

Becoming Precarious in the age of neo-liberal bio-politics

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Introduction

To conduct our research project in Greece in these times of “crisis” gave us the all-depressing advantage of working with a vast array of thematic issues and fieldwork occurrences. Despite the abundance of research questions one could raise concerning the current actualization of “debt crisis” in Greece, there was something very specific we wanted to share as a thematic focus in this (dystopian) landscape of “crisis” to the *Teaching the Crisis* summer school: A formation of affect as an horizon of bodily perceptions and expressions that determine what is sensible and insensible. We argue that, by permeating a thick assemblage of discourses, political decisions, legislatures, embodiments and common sense reasoning, this formation produces and determines the lives that need and deserve protection from the pernicious effects of “debt crisis”. In other words, what we focused on was a question concerning regimes of truth, political injunctions, and forces of subjugation that determine whose life is livable and, more precisely, whose is not.

This question deals with the ongoing dispossessions that have occurred in the context of “crisis”, on a subjective as well as inter-subjective and collective level. We attempt to illustrate the ways in which such dispossessions result from a neo-liberal governance wherein the apparatus of security plays a prominent role. The production of unlivable lives, insecure and dangerous becomes a strategic vehicle, and, in fact, an affective formation itself, through which neo-liberal politics of “crisis-management” seek to gain some extra legitimacy and efficacy. In this context, “crisis-management” is, above all, a production of a certain order of intelligibility, one which constitutively involves the regulation of human vulnerability and precarity. It is in this concept we examined the current “debt crisis” as a primary neo-liberal tool for social and economic redistribution; that is, as an opportunity for strengthening the privatization processes and state reforms with all the “inevitable” by-products of inequality, exclusion and marginality. In that sense, to focus on vulnerability in the years of “crisis” means to draw primarily and deeply on the problematics of biopolitics/necropolitics, neo-liberal governmentality, medical anthropology and anthropology of social suffering.

In the framework of this examination of the affective apparatuses that make “crisis” intelligible and its governmental management acceptable, we used a repository of ethnographic material in order to ground these apparatuses on the collective sense of self, nation and belonging that produces the human debris of “crisis”. We followed subjects with disabilities and chronic diseases who depend for their survival on the welfare state benefits, we discussed the police enterprises for “cleansing” Athens from undocumented immigrants (operation “Xenios Zeus”) and substance-users (operation “Thetis”) by instating them in detention centers-camps, we explored ethnocentrism through xenophobic attacks against immigrants; we examined the state’s involvement in the slave-like conditions of undocumented immigrant work, and lastly, we focused on the wide-scale expansion of homelessness, the demonization of local activism by the mass media and the everyday attacks on immigrants, gays, anarchists, leftists and academics by the neo-Nazi groups. Such ethnographic examples represent multiple aspects of our research focus. They point to subjects whose lives have *always* been in a state of precarity, in the sense that they (permanently, momentary or occasionally) occupy spaces of subjection and abjection; spaces that are reactivated by the neo-liberal politics of austerity and dispossession.

In order to better situate ourselves vis-à-vis the field of our focused interest, we had come up with a multi-sited research methodology. In addition to conducting interviews with a broad network of doctors, patients, of the healthcare landscape, we also attended academic events, conferences and several workgroups, we took part in demonstrations and activist actions, we collected visual material, newspaper articles and photos, and we followed-up broadcast, social media posts and discussions. In all, we explored the most intense aspects and events of this turbulent field, focusing on the ways in which precarity and livability are distributed and regulated.

A brief genealogy of the Greek “state of emergency” may give us the opportunity to understand how the “crisis” is not a starting point for the production of precarity, exclusion or marginality, but rather the “critical event” which opens and legitimizes the possibility of neoliberal governance (see Das 1995). In other words, we tried to explore how the “crisis” is the biopolitical tool that allows the transformation of the political impossible into a new possibility and “opportunity”. This becomes even more obvious when one examines the public landscape of emergency that is under a crucial process of restructuring right now in Greece: the Greek welfare state, which has been stigmatized as a source of corruption, social indifference and inefficiency and it was always in a “*state of crisis*”.

In fact, through this methodology we tried to examine how the political question of a public health care system based on solidarity and equity was posed after the fall of the junta in 1974 and the institution of parliamentary democracy or the so-called “Metapolitefsi”, since ‘80’s and how during that time of political transition, the question of public medical care could be posed as a common sense, a possible political claim, a possibility which arose only after a long history of exclusive medical system and a restricted access since 19th century. ¹

Even though during the 1980s it had been articulated a political agenda of reinforcing the public character of health and education, the decade of the 1990s witnessed a gradual devaluation and even stigmatization of the “public space” and “social goods” which was manifested in a new law consolidating a “free-market” discourse in healthcare according to the neoliberal doctrine. This means, for example, that people with disabilities and chronic diseases, during the last thirty years were always in a „state of crisis”, in a state of precarity and marginality as they had to address their request for social benefits to a complex bureaucratic network, where the result of this offer was never easy and the access to free and public healthcare was never a given.

Nevertheless, we tried to trace how, since the 15th of September 2008, after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, the impact of this problematic situation for the investment banking business meant to change radically the Greek g-local context and how the dominant narrative of „crisis” was used to naturalize and medicalize political processes of redistribution of resources and services. The declaration of “the state of emergency” by the Greek government in 2009 can be seen as a “critical event” that generated new social categories and forms of actions, resignifying the public landscape as a source of corruption, blaming it for the creation of the debt increase. In this context, the high co-payments for a series of medical exams and drugs for the patients, the evacuation of hospitals and their transformation into minor, basic healthcare centers, the “mobility” process of the

¹ In Greek, the name *Metapolitefsi* means the transition from one regime to another or from one way of being involved in *politics* to another. In the contemporary collective consciousness though, the name embeds the fall of junta in 1974 and the institution of parliamentary democracy. For British historian Mark Mazower (2000: 7), the name is connected with Greece’s “return to some semblance of tranquillity” after “Europe’s bloodiest conflict between 1945 and the breakup of Yugoslavia” among the Left and the Right that started even before the Second World War. The seven year junta, he observes, was the last bloody chapter of this civil conflict and, for that, *Metapolitefsi* embodies the promise of a new governmental state deprived of the terror of ideological persecutions and national disunity. Thus, the term possess a manifold quality being obscured due to its historical weight: the political changeover of the year 1974 (what is widely accepted in the Greek public sphere), the transition of one regime to another (the etymology of the word itself) and the promise the preposition *Meta-* (post) withholds, both as an effort to heal past wounds and a quest for a new future. The regime of *Metapolitefsi* that characterizes the last 30 years of Greece is indeed so grounded to this promise, that it is unattainable to fully understand the political transitions that happened within – such as Greece’s dedication to the European vision and the ideal of the socio-democratic welfare state – or the collective feeling of distress that have grown since 2009 due to the austerity measures taken as to deal with the so called debt crisis, without taking seriously the resurgent discourses about the ‘end of *Metapolitefsi*’ that characterize much of today’s political rhetoric (see Kyriakopoulos 2012).

personnel, the restrictions of the patients' access to the healthcare system, the everyday suicides are not a result of a general and indeterminate use of the "crisis", but rather a constitutive element of the "opportunity" the politics of "crisis" brings. As Michael Hardt puts it: "we move from welfare to debtfare", where debt is for neo-liberals the bio-political tool to articulate, in a cynical way, that "public health is a bad business" (as political philosopher Montserrat Galcerán Hugue aptly stated it in the *Teaching the Crisis* summer school).

Besides, we tried to examine how the so-called financial "crisis" is not a matter of a problematic economic situation but rather a new kind of governmentality in a wider political and social space. However, Aihwa Ong (2007) reminds us that even if the neoliberal narrative is based on market rationality, this narrative is not a singular, coercive, monolithic doctrine, but a flexible and complex network which is more a "mobile technology" rather than a universal and static command. Ong, through this dynamic approach, explores this mobility and flexibility of the neoliberal discourse, showing the "assemblage" of mobile biopolitical choices in a specific cultural context, examining the open space of the unpredictable which arises through multiple sites and levels of resistances, negotiations, conflicts that take place in this war-frame. Similar to Ong, Italian political philosopher Sandro Mezzadra stated, in the context of the *Teaching the Crisis* summer school, that "we need an analytical framework for understanding crisis and neo-liberalism not through homogeneity but through the complexity of heterogeneous practices and discourses."

However, we contend that in states of emergency, as *states of exception*, we need to be open and sensitive to the subtle and imperceptible inscriptions that take place within, during and even, some times, against such violent en-rationalizations of life, past and present. This niche is far from being against to theoretical examinations of the "unpredictable" through sites of resistances, negotiations and conflicts. To the contrary, it is an effort to understand the future horizons that are projected in the present and are most clearly reflected in the bodies of the inappropriate, the damned and the abjected. As German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin was focusing on the *prostitute* to discuss the urban nuclear family and the *flâneur* so to accentuate the everyday life in modernity, so do we believe that focusing on the unlivable bodies as the debris of crisis is to focus on the resistance, the negotiation and the conflict per se, on the shifts they bring to the rationalities and the everyday common sense reasoning, and the images of tomorrow that are projected in the present as a way to surpass crisis.

The enforcement of a regulation on the transmission of infectious diseases, and especially HIV, among the "priority groups" of sex workers, intravenous drug users, homeless people and undocumented immigrants that occurred on the spring of 2012 is an example of this kind. The most disturbing application of this regulation was the enforced detainment and HIV testing of several

foreign sex workers (with the final imprisonment of 27), and the publication of their identities and HIV status on the TV news. This regulation was repealed shortly after its application due to incongruity with international guidelines on HIV testing and protection of human rights.

We focused on this fundamental condition of neoliberal governmentality, which has to do with the production of not only economically indebted but also socially precarious and abjected subjects. The norms of self-sufficient individuality, supposedly fortified through its detachment from society and formed according to the idealized image of the efficient and competitive privileged entrepreneur, is thus projected upon those lives deemed dangerous and dangerously vulnerable, those lives that don't match the normative requirements of neoliberal life and livability.

We drew from the early 80s, when the emergence and consolidation of a "middle class" was one of the defining moments and simultaneously the fundamental condition of the then concluded "social contract". The processes of racist discriminations produced and demarcated the dominant nationalist, patriarchal, and heteronormative social body by displacing those subjects that fell short of its normative requirements, led to the consolidation of the idealized figure of the petty bourgeois Greek national subject. This critical account of current greek history, led us to the conclusion that in two characteristic historic restructurings of the state's structures, the biopolitical regulation of subjects and populations was of critical importance for the change of the logic of governing.

These public enterprises of marginalization and exclusion by physical, social, mental and psychical extermination of subjects and groups reveals us what it means to be excluded from the dominant aesthetic national-patriarchic standards of belonging through, as Susan Sontag (1975) has shown, a desire to dissolute *alienation in ecstatic feelings of community*. This "protection" of belonging through limitation and sacrifice suggests the fantasy of the all regained competence of the State to protect identity and effectively preserve the community from the misfortunes of crisis (see Taussig 1997). Thus, the psychic derision and physical extinction of the HIV positives pertains to the over-signification of the threats of (all lost) orderly life and the strategic redefinition and certification of the inappropriate figure as a state's performance to its anticipated paternalistic role. The grid of these governmental techniques is a fierce example of the biopolitical regulation of populations, which comes, as Athena Athanasiou (2012) has state it, as an apparatus of power, object and purpose so to deal with the side effects of crisis. That means that the tattered face of the inappropriate Other is made more so to regulate the processes of (normal) human life in the (abnormal) state of emergency.

This technology of power, in Michel Foucault's sense, focuses on processes of self which work to normalize subjectivity by investing bodies with an affect on what it means to care and protect one's

self. While Greek state acts by way of bureaucratic and repressive mechanisms of medicine and the police, reactive forms of knowledge are produced as a reflection to the production, control and discipline of the vulnerable subject. In this sense, unlike Michael Hardt's assertion during the *Teaching the Crisis* Summer School, that capital produces subjectivities, we can see that capital's value is constructed within those power relations and by those vulnerable subjectivities. That means that to be *economically indebted* as a performance of self within today's neo-liberal governmentality is a privilege insofar as one *desires* to enact the multiple and ambivalent conditions of citizenship in its current contexts. Yet, it is marginalization that enables the possibility for the construction of (multiple category) citizens and the ability to safely and openly categorize the human in the first place (as Hardt does).

To feel safe and protected in the context of the current debt crisis is a ground that has acquired great significance within today's bio-political governance and neo-liberal logistics. For it is a ground that all inscriptions take place; inscriptions that involve the ethics of having and missing, gaining and losing. In this process, the way to enact one's personhood passes through the face of the Other in unprecedented ways because of the biopolitical mediation of the aesthetically healthy body by neo-liberal ethics of crisis. There is a deep seated relation between this archetype and its Other. The norms of self-sufficient individuality, one that is fortified, supposedly, through its detachment from society and that embodies the idealized image of the efficient and competitive privileged entrepreneur, are projected upon those lives deemed dangerous and dangerously vulnerable, lives that don't match the normative requirements of neo-liberal life and livability. Thus, bio-politics of crisis deploy the marked bodies of the sick, the poor and the impoverished, the homeless, the unemployed, the disabled, the migrants, the HIV positives, the queers and the addicts as a strategic affective vehicle for a redistribution of public space, resources, representation and senses of belonging.

Sandro Mezzadra suggested in the summer school that in order to understand contemporary capitalism, we should locate ourselves in periphery than in the centre. We would add that we should consider this position not just in terms of geopolitical centre/periphery structure, but in terms of subjectivation processes as they come about through multiple, contradictory and imperceptible rationalities and ethics of life as well. Because it is within these vicious processes of losing and projecting these losses to Others that the neo-liberal ethics of crisis becomes tangible as concrete realities. A way to imagine oneself as having through and within the neo-liberal logics and the ethics of economics. Thus, unlike Andrei Kurnik's invitation to include those at the margins during the uprisings which accompany such violent procedures, we suggest that we stay suspect to all acts of inclusion and deconstruct the same structures of hegemonic political discourse that produce those at the margins. If the dominant academic subject ought to think "the political" for the Other, in such

a degree so to lose track of the endless mimetic juxtapositions of the specters' of the political and pose the question: *Can we think the political without a subject?* As Stefano Harney did in his lecture at the summer school, as an effort to disengage political action from a specific image of a subject, then, considering the performative quality of actions through contradictory rationalities of life and, mostly, the subtle corporeal inscriptions that happen because of bio-politic governance and affective manipulation during crisis, it is more sane and ethically grounded to a disapproval of politics of abjection to ask if it would be possible to act consciously towards the care of the Other at ones' time of losing. That means to ask if it would be possible to act without waiting for the teleological promise of political action to be fulfilled, but to be conscious of the ideal images we uphold for our selves, the ambivalent politics these ideals sustain and the constitutional Others necessary for their presence.

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