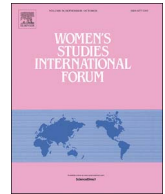




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Nesting Crises

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Introduction

“[W]e're experiencing a crisis within a crisis.”

—Tasia Christodoupolou, Deputy Minister for Immigration Policy, Greece.

Since the declaration of financial crisis in 2008, and the imposition of austerity measures in 2011, Greece has become an epicentre—or a “laboratory” (Stavrakakis, 2013: 34; Douzinas, 2013)—of multiple, successively declared crises, including the humanitarian crisis induced by the devastating effects of neoliberal structural adjustment policies.¹ The hegemonic explanatory frame centres sovereign debt crisis (attributed to corruption, profligate social spending, tax evasion, and mismanagement) as the efficient cause of austerity and of the (unavoidable, since There Is No Alternative) human suffering that it has wrought. The recent arrival to crisis discourse, since 2015, is the ‘refugee crisis’: disavowed by authorities for decades, and the consequence of a global state of permanent war, now, in European media accounts and politicians' speeches it is noticed and appropriated as ‘Europe's worst refugee crisis’ since World War II,² when Europeans were displaced en masse, in some cases to the same countries (for instance, Syria) the nationals of which are now seeking refuge in Europe. In this paper, I approach the explosion of crisis discourse as a medium for ideological negotiations of nation-state borders in relation to a

continental project of securitisation. I suggest that ‘crisis’ functions as a lexicon through which sovereignty can be reasserted in relation to supranational institutional interference in ostensibly democratic governance. Specifically, I examine how the refugee crisis and the debt crisis converge in nationalised space in Greece³; that is, how in state discourse, ‘crises’ serve as a conduit through which the borders of an embattled nation are redrawn and hardened against threats from a political space conceptualised as ‘outside’ the nation. In other words, rather than taking for granted that ‘crisis’ refers to an objectively knowable, measurable reality with an uncontroversial causality, I approach ‘crisis’ as a discursive condition that normalises extreme state and para-state⁴ violence to enable capital accumulation by dispossession (the flip side and quintessence of debt and neoliberal structural adjustment), while simultaneously reasserting the legitimacy of national sovereignty through migration management. But ‘crisis’ is arguably also an existential condition, constructing new subjectivities for whom the scarce good of citizenship—or its obverse, refugee status—becomes valorised (through exclusion) as the way to ‘weather the crisis.’ Thus, while the debt crisis and austerity, on the one hand, and the arrival of refugee claimants, on the other, are constructed in hegemonic discourses as threats to sovereignty, I argue that discursively they function to construct the borders of the normative national subject.⁵

My point of entry is the declaration of the Greek government by the

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¹ After eight years of neoliberal austerity, more than one-third of Greeks live in poverty; Greece has the highest rate of unemployment and youth unemployment among EU member states (23% and 45.7% respectively) (Eurostat, 2017). In the absence of systematic studies, it was estimated in 2011 by NGOs that 20,000 people were rendered homeless, a number that has visibly grown (and includes recently arrived refugees) in the intervening six years (Klimaka, 2011). The health system has been radically defunded, leading to devastating direct and indirect consequences including increases in infant and adult mortality rates, seropositivity rates resulting from new infections, suicides, and malnutrition (Kentikelenis, Kranikolos, Reeves, McKee, & Stuckler, 2014).

² The eurocentrism of the analogy betrays the appropriation of ‘crisis.’ Of course, migrants have fled countries at least nominally within Europe far more recently than the dominant ‘European’ imaginary allows—during the wars in the former Yugoslavia (1991–2001), the Albanian economic collapse (1997), and fleeing anti-Romani persecution in Hungary (see Beaudoin et al., 2015). Moreover, the antisemitic violence which Christian Europe inflicted on Jewish citizens, denationalising, displacing, and forcing them to flee the continent is rendered invisible in this analogy, which constructs ‘Europeans’ as victims (Jansen, 2015).

³ By ‘nationalised space’ I mean the territory arrogated by a nation-state as the spatial expression of its authority, and the realm in which the enforcement of state authority is legitimised by sociohistorical and juridical inventions and instruments but also by affects of belonging, inheritance, and nostalgia. My point is that by naturalising its location in space (as well as narrativising its emergence and continuity through time) the nation-state appears to gain an embodied subjectivity, so that it can ‘experience,’ ‘suffer,’ receive ‘solidarity,’ etc.

⁴ The incomplete democratisation process since *Metapolitefsi* (“regime change”) initiated upon the overthrow of the dictatorship in 1974, has left intact para-state institutions—far-right paramilitary organisations, which were active especially during the Nazi occupation, the post-civil war period, and the colonels’ dictatorship, and have resurged in the form of neo-Nazi paramilitary battalions that patrol and in some cases control neighbourhoods, attacking migrants, LGBTQ people, and leftists. However, the para-state can also be identified within state institutions, known as “the state within the state,” as evinced by the open collaboration of police with neoNazis, as is being extensively documented through the trial of fascist political party Golden Dawn for its alleged criminal activities.

⁵ I take it as axiomatic that this subject and its foil are materially constructed through heteronormative as well as racialised power relations, but given the focus of this paper on the declared crises and their hegemonic discursive constructions within Greece, the naturalised violences of heteropatriarchal gender—mundane, extreme, ubiquitous, yet discursively repressed by the construct of ‘nesting crises’—are beyond its scope. Elsewhere, I have argued that racialised and gendered violence secures the politics of austerity, so that what through might be termed an ‘affective economy of hostility’ articulating racialised and gendered modes of belonging and estrangement, some bodies are rendered vulnerable and precarious, while others assert an entitled relation to national space while nevertheless being economically disintitled by austerity measures (Carastathis, 2015). See, also, Konstantinos Eleftheriadis (2015) for a discussion of the ‘sexual politics of austerity’ and queer anti-authoritarian counterdiscourses.

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end of the summer of 2015, that it was “experiencing a crisis within a crisis” (Christodoupoulou quoted in Greenwood, Payne-Frank, & Fotiadis, 2015; Prime Minister of Greece, 2015), dually victimised by migration ‘flows’ and failed European solidarity in a context of ongoing austerity measures required by its institutional lenders. The figure of ‘a crisis within a crisis’ functioned to delineate the boundaries of national space and time and to distinguish the normative victims of what are seen as distinct, if overlapping political phenomena (debt and migration), from those who parasitically share in, or indeed by their very illicit presence cause or contribute to the suffering of the national subject. If the global economic crisis had already been made ‘ours’ by being constructed as a problem inherent in the national economy, the global war on migration became reinvented as ‘Europe’s crisis,’ and then ‘Greece’s.’ The nationalisation of ‘crisis’ then, has a triple function: first, to conceal the systemic and structural underpinnings of violent processes of dispossession and displacement; second, to authorise the imposition of regimes of management and securitisation; and third, to reify borders that simultaneously fortify the agencies of state sovereignties while containing those of embodied human beings. The figure of ‘nesting crises’—‘a crisis within a crisis’—emerges through gestures of ownership or territorialisation of crisis: that is, in the conditions under which, affectively and politically a ‘crisis’ becomes ‘ours’ rather than ‘theirs’ and, indeed, constitutes the ‘we’ and the ‘they.’ ‘Nesting crises’ discourse can thus be read as a vocabulary through which national sovereignty is reasserted and national unity reconstituted.

Bordered crises

Greece has geopolitically been positioned as the ‘gateway’ to Europe, and has been assigned the role of ‘managing’ so-called ‘mixed migration flows’ to Europe in the eastern Mediterranean. Characterising “[w]hat we have at Europe’s doorstep” as “a refugee crisis,” the United Nations High Commission on Refugees urged Greece to “take charge” of it (William Spindler quoted in Nebehay, 2015). The rejoinder by Greece’s then-Deputy Minister for Immigration Policy, Tasia Christodoupoulou, was that the EU member states have abdicated their responsibilities, as “[s]olidarity has been replaced by national self-interest” (quoted in Greenwood et al., 2015). Claiming the Greek government is inadequately supported by the EU institutions, Christodoupoulou stated that “in the middle of the financial and humanitarian crisis Greece is going through, there is a refugee crisis” (quoted in Greenwood et al., 2015). It is worth quoting at some length the statement of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras at the Governmental Summit for the Management of Issues Related to Refugee Flows, held on 7 August 2015.

Greece is a country in economic crisis. Despite this, it is facing a major crisis, a humanitarian crisis, within the crisis. For this reason, we will do everything possible in order to fulfil our humanitarian obligation to give of our remanence⁶ to these people. But we will also do everything possible in order to highlight the real dimensions of the problem, which are dimensions that exceed the capabilities of our country. They are European dimensions and a European problem cannot be addressed without the principle of solidarity. Countries that receive migrants cannot be treated as warehouses of human lives; neither can the Mediterranean Sea become a ‘sea graveyard’. Certainly, border controls, the preventative and essential controls, must be stepped up in the framework of legality. On the other hand, we are dealing with people who are seeking to find a better life and it is certainly not within the framework of our values nor our logic to sink vessels with small children and defenceless people. Certainly, the borders should be controlled. But this can only be done through an effective

⁶ Here, I translate as ‘remanence’ the Greek word *υστερήματα* (*istérima*), which means to give of the few scarce resources that you have. Referencing the era of the German Occupation of Greece, with this choice of words, Tsipras stresses the sacrifice of the Greek people (who have little to give) in relation to ‘welcoming refugees’.

cooperation among our country, the European Union and neighbouring countries, to substantively address refugee and migration flows, but also to address the problems at their root cause. And their cause is wars and interventions that are carried out in these countries, where today, after others have sown winds, we are called upon to reap storms (Prime Minister of Greece, 2015a, my translation).

Arguably, the figure of nesting crises—a ‘new’ crisis in the midst of an ‘ongoing’ crisis, a ‘humanitarian’ crisis within an ‘economic’ crisis—exemplifies the “state thought” (Sayad, 1999/2004), which structures hegemonic ‘leftist’ understandings about migration in relation to the nation-state, such as those expounded by the ‘first left’ SYRIZA government of Greece—albeit one that governs in coalition with a right-wing populist nationalist party, ANEL.⁷ Migrants and refugees were instrumentalised in anti-austerity discourse, on the xenophobic right and on the radical parliamentary left. If SYRIZA contested the transnationally trafficked construct of the ‘illegal immigrant’ by introducing the concept of the ‘refugee’ into political discourse, as we see in the above excerpt, it has not always been above using the xenophobic constructs of unmanageable ‘hordes’, ‘influxes’, and ‘flows’ of refugees to political advantage. Faced with a scandal (discussed further below) of human rights violations in the infamous Amygdaleza detention centre in early 2015, the Deputy Minister of the Interior in SYRIZA’s first government, Yannis Panousis, declared:

Personally, I would break the Schengen [Agreement ...] If Europe does not want to support us, just give us money to suffer all the social and other consequences of wars [...] for which we are not at fault; we should be sharing these flows. If it [Europe] doesn’t want to share, I would open the borders, let 500,000 go to other countries, let’s see how Europe will become sensitised to that.⁸

Yet, more often, as evinced in Tsipras’ statement, SYRIZA has represented its approach to the ‘migration question’ as one of social solidarity (Efsyn, 2015). Condemning the lack of social solidarity expressed by ‘egoistic’ EU member states, Christodoupoulou characterises ‘us’ as experiencing nesting crises. This begs the question of not only who, precisely, is facing this ‘crisis within a crisis,’ but also the question of who are the subjects of failed European solidarity: refugees, Greek nationals, or, for that matter, the Greek state? Despite their stated opposition to a right-wing agenda of fortified borders, push-backs, and detention of undocumented migrants, in Christodoupoulou’s and Tsipras’ remarks we can trace a broader discourse of the simultaneous victimisation of the country by austerity politics and by migratory ‘flows,’ in which EU institutions mandating neoliberal restructuring and regulating border, detention, deportation and asylum policies are constructed as threats to national sovereignty. This shifts, without normatively challenging the target of xenophobic racism, from migrants ‘stealing jobs’ or draining ‘scarce resources’—as they are represented in right-wing and fascist discourses—to the proxy-figures of ‘European’ institutions, which leave Greece ‘defenceless’ in the face of the refugee crisis.⁹ The ‘nesting crises’ invoked in state discourse hypostatise

⁷ ‘SYRIZA’ is an acronym which stands for Coalition of the Radical Left. Also an acronym, ‘ANEL’ stands for Independent Greeks.

⁸ Yannis Panousis quoted in Vima Fm 99,5, “Panousis: What I Saw in Amygdaleza Can’t Stay,” *To Vima* (2015), accessed at <http://www.tovima.gr/vimafm/interviews/article/?aid=678246> on 18 February 2015, my translation.

⁹ These observations converge, in part, with Andre Gingrich’s analysis of what he calls “neonationalism,” which has “a basic, tripartite hierarchical ideological pattern: a coherent, culturally essentialised form of ‘us’ is positioned in the centre, and is contrasted against two groups of ‘them’.” One group of ‘them’ is constructed, in terms of power, as being ‘above us’: the EU authorities in Brussels [...]. A second stratum of ‘them’ is perceived as being ranked, in terms of status, ‘below us’: local immigrants and other cultural and linguistic minorities living in the EU, plus their ‘dangerous’ associates in Africa, Asia and elsewhere” (Gingrich, 2006: 199). However, Gingrich examines right-wing neonationalism whereas I am considering how nationalism is configured in its left wing variants, and there are important differences: for instance, instead of Euroscepticism, in SYRIZA’s discourse we discern an appeal to the normative value of the “Europe of solidarity”; instead of overt xenophobic racism we discern a professed commitment to social inclusion and human rights.

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