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The Crisis, the Media and the Representation of the Working Class: A Greek Perspective

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Abstract

The main focus of this article is to map the field of the dominant discourses fabricated, promoted and cultivated in the field of Mass Media, in terms of the decade-long Greek crisis. What will be supported is that, during the whole period, the Mass Media have played a definitive role in comprehending and dealing with the crisis, in the implementation of economic, political and social policies, but also in the expression of opinions regarding its causes, consequences and management. The absence though, of critical and radical discourses, as will be supported, apart from not having contributed towards a deeper understanding, by remorselessly espousing the neoliberal dogma, they have also hindered the creation of the required objective terms for collective action and effective resistance. In that respect, I urge for the need of a critical approach of the crisis which, bypassing the politics of the mainstream media and bourgeois ideologisms, would kaleidoscopically conceptualise it, while placing central focus on the exploitation of labourers and the ongoing class struggle. In this direction, I also consider imperative the examination of how people engage with the media discourses of crisis and how these operate in the co-construction of their realities.

Keywords: *Greek crisis, media discourses, working class, crisis media representations, propaganda*

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“Besides, in these times, liberty is no longer proscribed; it is going its rounds again.”

(*Gambara*, Balzac, [1837 (2014): 16])

Introduction: Setting the Scenery

The way in which the political status quo in Greece has handled the *crisis*, for over a decade, emphatically vindicates the great Greek novelist, poet and National Resistance fighter, Menelaos Lountemis (1906-1977) who, in his novel *Abyss Street Number 0*, states that: “In this land, over these last few years, there have been told the worst lies in History. There were lies that were ashamed themselves, since the mouths uttering them were not. There was much abuse of pomposity, cheap drama, a great waste of useless patriotism” (Lountemis, [1962 (2015): 285]).

The story of the Greek crisis is well-known and often told. In fact, the last years there has been a surge of writings on the topic. A legitimate, though, question that my last statement could reasonably raise, is the following: By whom has it been told and written? Therein lies the vital importance, in the current circumstances, of addressing a series of crucial and closely interrelated issues: Are the dominant narratives on the Greek crisis sufficient? And if not, how can we ascertain this? How do the dominant narratives on the Greek crisis describe reality and interpret facts? What is the *meaning-making* associated with the bourgeois interpretations of the Greek crisis? What constitutes the field of public discourse on the crisis, articulated in the public sphere and Mass Media, at this particular moment?

To that end, I want to point out from the beginning of this article that I won't get into excessive details, especially those connected with the so-called *Greek particularities*. Instead, and without questioning some aspects of this line of argumentation, my approach is that the Greek crisis is not primarily a debt or double deficit crisis, nor as crisis due to corruption, bribery and appropriation of public funds.

In the same vein, and without any intention of downplaying the importance that some of the following aspects played in the whole equation, I support that the actual problem of the Greek capitalist economy cannot be pinpointed in circumstantial mistakes. Neither can be found in choices and actions of isolated factors which distorted the otherwise *proper functioning* of the system, as misplaced

as they may have been. On the contrary, I argue that interpretations, which do not address the Greek economic crisis as a deep, structural crisis of the capitalist system itself, can only lead to explanations that, deliberately or not, aim to conceal the innate structural problems of capitalism.

Therefore, and in direct contrast to what we are used to, from dominant political circles, public discourses, media narratives and bourgeois interpretations, the national crisis is considered here in light of the international economic crisis, and the state of the global capitalist economy, which has triggered both the internal contradictions of Greek capitalism and the pressure by the global and European crisis internalised by the Greek social formation (c.f. Maniatis and Passas, 2013; Milios, 2001; 2014; Sakellariopoulos, 2014; Passas and Pierros, 2017; Chrysochou, 2018a; 2018b).

In that respect, almost 10 years after the financial markets' assault in late 2009, and while the threat to global economy is far from eliminated, Greece is still experiencing the consequences of the 'biggest structural crisis in its recent history' (Karamessini, 2015: 239). In its course, the applied policies of internal devaluation and controlled bankruptcy, as well as the application of austerity measures have kept the country at a low level of production, investments, national demand and work productivity. At the same time, in proportion to the universal blow administered to the function of the economy, the country's social tissue, state apparatus and human and material resources have been undergoing radical transformations.

Meanwhile, salaries and pensions have been cut up to 40%, taxation has become exhausting, especially for lower and middle classes, unemployment has reached record highs and there is virtually no hiring in the public sector. In general, a new scenery for working relations is formed, dominated by the infringement of acquired rights and labour law, the deconstruction of collective agreements, the transformation of full-time employment into flexible or undocumented labour, the liberation of mass dismissals and the loss of any job-related benefits (Chrysochou, 2018b). All these have contributed to a socially unprecedented increase of phenomena of food insecurity, deprivation, poverty, and social exclusion, while there has also been a notable rise in depression, mental disorders and suicides (Economou, et al. 2012; Simou and Koutsogeorgou, 2014).

Given all the above, the most fitting illustration of this deep, structural crisis of the capitalist system itself is, in my view, given in the following extract from the book *War Primer*¹ by Bertolt Brecht.

[...] THE WORKERS CRY OUT FOR BREAD

The merchants cry out for markets.

The unemployed were hungry. The employed

Are hungry now [...]

THOSE WHO TAKE THE MEAT FROM THE TABLE

Teach contentment.

Those for whom the contribution is destined

Demand sacrifice.

Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry

Of wonderful times to come.

Those who lead the country into the abyss

Call ruling too difficult

For ordinary men. [...]

(*War Primer*, Brecht, [1955 (1998)]-emphasis in the original)

Articulating a Subversive and Critical Discourse in Times of *Crisis*

When discussing, therefore, the economic crisis, regardless of how it manifests itself, namely as a debt crisis or a credit system crisis, it is essentially a crisis of the capitalist relations of production. In the field of politics, at least in the Greek case, this systemic crisis is reflected as a crisis of overaccumulation of lies, political deception and political fissures in the joints of a bankrupt political system in search of ways to remake itself.

But what is the situation in the social and cultural environment in Greece, and how has the prolonged crisis affected it? The only thing we know for sure is that, the neoliberal attack and the ensuing violent economic and political directives that arose from the status of supervision brought with them several shifts at the level of ideological orientation, proposed cultural standards and dominant discourses. The latter can be traced in a range of domains: from politics and education to the field of the Mass Media and public discourse, as articulated in our daily life, including the social networks on the internet. Naturally, the extent to which we can speak of radical transformations is the subject of a wider discussion and, at the same time, creates a

vital need for new interdisciplinary research work, which will critically and empirically process possible changes that have occurred in the Greek society over the past decade.

Paradoxically, even though the economic crisis and its repercussions have long been under investigation, constituting in fact a prevalent topic, there is in the relevant literature a marked inability to articulate a subversive critical discourse. A discourse, which, having rid itself of *naïve* simplification, superficiality, conformity and neutrality, will actively contribute to the scientific understanding and interpretation of the contemporary world, within the wider context of the present economic circumstances. I do not mean, of course, to imply that it is an easy endeavour that I am proposing, given especially the stifling conditions of neoliberal dominance that we are struggling under. Neither, do I claim that there is total lack of research work which definitively enriched the discussion towards a critical overview of daily life, especially in Greece, where such kind of works abound (though unfortunately, much is lost in translation).

On the contrary, what I would like to emphasise is the necessity of a more systematic approach in this direction, which will holistically and critically discuss the attempted *naturalisation of reality* proceeding to a macro-level analysis of neoliberal dominance. Such an approach, transcending subjectivity and rooting it in the class stratification of our society, must consider causes, phenomena and consequences on the basis of socio-political determinants. This is essential, since for a nation to be able to recognise that there are ways to change the situation, it is not enough to experience its tragedy intensely. On the contrary, it should properly and wholly understand the causes. Sadly, the sombre reality, combined with the official bourgeois and media interpretations, have deprived Greeks of this exact capability: the ability to try to understand (Gounari, 2014: 309-310).

Within that context, the research focus of this article is an initial approach of the dominant orientation in the Greek ideological field, mainly drawing from the dominant representations and discourses fabricated, promoted and cultivated in the field of Mass Media and advertising; a domain, indeed, especially suited for such promotion. An important parameter which will have to be highlighted, therefore, for the sake of clarity, is that my central aim is not an in-depth analysis, but more of a mapping of the Greek current *terrain*.

The Power of Media and Information: A Double-Edged Sword

Undoubtedly, the media served and continue to serve a variety of functions, changing their role, face and character according to the historic, social, economic, political and ideological framework. Their multi-dimensional role is apparent in the substitution of the term *information media* with the term *Mass Communication Media*.

The media, by transmitting, producing, organising and signifying events, issues, information and news, but also by trading in, charged with values and ideologies, emotions and ideas, as will gradually become apparent, play a crucial role in society. In fact, they are for the public, one of the dominant fields of perception, evaluation and interpretation of the modern world, daily life and social experience (McQuail and Vidal, 1991; Gamson, 1992). The exuberant founder of realism, the French author Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), in the second volume of one of his greatest novels, *Lost Illusions (Illusions Perdues)*, [1837 (2004)], presents an excoriating critique of journalism and newspapers. In fact, stressing the ways in which media were managed, organised and manipulated by those in power, in the French society of the 19th century, and tracing the connections between politics and the press he states that newspapers are the ‘brothel of thought’ and that if the Press did not exist, we should not invent it.

The power of the media is unquestionable, as is their utility as communication and information media (Castells, 2009). This does not, of course, automatically guarantee their proper function. How could something like this be true, in fact, since the media are on the one hand connected with the political system and political life as an informational transmitter of developments, and on the other, they constitute corporations which evidently pursue a profit (Zacharopoulos and Paraschos, 1993).

Based on what has been said so far, it should not come as a surprise that, since the outbreak of World War I, governments around the world are constantly negotiating with the media in an effort to supervise and also harness them. In our days, in fact, given the aforementioned centrality of the media, the political parties turn to communication more and more, adapting their strategies in order to control the daily flow of information and affect public opinion. As a result, a new public space is formed, characterised by ‘the modern publicity process’, namely, the

competition for influence and control of public opinion on basic political events and issues (Blumler, 1990). In fact, in periods of crisis, as I will proceed to demonstrate, this phenomenon becomes even more intense since the need for assurances that the media will function around promoting the *national* interests (Cull, Cullbert and Welch, 2003) becomes imperative.

In contemporary societies, information does not constitute solely a core element of political, economic and social activity, but it is also a form of communication that is not eliminated after its emission, making it a *de facto* mode of socialisation (Bell, 1979). The principal means of carrying out this mass communication, as well as the daily process of informing the public, is none other than the Mass Media, which have largely established their dominance (McNair, 2006; Webster, 2006; Pleios, 2011a; 2011b). The advent of the well-documented *information society* was, of course, greatly facilitated by the rapid development of the internet and the New Media, whose impact on daily communication, social coordination, production and consumption of content is constantly growing (Bruns and Burgess, 2012).

According to, the revised in 2001, article 15 of the Greek Constitution (211/A/24.12.2019- referring to cinema, photography, radio and television): “Radio and television are under the direct control of the State. [...] The direct control of the State, which also assumes the form of the status of the previous permission, focusses on the objective and on equal terms transmission of information and news [...].” But what does objectivity and transmission of information and news on equal terms actually mean? Can something like this be upheld in our times? Can it generally be upheld? I will try to respond to those questions by asking a different one, so aptly posed by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) in a speech he gave in Moscow in 1920:

Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticised? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinions calculated to embarrass the government? (Lenin, 1920, cited in Reston, 1967: xii)

Unveiling the Mechanisms of Propaganda

It seems evident that we are constantly bombarded by messages that attempt to convince us of something (Pratkanis and Aronson, 2001). But the problem lies in the fact that these messages are not simply trying to convince us of the validity and the accuracy of an opinion through discussion and analytical citing of arguments (persuasion). On the contrary, Mass Media, almost systematically, resort to the application of added methods, which, by making use of various techniques, symbols and the emotional factor (propaganda) aim to manipulate and ultimately deceive the audience (Webster, 2006). Possession of knowledge equals greater power and the outcome is better control of the masses. What we think of is based on what we learn. Therefore, manipulation of a mind or of a nation can be achieved through manipulation of information.

The question which arises thus, is whether we can still talk about information as a public good in today's class society. In the *Code of Professional Ethics and Social Responsibility of Journalists* (1998), which defines the moral principles of the profession, article 1 emphasises that: "The right of the individual and the citizen to inform and be informed freely is unquestionable. Information is a public good and not a commodity or means of propaganda. The journalist can and must consider his primary duty to society and himself to make public the whole truth [...]."

To what extent is this possible, however, in a profession that has become more competitive than ever and whose frenzied pace, as well as political and financial dependence do not leave room for verification and proof? How is it possible to not sacrifice objectivity and truth on the altar of profit, ending up in what was so aptly put by Orson Welles in his mystery drama film *Citizen Kane* (1941): "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story."

Walter Benjamin [1940 (2003)] wrote in one of his best-known controversial works *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, known also as *On the Concept of History* that history is written by the victors. Drawing on the same analogy with regard to the media, what I am supporting is that in class societies, the truth has a class sign. There is no truth, nor information which can be above and beyond classes and societies. Mass Media, print or electronic, will express the truth of their owner, they will inform

according to the interests of their owner. And this will happen whether the media are state-owned or privately owned, one way or the other. We should not forget what Marx and Engels pointed out in *German Ideology*, where they set the ideological framework which defines the role of Mass Media as a role of a central ideological support mechanism of the dominance of the bourgeoisie.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class [...] determine the extent and compass of an epoch [...] hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus, their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. (Marx and Engels, [1932 (1974): 64]

Within that context, medias' role is not limited to the transmission of information, but they also function as centres of political control and influence (Serafetinidou, 2003). More specifically, based on the analytical framework outlined above, in this article, the Mass Media are approached as means of dissemination of ideologies in the following ways: as a representation of specific versions of reality; as the formulation of dominant orientations and modes of perception and comprehension of the world through principles and ideals consistent with the ones proposed by neoliberalism; as management of the cultural framework and the standards of the current historic moment; and finally as the composition of an institutionally strong, non-confrontational discourse which aims at the preservation of social consensus.

By as early as the 90s, Noam Chomsky, posing the critical issue of attempting to influence public opinion using control and propaganda techniques, had characterised modern societies as “manipulated democracies”. In his book, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (Chomsky, 1997: 16), he stressed that “Propaganda is to democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state”.

What is the history of propaganda, however, and how is it defined? The truth is that propaganda has existed as a practice since long before 1900. In fact, the first attempts of mass influence of the public opinion came with the patriotic slogans of the French Revolution and continued until World War I, where the British Ministry of Propaganda played a definitive role in the developments. After World War II, the logic of propaganda was extended to other domains of human activity, escaping the tight constraints of politics and affecting the whole spectrum of social life (Zaller, 1992). In the political scenery and communication media, it first appeared with the intention of approaching and influencing public opinion in the early 20th century (Taylor 1998). Regarding its definition, what can be said with some certainty is that it is a multifaceted concept, characterised by a multitude of definitions and a theoretical and conceptual polyphony (Charlafti, 2017).

The different techniques of propaganda practice that have been documented are essentially countless. Harold Lasswell (1902-1978) is considered a pioneer in this domain, having published his study on the propaganda techniques used in World War I in 1927. The foundations, however, of propaganda analysis at the level of political communication were laid in 1946 with the collective tome by Bruce Lanes Smith, Harold Lasswell and Ralph Casey; this work constituted a review of everything that had been written on propaganda until then. In our days, the development of the Mass Media along with their dominance of the public sphere as the undisputed transmitters of information and opinions on matters of public interest (Pleios, 2001a; 2001b) have given the concept and practice of propaganda a central role. Thus, it has stopped being simply a method used by specific people and with specific purposes and has become a constant socio-political phenomenon taking into account the social structure as a whole (Bernays, 1928).

Journalists as Foes of Their Own Household

But what is the role of the journalist in the context of the moment? I would like to begin with the answer given to this question by John Swinton (1829-1901), the Scottish-American journalist, who may have gained his greatest influence as the chief editorial writer of The New York Times, but is mainly remembered for his weekly labour sheet, John Swinton's Paperii, as a reply, at an official dinner before the New York Press Club (1880, cited in Boyer and Morais, 1955), to a toast offered by one of the guests to the independent press:

The business of the journalist is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of mammon, and to sell his country and his race for his daily bread. You know it and I know it, and what folly is toasting an independent press? We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks; they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes. (Swinton, 1880, cited in Boyer and Morais, 1955)

But what does the French philosopher, author and journalist Albert Camus (1913-1960) write in his intense manifesto-like text in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the war, and while censorship of the press was already happening in France? In fact, he considers journalists' own attitude as one of the greatest obstacles to independent press. So, denouncing misinformation, but also emphasising the importance of individual, apart from collective choices, regarding the creation of free personalities, Camus, in his censored manifestoⁱⁱⁱ (*Le manifeste censuré de Camus*) calls on the journalists to remain free and independent in times of war. In his own words:

[...] Many obstacles are put in the way of freedom of speech. It is not the most serious of them that can break a spirit. Because the threats, the suspensions, the persecutions generally bring the opposite result in France than the one desired. But we have to agree that there are discouraging obstacles: [such as] the consistent idiocy, the organised spinelessness, the aggressive unintelligence, and we pass over them. There, that is the great obstacle that we have to surmount. Obstinacy becomes a cardinal virtue. Through a curious but obvious paradox, it serves objectivity and tolerance. (Camus, [1939 (2012)])

Almost 80 years have passed since Camus' call for independent journalism and his *voice* is still relevant today. As a matter of fact, the situation we are facing is far from optimistic. This gloomy picture was aptly presented by the British investigative journalist and inventor of the term "churnalism", Nick Davies (2008), in his article *Our Media have become mass producers of distortion*, on the *Guardian* of 4th February 2008. More precisely, some months before the world plugged into its worst, since the Great Depression, capitalist crisis, the journalist turns the spotlight on the distribution of propaganda and second hand news by the media (Reich, 2010). In his own words:

Where once journalists were active gatherers of news, now they have generally become mere passive processors of unchecked, second-hand material, much of it

contrived by PR [Public Relations] to serve some political or commercial interest. Not journalists, but churnalists. An industry whose primary task is to filter out falsehood has become so vulnerable to manipulation that it is now involved in the mass production of falsehood, distortion and propaganda. (Davies, 2008, para. 7)

Media Discourses and the Concept of *Crisis*

A *crisis* is by nature a complex *reality*, an important part of which remains elusive by having its essential elements ignored (Brody, 1991). This is what makes the need for information more pressing than ever, since without it, we can neither grasp the very *essence* of the *crisis*, nor assess its repercussions and properly estimate the underlying dangers (Fearn-Banks, 2002). From this point of view, therefore, it can be argued that, during a *crisis*, the part played by the Mass Media, as the primary source of information for the society, is crucial since the content of the dominant discourse they articulate, that is the content of the dominant interpretation, as well as the *meaning-makings* associated with it, is what creates the problem itself: the nature of the *crisis*, its causes, its manifestations, its ramifications and its solutions. In that sense, the dominant discourse about the crisis, and the narratives that the last shape, regardless of their interpretive range, acquire a political function to the extent that they convert into ‘folk wisdom’ or ‘tacit knowledge’ (Roitman, 2014: 5; Dedousopoulos 2017).

But let me illustrate my reasoning. Following the above line of thinking, the crisis discourses and narratives articulated by the media, expressly or implicitly, describe, represent, propose and also construct specific versions of and perspectives on *reality*, which carry with them a predetermined frame of perception, comprehension and interpretation of the *crisis*, as well as specific materialised manifestations and socio-political responses (Chun, 2017). At the same time, the narratives articulated as communicative stakes do not stop at the mere description of the *crisis*, thus *defining*^{iv} the term, but also position causation within the temporal sequencing of events that are identified as significant, employing agents and victims and determining the ways to react and deal with it (Ricoeur, 1984; Walby, 2015).

Indeed, for a large part of the public, the aforementioned discourses and narratives take the form of logical standards by which they interpret *reality* and construct their *common sense* beliefs (Gramsci, 1971) and their *economic common-sense making* (Chun, 2017) rendering thus, the examination and the advancement of our understanding as regards people’s engagement with them a pressing issue to

address. Because by doing so, we can also map the ways in which we can build the necessary counter-hegemonic discourses that can mobilise a critically grounded *good sense* of people in their questioning and challenging the *status quo*. In any case, we should not forget what Antonio Gramsci (1971) reminded us: that the *common sense* beliefs are not to be dismissed and ignored so easily, for they have material consequences.

It is not difficult, thus, to discern in what has already been said, that the above raised issue is considered of great importance, with significant political and social repercussions. On the one hand, it is precisely this economic common-sense making that leads to a reimagining of day-to-day experience as a somewhat coherent narrative, which is in turn reiterated and strengthened among the people themselves and across communities, including the news and the social media (Chun, 2017: 50). On the other hand, the kind and content of news reporting of the crisis can act as forms of exercising political authority through shaping political agendas and outlining spaces in which specific proposed political solutions can be sought (Cohen, 1994; Dedousopoulos, 2017; Chrysochou, 2018a).

Contrary to what one might expect, in periods of crisis, the media most commonly support the policies applied by the state and the dominant political powers and elites (Bennett, 2016), with the corresponding consequences, both on how events are reported, and on whether basic principles of journalism are safeguarded (Bennett, 2016). One of the main reasons this happens is that crises, contrary to other events, are news in their own right (Arno and Dissanayake, 1984), thus imposing their publicity and, at least partly, their own agenda regarding their coverage by the media (Fearn-Banks, 2002).

Given the above, it is certainly not surprising that, in such times, propaganda is more evident than ever. Actually, it constitutes the lever and driving force in synchronising the aims of citizens with the aims of the state, as well as the means of selective dissemination of information and promotion of specific political opinions, ideologies and cultures as model, urging thus the citizens to endorse them. Therefore, the primary goal of the media within such a framework is not to inform the public, but to frame the daily agenda in such a way as to achieve the most effective legitimisation of established policies and practices in the collective

conscience of the public, and serve interests and political purposes (Hayward, 1996; Williams, 2003).

As a result, propaganda, along with some of its fundamental requirements, such as the state's intention to align its citizens' goals with its own objectives, the selective or one-sided dissemination of information, the citizens' internalisation of political positions, ideologies and cultures, presented as model by the media, and the invocation of emotions emerge and become more prominent in such periods than any other (Lippman, 1992; Shahin and Terzis, 2012). At this point, though, and before turning my attention to the media discourses revolving around the 2008 global capitalist crisis, it would be an omission to not refer to the variations in intensity of this phenomenon as a function of other factors, such as the communicative-political system of a country (c.f. Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and the nature (c.f. Bennett, 2016) and culture of the medium (c.f. Brody, 1991) which is covering the crisis.

What Role Did the Mass Media Play During the 2008 Global Capitalist Crisis?

Without a doubt, the 2008 crash affected millions of lives worldwide, eradicating incalculable amounts of wealth and personal savings, putting many countries and their people in debt, bringing radical changes in all domains of human activity, and causing a limitless social and humanitarian crisis. However, if a more penetrating look sees through the surface and tries to decode the elements of our era, it will realise that apart from the gloomy and grey *reality*, there is also an unexpected, but welcome, by-product of the 2008 global capitalist crisis. This is none other than, the realisation that the economy has not been doing well for a long time, at least in comparison with the still fairly recent 'good old days' (Chun, 2017: 46).

Apparently, a large portion of the public has begun to realise that they were being sold a dream completely at odds with what *reality* can offer. In this light and considering how diligently the average member of the public avoided anything to do with economics before, the unprecedented amount of public debates over the global economy, especially in the social media and online mainstream media platforms, all over the world, is fascinating (c.f. Couldry, 2010). In this framework, the historian and philosopher of economic thought, Philip Mirowski, remarked back in 2010 that "[...] suddenly it seemed like everyone with a web browser harboured a quick

opinion about what had gone wrong with economics and was not at all shy about broadcasting it to the world” (Mirowski, 2010:30).

In fact, with the outbreak of the global capitalist crisis, the people suffering its consequences voiced the question of *how* and *why* this happened to them, and demanded a simple answer to a simple question: “What was different this time compared to earlier bankruptcies and shady economic deals?” (Mirowski, 2010: 30). Thus, despite the declarations of contemporary capitalism for being *omnipotent* and the *single worthy alternative*, it has been rocked to its foundations. In line with my last comment, Terry Eagleton (2011: xi), astutely pointed out in his book *Why Marx was Right* that “you can tell that the capitalist system is in trouble when people start talking about capitalism”.

However, the economists were apparently unable to provide clear answers, at least back in 2008 (Mirowski, 2010). In television or radio interviews, as well as in their writings, their expressed opinions remained within the boundaries of neoclassical professional orthodoxy, essentially ranging from a *Keynesian* approach to a *monetarist* or *Friedman* one. At the same time, mainstream media confined themselves to describing growing inequalities without ever considering or even mentioning the possibility of an alternative system, a possibility which is invariably portrayed as a vain endeavour if it is to go beyond a simple remedy. Following suit, those who influenced public opinion deliberately steered the conversation away from structural and recurring causes of the crisis related to capitalism and continued to present capitalism itself as the only obvious choice (Wolff, 2012; Chun, 2017).

The fact however, that the public did not have access to a wider range of scholarly voices through mainstream media, with views exceeding the limits of economic orthodoxy, had a profound impact on the way they framed, discussed and proposed to deal with the crisis (Mirowski, 2010; Chun, 2017). In fact, it is not even clear whether those people expressing the feeling that things are no longer what they used to, do in fact recognise capitalism as the underlying cause, or if they attribute the problem to a variety of related or unrelated issues^{vi}. It is a possibility that all this heated debate is rooted in simple people’s rising anxieties concerning job security, unemployment, wage stagnation or reduction, growing income disparities, house and student debts, and the former middle-class becoming increasingly impoverished in countries such as the UK, the USA, but also Greece. In fact, and although Greece has

always been a country with deep inequalities, since 2009, and in the space of barely two years, the total framework shifted through the process of social downward mobility, expanding substantially the working class (Sakellaropoulos, 2014; Chrysochou, 2018b).

Media Representations of the *Greek Crisis*

The global, as well as national, economic crisis could not of course leave the media unaffected. In fact, over the last years, the whole construct has been shaken to its foundations. What seems to be happening, in particular, is that the Mass Media are trying to ensure their survival through clinging to the one or other political side, while the repercussions of the economic crisis on their profession are constantly becoming worse (Barker, 2005). Celebrity reporters and radiant TV personas are out of work, while dismissals are in the thousands and the cutbacks are enormous.

But what went wrong and when did it start? In Greece, following a 25-year period of media prosperity (from the 80s all the way to the mid-2000s), the era of the crisis eventually comes to highlight permanent problems, which are predominantly connected with their systemic interference in various governments and the illusion they brought that the practices applied up to that point could, in fact, be perpetuated. So, media companies, and not just theirs, are caught unprepared and the terrain of mass communication is restructured. Among other things, revenues from advertising decline, loaning increases, journalists and other media workers are rapidly becoming redundant, the number of media decreases and their content changes (Leandros, 2010; 2013). As far as the media representation of the Greek crisis, the truth is that, ever since the beginning, and during the whole period, both the national and the international media have been playing a crucial role in shaping public opinion.

In fact, it would be no exaggeration to claim that, in terms of the Greek crisis, the Mass Media have played a definitive role in comprehending and dealing with it, in the implementation of economic, political and social policies, but also in the expression of opinions regarding the causes, the consequences and the management of the crisis. Looking over the last 9 years, and trying to provide a brief, but enlightening overview, I could support that, in general, the dominant discourse and narratives on the Greek crisis articulated in the media, not only proved insufficient to contribute to a deeper understanding of the crisis, but also constituted

the basis for the reformation of all sides of the Greek daily life based on neoliberal values, ideologies and practices (Athanasίου, 2012).

Given the above context, what we observe is the use of Mass Media, as tools to achieve political purposes, a *hegemonic reading* on their part of the Greek economic crisis, as an emergency situation that required taking and applying the corresponding urgent measures to deal with the *threat*, and a plethora of narratives of *accountability* built on racist stereotypes and bourgeois interpretations. Lastly, another characteristic, that is prevalent all the way down, is a discourse of propaganda aiming to polarise citizens and lead them to accept harsh measures and extreme behaviours as necessary, unavoidable and exclusive solutions (Stamkos, 2000; Mylonas, 2012; Marlin, 2013). The techniques used towards that direction were numerous, with the most noticeable and sophisticated among them, at least in the case of Greece, being the following: development of superstitions and stereotypes; strengthening the patriotic feeling; self-righteousness; populism; refocusing thought from essential matters to trivial details projected as news; all the way to the manipulation through horror, exaggeration, emergency and inevitability (Papageorgiou, 2018).

More precisely, it can be argued that the main interpretation of dominant circles presented the Greek economic crisis as an exclusively local phenomenon. In particular, Greece was portrayed as a profligate country with an oversized deficient public sector, with corrupt governments which, for clientelist reasons, submitted to the extravagant demands of Greek citizens and trade unions (Sakellariopoulos, 2014; Chrysochou, 2018a). Furthermore, when in 2010, Greece was forced to resort to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was systematically described and presented in the international media as a *disobedient* country that repeatedly broke the law, as the *bad pupil of Europe*, and as the source for the transmission of the *virus* of the crisis (Bickes, Otten and Weymann 2014). Simultaneously, especially between 2010 and 2012, Greeks were portrayed as a unified group with shared negative features. In particular, as *unruly, irresponsible, disorganised, lazy, corrupt, greedy and indolent* citizens, who having lied in order to adopt the common currency (euro), were spending their time drinking by the sea without a care in the world (Ovenden, 2015).

The above described process of assigning responsibility and blame was far from accidental. On the contrary, it should be seen as conscious attempt, from the

very beginning, to serve a double function. On the one hand, it provided a concise interpretive framework for the causes of the crisis (they brought it unto themselves) which demonised the people of a whole country, while at the same time, it aided in the concealment of the responsibility of the European political and economic status quo, and to the use of the fiscal and civil disobedience as an excuse for the involuntary subordination of the country to IMF supervision (Mylonas, 2012; Gounari, 2014; Ovenden, 2015). At this point, it is worth mentioning an extra factor that was also determinant, related to the political particularities of Greek society, and consequently of the Greek media: the *mediterranean model* to which the country's system of communications belongs (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). According to this model, which is closely connected with the historic and political circumstances that left their mark on the country, and more specifically with the existence of an absolutist regime in Greece until 1974 (Papathanasopoulos, 2004), the institution of Mass Communication Media is characterised by an intense political and economic co-dependence with the state.

Consequently, the absence of dominant critical and radical discourses and narratives on the Greek crisis, at least articulated by the mainstream broadcast media, apart from not contributing towards a deeper understanding of the depth, extent, nature, causes and *unseen generating mechanisms* (Dedousopoulos, 2017) of the crisis, by remorselessly espousing the neoliberal *dogma*, they have also hindered the creation of the required objective terms and appropriate conditions for collective action, effective resistance and radical management of the crisis (Grollios and Gounari, 2016). Applying this reasoning more extensively, it can be supported that a central feature of the media discourse during the Greek crisis was the mobilisation of a neoliberal system of values, along with a turn to neoliberalism's social and political *formulas*, with the aim of legitimising the destruction and privatisation of the national economy, and promoting the setting up of a sort of a neoliberal *laboratory* where new models of accumulation and new modes of governmentality could be tested, before being applied in other western countries at a later time (Gounari, 2014; Sakellaropoulos, 2014).

Hence, in practice, the media narratives and discourses have attempted, all the way through, to attribute a temporary character to the crisis by equating it with its manifestations, leading thus, to either naïve and arbitrary conclusions (i.e. the crisis

will be over if the symptom is moderated or ceases to exist) or even worse, to the *normalisation* of the phenomena, manifestations and consequences of the crisis. The last refers to the integration of the *persisting* symptoms of the crisis in *normal life* and to the process of *learning to live* with them, as if they have always been part of daily life.

At the same time, the Mass Media, by constructing and deconstructing interests, seeking *scapegoats*, and transforming economic, political and social issues to moral or psychological ones, in arbitrary and deceptive ways (Sakellaropoulos, 2014; Gounari, 2014; Ovenden, 2015), have tried to legitimise the crisis. Towards that end, more than often, the crisis was equated with its individual occurrences and was approached in subjective terms, concealing thus, that the society we are living in is made up of social classes with conflicting interests. Jürgen Habermas, arguing about the failure of such approaches, in his pioneering book on the crisis of legitimisation, reminds us that:

A society does not plunge into crisis when, and only when, its members so identify the situation. How could we distinguish such crisis ideologies from valid experiences of crisis if social crises could be determined only on the basis of conscious phenomena?
(Habermas, 1975: 4)

To put it in other words, while I cannot overlook that as social subjects we perceive of and experience the crisis in our own subjective manner, I will state that ignoring the class struggle or eliminating the concept of social class, as defined by specific productive and social forces, is no accident. Quite the contrary, this great concealment is part of a wider class project with specific aims. When social classes' conflicting interests are detached from the dominant relations of oppression and exploitation, they are reduced to contradictions in context (Katsikas and Kavvadias, 1998). Exploited and dominant classes are therefore presented as equal, with the former made responsible for the economic and social crisis, thus paving the way for the reassignment of the responsibility of finding solutions to the labour market itself (Grollios, 2004: 21-43).

Media and the Representation of the Working Class in Times of Crisis: A Snapshot from Greece

What is made clear from the above last part, is that there are many serious problems concerning media and class in contemporary societies. One of them is that the media have contributed to the immiseration and marginalisation of working-class people by failing to adequately represent the complexity, diversity and richness of their lives and values. This includes a failure to convey adequately the particular ways in which working-class people flourish and suffer, why they do so, and in what circumstances (Hesmondhalgh, 2017).

However, it would be inaccurate to consider this problem an outcome of the crisis, even though it has become worse over the last few years. The truth is that journalistic practices had already started to change in the era of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. In the 80s, along with discussions of the *end of labour*, the so-called *labour reporting*, which used to be part of almost every newspaper, covering exclusively issues connected with labour (i.e. labour law, unions, collective agreements, strikes, mobilisations), gradually started to disappear or change form.

More particularly in Greece, at least during its decade-long economic, political, ideological and to an extent cultural crisis, the term *working class* itself appears very rarely, while it is replaced by others, such as workers, the unemployed, the unemployed young, immigrants, and above all the *poor*. For the majority of Mass Media, workers don't have a face or a voice. There are of course stories of *human interest* which are connected with poverty, unemployment and the crisis, but not with the struggles against them. On the contrary, the coverage of these struggles is usually from the perspective of a 'hugely inconvenienced' public, while any reference to the causes of mobilisation is accused of populism (Papageorgiou, 2018).

At the same time, new models of business culture are promoted, framed in Mass Media by a dominant discourse and practices which aim to construct the image of the omnipresent company, the one standing by the side of the consumer and the worker; the company which listens to the needs of society and responds to them. This way, a new 'fetishised' relationship between society and company is formed, under the vestiges of so-called Corporate Social Responsibility^{vii}, characterised by an attempt of the latter to assimilate human moral principles (i.e. solidarity). The

company is slowly transformed into a dominant symbol that manifests itself, either alongside the advertised products and services, or as a sponsor behind socially sensitive actions and TV shows (Papageorgiou, 2015; 2018).

Simultaneously, at a deeper level, a new form of volunteering is cultivated and encouraged, going hand in hand with the neoliberal ideological spearheads of selflessness and offering without expectation of reward. For the whole duration of the economic crisis, the media and advertising have developed and projected a rhetoric regarding the necessity of creating an active society on the remains of a once known welfare state. This way, a new version of political subject is constructed, pervaded by the value code of solidarity, good will and an outdated altruism. In this framework, the actors are called, in the name of a humanitarian interventionist action and volunteering^{viii}, to substitute, through private and collective initiative, the virtually non-existent welfare state and the historically associated provision of services. Naturally, these new forms of political subjectivity are often coordinated by corporations, companies^{ix} and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), thus downgrading the notions of solidarity and volunteer work to mere daily life management tools. The latter, fully coordinated with the neoliberal propositions, not only normalise immiseration, but also legitimise the neoliberal policies through an institutionally organised philanthropy.

Concluding Remarks

Few could doubt that we are indeed at a crossroads, standing at a crucial, but controversial point, dominated by a negative correlation of powers, under the hegemony of totems and laws of capitalism. On the one hand, capitalism and its crisis, its inability to ensure better living and its hostility towards the environment, peace, culture, freedom and democracy put it at odds with both basic human needs and current capabilities (Pavlidis, 2012; 2017).

On the other hand, our era is characterised by the organisational and ideological regression of the working class and the absence of a structured and subversive alternative, or at least an alternative put in relatively mass and collective terms. In fact, despite the intensified class conflict, the spontaneous movement of the traditional working class, when not lured towards the extreme right by populist saviours, seems numb, detached and paralysed. Meanwhile, even though, the crisis is

the plague of our modern era, over which political stratagems, tactics, and ideological conflicts cross fire, it remains an abstract entity, thus rooting out discussion of causes, much less a specific political agenda aimed at overcoming it (Katsikas and Kavvadias, 1998).

Rejecting however, the above dead-end, and convinced that the resolution of the crisis, at an economic, political and ideological level, remains an open and particularly burning issue, I believe that in current circumstances, a critical and radical view of the crisis (which should not fall for the deception of a *politically clean* and *neutral* theory) is more imperative than ever. This view would inevitably transcend the dominant austerity narrative and bypassing the politics of the mainstream media and bourgeois ideologisms would kaleidoscopically approach the crisis, its roots, and consequently its causes, and repercussions, while placing central focus on the exploitation of labourers. It is in exactly this direction that, I also consider imperative the examination and profound understanding of how people engage with the public and media discourses of crisis and how these operate in the co-construction of their *realities*.

There is, without a doubt, a lot of work to be done as we come before a new situation on a global level; a situation where many theoretical issues need to be examined under the light of the crisis. But at least for those of us who do not limit our views and actions to the horizon of neoliberal, neoconservative and technocratic dogmas, the only way forward is in that direction.

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Endnotes

ⁱA book, which due to the particular artistic practice followed by Brecht (photo-epigrams), has been described by many as a practical manual, demonstrating how to read press photographs.

ⁱⁱ Actually, it was one of the most prominent American labour newspapers of the 1880s.

ⁱⁱⁱ The manifesto remained unpublished until a few years ago, March 2012, when it finally came to light through the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

^{iv} The concept of *crisis*, as a thick one, with a broad content and multiple uses in different historical periods, is charged with interlaced conceptual difficulties, which need to be taken into great consideration by scholars before including it in their own terminology (c.f. Katsikas and Kavvadias, 1998; Koselleck and Richter, 2006). The same also applies to other contextually and ideologically mediated concepts, like *democracy*, *freedom* and *capitalism*, which, precisely due to their diachronic use and adjustments of meaning, have been defined and understood quite differently by different people and groups throughout their history, ending up meaning many different things to different people (c.f. Williams, 1985; Wolff, 2012; Chrysochou, 2018a). In any case, my intention here is not to argue in favour of perpetual linguistic or lexical debates, since those concepts are approached as "real material enactments of hard-earned victories" (Chun, 2017: 141).

^v Culture is a complex and multifaceted concept, often associated with terminology and conceptual confusion in literature. For clarity's sake, thus, I provide the specific definition of the concept that I use in this article. Culture here, is not only approached as a way of life, meaning, as a sum of practices, ideological principles and values on which different social groups draw in order to interpret the world. More than that, culture is also considered a field of struggle, as far as the production, legitimisation and dissemination of forms of knowledge

and experience, where different groups, in their dominant or dominated social relations, realise their expectations through unequal power relations (c.f. McLaren, 2007).

^{vi} Let me stress here, that this last point is an issue of great political significance, associated with the social movements (i.e. Occupy movement) and the contradictory and conflicting views that people who participate in those hold on society, their country and the world.

^{vii} The slogan of Greek mobile service provider Wind constitutes a characteristic example: “When people try, companies have to try harder.”

^{viii} It should be noted here that this phenomenon particularly intensified during the most recent refugee crisis (2015- 2016) and the mobilization of NGOs and other volunteer organisations.

^{ix} Corporate discourse is quite obvious, mainly as it is articulated through advertising. In fact, it is often the case that this discourse usurps the concept of solidarity and advertises corporate support for various volunteer projects, simultaneously broadcasting the message for non-confrontational collective action. A typical example in this direction is the slogan: ‘All together we can do things’ from the TV show *Heroes Among us* broadcast in Greece in 2013 by a private corporate television network (ANT1).

About the Author

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