

**LEARNING, UNLEARNING, RELEARNING WITH THE  
MOVEMENTS: A STUDY OF THE GREEK EDUCATION  
MOVEMENT AND ITS PREFIGURATIVE POTENTIAL**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper explores the way in which education movement activists in Greece have been conceptualising and experiencing the economic crisis. Moreover, it explores the potential for learning through praxis. It is suggested that through their participation in the movement, activists would re-appropriate key terms, such as ‘debt’, in order to decode the crisis. As such, an unlearning of the ‘dominant grammar’ was attempted. This and attendant learning processes were underpinned by two mechanisms, ‘naming’ and ‘reflective vigour’, which would lead to a new reading of the crisis, more akin to the needs of the people rather than the elites who are responsible for it. The ensemble of learning processes analysed in this paper offers insights to the contribution of activism in nurturing hope amid despair. As such, the education and more generally the anti-austerity movement, constitute sites where Greece’s social and political imagination is being re-moulded. This ‘learning through praxis’ points to the existence of possibilities ‘from below’ which seem powerful enough to unleash the participants’ creative imagination and serve as ‘counter-negations’ to the negation of human dignity they have been subjected to by the crisis.

**KEYWORDS:** neoliberalism, Greece, social movements, education, learning, crisis.

## **Introduction**

This paper explores some aspects of the economic crisis that shook Greece in 2009 and its continuing aftermath. It reports on findings from a research project that aimed to understand the crisis, its origins and impact, as well as its implications on the lives of education movement activists who have been agents of political, trade union and syndicalist activity. I explore the crisis through the vantage point of the educationalists with whom I spoke and interacted during the course of this project.

The questions this paper addresses are as follows:

1. How is the crisis conceptualised and experienced by participants in the education movement?
2. What learning processes occur owing to the involvement of education activists in the Greek anti-austerity movement?

In this paper, I explore how socio-economic processes, which arguably 'are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions, of the social relations of production' (Marx, 1847/2008: 118), are articulated and perceived by education movement activists in crisis-stricken Greece. Approaching phenomena with economic underpinnings, such as economic crises, as aspects of the renewed social relations, allows me to analyse social movements as a part of the selfsame web of social relations that are being transformed in the current context. In turn, this enables me to keep with the dynamic nature of social movements and explore the learning processes that occur in the course of research participants' involvement in them. In order to achieve this, I draw on Lazzarato's (2014) reworking of Guattari, especially on meaning-making and patterns of signification within advanced capitalism, as well as on other works by these authors (e.g. Lazzarato (2006; 2011); Deleuze and Guattari (1972/2004), Guattari (1984)). This offers me a unique lens to my respondents' critique of the function of debt within Greece's contemporary political economy. According to this analysis, debt is not a threat to capitalism, but a mechanism for its revival, a technique of controlling people and governing individual and collective subjectivities. The paper is underpinned by a theoretical approach that explicates how education can serve liberation, as shown by Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971) but mainly by Freire (1970). As such, it underlines the prefigurative potential of the movement at hand,

that is to say of its importance as an agent of transformative action and alternative thinking and doing that could pave the way for a different future.

### **1. Accelerated neoliberalisation in austerity Greece**

The Greek state was forced in 2010 to submit the administration of the country to a consortium of unelected technocrats from the European Commission (EC), European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (the EC-ECB-IMF or 'troika' as it is commonly known). The factors that led to this situation are multiple and any attempt to summarise them risks occluding the inherent complexity of the issues at hand. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will provide an overview in order to assist the reader with understanding the key issues I am dealing with in the remainder of this paper.

High account deficits forced Greece to borrow at much higher interest rates than the countries of the European core. This borrowing came mainly from German and French banks, who already held significant amounts of Greek government bonds and were eager to minimise their exposure to a high risk borrower such as Greece. However, fresh borrowing at high interest rates increased further public debt and made the European banks suspicious of Greece's ability to repay it. At that point, it was made clear that the safest path for Greece would be to cease raising money from the selling of government bonds in the market and to enter a protectionist state of affairs with the troika becoming its main lender through a specially designed bailout package deal. This deal was expected to offer Greece some breathing space while it was restructuring its public debt and regaining financial credibility in the international markets. Given that within the Eurozone bankruptcy is not allowed, Greece was practically insolvent but technically keeping afloat owing to the bailout agreement. However, in order to cover the cost of fresh borrowing enabled by the first bailout agreement in 2010, Greece had to sign new bailout agreements, which almost in their entirety funded debt repayment obligations and interest rates. In other words, Greece entered a vicious circle whereby ever higher borrowing increased debt and ever higher debt increased its dependency on European financial institutions.

In relation to the first bailout agreement, this came about in May 2010 when Greece received a rescue package worth

110bn euros as part of an ‘Economic Adjustment Programme in the context of a sharp deteriorating in its [Greece’s] financing conditions’ (European Commission, 2015). The goal of this programme was ‘to support the Greek government’s efforts to restore fiscal sustainability and to implement structural reforms in order to improve the competitiveness of the economy, thereby laying the foundations for sustainable economic growth.’ (European Commission, 2015). This wording, though, risks occluding the real aim behind the lenders’ intentions, which was to help Greece balance its books but at the cost of fundamentally restructuring the country. ‘Structural reforms’ can be summarised in the triptych: tough austerity measures, privatisation of a country’s assets and resources, and liberalisation of trade<sup>1</sup>.

From a fiscal point of view, the reforms Greece implemented after 2010 failed to induce a positive change, even by the lenders’ standards. Specifically, by October 2011 it became evident that in order for Greece to deal with the mounting debt it had accumulated anew, chiefly owing to the conditions attached to the May 2010 bailout package, its debt had to be written off by 50%. Although this was celebrated as a success by the then Greek government, even harsher austerity measures were stipulated by the troika as a trade off.

The PASOK-led government of the time was too frail to survive the pressure and a political storm ensued, which led to the imposition of an interim (and unelected) prime minister who happened to be none other than the former Governor of the Bank of Greece. To make matters worse, the Greek economy was still in grave danger as it could not meet its repayment obligations and keep functioning effectively. In order to alleviate the situation, in March 2012 another bailout agreement was signed between the imposed and therefore unelected Greek

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1 In the past, the conditions imposed by the IMF and the impact of the reforms implemented at its behest, plunged supposedly ‘rescued’ countries into further recession, slowed down or even prevented growth for many years to come, dramatically increased unemployment and poverty and triggered social tensions. Chile is a case in point, but many other countries can be cited (see for example, [Loewenson](#), 1993; Sheahan, 1997).

government<sup>2</sup> and the (similarly unelected) *troika*, this time worth 164.5bn Euros (in effect until the end of 2014) (European Commission, 2015). However, even this supposed lifeline failed to produce positive results and in late 2012 the troika imposed another set of measures to relieve the Greek economy from its spiralling debt (with the aim to reduce it to 124% of Greece's GDP by 2020). By this time, all governments since the onset of the crisis had had implemented four successive austerity packages that included spending cuts, tax increases, pension and salary cuts and public sector redundancies. Only in April 2013 and under pressure from the troika did the Greek parliament pass a bill sanctioning 15,000 redundancies in the public sector (European Commission, 2014).

With economic production damaged due to austerity, concomitant labour market paralysis, frozen exports and unemployment at record levels (see next section), the Greek economy was in its worst state in more than half a century<sup>3</sup>. This is set out in the next section where I discuss the impact of the crisis on the living conditions of the Greek people.

## **2. Draconian austerity and the end of post-war prosperity**

Despite significant decreases in absolute poverty and a significant rise in the levels of economic prosperity for the general population between 1974 and 2008 (Mitrakos and Tsakoglou, 1998), these trends saw a rapid reversal in the post-crisis years. Indicatively, the Greek GDP shrank by over 25% between 2008 and 2015. Various studies indicate 'that the level of inequality and (relative) poverty in Greece were and remain substantially higher than in most developed countries (OECD, 2008, 2013)' (Mitrakos, 2014: 25). In the period between 2007 and 2011 alone, poverty in Greece grew by 15% (Keeley, 2014) with more than one in five Greeks (21,4%) under the poverty line<sup>1</sup> in 2011 (ELSTAT, 2012). However, the picture is bleaker if absolute poverty is taken into account. In 2011, there were

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, the former governor of the Bank of Greece was still at the helm of the country and he acted as the caretaker Prime Minister until the next general election.

<sup>3</sup> Politically, with the debunking of Greek liberal democracy with its defunct parliament and with party politics in crisis, the situation reached a dangerous low with the rise in prominence of Golden Dawn, a neo-fascist organisation which in 2012 secured seats in the Greek parliament.

36% Greek people living in poverty, an increase of nearly 80 per cent in comparison to 2008 when poverty stood at 20% (Eurostat, 2012). Since then, it is estimated that poverty levels have increased at an even steeper rate.

Children have been disproportionately affected by the rising inequalities and household income loss. According to UNICEF (2014) 'in Greece in 2012 median household incomes for families with children sank to 1998 levels – the equivalent of a loss of 14 years of income progress'. This means that Greece (together with Iceland) has the highest percentage growth in child poverty and the highest overall rate (41%) (UNICEF, 2014). The demographic changes created by the crisis are profound: since child birth records became available in 1955, they have been in continuous increase, with an accelerated climb recorded between 1999-2008 (Vrachnis et al, 2014). However, after 2008 this trend has been reversing and live births dropped by 15% between 2008 and 2012 alone (Vrachnis et al, 2014). If lower birth rates point to a shrinking of the Greek population, then this finding is tragically confirmed by suicide and mortality rates.

In 2011, the then Greek Minister of Health stated in the Greek Parliament that the annual suicide rate had increased by 40%, although this might be an underestimate given the large number of unreported suicides due to religious and other reasons (Ekathimerini, 2011). A survey conducted in 2011 found that 'there was a 36% increase in the number who reported having attempted suicide in the month before the survey from 24 (1,1%) in 2009 to 34 (1,5%) in 2011' (Economou et al, 2011: 1459). A more recent study confirmed the alarming rate at which suicides have been increasing in crisis-stricken Greece (Rachiotis et al, 2015). The most likely cause of suicide is unemployment. According to another study (Duleba et al, 2012: 41) 'unemployment is an independent risk factor for both suicide and depression.' Mortality rates also registered an increase since the onset of the crisis.

According to data collected 2012, an important year in terms of the onset of the effects of austerity measures implemented since 2009, there were more deaths in that year (2012) than in 1949, a time when two successive wars had ended (namely, the Second World War and the Greek civil war) (Vlachadis et al,

2014). Specifically, ‘the 2011–12 increased mortality in people older than 55 years (about 2.200 excess deaths) probably constitutes the first evident short term consequence of austerity on mortality in Greece.’ (Vlachadis et al, 2014: 691).

In the health sector alone, the troika imposed a spending limit of up to 6% of the (declining) Greek GDP (Reeves et al, 2014), which has resulted in a reduction in the number of health workers, longer waiting hours, limited or unavailable resources and compromised quality in service provision. This has left about half a million Greeks without access to health care. Between 2009 and 2011, state hospital budgets decreased by 25% and public spending on pharmaceuticals dropped by over 50%.

According to Stuckler (2014, in Cooper, 2014) ‘The cost of austerity is being borne mainly by ordinary Greek citizens, who have been affected by the largest cutbacks to the health sector seen across Europe in modern times’.

The figures presented in this section are indicative of the ways that Greece has become a laboratory of neoliberalism and they demonstrate how abstract policies can have concrete, material impacts on the lives of ordinary people. In other words, they show how the harsh living conditions in Greece have been inscribed within the neoliberal arrangements, which are now spreading across Europe and elsewhere. Against this background, I decided to explore the meaning education workers gave to the crisis and the ways in which they mobilise to overcome its consequences.

### **3. The research background and the methodology**

This research began in early 2011, at a time when I was immersed in exploring social class dynamics for a study published shortly afterwards (Themelis, 2013). During the process of writing up the findings of this study, it was becoming evident that class dynamics were changing anew. Greece seemed to be undergoing a process of transformation that rarely occurs at such a fast pace. Especially, the education movement and its vigorous protests and demonstrations captured my sociological curiosity and imagination as they were taking the country by storm and were making Europe take notice. I was both intrigued and inspired by what was happening in Greece and decided to

explore this movement by talking to and interacting with some of the protagonists.

My methodological approach shares some elements with 'intervention sociology' (Touraine, 1981) which offers several advantages. First, it allows the researcher to adapt his/her methods and tools of data collection in order to adjust to the rapidly evolving reality around him/her. In addition, intervention sociology is characterised by openness in relation to the positionality and ideological position of the researcher and his/her epistemological bias. As Touraine (1981) noted, the researcher is not merely a fly in the wall in the movement s/he researches, but s/he intervenes in it in multiple ways.

This intervention has to be explicitly reported to the research participants as well as to the reader. However, my intervention was much more limited than Touraine's in several ways. First, I did not aim 'to reconstruct the field of decision-making by examining actors, and occasionally by simulating the political processes' as Touraine (1981: 140-1) did.

Second, I did not aim to 're-establish all the actions which have exerted an influence' on the movement in hand (Touraine, 1981: 140). Rather, my aim was to examine all the actions that were reported by the research participants and the literature as influential in the course of the movement under study. I share with intervention sociology its core principle which is 'the action of the sociologist, whose aim is to reveal social relations and make them the main object of analysis.' (Touraine, 1981: 140).

Over the course of five years, from mid-2011 to late-2016, I visited Greece several times and conducted research in three urban centres. My particular location as somebody who was born in Greece and lived there for a quarter of a century before moving to the UK, and as a person well-versed in the language and culture of both places, offered me an advantage as a researcher.

During the course of the research project I maintained contact with some participants and conversed with them on numerous occasions, in Greece and the UK. The main bulk of information was gathered through informal conversations



with dozens of activists and semi-structured interviews with 18 academics and 11 secondary school teachers. From them, approximately 60 per cent were males and 40 per cent females. A small proportion, about 25 per cent, were early career educators, that is to say with less than 10 years of experience in secondary or higher education. Some of the participants who taught in higher education, were not in full employment and they were on fractional or seasonal contracts.

In several cases, activists stated that they had sustained intimidation or direct persecution by the Greek state owing to their political activity. The vast majority of activists were trade unionists, but at the same time they would occupy other positions, such as members of various organisations or political formations. Most participants belonged to political groupings affiliated to parliamentary or non-parliamentary parties or groups. Apart from the education movement, in nearly all cases, an activist would also be a member of another social movement. For example, some education movement activists were also participating in the anti-racist movement, some others had, to a greater or lesser degree, participated in the so-called Squares movement while others were actively involved in the education mobilisations against the sweeping reform in Higher Education, the law 'Athena'. I participated in conferences, workshops, events, demonstrations and various meetings in and out of educational institutions. Often, I would complement my information about events that were reported to be important, through mainstream and alternative news outlets (such as newspapers, magazines, e-zines, Greek television and radio and alternative e-news stations outside of Greece), social media and websites. The data collection for this stage of the project was completed in late 2014, though part of the literature I have used refers to the socio-economic situation up until 2016 in order to make connections with the material I gathered and the state of affairs since its collection.

#### **4. Learning amidst the crisis: from the financialisation of the economy to the conscientisation of activists**

One of the key questions this research sought to address was about the way education activists perceived the situation in Greece since 2009. In other words, I wanted to find out which factors activists themselves thought had caused the crisis and

what the crisis meant for them. For Plato<sup>4</sup>, a highly articulate activist who is reminiscent of Gramsci's (1971) organic intellectual, the situation was a result of a shift in capitalist development:

What has been happening in Greece has been happening elsewhere - an investment in finance. There was a big stock market crisis in 2000 [in Greece] when the stock market went from 2.000 to 6.000 units. This affected the SMEs mainly. Lately, shipyards have had less work and the banks became more dependent on foreign capital [than previously]. Big companies can move money in and out [of the country] in a day. But banks are funded by the state to the tune of 100 billion euros [refers to the 2010 bailout package Greece received].

Plato's account traces the origins of Greece's current crisis to the late-1990s when the stock market was propped by the then government as a field of propitious investment, a form of safe gamble. According to Thalassinis et al. (2006, p. 4) the '*Athens Stock Exchange (ASE) share price index rose by 102.2% between end-December 1998 and end-December 1999*'. This trend led to an unusually high number of Greek households to invest their savings in the stock market. This lens is helpful in understanding the transformation of the Greek economy into a '*zone of neoliberal experimentation*'. With the stock market's explosive growth, companies raised money very rapidly and cheaply. However, this money had no direct link to the country's production base: it was fictitious capital (Hudson, 2012). What is more, this set of processes generated the availability of cheap capital for companies which minimised their reliance on banks. The latter, though, now relied on new clients who '*turned out to be smaller companies or individuals who did not have a direct access to the financial market*' (Thalassinis et al., 2006, p. 4).

Stock market prices however started to fall dramatically: in 2000 ASE fell by 39%, in 2001 by a further 24%, and in 2002 by 30% (Thalassinis et al., 2006). The stock market collapse took down with it thousands of small investors and it comprised one of the most spectacular speculative bubbles in

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4 All names are pseudonyms.

the Greek financial history. At the same time, it launched the period of financialisation of the Greek economy. The complex relationship between the real economy and the fictitious one of financial capital is informative about the shape the Greek political economy would take in the new millennium. A glimpse of this relationship can be gleaned through the pivotal role the banks played in the rescue packages Greece has received since 2010.

The argument Plato propounded about the Greek banks having received a big share of the bailout money, was also made by other respondents. For example, Cleisthenes, a secondary school trade unionist, lambasted the role of the banks in the bailout packages as well as the nexus of intricate relationships they had developed with the country's lenders: '*All the ECB and IMF funding that Greece received through the two memoranda of agreement went to the [Greek and foreign] banks*'.

With this, Cleisthenes meant that (part of) the money received through the bailout agreements was reserved for the so-called recapitalisation of the Greek banks while most of the rest was shifted into European, mainly German and French, banks which possessed high volumes of Greek bonds. This web of interdependency that the Greek (and foreign) banks had developed with the Eurozone and EU's core institutions was seen as a direct threat to the interests of ordinary people. This was because people started to realise that national debt was increasing due to the so-called bailout agreements that were supposed to relieve the country from its debt.

This process, though, carried its own significance as it allowed for the shaping of activist consciousness that brought together educators in struggle during the years of the crisis. Freire (1970) calls this process conscientisation, that is to say the process of creating a '*consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality*' (Taylor 1993: 52). As I show in the next sections, conscientisation was the result of deep and complex processes that the struggle of education movement activists enabled and enhanced.

## **5. Decoding the crisis/unlearning with the movement**

Research participants often referred to the political and socio-economic situation in Greece as 'a system in crisis'. In explaining this they would use a vocabulary that referred to a medical

emergency. For example, they often said: ‘we are in a critical condition’, ‘our survival chances are small’, ‘the Greek economy is gravely ill’ and so on. At the same time, they often employed a technical or ‘economistic’ parlance, by invoking concepts such as ‘debt obligations’, ‘global economic growth’, ‘insolvency’ and the like. They invariably understood this vocabulary as a new discourse necessitated by ‘capitalism realism’ (Fisher, 2009). One of the key terms they were grappling with was ‘debt’.

Debt is neither an accident nor a curse for capitalism. By contrast, as Graeber (2011) showed, it is a key historical category that predates capitalism. According to this analysis (Graeber, 2011), debt has helped the flourishing of modern European cities and the further development of capitalism. It could be argued that, in our days, debt is the key lever in the re-structuring of the Eurozone and a core mechanism in the reshaping of advanced capitalism.

### **5.1 Debt and the creation of possibilities for negation**

In this section, I present some research findings about the participants’ understanding of debt with reference to their personal lives. In a country with traditionally low private debt levels, participants were shocked by the sudden relevance and centrality of debt in their post-crisis lives. Private debt was created chiefly, though not exclusively, through a combination of drastic tax increases, salary or pension cuts, a hike in unemployment and underemployment, and a drop in house prices which forced many home owners into negative equity and into arrears with their mortgage repayments.

In the main, mortgages could not be renegotiated directly with the banks, which raised disputes with borrowers that had to be resolved at the courts. While thousands of home owners were facing foreclosures and destitution, the banks were dealing with problems of their own. These included low reserves (partly triggered by various ‘bank runs’ as their customers withdrew their deposits en masse when the political or economic situation was fragile), a high proportion of ‘bad’ (i.e. non-performing) loans to companies and individuals and, since June 2015, with capital controls. This aspect of the Greek crisis is worth focusing on as it has significant implications in terms of constructing the ‘indebted person’ I discuss later.

The research participants conceptualised private debt in two different ways: first, as a shortcut for the crisis and, second, as a tool used for their subordination to the elites (domestic and external ones, e.g. the troika). The second function is discussed in the next section. Here, I elaborate on the first one.

Debt as a shortcut for the crisis, seemed to have psychological and emotional implications as it triggered feelings of impotence, despair and anger. As such, it operated at the cognitive and the emotional levels, though it also sparked processes with moral implications. Unsustainable debts, therefore, that households had amassed very rapidly during the first years of the crisis seemed to connote something visible though also obscure at the same time; something tangible and vague. To be precise, the outcomes of debt accumulation were visible and irrefutable as participants could not deny their dependency on the banks (as the latter possessed their mortgages). However, the processes through which research participants (and thousands of Greeks) became indebted were still unclear and increasingly disputed. In this manner, it can be argued that debt is a key term in the new grammar the crisis generated and its meaning is embedded in the prevalent culture. In other words, debt is a *signifying semiotic*, a term not only of the post-crisis vocabulary, but also a component of the post-crisis culture as it signifies commonly understood things within a given context.

At the same time, though, debt refers to some processes which manipulate elements of the dominant culture in order to achieve ends not intended by its users. These processes refer to various transactions and activities, which we unwittingly conduct and, in the long term, seem to exert control over our lives rather than the other way around. In other words, they subvert and antagonise meaning making processes humanity has been accustomed to and they seek to rewrite the rules of human socialisation. This is the function of the so-called *a-signifying semiotics* (Lazzarato, 2014), which increasingly shape human behaviour in late capitalism (e.g. behavioural control and customer manipulation through tailored advert generation).

I propose we approach debt as a *'trans-signifying semiotic'*: a term that carries elements from both signifying and a-signifying semiotics but is inherently infused with political

meaning (more on this in the next sub-section) (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2004; Guattari, 1984). This proposition rests on three observations. First, debt carries automatic evaluation and measurement, it refers to something comparable and measurable at one and the same time. As Athena's observations suggests:

We are forced to enter the struggle to save our houses [from foreclosures], to save our families. My children will be the first generation to have less than mine [generation] and that's a regression [in comparison to previous generations]' (Athena, university lecturer-activist).

The struggle Athena refers to, included petitions, demonstrations, solidarity representations at court hearings for families threatened with house repossession and eviction, and acts of sabotage or active obstruction against authorities attempting to repossess private properties.

The comparative undertones are evident from Athena's account as she compares her own generation with that of her children. What is more, she seems to be using debt as a yardstick of success for the two generations: owing to her generation's inability to save their houses from the banks, her children will be less well off, they will have socio-economically regressed, as she observes. Second, and parallel to the first process, the effect of this process is the creation of a commonly understood category, namely of the 'indebted person', which is juxtaposed to that of the free-of-debt person. In this way, a hierarchically formed taxonomy of people is created: debt enables us to instantly understand what is meant by it and make comparative judgements about people around us: 'we used to be respectable, ordinary people and we've become despondent, debt-ridden "rags"' (Nora, university lecturer-activist). Third, and owing to the second premise, debt shapes people's hopes, dreams, aspirations, expectations (from themselves and others) and it transforms the way they evaluate themselves and are evaluated by others. It inflicts on people shame, impotence and guilt, it lowers self-esteem and pushes the indebted person to occupy the position of the lowest moral ground. Not only is economic position people's affected by debt, but also their subjectivity, identity and social consciousness. Debt mediates people's social relations and reconstructs their social milieu.

As Patroclos, a secondary school teacher and trade union activist, said ‘debt is like a stone tied around your neck. You can’t stay invisible... It’s not even what you owe and to whom, it’s that your life doesn’t belong to you. How can I put it? You lose face, you lose dignity, [you lose] the will to live because all you will ever earn will not belong to you any more’. In the responses of these interviewees, debt is seen as the instrument of possibilities for the denial of human dignity, an instrument of negation of self-esteem and ultimately of freedom.

## **5.2 Debt as a trans-signifying semiotic**

By contrast to the previous section, in this one I am focusing on national debt, which had a prominent role in my respondents’ learning processes and attendant experiences and knowledge generated. Therefore, it carries added weight in my analysis.

For Demosthenes, a trade union activist and school teacher in a working class area in Athens, debt was deployed as a convenient strategy by the Greek and European (capitalist) elites to pass unpopular and draconian austerity measures: ‘*Debt is being used to change everything and Greece is used as a model for implementing austerity everywhere else in the world.*’ The use of debt as an expedient way to impose tough austerity measures is explained forcefully by Lazzarato (2011: 29): ‘*debt acts as a “capture”, “predation”, and “extraction” machine on the whole of society, as an instrument for macroeconomic prescription, and as a mechanism for income redistribution.*’ That is to say, debt enables the elites to phase back worker rights that were gained with struggles over a long period of time. It has the capacity to transform the relationship between state and citizens into one between debt collector and indebted individual. Consequently, debt is the creator of poverty, exploitation and destitution.

For some of my research participants, debt was the equivalent of economic subordination. In true Saussurean fashion ([1916] 1974), debt was a concept that was simultaneously empty and full of meaning: from an empty signifier of indebtedness, it became a full signifier of immoral governance.

Hollowed out from any moral legitimacy, debt was full of consequences for people’s lives. However, research participants took a critical stance and invariably deconstructed it in order to reinsert a new meaning to it. Its meaning was reversed and

instead of treating it as an objective category that exists ‘out there’ as a natural entity, research participants approached it as a symbol of domination. For Cleo, a teacher-activist, debt was the Trojan horse of austerity, a totem of economic (and symbolic) violence worshiped by the champions of austerity, such as the two leading political parties that supported the bailout memoranda, PASOK and New Democracy’, and in June 2012, formed a coalition government that implemented the attendant structural reforms imposed by the troika.

Debt, therefore, was viewed as a mechanism for subordination, the whip cracked on the Greek people in order to secure their obedience to the rules of the lenders and the elites. The reversal of signification in the meaning of debt in participants’ accounts, has to be viewed as a challenge to capitalism’s supremacy in meaning-making. For example, ‘finance’, ‘credit’, ‘debt’ and similar terms have been forced into excessive usage from the beginning of the crisis and have been habitually regurgitated as if a collective understanding about their meaning is shared. Their discursive and representational value is achieved owing to capitalism’s ability to impose meaning even when this is not reached intentionally. As Lazzarato (2014: 41) discusses ‘*what matters to capitalism is controlling the signifying semiotic apparatuses (economic, scientific, technical, stock-market, etc.)*.’ Put simply, the elites who seek to reassign the meaning of terms such as debt, credit, insolvency and so on, function best when they are the sole meaning-makers, when they have the monopoly in meaning-making. However, the power of the elites stems from the way they put the process of meaning-making into action. For example, while we use terms such as debt in their renewed meaning, we unwittingly participate in the creation of our renewed conditions of subjugation. The task of integrating different understandings of debt into the same meaning is entrusted to the smooth functioning of capitalism, which appears to work like a well-programmed machine: dispassionate, efficient and effective. And this is where the indebted subjects, such as education movement activists, would turn this process on its head and make terms like debt a ‘trans-signifying semiotic’: debt for them had become a call for transformative action, a cry of the subordinate against the dominant. This is a crucial point and one to which I turn my attention in the next section.



## **6. Recoding the crisis/relearning with the movement**

Notwithstanding their importance, semantics do not make history; they are employed to describe and analyse the modalities of social, economic, cultural and political life. As such, they are shaped by the prevalent social relations. These relations were often depicted by my research participants as belonging to an experiment while the Greek people were described (and at times described themselves) as a species trapped in a laboratory. Some respondents spoke of their co-patriots as ‘experimental rats’ on whom new products were tested, that is to say the conditions of restructured capitalism. Patroclos described this situation as follows:

Greece is an experiment that could be implemented in all countries—this can now be seen in Portugal, Spain and Ireland. There is a widespread lie that the Greeks tax evade and so on. But this makes it seem as if the crisis is local when in fact it is global and the same medicine is being given everywhere. If they succeed in Greece, they will then apply these policies elsewhere.

This argument echoes Douzinas’ (2013: 5) who suggested that *‘Europe used Greece as a guinea pig to test the conditions for restructuring late capitalism in crisis.’* In this vein, striking similarities emerge between Greece and many other countries of the European periphery, but also of the core<sup>5</sup>. In practical terms this ‘power to transform reality’ enabled the participants to decode, recode and respond to the crisis. It helped them enter a process of unlearning, re-learning and learning anew which was realised in and through their struggles against austerity and consisted of the stages discussed below.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, one of the most oft-repeated threats used by the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, to defend spending cuts in the UK was that Greece is the invidious example of profligacy and fiscal-management ineptitude. In order to avoid Greece’s fate, Cameron claimed, the UK needed to implement tough austerity measures (Robinson, 2012). Assertions like Cameron’s were also made by the leading political parties that reigned in Greece since 2009 and signed the bailout agreements and implemented the attendant austerity measures that ‘entrapped’ the Greek people to the experimental laboratory mentioned above. However, the research participants were aware that this language was employed in order to rapidly transform their reality.

### **6.1 Naming as a class act**

The first stage was that of 'naming'. Naming in education activists' narratives entailed identifying the key social agents and recognising their roles in political and socio-economic terms. In so doing, participants often spoke of the lenders, the troika, as part of an organised web who, having lent money to a practically insolvent Greek state, were actively showing their solidarity to the banks. These two forces then, the Greek banks and the troika, occupied the position of the oppressor in respondents' collective consciousness. They were held responsible for having subordinated the Greek people and deprived them of a decent living: '*This kind of action [the troika lending money to the Greek state that it then passes it onto the banks] causes austerity. And austerity feeds the banks. The Greek government wants to sustain the banks. The system is in solidarity with the banks, not the people*' (Patroclos, secondary school teacher and trade union activist).

At the same time, naming enabled the participants to differentiate their position and interests from those of their oppressors. This differentiation, in the majority of accounts of education activists I spoke to, was done in social class terms. When they were referring to the elites and the banks, they were drawing a clear distinction, a class boundary, between 'them' versus 'us', or better put, 'them' against 'us'. Naming, then, was a process ingrained into the vocabulary of class struggle of education activists. To paraphrase Althusser (1971), naming was an act of 'counter-interpellation': an interpellation from below that aimed to challenge the status quo.

### **6.2 Reflective vigour**

The process of naming was accompanied by what I call 'reflective vigour'. By this I mean the multi-layered process of searching for meaning which collides with personal and collective hopes and aspirations. In so doing, it continuously unravels aspects of the reality as it was ('life before the crisis') and its rapid transformation into 'reality as it is' ('life during the crisis/life in crisis').

'Reflective vigour' would invariably start from a description of the current state of affairs, '*the state we are in*'. It would then move on to the explanation and exploration of the past, '*the way things were*'. Both aspects were crucial in the participants'

narratives as they shed a bright light onto their understanding of their lived reality. They were serving as ‘*ontological anchors*’ aiming to root their accounts to *time* which they felt was ticking along dangerously, though, at the same time, it had stood still: ‘*we are heading towards a monumental disaster; the more things change the worse they will be getting*’ exclaimed Aglaia, a secondary school teacher-activist. Louiza, a fellow-activist who was gazing nonchalantly out of the window of an Athenian cafe, very close to the site where they had been both tear-gassed by the police a few weeks prior to the interview, agreed:

– ‘Yes, but *once the Titanic hits the iceberg, it doesn’t matter if you survive or if you are dead*’.

‘Is being dead the same as being alive?’ I interjected.

‘Being alive is worse!’, Louiza responded.

‘Why is that?’ I insisted.

‘Well, imagine you have hit the iceberg and you’re helplessly agonising to survive; without any lifeline, in the darkness, on your own’, Louiza explained.

‘Is Greece the Titanic?’ I enquired.

‘Yes!’ they both replied.

‘We are in the Titanic, but they [the Greek government] say that we will soon reach the shore. Perhaps they never saw the iceberg coming because they had all abandoned the boat [before it had hit the iceberg]’ Louiza added.

While the participants were ‘agonising to reach the shore’, that is to say to arrive at a better state of affairs beyond the bail out packages and the attendant draconian austerity measures, life felt like a ‘prolonged torture’ as another research participant told me: ‘*we’ve been through bad times in the past, but this time it feels like there is no light at the end of the tunnel*’.

### **6.3 Learning anew: possibilities for learning ‘from below’**

But what about the ‘light’ the struggle of those activists has been shining on their lives and the lives of others? Did education activists have a sense of achievement? Evidence shows they did though they were modest about its extent. Although in Louiza’s account anger seems to prevail over hope, the importance of highlighting possibilities ‘from below’ should not be overlooked (Cox and Nielsen, 2014). More than this, ‘stilling time’ triggered the education movement activists’ collective imagination to think about ‘life as it should be’: ‘you might be pushed [down], but you

also become stronger as you work with others and think about what to do ... you are not on your own, you know? You start thinking, “ok, I might be weak now, but one day things could change. Not radically, but they could change”.’ This process enabled them not only to resist, but also to create. The types of creation in which they partook included acts of solidarity, community organising, establishing new forms of thinking and acting about the commons and so on. For example, primary school teachers-activists from a working class area in Athens organised a ‘school bazaar’, something similar to a flea market, with the aim to raise money to fight a growing problem among their pupils: malnutrition owing to food insecurity in their households.

The monies raised from this initiative offered a temporary relief to a serious problem facing many students while at the same time it brought the school community closer together. In other words, it offered a glimpse of how ‘spontaneous critical pedagogy’ can offer some solution to material problems created by the crisis. By so doing, it pushed social relations to the terrain of solidarity and social ‘experimentation from below’. That is to say, participants in this instance initiated a process of localised though time-limited counter-experimentation to the rapid neoliberalisation experiment Greece has been undergoing.

On another occasion, possibilities from below were attached to a repertoire of initiatives that formed the ensemble of praxis the participants were immersed in. This praxis consisted both of resisting austerity but also of creating alternatives to it. These small acts of negation and creation were often generative of bigger possibilities, not only for the local activists but for others too. However, in many cases these were acts with huge local importance, though little wider impact. This was the case with collective action taken in a non-urban higher education institution. When the executive committee of this institution took the decision to lay off a high number of administrative and technical members of staff, some academic-activists defied the university executive’s decision and stepped in by offering support to the threatened staff. The praxis of these activists inscribed of a new grammar of possibilities, which we can analyse through the following triptych of action. In the first instance, these activists sought to persuade their university’s executive committee to reverse their decision of terminating

contracts of administrative and technical staff. In the second instance, they (academic-activists) joined the strike and actively demonstrated their solidarity with their fellow-workers and their disagreement with their executive committee's handling of the situation. Finally, the activists sought to promote a new set of social relations by resisting austerity-imposed measures (in that case, redundancies) and by acting in solidarity with their threatened colleagues.

Apart from the importance of this type of praxis in terms of breaking down unnecessary distinctions between so-called 'mental' and 'manual' types of labour, it also serves as a beacon of hope through the generation of possibilities it allows for resisting, defying and responding to the negation of possibilities that the economic crisis had ushered in. For the collective struggle of academic and other staff in the specific university led to a reversal of the redundancies that the institution's executive committee had decided. This chain of events furnished activists in that university with hope and knowledge of a new grammar: that of resistance and possibility.

Numerous other examples can be offered and they evidently indicate that education movement activists are active agents in re-conceptualising the crisis and using it as an opportunity to learn anew. This type of learning is generative of promising possibilities for a new type of social relations that are premised on solidarity and transformative action for the common good. However, part of this learning comprises the local character of this important struggle. In a nutshell, education activists' accounts and struggles offer strong evidence about the ways in which they had been decoding, recoding and responding to the crisis. I suggest that this is used as an opportunity to explore the 'learning potential' the crisis carries.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper I explored the way the crisis that has engulfed Greece since 2009 has been conceptualised and experienced by participants in the education movement. My aim was to shed light on the experiences and learning processes that occur during and because of activists' involvement in this movement. The theoretical framework for this paper lies in social theory that seeks to understand socio-economic processes within the context of rearticulated social relations the economic crisis has

introduced. In doing so, I discussed the role of the new discourse that has been brought about and its role in transforming participants' subjectivities. Decoding the language of the crisis helps us link the word with their world (Freire, 1970). It allows for connections to be made between the meaning the participants give to the terms that dominate their daily lives and the transformed reality around them. As such, it is a catalyst in the process of liberation that participation in social movements, and education more broadly, can offer.

My analysis suggests that debt's discursive potential flows both ways: on one hand, it is the 'suitable stratagem' domestic and foreign elites have used to subordinate the Greek people and make them accept tough austerity measures. In short, debt has made the rolling out of the ensemble of the neoliberal toolkit, such as privatisation, salary and pension cuts, redundancies, trade liberalisation, shrinking of the welfare state and so on, appear as necessary and unavoidable. On the other hand, evidence showed that debt has also become a symbol of resistance, a shortcut in the collective consciousness of education movement activists that triggers mechanisms of defiance and creation of new possibilities. The education movement, therefore, can be viewed as one of the most significant hotbeds of politicisation where Greece's social and political imagination is being moulded.

A space where creative destruction, the destruction of the discursive, material and other tools of subordination launched by the education movement activists, clashes with the destruction of creativity unleashed by the forces of neoliberal capitalism. Research participants seemed fully aware that the power bloc of the debt economy '*has seized on the latest financial crisis as the perfect opportunity to extend and deepen the logic of neoliberal politics*' (Lazzarato, 2011: 29). This is why they also selected the same moment to foment their critique to the neoliberal orthodoxy. Through the discussion of naming and reflecting, I illustrated how these two key processes form part of the repertoire of resistance and defiance the participants entered owing to their active role in the education movement. While this involvement is not enough to reverse the economic, ideological and political domination Greece is subjected to, it has triggered some deep processes at a personal and collective level. Throughout the previous sections, I underlined the fact that education movement activists do not only critique the status

quo. Crucially, they experiment in alternatives, in counter-propositions which have become the counter-narratives to the neoliberal hegemony. The involvement of activists in the Greek education movement offers glimpses to the existence of possibilities ‘from below’ which unleash the participants’ creative imagination and serve as ‘counter-negations’ to the main negation imposed by the crisis: the negation of human dignity and a decent life they had been subjected to. Although the education movement on its own cannot mitigate the effects of the crisis, its contribution in fostering possibilities for learning, resisting and creating new meaning is suggestive of its prefigurative potential.

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