

Chapter 7

Creativity in the Service of Economic Recovery and “National Salvation”: Dispatches from the Greek Crisis Social Factory



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Abstract This chapter focuses on discursive constructions of creativity in the Greek public sphere in connection to the Greek government debt crisis. Instrumentalized by policy makers and pundits pursuing neoliberal reforms in Greece, creativity is understood to serve a mode of biopolitical governmentality. This is connected to the production of a national consensus over the necessity for neoliberal reforms and to the individualization of the risks and insecurity that such reforms entail. This chapter looks at specific public discursive constructions of creativity in Greece from 2010 onward. Specifically, the creativity discourse is approached in both its progressive and conservative articulations as articulated by the social democrat Giorgos A. Papandreou, Greece’s prime minister during the first years of the crisis (2009–2011), and the conservative Kyriakos K. Mitsotakis, Greece’s prime minister in 2019 and at the time of writing. Simultaneously, this chapter foregrounds the examples of success stories of creative ventures that received publicity in Greece so as to unfold other examples of a hegemonic discourse meant to motivate society on a post-political, entrepreneurial, and nationalistic basis. Such success stories develop through the didactic narratives that proliferate in Greece’s mainstream news and lifestyle media, which are meant to establish a creative paradigm as a way out of unemployment and recession. Here, creativity forms a public repertoire that fabricates the crisis into a so-called opportunity for development that is borne through entrepreneurship.

Keywords Austerity · Entrepreneurialism · Meritocracy · Post-politics · Success stories

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95

7.1 Introduction: Creativity, Crisis, and Reform

On a broad, popular level, creativity is loosely connected to productivity, entrepreneurialism, innovation, novelty, development, modernization, and sustainability, as well as to concepts such as merit, skill, talent, and hip lifestyles. On a structural level, it is associated with changes in the mode of production that “replace the steadily declining role of manufacturing in national economies” (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, 4), and it is further associated with the advent of what is generally known as neoliberalism (Mould 2018, 12). To be more precise, according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), creativity developed as a paradigm of capitalist restructuring in response to the economic crisis of the early 1970s, capturing workers’ demands for autonomy and meaningful work, and assimilating them so as to restructure the social relations of production into a more flexible mode of capitalist accumulation.

In the context of the 2008 global economic crisis and the subsequent intensification of neoliberal reforms that followed it, including austerity cuts and the privatization of public property, creativity has been integral to a hegemonic discursive framework that pursues a creative–destructive policy agenda in which welfare institutions, civic and labor rights, and established norms, social relations, and meanings are confronted by market-orientated transformations. As an inherent individual trait or potential charisma, the notion of creativity is instrumentalized by policy makers and pundits to serve a mode of biopolitical governmentality crucial to neoliberal economic restructuring. Here, creativity assumes an austere, mobile, proactive, and entrepreneurial mode of living that corresponds to the individualization of the risks and insecurities that neoliberal reforms entail.

Publicly displayed through a variety of discursive constructions and practices—what McRobbie (2016) called “the creative dispositive” (11)—creativity carries a highly affective dimension. It is meant to interpellate individuals into viewing neoliberal reforms, such as welfare cuts and labor deregulation, as “tasks” that may lead them to distinction, recognition, self-accomplishment, and material reward. Among other things, this also means the privatization of both risks and care, as well as the development of the “individuals’ own market-conforming self-formation in the service of economic valorization” (Lorey 2015, 86). In societies where welfare institutions are shrinking and social solidarity networks are weakening, and in a globalized labor market characterized by increasingly reduced prospects of upward social mobility (Sennett 2008), people are constantly expected to independently reinvent themselves, update their skills, and even create, or “creatify” (Mould 2018, 108), their own work. Thus, by forcing citizens to be more creative, “austerity programs have imprinted the neoliberal ideology further into the social fabric” (Mould 2018, 105). The kind of creativity that policy makers encourage is connected to the mobilization and potential commodification of resources, institutions, and energies that have remained outside the capitalist market realm (Mould 2018, 100). In short, creativity in such a context of economic restructuring is meant to produce public consensus over neoliberal reforms, marginalize systemic criticism, and mobilize citizens to pursue their own individual way out of economic crisis.

In what follows, such critical theoretical approaches to creativity and creative work are deployed to deconstruct hegemonic discursive articulations of creativity in the Greek public sphere. This chapter looks at specific discursive constructions of creativity from the beginning of the Greek crisis in 2010 until February 2019, the time of writing. Creativity is approached in its both progressive and conservative dimensions, as articulated by the social democrat Giorgos A. Papandreou, Greece’s prime minister during the first years of the crisis (2009–2011), and the conservative Kyriakos K. Mitsotakis, Greece’s prime minister at the time of writing in late 2019. Simultaneously, this chapter scrutinizes specific “success stories” of creative ventures that received publicity in Greece in order to unfold examples of a hegemonic discourse to motivate society on a post-political, entrepreneurial, and also, nationalistic basis. Such success stories are developed through didactic narratives that proliferate in Greece’s mainstream news and lifestyle media and are meant to establish a creative paradigm as an inspirational way out of unemployment and recession. Here, creativity forms a public repertoire that fabricates the crisis into a so-called opportunity for development that is borne through entrepreneurship. The empirical material selected is meant to present, through indicative examples or vignettes, the ways that creativity manifests in an economic crisis. This chapter reflexively draws on Ernesto Laclau’s (1996) analysis of hegemony, which allows us to understand the ideas according to which creativity is manifested, the political visions it is meant to serve, and its affiliations to classist and nationalist pursuits.

7.2 Creativity and Conjunctures of “Race” and Class in the Greek Crisis

Critical research has stressed the culturalist and moralist construction of the Greek crisis, revealing the racist and classist underpinnings of such repertoires (e.g., Ervedosa 2017). Greece has been presented as an exception in the European Union and in the West; its oriental leanings were emphasized in order to dissociate it from the West. Austerity reforms and privatizations were presented as a realistic and urgent policy doctrine that would correct Greece’s alleged irregularities. Thus, the neoliberal reforms took the form of a modernization and Europeanization project. The strategy of capitalist restructuring was publicly uttered in the depoliticized and “wooden language” of neoliberalism (Badiou 2018, 26), disregarding the destructive effects that neoliberal reforms have had on Greek society (Fig. 7.1). In this way, mainstream accounts of the crisis focused on its symptoms rather than its roots in the global capitalist crisis and Greece’s vulnerability to it, which relates to its semi-peripheral position in the global economy.

As Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) noted, race and class are interrelated concepts. They signify the ideological tensions of capitalism in its efforts to create a universal ideology and a smooth global space for free market activity. According to critics (Berardi 2019), the endless accumulation of capital is only possible through the



Fig. 7.1 The crisis creates ruin and destruction without creation. A row of small-scale businesses, the backbone of the Greek economy (Lapavitsas et al. 2012, 224), closed after the emergence of the debt crisis and the launch of neoliberal reforms (downtown Thessaloniki, September 2018; photo by author)

commodification of potentially everything. This requires the free flow of commodities, finance, and labor. Particularisms of any kind that may block such a flow are incompatible.

Wallerstein, however, noticed that a seemingly contradictory movement exists in the process of capitalist accumulation, as it simultaneously encourages both universality and racism, allowing them to effectively coexist. On the one hand, a universal ideology is central to the spread and stability of the capitalist market system and the relations of production underlining it. To produce further growth, inclusion of difference is thus important for the assimilation of various populations and their effective proletarianization. On the other hand, competition and the division of labor produce social hierarchies that often lead to racism. Racism in this context emerges as a useful tool to minimize production costs and suppress dissent (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 33). In this sense, Wallerstein discussed the existence of a pattern of workforce ethnicization. This can be exemplified by the normalization of the social unevenness that exists between different social groups (e.g., migrants and “natives”) with regards to entitlements, such as politico-economic rights, welfare benefits, and access to commodities. This ethnicization-of-work pattern is susceptible to changes because the boundaries of racism have always been flexible and contingent upon the demands of capitalist accumulation. Based on context, this ethnicization process can exclude different populations and social groups that can be declared unworthy of rights at a given historical conjuncture.

Wallerstein’s analysis is appropriate to the Greek crisis. The culturalization of the crisis and the culturalist–moralist exceptionalization of Greeks from the realm of normality and the confines of Europeanness (however defined by Western bourgeois states) can be easily interpreted through the pattern of ethnicization outlined above. Imposing austerity on the non- or quasi-European other was justified by neo-orientalist technocratic assessments that deemed Greeks as corrupt, lazy, and unproductive. Simultaneously, the Western and Northern European communities justified themselves as entitled to privileges for incarnating the values of neoliberal capitalism related to entrepreneurialism, austere life, and hard work. Within Greece, the upper and aspiring middle-class groups reproduced the hegemonic, culturalist Greek crisis discourse in order to blame the poor and working classes for the country’s state of insolvency, attributing to them the brutish traits (e.g., lazy, profligate, non-innovative, inflexible) that bankrupted the country and blocked its competitive and innovative potentials.

From a broader perspective, the creative-class narrative is based on the distinction between creatives and non-creatives: “the creative class is measured against the non-creative working class and the service class” (Mould 2018, 22). Valued for their economic potential for capitalist growth, those understood as creative in Richard Florida’s (2005) sense—notably the educated, mobile, and multiethnic bobos (bourgeois-bohemian)—are preferred to those deemed as non-creative. Creativity and the creative class framework in capitalist globalization become benchmarks to assess different populations, social groups, and individuals based on their potential to produce value. Therefore, creativity surfaces as a biopolitical dispositif that governs inequalities (Lorey 2015, 65), normalizing the precarity and insecurity that austerity reforms produce and legitimizing classist and racist explanations of structural problems (such as an economic crisis) while triggering an individualized process of mobility and competition among the workforce. The collective crisis-stigma attributed to the Greek people here serves as a vehicle to boost individualist solutions to the crisis, while the fantasy of entrepreneurial creativity forms the horizon that orientates such individualized pursuits.

7.3 The Crisis and Austerity as Opportunities: The “Creative Greece” and Entrepreneurial Nationalism

Papandreou, a Third Way social democrat from the socialist PASOK party, was elected as the prime minister of Greece in late 2009 emphasizing the need for Greece’s modernization through calls “to the country’s creative forces”¹ to develop innovative practices. A few months after his election, his government signed the first

¹Παπαδρόου: Προσκλητήριο στις Δημιουργικές Δυνάμεις [Papandreou: A Call to the Creative Forces]. <https://www.capital.gr/epikairota/806878/papandreou-prosklitirio-stis-dimiourgikes-dunameis>; Accessed Feb 10, 2019.

memorandum of understanding with the European troika, an institutional body consisting of the European Central Bank, the European Commission, and the International Monetary Fund, that initiated vast neoliberal reforms entailing austerity and privatization in exchange for a large loan to support Greece's public debt repayment to different European and American banks and to avoid its defaulting on its debt (Roos 2019, 37). Up to then, Papandreou had campaigned for a modernized reform-policy framework that was to transform Greece into "Southern Europe's Denmark"² with Denmark being a country that scored high on Florida's creative class rankings (Florida et al. 2015, 22).

Shortly after Papandreou's electoral victory in fall 2009, Greece officially entered the crisis. Papandreou's modernizing, third-way reforms agenda then embraced austerity as another path of modernization for Greece. In his notorious speech of April 2010, delivered from the island of Kastelorizo, where Papandreou announced the activation of the troika's "rescue mechanism" in Greece, he closed his remarks with the following:

Our ultimate goal, our ultimate destination, is to . . . liberate the powers of Hellenism and to free every Greek from perceptions, practices, and systems that have blocked his/her abilities for decades. Let's give oxygen where there is suffocation, justice and rules where there is injustice, transparency where there is darkness, certainty where there is insecurity, and development for all. The inspiration, our faith, is here, from Kastelorizo to Corfu, from Crete to Evros, these wonderful people, and our youth with their potential and visions. I am absolutely sure that we will succeed. What we Greeks need is to believe in our capacities, our values, and ourselves.³

Likewise, the plan to develop Greece and overcome the crisis was narrated in equivalent terms associated with neoliberal creativity. To refer to Papandreou's words from one of his later speeches, in 2018:

How much would it cost to change structures in education to capitalize on and to invest in people, research, technology, knowledge, and in a high level of public education while opening it to the international market? [How much would it cost] to develop our education system into a product that could be exported, either through public or through non-state institutions? . . . How much would it cost to make better use of [European] Community funds in the agricultural sector so as to guarantee the production of high-quality and value Greek products, [to promote] the Cretan or the Mediterranean diet that form a brand name around the world, to develop competitive products with young farmers instead of selling our oil in bulk to the Italians? How can a worker feel creative if the state cannot secure a welfare system that guarantees a minimum standard of living and security? . . . How much would it cost for Greece to make use of its natural resources, [its] solar, wind, and green energy . . . [and to] help start-up businesses across Greece?⁴

²Πώς θα είναι η... "Δανία του Νότου" [How will the Denmark of the South be] <http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=82857> Accessed 10 Mar 2020

³Απρίλιος 2010: Το Διάγγελμα Παπανδρέου από το Καστελόριζο [April 2010: Papandreou's Call from Kastelorizo]. <http://www.thetoc.gr/politiki/article/aprilios-2010-to-diaggelma-papandreou-apo-to-kastelorizo> Accessed Feb 15, 2019.

⁴Γιώργος Παπανδρέου: Υπάρχει Ελπίδα, Αρκεί να Πιστέψουμε στις Δυνατότητες του Λαού και της Χώρας Μας [George Papandreou: There is Hope if We Believe in the Potentials of the People and Our Country]. <https://thecaller.gr/politiki/giorgos-papandreou-iparxei-elpida/> Accessed Feb 10, 2019.

In some ways, Papandreou’s vision was similar to Tony Blair’s for Britain in the 1990s; Blair sought to combine “a technological revolution, social liberalism, and the rise of a creative Britain” (Littler 2017, 86). In Britain, Blair strived to commodify the arts and attempted to “responsibilize” citizens by stressing personal vision, hard work, and self-confidence (Hewison 2014, 3) while criticizing state “paternalism” (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015, 19). Such arguments have been articulated by (third way/neoliberal) social democrats against a background of deindustrialization and welfare cuts. To be sure, Britain is a highly industrialized former colonial empire with well-developed creative fields, while Greece is a semi-peripheral country with limited capacity to compete in the global market. In this respect, Streeck (2016) demonstrated that the European Union’s integration policies liberated cross-market activity at the expense of the European periphery, thereby tightening the periphery’s dependency on the core (Amin 2014, 90). At the same time, the literature notes that the most economically advanced countries have the greatest concentration of cultural production and cultural fields, thus offering more opportunities for creative employment (Primorac 2008, 16). During the first years of the Greek recession, 30.5% of Greece’s creative workplaces were lost (Avdikos and Kalogeris 2018, 190).

Papandreou’s vision was connected to the creatification of already productive sectors, such as agriculture, which was in line with the demands of the global market and purported to boost productivity and gain a competitive advantage for established Greek products. Greece’s educational, cultural, and other creative sectors were to advance as well, supposedly through the troika’s structural adjustment reforms, which would transform these sectors into more open, marketable, and competitive entities. Papandreou offered a vision for a supposedly smart and creative rebranding of the country, one that would see Greek products gain market traction and attract creatives to the country’s innovative ventures, students to its schools, and tourists interested in new services and experiences (e.g., more “sustainable” forms of tourism, such as outdoor activities) instead of those associated with its rather banal tourism image related to leisure and antiquity. In addition to this rebranding effort, the foregrounding of a healthy and balanced Mediterranean diet and overall lifestyle were meant to restructure the agricultural and culinary sectors by triggering entrepreneurialism related to green business, such as eco-farming, organic cafes, and new restaurants (also known as neo-tavernas) that are rebranding traditional esthetics.

Businesses that weathered the crisis are in the tourism and leisure sector and have tailored their offerings to the global upper-middle class. Following this strategy, many new bars, cafes, restaurants, nightclubs, and booming Airbnb properties have opened across the country. Since 2010, these have been key sites of entrepreneurship and market-based creativity, transforming public spaces and the social fabric in a spectacular and exclusionary way, as most Greeks struggle to make ends meet (Dalakoglou and Poulimenakos 2018).

Papandreou’s vision for Greece, as retold in the 2018 speech quoted above, exemplifies the nature of creativity under neoliberal capitalism. Such creativity is about “seeing the world around you as a resource . . . because it feeds the notion that the world and everything in it can be monetized” (Mould 2018, 12). Competition, an export-driven economy, and smart and sustainable entrepreneurialism are supposed

to create win–win situations for everyone, provided that they are flexibly directed and couched in a modernized state. The crisis and its resolution fall on the shoulders of average people and the Greek state. The social responsabilizing dimension of Papandreou’s rhetoric should be emphasized, as it diluted responsibility for Greece’s bankruptcy by stressing that everyone was immersed in a nepotistic and dysfunctional system (Littler 2017, 91), meaning it was everyone’s—and most notably the working class’s—duty to aid in the country’s recovery according to the dictates of the free market.

It should also be noted though that Papandreou’s government passed the Fast Track Law to attract rapid investment under a pretext of doing away with bureaucracy. Among other things, this compromised environmental, welfare, and labor protectionist laws. The launch of extractivist mining activities by the Canadian multinational corporation El Dorado Gold in the pristine forests of Chalkidiki, with similar plans to develop elsewhere in the country, has jeopardized local economies, culture, the natural environment, and public health (Velegrakis 2018, 128).

Papandreou represents Greece’s progressive branch of neoliberalism, which practices a middle-class tolerance of diversity (Fraser 2017) while advancing a sustainable discourse that capitalism’s progressive apologists often use as an excuse for inaction regarding the environmental and social crises that capitalism produces (Jacobsson 2019). Since the beginning of 2016, when Kyriakos Mitsotakis assumed leadership of the Nea Dimokratia (ND) party, a conservative strain of neoliberalism surfaced, framing creativity, and the creative sector with concepts that are part of a conservative repertoire, such as meritocracy (Littler 2017). Syriza’s (the Coalition of the Radical Left that headed a coalition government between 2015 and 2019) capitulation to the European Union’s demands for austerity during the late summer of 2015 provided a strategic opportunity for ND to rebrand itself as a novel force of reform, innovation and development, even though the party represents Greece’s most established conservative political force. During Syriza’s administration (2015–2019), the creative aspirations of progressive neoliberalism (like those of Papandreou) were generally toned down. Although the general neoliberal reforms policy framework remained largely intact, on a public level, Syriza sustained a compromised public agenda that stressed social inequality as a major structural problem, without overstressing individualist solutions to the economic crisis (Stavrakakis and Katsampekis 2019).

7.4 The Creativity Cult: Entrepreneurial Success Stories

An entrepreneurial cult has been growing in Greece since the beginning of the crisis and is related to the construction of a “creative Greece” image, which is that of a nation emerging from the debris of a financial crisis. Throughout the crisis, the mainstream media presented successful businesspeople as role models and moral authorities. For instance, the conservative daily *Kathimerini* published a profile of

Greek entrepreneurs who had received an award for investing in innovation. There, one entrepreneur emphatically argued that “the country will exit the crisis when we all begin to pursue riches, for there is nothing shameful in being rich, because poverty is what one should be ashamed of.”⁵ Mass media are never short of success stories about self-made, confident, hardworking, and visionary entrepreneurs. As branding strategies that attract creatives, tourists, and investors, success stories are “based on selective storytelling, on the employment of a limited number of hegemonic, optimistic, and boosterish representations . . . excluding dissident voices and negative representations . . . therefore creating disparities between the promoted image of a place and reality” (Katsinas 2019, 3).

In the following example of an entrepreneurial success story, we see these characteristics in an individual’s idea to appropriate free and still abundant seaweed from Greece’s seashores in order to produce products such as mobile- phone cases. As with the aforementioned booming of new cafes and restaurants during the crisis years, examples of market-based, applied creativity show that capitalist innovation is not so much about novelty as it is producing more of the same (Mould 2018, 15). Indeed, the market is already overflowing with products such as mobile phone cases. Drawn from the Aegean Airlines’ bimonthly magazine, *Blue*, one reads the following:

Stavros Tsompanidis [is] a natural born Greek innovator. The 24-year-old founder of PHEE, who featured in this year’s Forbes 30-under-30 list as one of Europe’s most promising young industrial entrepreneurs, is a fine example of a new generation of Greeks who are setting themselves goals for themselves, working diligently, and ultimately succeeding.

[After being] asked if he had a message for his peers in the brain-drain generation poised to seek opportunity beyond the recession-struck Greece, the young entrepreneur said that effort is always rewarded: “whoever tries hard—regardless of his or her educational background—and has a burning desire to create, will succeed. It is as simple as that. Anybody who is spoiled and expects solutions from others will never make a leap forward towards a better life.”⁶

The narrative reproduces the foundational bourgeois myths of the successful, hardworking, gifted entrepreneur that can transform anything into riches, stressing the commonplace (bourgeois) morality tale that one can only thrive if one believes in oneself, works relentlessly, and is adequately determined and motivated. In this context, the failure to reach a better life is solely attributed to the individual. Therefore, the system causing failure and the degradation of life is abstracted and naturalized.

⁵Οι Πρωτοπόροι που Επέδυσαν στην Καινοτομία εν Μέσω Κρίσης [The Pioneers who Invested in Innovation in the Midst of the Crisis]. <http://www.kathimerini.gr/956281/article/oikonomia/epixeirhseis/oi-prwtoporoi-poy-ependysan-sthn-kainotomia-en-mesw-krishs> Accessed April 07, 2018.

⁶Συνέντευξη: Τσομπανίδης [Interview: Tsompanidis]. <https://el.aegeanair.com/taksidpeste/en-tisei/periodiko-blue/blue-70/> Accessed Feb 05, 2019.

In a January 1, 2018, piece posted on the popular lifestyle website *Lifo* under the headline “The gastronomic revolution is coming from Thessaloniki,” one reads the following:

During the crisis, Thessaloniki went through its own darkness . . . that was followed by its “Renaissance.” It all started in 2012 with *Serbico*: a restaurant cooperative set up by 12 (!) young guys who all had their roots in the anti-authoritative scene of the city and who were previously running the canteen of the Technical Schools [TEI] for seven years. [They created] a cuisine, brought in new techniques, made a grocery store, [created] a magical, posh hall with aesthetics that are not reminiscent to those of the old freaks of our Exarchia [an Athenian district where many anarchist/anti-authoritarian groups are situated] . . . [Not only] did they change the menu but also the way that a restaurant works: self-management, equality, and teamwork in the kitchen. The new generation of high-tech cooks finds shelter and courage in the view that you can set up your own business without being dependent upon any irrelevant businessman and turn your job into a partisan affair outside the known contours of a capitalism that they all detest.

So when the *Serbico* team broke up, Dimitris Tasioulas opened *Thria* . . . from the beginning, *Thria* had something different to say. Something more gastronomic, more creative, more gourmet, if I may say so. If Michelin would come to the city looking for [restaurants to give] awards [to], they would definitely have to come by here and try a crisp puff pastry with black sesame seeds . . . The decoration, the open kitchen that works like a TV—behind the glass, you envisage a show of young, stylish kids working through a ballet-style coordination in a choreography of the latest kitchen techniques, all civilized and clean cut. Without screaming and without hitting each other, they create a feeling that makes you think “Thessaloniki, just like New York,” European and cinematographic.⁷

The long quotes above demonstrate a variety of creative trends in crisis-struck Greece. One may notice the expression of a “dialectic of the same” to unfold, with the restaurant business still at the forefront of Greece’s entrepreneurialism, given that this is one of the main things that the market demands from Greece. Of further interest is the punk esthetics and mode of organization often found in such emerging businesses. As Angela McRobbie (2016) has shown, the pressures of austerity and unemployment often force people to mobilize countercultural practices for self-generated economic activity. From survival tactics (as the article mentions, the former anarchist activists used to run a self-organized school canteen, an illegal and highly precarious kind of work), specific practices become systematized into concrete and highly competitive and innovative schemes that refresh (or “revolutionize,” to use the author’s term) a specific market. Simultaneously, the author displays her Western-centric and middle-class fascinations. The restaurant appears as an experiencescape in which the cooks— besides preparing delicious, creative, and chic dishes—also perform elegant and sanitized choreographic spectacles of craftsmanship and civility. Here, the periphery’s fascination with Europe appears. The making of a European Greece is a recurrent theme in Greek liberal narratives. Hence, entrepreneurial activity and, with it, austerity reforms emerge as crucial to the Europeanization of Greece.

⁷Η Γαστρονομική Επανάσταση Έρχεται από τη Θεσσαλονίκη [The Gastronomy Revolution Comes from Thessaloniki]. https://www.lifo.gr/articles/taste_articles/177201/h-epanastasi-erxetai-apo-ti-thessaloniki Accessed Feb 17, 2019.

Successful entrepreneurial stories are generally narrated by a variety of mainstream media, reproducing tropes that constitute a social logic meant to be post-ideological, technocratic, novel, and meritocratic. This logic is intended to interpellate citizens in the entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberal austerity, promising to suture, through hard work, mobility, and determination, Greece’s allegedly *sui generis* ills. In a final example, a quasi-political site entitled Thousands of Voices (www.xiliadesfwnes.gr) posted the following to its Facebook group:

Kostas Tzoumas sold his start-up company for 90 m euros to Alibaba. It is a company that offers processing services for vast data quantities, fraud detection, and direct communication with customers . . . His company has developed partnerships with giant companies such as Netflix, ING, and others. Young people like Kostas show us the way to a Greece of the future. It is worth congratulating him for his huge achievement!⁸

According to the theory developed above, such social media posts are meant to inspire individuals and breed in the general public a sense of hope and desire for the reaching of the exceptional. A standard bourgeois myth is reproduced here as well, and it sustains the illusion of a potentially rapid social elevation available to everyone, while creating a public admiration for the rich, who emerge as heroic and self-made figures. Reproduced by a page that proclaims its open support to Mitsotakis and the ND, the post is meant to associate such entrepreneurial ventures with ND’s return to government and its agenda of building “the Greece of the future.” What we can see here is a political dialectic of the same, as the old ruling conservative party of ND and its leader, the descendent of a well-established political family in Greece, are framed as the heirs of the new. The post reads as follows:

We call to leave behind nihilism and intolerance. It is time to revive the values that are the symbols of Hellenism, such as bravery, inventiveness, solidarity, unselfishness, and pride. For us, these define [the essence of] contemporary patriotism. The politician who today expresses 12 reasons for us to support him [a link is provided here in the original that explains these 12 reasons] is Kyriakos Mitsotakis. He is the only one who understands us and consistently fights for our vision. He is the only one who is not afraid to collide with what holds us back and has proven so. Kyriakos is the only one who can really change the terms of the game and take us out of today’s quagmire. Are you part of the silent majority? Today, you are no more! We are no longer silent. We have a voice. Thousands of voices! We are the majority that will change Greece.⁹

The reference to Mitsotakis in quasi-messianic terms, as a figure who can “really change the terms of the game” offers an undemocratic understanding of politics as something that can be managed by supposedly charismatic individuals alone. Most importantly, such texts are meant to produce a personality cult and boost popular support for the politics, ideas, and practices represented by the leader. The politico-

⁸Ο Κώστας Τζούμας Πούλησε την Start Up Εταιρεία του για 90 Εκατομμύρια Ευρώ στην Alibaba! [Kostas Tzoumas Sells His Start Up Company for 90 Million Euros at Alibaba!] https://www.facebook.com/pg/xiliadesfwnes/posts/?ref=page_internal Accessed Oct 28, 2019.

⁹Είμαστε Χιλιάδες Φωνές [We Are a Thousand Voices]. <https://www.xiliadesfwnes.gr/poioi-eimaste> Accessed Oct 28, 2019.

ideological dimension of creativity can also be seen because the expressed creative fantasy is supposed to arrive with the coming of Mitsotakis to power and the reforms that he is meant to introduce. An entrepreneurial nationalism is also present in the essentialist features of “Greekness,” are to naturalize a popular support for ND. For the authors of this text, ND’s coming to power would mean the opening of the path toward Greece’s resolute future (Laclau 1996, 28). The text posits potential in the essentialist features of the Greek identity, potential that remains untapped due to the reign of the leftist Syriza, which is charged with “nihilism and intolerance.” This way, Syriza is blamed for the ills of the economic crisis and austerity.

7.5 Creativity and Meritocracy: Reinforcing the Status Quo

Though a nuanced idea that one can associate with different sociopolitical contexts, meritocracy is today a concept co-opted by neoliberals and conservatives to attack social welfare institutions and socialist politics (Littler 2017). Mitsotakis is a vocal advocate of meritocracy. However, his calls for meritocracy are controversial due to his own status. Despite his personal branding strategy, which was developed by his party and by Greece’s mainstream media, and notwithstanding his efforts to publicly dissociate himself from his privileged background, Mitsotakis remains the beneficiary of a former prime minister, his father, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, who also headed the party of ND. Therefore, his meritocracy call represents the elites’ reaction to the lower classes, the so-called plebes, which went so far as to elect a leftist party (Syriza) to power in Greece.

Mitsotakis’s meritocracy vision is often blended with nationalist and racist tropes, as evidenced in the following:

Greece has always been, in terms of its institutional tradition, a European country in the Balkans. Mr. Tsipras, Mr. Kammenos,¹⁰ and their company turned us into a Balkan country in the European Union.¹¹

A process of self-orientalization emerges here, along with the iteration of occidentalist and classist stereotypes with regards to the Balkans, presenting them as Europe’s negative other.

Among other things, Mitsotakis took to Twitter to congratulate successful director Yorgos Lanthimos (member of the Greek weird wave cinema movement) after he was nominated for several Oscars for his 2019 film *The Favourite*:

¹⁰Here, Mitsotakis referred to the two main political partners (Alexis Tsipras from Syriza and Panos Kammenos from the Independent Greeks) of the Syriza-led coalition that governed Greece between 2015 and 2019.

¹¹Κυρ. Μητσοτάκης: Πλειοψηφία της Γκαζόζας, Εκβιαζόμενος Προθυπουργός ο Τσίπρας [K. Mitsotakis: A Soda Majority Government, Tsipras is a Blackmailed PM] <https://www.liberal.gr/arthro/238852/politiki/2019/kur-mitsotakis-i-pleiopsifia-tis-gkazozas-katantia-gia-ti-chora-ekbiazomenos-prothupourgos-o-tsipras.html> Accessed Feb 04, 2019.

“Congratulations Yorgos Lanthimos for the great success of *The Favorite* at the #Bafta 2019. Very proud of your accomplishments! This is truly #Greece_at_its_best.”¹²

However, in his Tweet, Mitsotakis misspelled the film’s title (as one can see in the quoted tweet above, Mitsotakis wrote “*The Favorite*” instead of “*The Favourite*”) while incorporating Lanthimos into his meritocratic vision for Greek excellence, closing with the hashtag “*Greece_at_its_best*.” The idea of success certified by credible, market-driven institutions and media publicity seems to be a defining marker of meritocracy. Concerns about cinema and the arts are secondary to the accomplishment of “national success.” Indeed, as Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015, 30) have noted, neoliberal cultural policy marks a shift “away from culture, and towards economic and social goals: ‘competitiveness and regeneration.’”

The word “creativity” appeared in 53 posts to the party’s online press center (<https://nd.gr/grafeio-tupou/>) from February 2016, shortly after Kyriakos Mitsotakis was elected as ND leader, until February 2019, when this study was conducted. These posts are composed of various speeches and comments provided by Mitsotakis and other leading party members. In them, creativity is articulated in a programmatic political discourse that includes signifiers such as “meritocracy,” “competition,” “mobility,” “opportunity,” “flexibility,” “investing,” “education,” “low taxation,” “business incentives,” “work,” “growth,” “entrepreneurship,” “Greece,” and “Europe.” The following excerpts are indicative:

We do not want people to be trapped in poverty, forever dependent upon state benefits. We want to give them the opportunity to rebuild their life and to feel joy of creation (Nea Dimokratia 2018, 34).

The well-studied ND program can really, I believe deeply, lead to a new “Greek miracle.” At last, we may activate the so-called “growth accelerator,” which today does not work, and mobilize the creativity of the Greek, to bring a self-sustaining spiral of positive expectations for another image at all levels.¹³

I am now coming to the national insurance issue. The law of Katrougalos [Mitsotakis here refers to the unified national insurance law that Giorgos Katrougalos, Syriza’s minister of Labor and Social Insurance passed in 2016] is a bad one. You all know this. Not only because it reduces pensions, but because it ultimately punishes creativity and work. Why should one work more if he knows that he will get the same pension as everyone else? How are businesses to recruit when labor costs rise unnecessarily due to high employer contributions? And why should a freelancer declare his actual earnings when the amount of his contributions is to be unsustainable? And who is nowadays motivated to join the insurance system—please observe this, because it is very important and I come across it whenever I talk to young people—if he believes that he will never get a pension? “I prefer to receive half of my earnings black, as I do not care about [paying for my insurance] stamps,” a young man who works in a café told me.¹⁴

¹²<https://twitter.com/kmitsotakis/status/1094935344754147329?lang=en>, accessed Dec 17, 2019.

¹³Ομιλία του Προέδρου της Νέας Δημοκρατίας κ. Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη στο Thessaloniki Summit 2018 [Speech Given by the President of ND at the Thessaloniki Summit 2018]. <https://nd.gr/omilia-toy-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-k-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-sto-thessaloniki-summit-2018> Accessed Feb 15, 2019.

¹⁴Ομιλία του Προέδρου της Νέας Δημοκρατίας κ. Κυριάκου Μητσοτάκη στην 83η Δ.Ε.Θ. [Speech Given by the President of ND at the 83th International Trade Exposition of Thessaloniki].

And above all, we will unleash the dynamism of the Cretans, this great untapped resource of wealth that we have. We will liberate the creativity of the entrepreneurs of this place so as to allow them to invest. We will facilitate investment, simplify bureaucracy, and provide tax incentives, in order for Crete to become a true protagonist; as it deserves, as we deserve.¹⁵

For the Greek Conservatives, creativity is something that emerges through the further liberalization of the market and the state's support of the private economy. Pro-private economic regulation that combines low taxation and minimal state protectionism is supposed to "unleash" Greek creativity. At the same time, creativity also appears as something inherent to Greek identity. Work precarity is presented as desirable to and even demanded by the working class, which, through random but carefully instrumentalized examples picked by ND's public communication strategists, appears discontented with welfare and labor protection laws. The working class is forced to participate in the "joy of creativity," which, in Mitsotakis' articulations above, formulates the quintessence of human existence. Individualized workers are to self-govern in a precarious and uncertain market-orientated society in which they are urged to live according to an ethos of personal sovereignty related to individual decision-making and freedom; this "normalizing self-governance is based on an imagination of coherence, identity, and wholeness that goes back to the construction of a male, white, bourgeois subject" (Lorey 2015, 30).

Simultaneously, welfare dependency is targeted as anti-creative and anti-work, since it purportedly creates a flat and equal society that has detrimental effects on merit. In Mitsotakis's vision, welfare "traps people in poverty." In reality, Greeks have never enjoyed an extended welfare state of the kind that the core European Union states offer their citizens. Nevertheless, even minimal welfare is demonized as anti-productive and corrosive to character. Welfare and labor regulation are supposed to block investments and suppress the market's meritocratic potential, which, in the neoliberal imagination, emerges in a "pure" form, through an "unmediated" negotiation between the worker and the capitalist that is to take place in a labor market that is "undistorted" by pro-labor regulation. A pure form of liberalism is thus propagated by Mitsotakis and his followers, with the state to safeguard the free market competition framework from democratic demands and interventions.

Historian Quinn Slobodian (2018, 10) demonstrated that the free market is actually sustained by global institutions that impose and safeguard its norms and structure. Furthermore, "the neoliberal mantra that the socialized provisions of the welfare state should be gradually sold off to the private sector, piece by piece, has resulted in widespread 'asset stripping'" (Littler 2017, 118). Privatization has resulted in the skyrocketing of inequality and unprecedented levels of poverty and exclusion faced by societies around the world. Mitsotakis anti-welfarism is

<https://nd.gr/nea/omilia-toy-proedroy-tis-neas-dimokratias-k-kyriakoy-mitsotaki-stin-83i-deth> Accessed Feb 15, 2019.

¹⁵Συμμετοχή του Προέδρου της Ν.Δ. Κ. Μητσοτάκη σε σύσκεψη στην Ιεράπετρα για τη λειψυδρία στην Κρήτη [Participation of the President of ND K. Mitsotakis at a meeting in Ierapetra on water scarcity in Crete]. <https://nd.gr/nea/symmetohi-toy-proedroy-tis-nd-k-mitsotaki-se-syskepsi-stin-ierapetra-gia-ti-leipsydria-stin> Accessed Feb 15, 2019.

connected to a sweeping privatization agenda that his party is committed to developing during its reign. As Minister for Development and Investment Adonis Georgiadis bluntly stated in December 2019 at the 21st annual Invest in Greece forum held in New York, "Why don't we sell more? Why don't we privatize everything? ... our appetite [for privatization] is so huge that it increases by month."¹⁶

7.6 Conclusion: More of the Same

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the ideological configuration of creativity in the context of the Greek crisis. I traced this ideology in its public form as articulated by the neoliberal left and neoliberal right as well as through the mainstream media. I focused on the local context of semi-peripheral Greece during its prolonged economic crisis. Here, creativity has been a public repertoire that fabricates the crisis into an opportunity for development promised by entrepreneurship. Neoliberal creativity has a strong affective dimension, as it is intertwined with consumerist, middle-class, and occidentalist ideas, fascinations, and identities. This ideological assemblage interpellates subjects to hegemonic endeavors related to the economic and political restructuring processes, which are continuous in the neoliberal era. The process described by McRobbie through the notion of the creative dispositif is a catalyst in the production of competitive, mobile, anti-political, and austere subjects. In times of permanent crisis, austerity, and downward social mobility, the ideology of capitalism is also sustained by a regular propagation of its own foundational myths that reproduce promises of prosperity, growth, and achievement.

As David Harvey (2014) stressed, neoliberalism is a political project aimed at the reconstitution of upper-class hegemony. It is no wonder that between 2010 and 2016, Greece's richest 10% augmented their share of wealth from 38.8% to 54% (Hadjimichalis, 2019). The repertoire of meritocracy is an ideological expression of such politics (Littler 2017, 115). Here, creativity is intended to provide a positive public spin on the neoliberal reforms agenda, in line with the blaming of the poor for Greece's crisis. While racism makes a negative interpellation of the peripheral subject, creativity and entrepreneurial nationalism make a positive one. Together, both such interpellating moments are to orientate the peripheral subjects' mode of self-governance in a time of perpetual crisis and austerity.

During the crisis's early days, Papandreou launched what appeared to be a progressive entrepreneurial nationalism that combined essentialist notions of Greekness, and he further issued a call for what can be understood as biopolitical economic regeneration. Besides calling for the state's modernization, Papandreou—

¹⁶Γεωργιάδης Διαλαλεί "Καλώς Ήλθε το Δολάριο" [Georgiadis Declares "Dollar, Welcome"]. <https://tvxs.gr/news/ellada/o-georgiadis-dialalei-kalos-ilthe-dolario> Accessed 12 Dec 2019.

in line with the hegemonic Greek crisis narrative—attributed to the middle and lower classes the responsibility for the crisis of Greece’s peripheral capitalism to their alleged consumerist lethargy, dependence on European Union funds, and lack of civic culture and entrepreneurialism.

Several years later, at the supposed end of the Greek crisis, Mitsotakis further stressed these tropes under an anti-leftist agenda that was tantamount to a deeper assault on worker and civic rights, this by defending the private sector and issuing his call for transnational capital investments in the country that he aspires to reform as business friendly. Like with Papandreou’s aforementioned Fast Track Law, it should be further noted that Mitsotakis has also been a defender of particular extractivist investments (such as the extraction of oil and gas from deep-sea waters, among others) that jeopardize the natural environment and public health, while claiming that they supposedly bring jobs, growth, and “development”. Neo-liberal creativity on the periphery thus emerges from a pretext of proletarianization, land and assets grabbing, and extractionism, all protected by a powerful, pro-business state. Together, such features constitute the archetypical practices of capitalist accumulation.

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