

# GPSG Working Paper #27

Research Note

## ***Policing the Greek Crisis: Public Order and Civil Unrest in Times of Turmoil***

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### **Abstract**

*The ongoing economic crisis in Greece has turned the focus of social and political discourse mainly on the manifestations of protest, unrest and political extremism. This research project proposes to shift the focus to the understudied subject of policing civil disorder and other forms of dissent as very little is known about the individual views and collective experiences of Greek police officers, especially those involved in frontline services.*

*The project focuses on the relationship between public order and civil unrest in Greece via an in-depth study of policing protests in Greece. In terms of specific objectives, the project will look at how policing violent disorder and other forms of dissent shape the attitudes and responses of police officers and how do dominant dogmas of public order policing impact on their own engagement with the public, and to what extent such dogmas are responsible for police brutality and excessive conduct.*

*In the Greek context, police practices, views and perceptions remain largely unexplored and have not been addressed adequately, leading thus to a recycling of stereotypes and established opinions and blocking effective reform of the institution. As such, the project aims to inform social policy and offer recommendations which can help to address police grievances, improve the quality of interaction between the police and the public, and introduce reforms that effectively reduce practices of excessive police violence.*

**Keywords:** *Civil unrest, crisis, Greece, police, public order, violence*

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## The Research Problem and Context

Since 2010 Greece has undergone a period of intense and rapid economic and political transformation – a generalised crisis - as a result of austerity measures, privatization and the dismantling of the Welfare State. Manifestations of such crisis have not only been the burgeoning of protests and riots but also the virtual disappearance of political parties which dominated the political scene since the restoration of the democratic rule in Greece in 1974 (such as the Socialist Party PASOK), and the emergence of political parties/formations without a clear political identity, at least along the dividing lines of Left and Right as we have known them throughout the twentieth century (such as Elia or The Potami), but also the rise of political extremism, most notably of the far right (most notably, the Golden Dawn). As such, the very nature of the political system – parliamentary democracy – has been challenged and the State's legitimacy has been under constant scrutiny, questioning and general depreciation.

The police as an institution is no exception to this crisis, but what is particularly interesting is the role that the police as a State apparatus is required and expected to play in situations of generalised discontent, often resulting in open dissent or even clash between the citizens and the State/government. It is common place that the police/law enforcement institutions have been at the epicentre of protesting groups across the modern world: for the structure of the Western State police upholds the role of suppressing dissent when necessary (Althusser 1970) and guarantees - via repression when needed - the continuity of the political system along with the protection of democratic institutions and the protection of the majority's vote. However, Greece has a particular political history which has to a certain extent identified the police as a particular repressive force, especially given the role that the police has played in policing politics in the twentieth century (Mazower 1997). As such, the Greek police as an institution with its own culture, values and worldviews has not been yet the object of sociological analysis, except for the cases where police misconduct, violence or transgression is in question (Amnesty International 2012). There is a variety of historical, political and cultural reasons for such gap in sociological knowledge.

Historically, the collective trauma of the Civil War, which followed the end of the Second World War, has rigidly defined the political identities and symbolic universes of the Left and Right in Greece. The political persecution of the Left in the years that followed the end of the Civil War has been associated in the collective memory of the Left with the police, as the instrument of the State implementing aspects of such persecution. The colonels' dictatorship (1967-1974), which systematically suppressed democratic political dissent in Greece, further consolidated the popular perception of the police as a repressive State apparatus. This particular historical experience of policing politics (Mazower 1997; Mouzelis 1979; Samatas 1986; Veremis 1997) as well as the swinging of the pendulum since the restoration of democracy in Greece towards an ideological hegemony of the Left (albeit not in terms of political power *per se* until the recent election of January 2015), have contributed not only towards mistrust, but often open hostility between the police and the progressive side of the political spectrum. The police has been occupying an almost structural role in the symbolic universe of Left political dissent, be it parliamentary, communist, extra-parliamentary, or with anarchist leanings. In a way, it would not be exaggerated to maintain that 'hate against the police' has become a kind of ideological glue, which brings together the fragmented and often polarised political field of the Left. The almost ritualistic evocation of the symbolic rejection of the police during public protests is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this ideological trend.

Furthermore, the development of a peculiar anarchist subculture in the aftermath of the restoration of democratic rule, which has enjoyed certain legitimacy as a more 'pure political force' on the left side of the political spectrum and has been at the forefront of steering protests towards violent clashes whilst been given a new role after the 2008 Athens riots, has contributed significantly in popularising a view of the police as 'the enemy of the people' (Boukalas 2011; Trocchi 2011; Vasilaki forthcoming). Even though forty years have passed since the restoration of democratic political life in Greece, and even if the police force has been reformed to a great extent (Stergioulis 2001; Zianikas 1995), the idea that the police uphold authoritarian political views is widespread and willingly not challenged given the importance that such idea holds in structuring the dividing lines between the Left and Right. The persistence of political terrorism in Greece (Kassimeris 2001, 2013) which often takes the police as its primary target, along with the peculiar cultural understandings of lawfulness – where the law is not seen as absolutely prohibiting or set in stone but as negotiable and malleable, and its institutional representatives are seen with suspicion – have further contributed to consolidating popular representations of 'the police versus the people' cliché. This broader context has made sociological engagement with the police a non-subject.

These historical and cultural parameters which have established a negative public narrative of the police have been further accentuated in recent years. The 2008 Athens riots, which followed the shooting of a teenager by a police officer in central Athens, and spread across the country for almost a month along with acquiring international resonance and immense symbolic value in the universe of dissent to State violence and police brutality, have heavily affected the already strained relationship between the police and the public. This event has also consolidated the idea of the police as an obscure, parastate institution rather than a necessary pillar in the functioning of a democratic state, an institution serving and guaranteeing the rule of law. More recently, the economic crisis and the social turmoil it generated have been translated into a proliferation of protests, which often have taken the police as their target. The retreat of the Welfare State and the determination of the successive governments of the crisis era to push the austerity agenda, a 35% drop of the GDP which touched an unprecedented variety of social groups and strata have left the police as the only visible representative of the State and made the police the unwilling protagonist of the crisis as well as the unwilling enemy of the people. The turn of a part of the police force to the far right (Christopoulos 2014; Psarras 2012) – which has been highly mediated to the point of resembling to a moral panic – along with the belated reaction of the government to the criminal activities of the far right, has further exacerbated the stereotyping of police as harbouring sympathy for undemocratic, authoritarian political formations.

Thus far, the sociological gaze has been focused mainly on the protesters and the manifestations of resistance (e.g. Dalakoglou 2012; Douzinas 2013; Gourgouris 2011; Theodossopoulos 2014). this research project proposes to shift the emphasis to the understudied subject of the police (with the exception of the new subject of transnational protesting emerging with the alter-globalisation movement, and its relationship with the police, Della Porta et al. 2006). Very little is known about the views and experiences of police officers themselves, especially those working in frontline services dealing with protests as the most prominent manifestation of the crisis. More precisely, the project will look at the ways the experiences of police officers shape their response towards protests, to what extent their political identification is determined by the negative views of the public and the relative social isolation that they face, how do dominant dogmas of policing impact on their own engagement with the public, and to what extent such dogmas are prone to causing incidents of excessive police violence. The project aims to offer not only a yet non-existing in-depth empirical knowledge of policing protests but also precise policy

recommendations which can help to reform the Greek police, to secure transparent processes of engagement with the protesting public and effectively reduce practices of excessive violence, but also to contribute to the socialization of security forces, especially the police which has been particularly demonized.

## Theoretical Background

The policing of protests reflects to a certain extent the relationship between the state and society. The social contract between the sovereign and the people constitutes the bedrock of modern states and as such, if the sovereign power violates this contract, its legitimacy to govern can be challenged. It is well established in the relevant literature that heavy-handed and confrontational approaches affect negatively the legitimacy of the government/State (Reiner 1998). The rise of civil rights movements along with the professionalization of the police are considered major factors in the shift of policing practices from a confrontational to a non-confrontational model of policing (Sombatpoonsiri 2015).

Even though the modern state's legitimacy partially arose from its ability to sustain public order through rigid policing, rather than from its facilitation of public manifestation of grievances, research on state repression invariably points out that authoritarian responses following 'the law and order' viewpoint result in authorizing excessive use of force against protesters and dissidents (Churchill and Vander 1990; Davenport 2005; Earl 2003; Kowalewski 2003; Sluka 1999). Previous experiences of policing, the nature of social conflict as well as technological changes in crowd control contribute into forming the balance between what is known as the *escalated force* or confrontational approach, and the *negotiated management* or non-confrontational approach (Sombatpoonsiri 2015; for a problematization of such dichotomizing see Vitale 2005). As such, street politics, expressed via the rising of protests movement in Greece and abroad, especially since the outbreak of the economic crisis, is a prime challenge for policing strategies and for the very legitimacy of the State today. When protests are seen as legitimate – as they are seen by the vast majority in Greece – forceful, repressive responses from the State via the use of the police undermine the legitimacy of both the State/government and the police. The appeal of the grammar and language of public order and disorder, of lawfulness and anomie, of crisis and normality which may be convincing – paradoxically – in times of stability, can be seriously challenged and have the exact opposite result in times of turmoil, precariousness and generalised insecurity. The advent of a new government of the Left into power in Greece, which has originally adopted a non-confrontational approach, has been put under test, initially by the wave of occupations of public buildings, universities as well as the governing party's headquarters by anarchist groups. The recent turn of the governing party to austerity politics has already turned the mood of the public: activists took on the streets again and further protests are expected as the austerity agenda is crystallised to specific policies. The considerable lack of non-violent protesting in Greece – as invariably protests are steered towards violent clashes, minor or major - make policing protests and dissent in Greece particularly complicated issue.

On a more general theoretical level with regards to the nature of the police as an institution, police-related violence tend to be seen in rather one-dimensional perspective. Foucauldian (2008) approaches revolve around the concept of governmentality and see police violence as the effect of the emergence of disciplining institutions of the modern State, and its technologies of surveillance and control. For critical theorists such as Benjamin (1978), police is seen as intrinsically 'ignoble' because of its authority to 'make law' rather than merely enforce law. Derrida (2002) also concurs with this view by observing that even if the police does not make the law, it acts like the lawmaker of modern times, since each time

the law is indeterminate enough to open a possibility for the police to make the law. More contemporary academic engagement with the issue also point towards the ethical perils related to relativizing police violence (Roben 1996; Sluka 1999), however, more nuanced approaches have emphasized the multiple modality and lack of clear distinction between perpetrators and victims of police violence (Jauregui 2013; see also Das 2007 and Mamdani 2002).

### **Research Questions and Aims:**

The project will investigate the matter via four specific objectives:

#### 1. To investigate how police officers perceive their role and experience in relation to the current economic, political and economic crisis

The project will investigate to what extent the recent austerity measures have had an impact on the everyday conduct of professional duties, the general morale of the police force as well as on their relationship with the public. The police underwent similar suppression of wages and general level of living standards as everyone else in Greece, however, police officers are ordinarily called upon (sometimes on a nearly daily basis) to control demonstrations from members of the public who protest against austerity and highly unpopular economic decisions. The project will investigate how police officers experience this contradiction, how they think that their relationship with the protesting public has been reshaped in the past five years and what they believe that the role with regards to the protesting public.

#### 2. To examine how police officers perceive and assess their experience of violent incidents, riots and demonstrations of political nature

The project will examine how police officers experience their involvement in policing incidents of political nature which turn violent. Since the outbreak of the crisis, protests of all types have bourgeoned in Greece and more often than not, they have taken a partially violent turn. Emphasis has often been given to the experience of demonstrators, rioters and instigators of violence during protests of political nature, since they represent in the popular imaginary the disempowered people against the powerful, and largely perceived as unfair, State. However, little attention has been paid to the views and understandings of such situations by the police, because of the blanket, monolithic perception of the police as a repressive State apparatus only, which tends to look at the police officer as an instrument of a hierarchical repressive structure only, rather than a social agent too. The project will examine how and if police officers differentiate between types of protesting and types of violence, how they perceive the demonstrators, how they make sense of their role in such situations, and how they experience the physical, psychological and symbolic violence they are submitted to during protests and how does such violence shape their response.

#### 3. To analyse the impact of the symbolic targeting of the police on the police officers' political identification

The project will study the views of police officers vis-à-vis the symbolic and political targeting they are submitted to by parts of the political spectrum. For historical reasons explained above, the relationship between the progressive side of the political spectrum and the police has been strained, and the police occupy a prominent – albeit negative – role within the Left symbolic universe. The recent popular association of the police with the far right, in the aftermath of general, local and European elections, has further aggravated

this tension. The project will investigate why police officers – and especially those among the riot police – have been both more vulnerable and targeted in relation to extreme ideologies of nationalist nature, such as those of the Golden Dawn in Greece, and whether such identification has a real impact on the conduct of their duties. It will also look at how police officers perceive their demonization, especially in the current times of crisis, why they think that it occurs, what are their responses and coping mechanisms in relation to such peculiar social exclusion, and whether this affects their political sympathies.

#### 4. To assess how dominant dogmas of policing affect the understanding of the protesting public, the attitude and general engagement of police officers during protests

On a more theoretical and cross-European level, the project will assess how dominant dogmas of policing protests – such as the dogma of ‘astynomokratia’ (‘police omnipresence’) which has been prominent during the years of the crisis - structure the responses of police officers, whether such dogmas make the police officers prone to excess of violence, and vice-versa, whether non-confrontational approaches constitute a more effective response, but also whether non-confrontational approaches are appropriate when protests degenerate into generalised violence (e.g. riots). The project will examine the views of police officers in relation to dominant policing dogmas vis-à-vis public protest and unrest, how do dogmas of policing affect the way they regard the demonstrators and their legitimacy to protest in general, and how does the dogma of ‘astynomokratia’ (‘police omnipresence’) in Greece contribute to the conflation between police as a service and police as a repressive state apparatus, in particular.

### **Research Methodology and Approach**

Methodological approach: This research is qualitative in nature. It will adopt an inductive approach which will allow for the participants’ voice to take precedence and dynamically contribute to the emergence of explanations and more general theorizing about the phenomenon in question. The research will assume an interpretative stance, which focuses on the production of social meanings, and the ways reality is constructed by the social subjects, along with a phenomenological emphasis on experience. This approach will contribute to the emergence of explanations and the formulation of policy recommendations about the phenomenon in question.

Data collection: Data will be collected mainly via semi-structured interviews, since the project aims to explore the views, perceptions and experiences of participants. Semi-structured interviews offer both the flexibility to pursue topics of significance as they emerge during the interview process and during the exploration of the research terrain, but also to focus on predefined areas of interest to be explored via sets of thematic questions.

Along with semi-structured interviews, moderate participant observation of the daily conduct of duties of police officers will be carried out: this ethnographic method is ideal to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a specified group of individuals (e.g. an occupational group, such as the police as a firmly defined and relatively isolated social group) and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment over an extended period of time (Atkinson 1990; Hobbs 1998; Wacquant 1995). My existing experience in conducting research with police officers demonstrated that the participants are receptive to this research practice, precisely because of its intimate character which can shed light to invisible aspects of their profession. A moderate level of participation will guarantee a balance between involvement and necessary detachment to remain impartial.

Additionally, focus groups of five participants will be conducted, at the exploratory stages of the project. Focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and interaction processes within the group itself. They are an effective medium for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic in a short period of time, identifying prominent themes and observing processes of opinion formation, consensus and divergence (Farnsworth and Boon 2010; Smithson 2000).

Recruitment of participants and field access: Participants will be recruited by having recourse to existing contacts within the police force as I have already established access and trust via my ongoing research on the perception of the crisis by police officers in Greece. I have already created a large network of participants and identified key informants within the services dealing mostly with the policing of protests, civil unrest and riots, i.e. the riot squad (YAT and YMET, commonly known as MAT) and Kratiki Asfaleia, the Greek equivalent of the MI5 and in particular the Section in charge of State and Polity Protection, which also deals with the matters of civil disorder, via my current research fieldwork. I have already secured permission from the Ministry of Public Order as well as the Headquarters of the Police for my ongoing project which can be extended for the project in hand.

Data analysis:

The data will be coded and analysed following thematic and narrative analysis. Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups will allow for coding, identification of patterned responses and construction of categories of analysis. Narrative analysis will allow to focus on the ways in which the participants make sense of and narrate their selves and their experiences, and to analyse these narratives as social products emerging in the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations.

Ethics: The British Sociological Association ethical guidelines will be strictly adhered to (<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx>). The researcher will explain clearly the aims and objectives of the research project to participants. Oral informed consent will be sought (existing research confirmed that participants are particularly concerned about anonymity and confidentiality) and participants will be told that they are free to dissociate themselves from the project at any stage of the research. All data will be subjected to rigorous anonymization, pseudonyms will be used during transcription and drafting of research papers. Audio materials will be stored electronically and will be saved safely via the use of password known to the researcher only.

Given the sensitivity of the topic and the issues of security that it raises, as well and the fact that participants are embedded in strict institutional hierarchies which are constitutive of their profession, special attention and care will be given to actively prevent any potential harm, be it physical, psychological or ethical, and no information given will be used without the full consent of participants. The researcher will commit herself into maintaining contact with the participants during the data analysis phase of the project, to discussing potential plans for publication in academic journals with the participants, and to sharing the outcomes of the research with them.

## **Political Significance and Policy Relevance**

Political significance:

The research questions listed above aim to investigate pressing issues and challenges that Greece is facing at the current political and historical conjuncture. Greece is undergoing an important crisis of institutions, political parties, and of the relationship between the citizens,

the State and the public sphere. However, this generalised crisis can be seen not only as a predicament but also as a moment of transformation, and in this context, sociological knowledge can help to shape policy for the challenges the police force is facing in the twentieth-first century. As mentioned above, the already strained relationship between the public and the police has been further aggravated due to the crisis. In that sense, it is politically urgent to construe the complexity of the tension between the public and the police force and to create the possibility for a more positive relationship to emerge. The knowledge generated by this project could contribute towards this much-needed transformation.

Greece has been a laboratory of political protests since the restoration of democratic rule (1974) and has demonstrated a peculiar tolerance to aspects of political violence, which has been further accentuated since the 2008 Athens Riots and the following ongoing economic crisis. A particular strenuous relationship between the State and its citizens has emerged, which has been crystallised on the police as that particular repressive apparatus which enabled the implementation of unpopular reforms by suppressing dissent. This has also had an impact on the police who are demoralised and who have felt that they have been instrumentalized in a way that placed them within a dichotomy of 'the people versus the police'. The rejection of the police reflects the depreciation of State institutions and political parties and elites in Greece which is the focus here, but also in Europe more general. Such tension, if not hostility, needs to be construed and addressed immediately as well as in the long run given the structural role that the police holds in the healthy functioning of a democratic State.

#### Policy relevance:

The police has been largely perceived in Greece as a repressive force and has been often at the epicentre of controversies of human rights abuses. Gaining in-depth knowledge of the processes involved in policing civil unrest – whether protests or riots - will help to revise the structure of the system in place and to ensure resilient, transparent and efficient practices. Investigating the possibilities of European collaboration, especially with countries facing similar civil unrest, due to the ongoing economic crisis and in the midst of major transformation of the political landscape and the rise of Euroscepticism as form of protest, is of prime importance. The Greek crisis is possibly a harbinger of a more general crisis of European consistency, integration and legitimacy and as such investigating state responses to civil unrest is not a matter of local/regional but of European relevance. As Greece has been a central site of protesting and dissent in recent years –and with further prospect of civil unrest due to the dire economic situation and political instability that the country is facing at the moment – policy recommendations based on the Greek experience are both instructive and transferable into the European context.

#### **Intended Outputs**

The ultimate aim of the proposed research is to produce a monograph on policing civil unrest in Greece, with a special focus on the – not thus far researched - experience and views of police officers during the crisis. In the meantime, two peer-reviewed articles will be submitted, one focusing on a comparison of confrontational and non-confrontational models of policing and their application in Greece; and a second one focusing on police violence and transgression.



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