

Pain, fate, and crisis: Dispatches from austerity-Greece

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Liza is a 21-year-old paid intern who works as a plastic surgeon's assistant, whom I met during the early phase of my field research. She is a good-looking brunette, usually very sociable and friendly, who came to Athens from her island village in Kolpos (a pseudonym) located near the border with Turkey. Her skin still bears the marks of a recently gone puberty, with little spots still visible near her sideburns, which she covers with makeup. She has thick eyebrows which are even more accentuated with an eyebrow pencil, and often wears red lipstick on her mouth, but not today.

We sit at a cafeteria during her lunch break on a busy, leafy square. At this same cafeteria she had announced happily to me, just a week ago: “Évala hilákia!” (‘I put on lips!’). What she meant was that she got injected with fillers, to make her lips appear fuller. But, today, Liza is extremely sad. Without taking off her eyeglasses, she tells me, somberly:

“Did you see the news?...My whole village has been leveled to the ground...”.

That same morning, a very powerful earthquake had hit the easternmost islands of Greece, which also caused damage at several towns located at Turkey's shoreline. Kolpos, however, suffered the greater damage.

At the age of eighteen, Liza left her island and came to Athens to become a beautician, and has stayed in Athens since then. She lives in a small room at her father's house, a man with whom she was estranged for twelve years, after he left her mother to pursue a new life in the city. She reconnected with him after a long period of silence, and they made a deal that she would stay at his house until she could afford a place of her own.

She takes out her phone and shows me pictures posted by a friend on Facebook, showing the earthquake's aftermath. I see many houses turned into rubble.

“This is my neighbor's house”, she says, pointing to a pile of ruins laying in front of what seems to be an exposed tiled bathroom. The bathroom looks naked.

“This is the house of Eleni. She died”.

An earthquake like this is, I think to myself, apart from disastrous, a blatant reminder that all that society builds, and especially the edifices that conceal us not just from the forces of nature but from other humans, can be annihilated in a second. The façade of privacy is stripped down; the line between private and public is erased. All secrets are out, like the designs of those bathroom tiles.

“What about your own family?”, I ask her.

“My house, luckily, is amongst the three that still stand erect. And my family, thank God, is fine. But you can’t imagine the agony I went through when I heard on the news that a 45-year-old woman is missing. I thought it was my mother. I started screaming at work, just a few hours ago, in front of everyone...”.

“And will you go visit?”, I extend my arm to touch her hand, as I can see she is about to cry.

“I can’t go back because the flight costs four hundred euros...! That’s more than my monthly salary... And the boat takes two days to get there and back. And I can only afford to be away on weekends... I can’t leave work. So, I can’t take the boat.”

Liza has often expressed frustration about her financial insecurity. It is only now, however, that I start making sense of the kind of hardship she has repeatedly mentioned during our meetings, in phrases such as being “completely broke”, “not having a life” and “feeling trapped”. She had also stressed how she feels “stuck” in Athens, which may have “a few” opportunities (compared to Kolpos), but nothing compared to what she had imagined before she arrived in the city.

“Is life even worth living? This is what I wonder these days...”, she adds, and she finally lifts her sun glasses to reveal a set of swollen, reddened eyes.

She looks down at the table, at her uneaten sandwich, which is now cold. A pigeon flutters its wings besides us, in an effort to land on the table next to ours. A feather from its wings finds its way onto the sandwich. Liza takes the whole plate and places it at a table behind her, so that the surrounding pigeons can freely take turns to eat it. As a result, a noisy swarm of pigeons gathers around the plate, but she seems oblivious to the fact.

“I keep thinking about my neighbor, Eleni... I can’t fathom how miserable her life had been, and how unfair. Her husband beat her. She tried to leave him twice! She took the kids with her, slept almost on the street for two days. And no one helped her! The whole village turned a blind eye, as they didn’t want to upset her husband... Or maybe they just didn’t want to get involved with that psychopath. A few days later, he found her. He beat the crap out of her. And... what happened? She never left him in the end... how could she? Where would she go? She had nowhere to go. Then, later, she had cancer, in the stomach. Poor Eleni... She

had cancer; her husband cheated on her; he even beat her. The bastard. She was powerless and trapped; she was poor. And what happened in the end? Her own ceiling flattened her (tin plákose to taváni tis)...! *What a life, eh...!?*”

She smiles bitterly, then grabs her phone again to show me a few more pictures of destroyed homes. She looks at the pictures in disbelief, unable to process what she is seeing.

“I don’t have really have a life here... I work all day, and I go home at night, and sleep at a house which is not even mine... But I work. And I work at a job that I like, which allows me to be around women and we do all this interesting stuff... and I learn so much! And I think that this job, this environment and everything we do in there, is the only thing that has kept me sane. I feel like I don’t have much control over life right now. This is such a crazy time... But when I’m at work, I feel like at least I can control something, as if something still matters.”

Liza’s case is common of a young Greek woman living with limited family assistance and rudimentary means in the present era of ‘austerity’. Her experience of precarity and her sorrow on the one hand perfectly distils the current “crisis experience”. On the other hand, she seems to talk about it as an unmistakably and eternally “Greek” story, as it condenses the kind of eternal struggle – *o agónas* – which conjures up what being Greek means to most modern Greeks (Dubisch, 1986; Herzfeld, 1985). Liza’s planned life course, which had been envisioned as more-or-less stable and well thought-out as she was reaching adulthood (leave the village, move to the capital, study, find a job, and then perhaps ‘settle down’) was being tested, and even defeated, with every passing day. The events at Kolpos – a sudden, violent destruction of her home, shattered her ‘shelter’ and foundation, as most Greeks perceive their family home. Suddenly, her job became a ‘last resort’, a kind of anchoring with reality, and the only aspect of her life which entailed some hope for the future; a prospect for change towards the better, and not for the worse.

Pain and Greece

In the present but also ingrained in the idea of the Greek self historically, suffering and hardship are embodied as a constant, and perceived as a continuation of a string of tragedies distinctive of Greece and other small nations which are at the mercy of larger and more powerful nations. Oftentimes, during field research, I felt that hardship is seen as the inescapable “fate” of the Greek individual, and especially of the Greek female. This is a sense that, try as one might, escaping suffering is in the end futile. Folk wisdom and popular songs conjure up this theme, like the song “Kemal” by Manos Hatzidakis:

My defeated whiz, times don't change
with fire and with blade
this world advances'

Good night, Kemal,
this world will never change
Good night...

There is a viciously cyclical nature in suffering as Greeks understand it. Life is expected to be a series of hardships. Even if one dares to dream of a life without suffering, they will unavoidably be disappointed in the end, is the wisdom of Greek thought. This 'national' pain was brought to my attention during fieldwork, but I also discovered it in a large amount of Greek literature. Browsing books on folktales from Greece, I came across a story about Karagiozis, a shadow-puppet caricature and symbol of the starving, poor Greek individual who lived under Ottoman occupation. An accompanying review of the book stated that Karagiozis is an expression of the "eternal Greek pain".

Pain also fares in many ethnographies on Greece preceding my own, and especially in the work on and by women. This is due to the fact that pain is also gendered in Greece (Seremetakis, 1998: 151), with 'suffering' seen as belonging to a realm more 'naturally' proximate to women. Jill Dubisch, for instance, explored Christian Orthodox rituals of pain on the island of Tinos, while Panourgia (1995) and Seremetakis (1991) studied death and mourning in Athens and in Mani respectively; while others, like Alexandra Halkias (2004) mention pain briefly, but acknowledge its significance.

Greek pain may spring from a deeply felt, communal grievance about standing at a European periphery, simultaneously occupying a central imaginary and historical role inside the West but essentially remaining forever outside the boundaries of Europe's core in any real manner. Davis defines Greece as simultaneously of and outside Europe. And Herzfeld has granted Greece the status of a crypto-colonial state (2002: 901), by arguing that Greece exchanged hands – from Ottoman Empire to the indirect rule of the Great Powers and then on to the European Union – concluding that the country has never, in fact, succeeded in becoming sovereign. "Since their initial proclamation of their independent nation-state in 1821", Herzfeld writes, "Greeks were forced to fit their national culture to the antiquarian desires of Western powers" (2016: 10). It is as if Greece's ancient history, appropriated by the West as the birth of its civilization, no longer belongs to Greece. It is adopted, seized, and shared across 'Europe', leaving only its symbolic remnants (the Acropolis, more potently) to stand

at the very centre of the Greek capital, acting as a stark reminder to Greeks of everything that Greece no longer is.

As noted already, though pain is acknowledged as being a “central social fact” in Greece (Seremetakis, 1998: 151) and is experienced as indispensable to Greek womanhood, little attention has been given to its displays, especially to those ‘quieter’ demonstrations that do not take the form of a distinct public performance such as laments or mourning (Seremetakis, 1991), which have been well documented. Dubisch (1995) however, is an exception. She considers the absence of pain in many ethnographies about women a curious – even inexplicable – oversight. Like Seremetakis, she argues that what may account for such an absence in Greek ethnography is the propensity by non-Greek anthropologists to consider emotions to be ‘private’ rather than cultural and public matters. Dubisch and Seremetakis, however, recognize the public, performative, communicative character of pain in Greece and stress that emotions can be social and cultural idioms (Dubisch, 1995: 213), meant to be studied as a central “part of the construction of culture itself” (Ibid.).

Dubisch determines that female expressions of suffering belong to a kind of *performance* which she calls the ‘poetics of womanhood’ (after Herzfeld’s ‘poetics of manhood’, a trope for understanding Cretan men’s highly visible performances of ‘maleness’). Poetics of womanhood are less visible – often mistaken for ‘passive’ – performances that embody what being a Greek woman is. They are not simply indicative and performative, but inscriptive, creative, expressive, and transformative, according to Dubisch (1995: 204; also in Seremetakis, 1991: 2). Expressions of suffering within the context of the poetics of womanhood – like Marina’s monologue in Dubisch’s vignette – are performed in ways that can be “used to make statements and claims” (Dubisch, 1995: 206) about one’s life, and may even provide an idiom of defiance against the dominant social order (Ibid.). They may thus act as subtle, or not so subtle, reminders of female subordination. Such performances, Dubisch adds, are not simply “personal” and individually felt emotions, but are about socially asserting what “being a woman” is (1995: 212; emphasis mine). Through accounts of suffering a woman claims her position, and comes to exist. She calls attention to herself and to her position as she experiences it within her social world.

Yet pain has another dimension. Beyond being a means of defiance, and culturally inscriptive, it is also a mobilizer of “trans-individual systems of communication” (Seremetakis, 1998: 151). In my own field, pain often acted as a lever for communication, socialization, and connectivity, especially amongst females. It enables people – women especially – to bond, as it allows for certain elements to reveal themselves as common and shared. The underlying troubles causing the pain might reveal themselves as somewhat universally female (the inescapability of ageing, for example, and the marginalization caused by it), which in turn

unites women under a common ‘female universe’. And by expressing one’s troubles and pain, one is able to summon collective suffering, tie one’s own individual suffering to a larger circle, and thus eventually facilitate a sort of catharsis. “Pain is plural” in Greece, as Seremetakis (1991: 115) contends. And Maniats (in Greece’s southern Peloponnese), she adds, see pain as a ‘burning’ and a ‘fire’. This “burning” liquefies and ‘melts’ the person (Ibid.), thereby connecting her to the larger, suffering whole. Expressing pain is thus a system which unites; Greek pain is a shared emotion that brings individuals together instead of urging them to suffer privately.

In her 1986 ethnography regarding female friendships in Crete, Robinette Kennedy stressed the significant role played by women in each other’s lives—lives that were lived more-or-less marginally inside Cretan male-dominated society – in which the two sexes had distant relationships. Kennedy maintains that the friendships formed between women often enabled them to cope with their lives on a profound level, as they provided women with an unmatched support system, or “emotional scaffold” (1986: 124). They thus brought fulfillment, deep joy and a rare sense of connectedness and empowerment, in a life otherwise colored by confinement and social immobility (1986: 123).

Undeniably, things have changed for rural Cretan women today, like they have for all Greek women, both in urban and rural settings. Women now enjoy a very different lifestyle in Greece which includes freedoms and a mobility comparable to that enjoyed by men, though – as elsewhere – subtle forms of subordination still exist. Equality (or its lack) is not the point I wish to focus on, however. What interests me in Kennedy’s work is the focus on a female support system – the ‘emotional scaffold’ – which has rarely been emphasized in recent ethnographic work on Greece. Drawing a parallel with this past, we may argue that women today, even though they possess a much more liberated lifestyle, still seek out other women with whom to identify, connect, and bond in the face of trouble or other, more mundane challenges, because they still face issues that are gendered (such as the desire, and the social pressure, to ‘stay young’). Therefore, although the type(s) and cause(s) of suffering that women are called to manage today differ from the more overt kinds of oppression of the past, the coping mechanisms and the need for ‘support’ remain high. Most women are willing to confide in other women about their problems a lot more freely than they would to men, an activity which merges them with what Anna Caraveli calls “a [female] community of pain” (1995: 214). Still today, the idea that women “understand each other” better is prevalent, as is the idea that some matters are ‘women’s only’ and should ideally be taken up with female friends (or relatives) – who can ‘relate’.

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