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*From economism to autonomy:
A Greek economic emergency and the transformative vision of
degrowth*

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Abstract

The density of events over the last years, together with the continuous scaremongering from the dominant political and media circles, has put the Greek society into an informal “economic state of exception”. Austerity measures and neoliberal policies such as large scale privatisations, under the name of “reform” or “modernisation” are presented as a painful but necessary evil and a value-free solution to a problem that is merely numerical. Yet, limiting the debate to a financial dialectic fails to address many fundamental issues that cannot fit into economic models. This directly challenges the very idea of democracy and quite reasonably leads to widespread social unrest. Trapped into the same economic logic, opposition against the austerity policies and autarchic state practices has so far been reactive and defensive. A radically different, constructivist proposal would be to initiate a process of collective visioning in order to re-establish society’s institutional structure. Drawing from Castoriadis’ project of autonomy, this paper discusses the importance of a truly democratic regime, as well as the existence of a positive vision, in the process of social transformation and goes on to suggest that the emerging academic debate and social movement of degrowth can stimulate such a vision. It is therefore argued that degrowth should remain a visionary terrain and, at the same time, explicitly reclaim its political dimension.

Keywords: *Economism, autonomy, Greece, crisis, democracy, degrowth, transformation*

1. A subjective diagnosis

The constant terrorisation and scaremongering from the conservative political and economic elites, as well as the major media pushes the Greek society into an informal but permanent “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) that has infiltrated all aspects of life, from work and social relations to consumer attitudes. Rather than exchanging political proposals, even at their simplest form, the public debate was (and still is) exclusively dominated by economic arguments, a fact that overshadows almost all prior ideological references. The continuous media reporting of unimaginable amounts of money, incomprehensible financial terms and meaningless economic indicators has limited the debate to a number-crunching analysis, implying that Greece’s problem is mainly numerical and that resolving this first is a prerequisite for overcoming all other societal issues. This in turn has led to an extreme polarisation within society (exacerbated during the double presidential elections of May and June 2012) naively defined by the support or rejection of the “Memorandum”.¹

On the one pole, the ideologically compacter pro-memorandum “reformist” camp endorses more deregulation (e.g. large scale privatisations) and considers all austerity measures, under the name of “modernisation”, as a painful but necessary and value-free evil. A thorough and in many respects accurate analysis of the chronic issues of corruption, bureaucracy and clientelism within the public sector is followed by an unjustified premise that the only natural solution to such problems is the implementation of extreme neoliberal policies, while any resistance to the proposed reforms is considered as stemming from trade union interests. Fiscal reforms are presented as objective, ideologically neutral and disconnected from their social and environmental consequences.

Moreover, driven by the contemporary security obsession, the (pro-memorandum) conservative political elites are constantly equating and denouncing all incidents of (real or perceived, left or right wing) violence and subsequently promote “neoliberal neutrality” as the cure against the danger of the “extremes”. “Structural reforms” has then become the new dogma that would save us from both backward-looking leftists and “extremists”. Put simply, their argument goes as follows: *“The situation is critical, too critical to leave it at the hands of ordinary people and too urgent to wait for deliberative democratic procedures. So we, the neoliberal specialists, can guarantee to protect the Greek society from the danger of the extremes and offer economic stability. This will no doubt require some sacrifices but, really, there is no alternative”*.² This attitude, perpetuated by the two traditional main parties (conservatives and social democrats), gained much popularity and received enough votes in the 2012 elections, especially from rural areas, as well as the older, inactive and more sensitive to security issues part of the electorate, enabling a pro-memorandum coalition government to be formed.

¹ Agreement made between the Greek government and the EU/ECB/IMF “troika”, dictating the fiscal reforms Greece needs to perform in order to receive bailout packages, accompanied by a series of unprecedented austerity and deregulation measures.

² For a discussion on the relationship between the “markets” and national-popular sovereignty, as well as on how this has been challenged during the 2011 events, see Gavriliadis & Lalopoulou (2012) and references within.

On the opposite pole, there is a populous but heterogeneous group fighting against the memorandum and its austerity measures, though without shared motives or ideology. A big part of these people found electoral refuge at the “coalition of the radical left” that, despite its name and widespread polemic it receives, represents only a fraction of the more radical resistance against the memorandum; most of it is to be found in the non-hierarchical direct democratic assemblies on the streets and the informal networks that are being formed all across the country. In some cases small minorities used the opportunity to make a holistic critique of the organisation of society and demand greater civic participation³ but, overall, the continuous and generalised strikes of the past years offered no concrete proposals, but mostly aimed at an unspecified “revenge” and “punishing of the traitors”.

Rather than promoting an alternative vision for society, the mainstream reaction against austerity measures, by left and right alike, has been *defensive* (finding a way out of the crisis and return to the pre-crisis “prosperity”), *economistic* (avoiding wage cuts, fixing the balance sheets) and *nationalistic* (getting rid of northern European neo-colonialists). Largely absent from the reactions was any sociological critique or reference to the structural inequalities of the system, let alone an alternative proposal on how to build a more just and sustainable future society. The exclusive use of economic arguments by supporters of the memorandum (and sadly by most of its objectors) has by definition ruled out the possibility of dialogue on a number of everyday issues that do not fit into economic models. As a result, this restriction of the public debate into a financial dialectic has caused underlying tensions that led to riots against the state and its institutions.

The anger and the reaction against specific persons or policies can to a large extent be justified, yet any statement about “taking our lives back” must sooner or later be followed by “what will we make out of this life?”. The crisis will not be overcome by “exiling the traitors” as is often heard, or by changing political leadership in the existing system, but through the collective reviewing and re-establishment of the fundamental values and institutions of society, or else equally heteronomous societal structures will unavoidably be reproduced. This requires the conscious repoliticisation of a significant part of society, the active engagement in the commons and the creation of a collective societal vision. There is an urgent need for a process of deliberative visioning, as well as (a fight for) the creation of an institutional framework that would enable such open-end direct democratic deliberations with the widest possible participation. This is no easy task, yet the ongoing crisis with its fluid social processes poses an important opportunity for such a radical shift in attitudes.

The present essay will concentrate on the first two axes of the Greek society’s reaction (i.e. lack of vision and domination of economism) that – as I will argue – are inherently linked, while the issue of nationalism will be left aside. It should be mentioned however that this is also structurally linked with the other two. An entrapment into an economistic logic coupled with the inability of the Greek society to collectively envision wanted futures and produce a meaning and an image of self has rendered many people powerless and vulnerable to populism, nationalism and all sorts of conspiracy theories. As

³ Most notably during the widespread public assemblies during the summer of 2011 in the squares of all major Greek cities.

a result many sought refuge in the secluded, protective environment of deeply hierarchical ultra nationalist organisations.

2. In defence of politics

The domination of economism is of course not unique to Greece, but is characteristic to most western growth-oriented modern societies. Economism has been defined as “a mix of academic, popular and political beliefs that serve to explain and rationalise the economic system” (Kallis et al. 2009: 14), e.g. viewing the world through the lens of market signals. This has been achieved via a deep transformation, not only of the economy, but of society as a whole (Bonaiuti 2012). A growth economy needed the creation of a growth society, where the economic sphere was detached from reality and subsequently increased in complexity. Capitalism, especially in its current neoliberal variant, is therefore not just an economic system, but an ensemble of economy, society, politics, ideology and culture shaped by history (Devine 2011). It has – arguably – degraded social ties, legitimised the commoditisation of nature and created a specific type of person: consumer, atomistic, competitive, lonely, fearful, resource-intensive. More importantly, dominant institutions are presented as objective and give rise to persons that tend to reproduce them. As a result, a society of atomistic neoliberal institutions tends to create individualistic neoliberal characters of people.

While economism is aggressively dominating all social spheres in Greece and the governing of the state is assumed by technocrats and all kinds of economic and political “specialists”, real politics is being ruthlessly abandoned and democracy itself officially questioned. Many people have given away their political duties in exchange for small benefits or for a vague trust in the system and as a result are less and less involved in decision-making, leaving this responsibility to a chosen few. This reveals an increased separation between *politics* and *power* or, in other words, an increasing depoliticisation of a large part of society (Castoriadis 2003[1994]). This depoliticisation has in turn facilitated the emergence of the current informal “state of emergency” that has allowed the political elites to justify the clear violations of both the national constitution and EU principles and the curtailment of legal norms, such as accountability (Kalyvas 2012).

A further notable trend that has emerged during the last years in Greece is a concerted effort mainly by the established political elites to cancel out the traditional left-right ideologies and transcend them using the deceptively value-free rhetoric of progress, reform, and modernization.⁴ By promoting the neoliberal mantra that we should primarily strive for economic growth, and so it is justified to invite technocrat specialists that can handle those issues better, they implicitly support that societal issues (including the political organisation) will be resolved using mainly non-political means. This has resulted in the further depoliticisation of large parts of society.

Unsurprisingly, the current crisis is being used by the local and international elites to further deregulate the Greek economy and follow their view of “development”. Following a

⁴ Incidentally the same strategy is being used by various nationalistic fronts that refrain from positioning themselves in the right-left spectrum, but define themselves referring to their national identity.

rapid shift of societal baselines, people will be more ready than before to ascribe to the new degraded conditions, under the fear of being jobless, stigmatised and ostracised from society. Resistance against this shock doctrine, the “systematic raping of the public sphere in the aftermath of a disaster”, where “people are too focused on their daily concerns to take care of their interests” (Klein 2007) should include not only the maintenance of collective memory, but also decisiveness and risk-taking. If politics is not to be rendered harmless, confusing and irrelevant, a clear distinction and separation of “traditional” political ideologies is needed. The market logic of neoliberalism needs to be combated with a different kind of logic, that of equity and freedom, which would explicitly endorse many of the universal values that can be found in, among others, the left, green and anarchist movements.

Moreover, the crisis of representation and democracy might be resolved through the rediscovery of the principle of (democratic) citizenship. This, according to Kalyvas (2012), can neither happen only within the electoral and procedural mechanisms of parliamentarism, nor completely outside it. His suggestion is to consciously create political instability and gradually radicalise segments of society, then let the “fight” be played out in the public sphere. In any case, future demonstrations should be more visionary rather than defensive and economic. In other words, people should stop striking as consumers but refuse the identity of the consumer altogether (Fournier 2008). If we envision a democratic convivial culture, we need to make space for such a culture to emerge by reclaiming the public sphere and public spaces, literally and metaphorically, so open up more opportunities to be defined in different terms (Fournier 2008) and initiate a process of self-institution.

3. Castoriadis’ project of autonomy and its relevance for democracy

Cornelius Castoriadis’ concept of autonomy that is experiencing a renewed interest within academic circles is, I will argue, particularly relevant and useful in understanding the current situation and trying to move from defensive criticism to taking on a positive vision for our society. Castoriadis’ thought starts off with the premise that humans are social beings and all norms, laws and institutions are social constructions. This ability of societies to provide a collective meaning, dubbed the social imaginary, creates imaginary social significations that define the values of any society. To be autonomous, according to Castoriadis, is to be able to think and act freely and to be able to participate in the construction of these social significations. Autonomy can therefore be defined as the self-conscious creation of society’s institutions, rather than their creation by other people or the belief that they are the best outcome of history itself, or evolution. According to this interpretation, a just and free society can only exist if each and every of its members can freely question, create and modify the existing institutional structure (Castoriadis 1998 [1975]). Similarly, according to the radical philosophy of Otto Wolf, an autonomous society cannot be achieved without autonomous individuals. Institutions should then be judged according to their positive or negative contribution to the freedom to live, be creative and be involved in governance of all members of society, equally (Tasis 2011).

This is closely linked to the idea of direct (or real) democracy where people are able to actively participate in decision making and resonates the four basic elements of the Athenian democracy: freedom (incl. participation in governance), equity, justice and control (Oikonomou 2011). Following this reasoning, democracy is not confined to a set of rules but it is a form of society: a political, social and economic regime that must always be open to questioning. An autonomous, or “post-revolutionary”, democratic society should not be simply a self-managed society, but a society that self-institutes itself explicitly, not once and for all, but continuously (Castoriadis 1988). This then requires a democratic culture and a democratic identity (Olson 2006). “Revolution” is therefore not only about reacting, but most importantly about the building of alternative values that will lead to institutions less totalitarian, more democratic, more participatory. It is a continuous process of self-institution by the citizens themselves, which should lead to the radical transformation of society. The goal of politics is seen to be freedom (autonomy) rather than happiness or anything else, a fact that challenges the belief that equity and freedom are often conflicting. Uncertainty would of course remain an inherent part of such, as any other society. However, this type of uncertainty can be considered more acceptable to that of the current oligarchies, because it will be based on collective decisions and a sense of ownership of the rules and regulations, which would make any consequences easier to overcome (Olson 2006).

How can then these insights be useful in understanding our contemporary representative democracies and our societies at large? The rise and domination of the capitalist system has made modern societies appear as autonomous because people have more choices and more personal possibilities, but this “individual autonomy” obscures the fact that a new external factor, the markets, determines the institutions (Castoriadis 1998 [1975]). People sacrifice their autonomy, understood as the explicit self-institution of society, and put faith on an institutional structure that provides them with a false sense of representation, but in reality alienates them from decision making. It has been argued that at the present society there is no shared imaginary, other than the market imaginary (Bonaiuti 2012), and the impersonal nature of “the market” makes it impossible to confront it. Nevertheless, to be free, in the Castoriadian sense, would mean to decompose the dominant capitalist ideologies redefining concepts such as growth, development and progress that from means have become ends in themselves and become autonomous: in control of society’s own “tools” and institutions. The abolition of the established social imaginary and the emancipation of society can and should be done “from within”.

4. Degrowth as a constructive vision for the radical transformation of society

The Castoriadian thought, together with Ellul’s (1964) and Illich’s (1973) critiques of the technological society and consumer culture, have been some of the main ideological standpoints of the emerging degrowth movement (Muraca 2013), which is also deeply inspired by, and in a way revisiting, Georgescu-Roegen’s (1971) and the Meadows et al. (1972) Limits to Growth debate.

Over the last years, there have been many interpretations of degrowth (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010). These include material/biophysical degrowth, literally reducing our material

and energy throughput, as well as economic degrowth, in the sense of either being ignorant about it (e.g. van den Bergh's 2011 "a-growth") or actively supporting the downscaling of the economy. Demaria et al. (2013) have recently made a case against reductionist approaches that could fundamentally alter the ideas of the degrowth movement. The inherent power of the movement lies exactly on its holistic critique of the growth culture with its heteronomous, hierarchical power structures that degrade human behaviours. This interpretation of degrowth requires nothing less than a total change in attitudes and a complete reordering of values. It requires the decolonisation of the current social imaginary and the creation of a radically different organisation of our society, for, as Latouche (2008) has lucidly put it, and we only briefly started experiencing in Europe, "there is nothing worse than a growth society without growth".

I have argued that in order to make the next step of radically transforming society, it is imperative to abandon a purely defensive attitude and initiate a process of collective visioning, creating and deliberating upon future images or scenarios and then assessing the way to get there. The appealing aspect of such processes is exactly the constructivist approach of looking into the future, i.e. the view of the future as something that is created by the society, rather than something that can be predicted by extrapolating current trends (Tight et al. 2011). Here lies the invaluable potential of the degrowth movement and broader debate: degrowth, in its broadest sense, can exactly offer a new political project (Kallis 2011) to trigger this process of societal transformation. It can propose a new storyline and provide a platform that would stimulate the creation of collective visions of a future that will be simpler, but not regressive (Romano 2012) ecologically sustainable and socially equitable, away from economism, towards autonomy.

It is notable that despite a broad consensus about the current system's malfunctions and a growing dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies, the social imaginary of continuous growth, a sort of modern religion, largely remains. In addition, the system itself supports "psychological egoists" (Holland 1995) that, in turn, create institutions that tend to reproduce them. In order to imagine a structural reorganisation of our society and "escape economism", "decolonise our imaginary" and "recolonise" the wide realm of social spheres that is now only dominated by the economy (Latouche 2012), we first need to ponder on how we ended up here. We need to collectively question the fundamental drivers causing environmental and social degradation, such as the consumerism culture (Kosoy et al. 2012). A radical transformation of the social organisation should include first and foremost the psychic organisation of people (Castoriadis 1985 [1974]). Put bluntly, we need to replace the consumer by the citizen (Fournier 2008), by resuming degrowth's political dimension and call for a true/real democracy that would provide the conditions for new beliefs and norms to be instituted.

In our quest towards a just and sustainable "degrowth" future, the stake of a loss or degradation of democracy could be substantial. The degrowth movement should embrace urgent calls for real democracy where re-politicisation and re-democratisation are made explicit: Politics as the perpetual act of instituting of societal rules and norms, democracy as the regime of collective self-institution of such norms (Castoriadis 2003[1994]) rather than a set of rules, or even a commonly shared "praxis" (Ott 2012). If degrowth is to be associated

with such goals, then it is clearly seen as an open-end process (Schneider et al. 2010), rather than either a set of reformist proposals or a transition to a “final state of affairs” (Ott 2012: 572).

5. Final considerations

The present essay has supported the view that degrowth should be much broader than a set of defensive counter-proposals and avoid being economic in itself, but essentially remain a visionary terrain. At the same time degrowth should embrace calls for direct democracy, in order to revitalise real politics and reinvent the citizen. The two are far from independent, as the consumerism growth culture and the domination of economism, dictated by neoliberal capitalism, have been instrumental in degrading social ties and depoliticising society (Castoriadis 1998[1975]). A decolonisation of the growth imaginary is then vital in the process of not only reconnecting to the biosphere (Folke et al. 2011) but also re-inventing politics. The role of democracy (as an open-end participatory process) is critical, for an autonomous society will neither be formed from null, nor maintained by itself, but from the direct and constant engagement and participation of citizens in common affairs. This is not only constrained in scrutinising the established institutional framework,⁵ but involves experimenting with a range of post-growth visions and scenarios of future democratic regeneration (Deriu 2012). Degrowth’s biggest contribution so far has been in stimulating such collective visions. Future research should further explore the institutional and procedural framework of a degrowth society.

In this line, of great interest are Romano’s (2012) concerns about the effectiveness of the appealing but rather paternalistic call for voluntary simplicity that would create more or less alienated “islands of degrowth” in a sea of uninterrupted growth. It is perhaps more worthwhile, and more challenging, to try and understand the current dominant anthropological type, and work within the current (unsustainable, heteronomous) state of society in order to shift the mainstream societal structure rather than (or perhaps on top of) creating alternative communities. In any case, we are in urgent need of constructing new imaginaries collectively and democratically, so need to create more opportunities to do so, temporally, culturally, spatially. Public deliberations of imagined degrowth futures would not guarantee “success”, but would make the degrowth project less elitist and more attractive. Vice versa, by explicitly highlighting its political dimension, the degrowth debates could and should stimulate a re-politicisation of society and a return of the citizen and the true meaning of democracy.

Nevertheless, the link between degrowth and real democracy is by no means intuitive; there is no reason to believe that a democratic society will automatically endorse a degrowth lifestyle (Romano 2012). Nor will a degrowth future be easier to achieve via direct democratic procedures (it will probably be more difficult), but it will almost certainly be more desirable. The same applies to any other decision that directly affects the citizens. The importance of a more direct democracy for modern Greece is enormous and in stark

⁵ In the Greek context, this would mean to try and identify for example the institutional elements that force a large number of people to place their trust on all sorts of “specialists” and embrace a vague call for “development”, rather than fighting against the day-to-day disintegration of society.

contrast to the top-down structural changes imposed by the troika. For example, a comprehensive public deliberation could be instrumental for legitimating a number of selected reforms.

The Greek society is in need of a deep transformation including political, institutional and cultural change (Kallis 2011) and an economy serving all human values, not only monetary ones (Kosoy et al 2012). The current crisis in Greece is above all a crisis of values, of our anthropocentric, self-destructive, technocratic societies. By focusing on the economic crisis ignoring its social and environmental components, we limit the debate on whether austerity measures can or cannot achieve a certain fiscal goal. So we forget the obvious: "Is this our only goal?". Discussions should return to the essentials, i.e. the meaning we give to our work and our life, creating a collective vision and start moving towards it. Such a process cannot wait for the decision of the European Parliament on the Xth stimulus package that will "save" the economy. Instead it is the collective values of society that will define and legitimise any economic, or other, policy in practice.

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