulled by the promise of a coming inclusion into the capitalist dystopia that construes human beings as debtors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to David Palumbo-Liu for inviting me to participate in the panel on debt and debt resistance that he organized and that resulted in this publication. I have decided to keep this essay short and to retain most of its orality, in the hopes that I can preserve some of its immediacy and urgency. It was prepared initially as part of a panel on narrative representation at the 2012 American Anthropological Association, and it is a small part of a larger project that deals with the Greek crisis and the invisibility of its effects that are hidden in the folds of quotidian life. I have presented different portions of the larger project at various fora, and I am grateful to all who have engaged with it and have offered valuable commentary. A much longer version of the essay is forthcoming in *Figuring Resistance: New Anthropological Analytics on Social Justice*, edited by Othon Alexandrakis (Zone Books). A

⁸ See, e.g., E. Kondilis, E. Smyrnakis, S. Giannakopoulos, T. Zdoukos, and A. Benos, "Privatising the Greek Health-Care System: A Story of Corporate Profits and Rising Inequalities," in *Europe's Health for Sale: The Heavy Cost of Privatisation*, ed. J. Lister (Oxfordshire, UK: Libri, 2011), 29–43.

⁹ What I have in mind is something along the lines of this initiative, but more ethnographically grounded and wider in its scope (to include both urban and nonurban conditions): <http://crisis-scape.net/>.

¹⁰ See also Roger Cohen, "Capitalism Eating Its Children," *New York Times*, May 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/opinion/cohen-capitalism-eating-its-children.html?hp&rref=opinion&_r=0.