

Post-oxi great depression in Greece

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Woestman provided in 2012 analysis of some of the gender dynamics in Greece in what have turned out to be the early days of the crisis. Now in 2015 she returns to this analysis and finds that the enduring crisis coupled with forced neo-liberal economic reforms have cause an overall feeling of depression and burn out: "Greeks tended to yell, not let themselves go to hell...[now] all hell is going to break loose".

Introduction

In a 2012 WIDE+ newsletter¹, I presented an analysis of some of the gender dynamics in Greece in what have turned out to be the early days of the crisis. These included the gender labor gap in Greece having shrunk during the early days of the crisis, as men's positions worsened even more than women's – but was highly differentiated by sector. I also noted that women's unpaid work loads were increasing, as public sector services were cut, and that they were being pressured to return to being “only housewives” to leave jobs to the men. Discussion on further development in these trends between 2012 and 2013 can be found in Karamessini and Rubery (2013).² I also noted that gender based violence was on the rise, a point developed further since by Svarna in her 2014 piece.³

In 2012, I also discussed the rapidly increasing implementation of the neoclassical economic model in Europe that WIDE(+) has been critiquing since its inception, and within which the above-noted gender dynamics are embedded. I noted the widening core-periphery divide in Europe, as the neoclassical core enforced harsher neoclassical economic “recovery” programmes on the periphery than they had undertaken at home. I also talked about the way politicians were whipping up national stereotypes to deflect attention and blame from themselves as well as to prevent potential resistance alliances across countries.

Many of the “periphery” countries that have undertaken such “transitions” in the last years - Eastern European as well as southern - are currently ruled by conservative governments, afraid of the growing resistance within their own countries. Many have joined the “core” alliance, and in the national stereotyping which has perhaps been at its strongest in the maligning of Greeks – who elected a socialist government in January - as lazy, cheating, makontents.

Little could I imagine in 2012 just how damaging the psychological as well as economic effects of the confluence of these broader developments could be in Greece three years down the line. In 2012, I had mentioned that the suicide rate that had risen 35% between 2010 and 2012, especially among men who had lost their jobs.

Now, I would like to share with you my reflections on the emerging “structure of feeling” - a term coined by Raymond Williams to talk about “a social experience in solution,” something that feels as definite as a structure but is created through accumulation of intangible day to day experiences⁴ - in Greece after the great majority of its citizens voted no to more austerity, but its government

1 https://wideplusnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/wide_plus_pub_2012_12.pdf

2 <https://www.routledge.com/products/9780415815376>

3 http://www.wunrn.com/news/2014/05_14/05_26/052614_greece.htm

4 http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9780631207535_chunk_g978063120753522_ss1-37

was forced by the conservative block to sign up for more as a condition for Greece to receive further financial assistance and remain in the eurozone. My talks with people in Athens and on the island of Kythera – most of whom are either professionals, skilled or semi-skilled workers - have not demonstrated gender-differentiated analyses or dynamics in this process. Rather, what I have observed is a generalized sense of – though I am no psychologist – what I believe could be called burn out-induced depression.

Exhaustion

It is August 15th. The third MOU in as many years was approved yesterday by the Greek parliament and the Eurogroup – the unelected European finance ministers group to which most European political leaders have advocated their power. In antithesis to the past six months, hardly anyone I have met in the last weeks Athens or on Kythera island is talking about it.

People are simply exhausted. The constant hyper-tension since “re-negotiations” of the last memorandum of understanding (MOU) began in February under the Syriza government, following on five years of ever worsening economic depression, have taken their toll. My friends appear to have been put through old washing machine wringers. Their vivacity zapped, most people walk around like zombies, with intermittent outbursts of irritation.

Withdrawal

People are also emotionally withdrawn. Unlike past reunions, which would go on for hours – all night - my friends manage about two hours, before they say something like: “Lois, I am really happy to see you. But, sorry. I need to lie down. I just don't have any more energy to talk.” Some had to cancel jointly made vacation plans, explaining that the most they could manage emotionally was to get to their nuclear families, where they could collapse. No energy for vacation? Greeks? My friends?

Most people I have spoke with have little if any money for vacation, anyway. Mid-August is traditionally the busiest time of year for tourism in Greece. Athens empties out. Greeks I have spoken to who have the wherewithal for a holiday have had to pare it down to just a few days – a week at most. They can afford to eat once a day, managing coffees etc. in their rooms.

Tourist business owners on Kythera explained that, in addition to very limited Greek tourism, foreign tourism has dropped radically. It was a fairly normal season in May and June. But as soon as the capital controls hit, foreign tourists practically ceased coming. July was dead, the first two August weeks nothing like the packed crowds of former years. One of the few remaining sources of income for Greeks has thus been drastically reduced this year.

In Athens, where most of its residents have remained, people travel to beaches reachable by public transport: “In this way, we can take a break by the sea, and pretend we have gone on vacation.”

Humiliation and hopelessness

After the rough treatment of PM Tsipras in the post-oxi “negotiations” with creditors, people I have spoken with feel humiliated. They are convinced that it will only get worse, as there are no mechanisms in place for economic recovery anywhere down the line in their lifetimes. Most serious reviewers of the newest MOU agree. Is it any wonder, then, that people are disaffected, experiencing the finalization of the third memorandum as anti-climactic? An older gentleman told me: “Now that Tsipras had to cave in to more austerity and micro-management of our economy - who are they to tell us about the size of our bread, and force people to work on Sundays when even they do not? - to keep us in the Euro, what is the point of following debates any more? All hope and any chance of retaining a bit of personal and national pride is lost.”

Resourcelessness

This assessment of some of the burn out, or depression, aspects I see in Greece today are backed up by statistics, which show that depression as well as suicides rates have been on the rise in Greece since the Great economic Depression here began. Depression rates have risen from around 3% to 8%. Individuals are not accustomed to diagnosing or dealing with such a phenomenon, either in themselves nor in loved ones. As one interviewee put it, "Greeks tended to yell, not let themselves go to hell." Now, many people have passed the stage where they can yell. And even when they do – as in the overwhelming oxi vote to more austerity – it appears to have no positive effect on the outcome. Nor is the medical system equipped to help out. Even before the crisis, psychotherapy was something only the well enough to do could afford, because it has not been covered by the health care system.

In a context in which mostly unemployed men are the ones who commit suicide – I believe because of cultural expectations that they be the main breadwinners - one could speculate that perhaps women are doing most of the emotional work of trying to keep up moral. This, however, is not something I have seen from my brief stay here. In the limited sample of people I speak with, women appear equally affected. What processes can women or men refer to to keep up moral?

One commentator on the current economic moment in Greece used the phrase: "Well, to use a technical term, all hell is going to break loose."⁵ A psychologist I spoke with used essentially the same phrase to talk about the portending psychological effects of it for others - and for himself.

⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonkblog/wp/2015/06/28/greeces-crisis-has-almost-reached-the-point-of-no-return/>