



## Times of Crisis and Seeds of New Intimacies on a North Aegean Island: Activism, Alternative Exchange Networks, and Re-Imagined Communities

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«Μαζί και στο λάθος» ('Together even when it fails')

– Activist and union leader, Lemnos, July 2012

Cultural intimacy, that 'fellowship of the flawed' (Byrne 2011; Herzfeld 1997, 2005, 2009), elucidates a framework for the analysis of how hegemonic discourses of national identity effectively coerce, or fail to coerce, citizens. Originally emerging from Greek ethnographic contexts, this framework focused the anthropological lens not on publically performed consensus, but on silent – or silenced – dissent vis-à-vis hegemonic national discourse about one, glorified, 'Greek Past' and the behaviours and attitudes prescribed for those who claim it as their 'National Heritage' in the present. Denoting continuity of descent from that singular past, heritage dominates national discourse in Modern Greece (e.g. Damaskos and

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Plantzos 2008; Hamilakis 2007) and is premised upon western European definitions of heritage as inheritance (Byrne 2011; Handler 1985, 1988). Because of the resonance and significance of that 'Greek Past' in western Europe and North America since the late eighteenth century, and given the particular historical contingencies that led to the institution of Modern Greece in the nineteenth century (Gourgouris 1996; Herzfeld 1987), national identity and the quality of 'being Greek' are mediated by expectations inscribed in the capitalist 'global hierarchy of values' (Herzfeld 2005:46) and are materialized within a process that Herzfeld (2002) has termed 'cryptocolonialism'. The social spaces of shared embarrassment or dissent, that cultural intimacy outlines, should be perceived in this context.

In this volume, as he considers the recent European-Greek crisis, Herzfeld takes his framework a step further: 'At this moment the model of cultural intimacy comes into its own as a tool for analysing what has hitherto been treated as an almost exclusively economic issue'. We start from the same premise; that cultural intimacy affords an integrated, holistic analysis, of the Greek crisis *because* it situates our ethnographic lens on those intimate social spaces where hegemonic national imperatives meet gestures, performances, or expressions of heterodoxy. We propose to extend the model's scope to examine the emergent spaces of grassroots activism, in which intentionally enacted, practiced, and materialized public expressions of resistance and non-compliance come to constitute 'new intimacies'. Activism encompasses effective (and sometimes effectual) public expressions and interventions, which transcend dualities fundamental for the original model: dissent vs. cooperation; 'outward' expressions of consensus vs. 'inner' expressions of difference. Inevitably our analysis also transcends the 'national'. National imperatives are (and always have been) fluid: intrinsically intertwined with changing global trends and shifting power balances. Furthermore, twenty-first-century activism is enacted as much 'on the ground' as it is in virtual space, and thus is (or appears to be) relatively unrestricted by such physicalities as national borders.

The escalating European debt crisis has unleashed a wave of discourses that debate not structure and policy, but conduct and morality, couched on cultural primordia (Appadurai 2006). At issue is the 'nature' of Europe as a cultural project and how it may compare or, in the case of Greece, contrast with that of its members. From the very acronym 'PIIGS', evoking corruption, laziness, irrationality, and irresponsibility, to artistic responses like the opera 'Yasou Aida', where the characters play out the conflict between Greece and Germany in the European Central Bank, to Günter Grass's highly critical 'Europe's Disgrace' (Grass 2012), crisis etiologies reduce complex issues of history and political economy, along with their multilateral 'improprieties', into reified national stereotypes and moral prescriptions, which not only shape perceptions, but influence policy (Krugman 2012; Varoufakis 2012).

Cultural moralism, encoded in such stereotypes, is intimately connected to policies of austerity, and it is austerity that realizes the crisis, creating new spaces of precarity within Europe, as more and more people 'suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death' (Butler 2009:11). Austerity relates to the construction of

worthiness and belonging, not unlike the biopolitics of deservingness at play in the classification of the nation-state's 'Others' as refugees, asylees, immigrants, and so on (Rozakou 2012), but directed to the (European) self. Not surprisingly, the direct effect is conservative: nation-states are re-homogenized and the project of a Eurocapitalist modernity reaffirmed as the only legitimate path, and the measure against which all other ways are to be judged. The 'global hierarchy of value' reasserts itself. However, 'cultural intimacy is about *alternative* discourses' (Herzfeld 2005:54) and social poetics, which Herzfeld sees not merely as performative, rhetoric, or symbolic, but as materially constituted, affective, and grounded in the lived historical experience of people (Herzfeld 2005). In the current historical moment, grassroots mobilization is an emergent site for alternative poetics. These are the processes we trace on the Northern Aegean island of Lemnos. For these newly minted activists, alternative imaginaries and new forms of mobilization are deeply intimate affairs rather than rhetoric performative expressions of global trends. As they attempt to change their everyday life in meaningful ways, these activists creatively invest old tropes and their proscribed silencing and denials, with new meanings and public display, opening up new spaces for action.

We begin with a brief overview of alternative movements and activist mobilization in Greece. The economic crisis has been a catalyst for the mainstreaming and explosive growth of political and economic experiments that were historically marginal and slow to grow. Sotiropoulou (2011) documents the proliferation of alternative currencies, time banks, barter networks, seed exchange, and artisanal agricultural networks, as well as other cooperative and collective forms throughout the country. These newly formed collectivities and networks are not strictly economic; rather, they express ideologically complex social, environmental, and in some cases, spiritual concerns, reflecting a growing global trend in 'alternative globalizations' and other new social movements (see Allen et al. 2003; Gibson-Graham 2006; Graeber 2002). A pertinent example from Greece is the traditional/heirloom seed collection and exchange network 'Peliti' (<http://www.peliti.gr/>), a grassroots movement that began as a personal and spiritual crusade of its founder, and currently can be found all over the country. Peliti is particularly relevant not only because it has been inspiring alternative mobilization throughout the country, including Lemnos, but also because of the ways it implicates 'Greek heritage' vis-à-vis traditional agricultural practices, seeds and animals circulating outside global agribusiness networks, but also as ideas about community, lifestyle, biodiversity, and the environment. These are particular, personal notions about what constitutes heritage and who 'owns' it that often depart significantly and may even challenge the exceptionalism inherent in the nationalist discourse about 'Greekness' and the 'Greek Past' (Gourgouris 1996; Herzfeld 1982). Such small shifts in the national imaginary of the 'Greek self' remained marginal until the current crisis brought many of these grassroots alternative groups into the mainstream (e.g. Donadio 2011), occasionally heralding them as a 'solution' (by the people and for the people). The Greek official state quickly jumped into this bandwagon; it is not a coincidence that a number of resolutions have been voted by the Greek Parliament to facilitate barter and alternative currencies, or that since September 2012, as the crisis (economic but

also social and political) deepens, at least two different series of documentaries on alternative activist groups aired on national Greek television.

At the same time, many young Greeks driven by unemployment and lack of opportunity, especially in the larger urban centres, return to 'the village', revisiting various kinds of agrarian production. In the process, they discover 'traditional' ways of agricultural life, in other words, seeds, products, and practices linked to local histories or narratives. In this manner, alterity articulates with neorurality to redefine 'tradition', 'heritage', 'belonging', and 'community' at the local scale, maintaining its position outside the realm of the industrial (national and global) agrifood system. This 'localism' demands further interrogation, as these new communities of urban farmers and activists are at the same time spatially delimited (at the 'village', στο χωριό, or in the 'provinces', στην επαρχία) and fluid: interconnected, exchanging ideas as well as seeds, products, and materials via global immigration, trade, and virtual networks. If crisis demarcates spaces of precarity that engender new forms of agency, then it also affords new spaces where self, community, and by extension, 'the nation' and 'its heritage' are made and remade, discursively, materially, and through practice, at each moment and within different settings.

It is precisely the play of intimacy that has allowed some Lemnians to see themselves as activists. 'We're a mess', they declare, alternately referring to the country, the island, generic 'Greeks', and themselves, their organization and its activities. It is this seeming reassertion of the most common of stereotypes ('a mess') that motivates and sustains alternative action in a rather peculiar and unexpected context. Lemnos after all is neither a large urban centre, nor a centre of any kind. Although it is one of the largest North Aegean islands, Lemnos has never been a major tourist destination. Its location off the coast of Turkey was deemed of strategic significance resulting in strong military presence, especially since World War II. Consequently, the local economy developed to provide services to the soldiers and officers and their families stationed there, supplemented by other kinds of economic activity such as shipboard employment for men, some agriculture, and fishing. Historically, local elites derived their significant affluence from trade, cotton especially, as well as from owning large commercial fishing fleets that sailed the entire eastern Mediterranean. However, in the last decade, military presence has waned, leaving an economic gap that was only slightly alleviated by the relocation of a small department of the University of the Aegean to the island. Haphazard tourist development (not unique to Lemnos) invited risk and financial speculation, often with devastating outcomes. Deep cuts in public spending enforced by the Greek government due to the recent crisis, impacted life in other significant ways: the local hospital is now closed, the few schools that were left are understaffed, and other important public services are unavailable to those who remain on the island throughout the year. Perhaps most importantly, connections via air or sea are increasingly unsafe and the island remains almost cut off from the mainland for a great part of the year. Lemnos, now more than ever is treated by the Athenocentric state as a backwater of the North Aegean 'Unprofitable Line'. This is associated with a significant decline in population, matched with decline in the practice and development of agriculture; much of the land and productive potential

of the island is currently unused or underutilized. All these factors shape the ways in which islanders experience the crisis, creating the specific context within which marginalization and disenfranchisement have led to local mobilization.

In the past two years, a loose group of activists has been coalescing around traditional and more experimental forms. They represent a young population (twenty to thirty-five) with little, if any, background in farming or any kind of political organization. They are furthermore not necessarily 'locals'. Many are recent arrivals, driven to the island by a combination of family ties, friendships, or mere luck; a number of them identify as urbanites. This diverse group is united by common concerns about making a living in this time of significant youth unemployment, framing them however within larger issues of sustainability, self-sufficiency, and community building. This frame orients their activism towards lifestyle elements that respect what they see as local natural and cultural resources and recuperate 'traditional' knowledge and practices. Primarily the group engages in collecting heirloom varieties of local plants, preserving them through repeated cultivation, and disseminating seeds for free. So far such 'political agriculture' has been their most successful area of action, but some have recently moved to organize barter exchange gatherings, and are exploring the formation of an alternative, solidarity-based, social economy. These activists are increasingly involved in the social and political life of the island, forging linkages with other groups, unions, social organizations, and municipal government officials, to address precarious changes such as the antiquated and unsafe commuter ships, the closing of the public hospital, or the imposition of a vast wind farm project that threatens the landscape and ecology of the entire island. Offered repeatedly, their primary motivation to action is 'improving things for our children'. Rhetorical or not, this designates a heritage (or legacy) markedly different both temporally and in its ideological connotations from that of the official national narrative determining 'Greekness'. Yet, for this diverse group combining newcomers and locals, claims to this kind of heritage restore a sense of belonging and connection, forging a new sense of self and community. Rediscovered 'traditions' and, through those, links to a place, its local histories, personalities, monuments, and practices, now mobilize action that can preserve and improve 'what we leave behind for our children'.

For these activists, the Greek crisis marks a turning point in their personal histories, not as trauma, but as inciting agency and new possibilities. Several people referred to the crisis as an opportunity, despite the fact that opportunity has been its first casualty, with legitimacy a close second. This play of contradiction is at the core of alternative imaginaries, and therefore, possible avenues for change, with their 'activist poetics' centring on the negative and embarrassing. Here, we are in the realm of cultural intimacy. Irreverence, irony, playfulness, dark and self-deprecating humour become fundamental discursive devices; the mood is radically egalitarian. No one is safe. The banal orthodoxies associating the state and Greeks with corruption, opportunism, 'laziness', and greed are also self-referential. Greece, and indeed the world, may be a mess, but so are they as a group: disorganized, last-minute, unreliable, ineffective, 'loose', and uncontained (*χαλαροί* and *χύμα*, laid back to the point of formlessness). It is however subtler inflections that forge strong bonds of community and mobilize public and open

action. ‘We are laid back’ conveys more than self criticism; it intimates the casualness of a community of friends, the playfulness of not being ‘serious activists’ but just a group of friends who get together to eat, drink, tease each other, and talk about activist things and big ideas. What is more, their haphazard ways ‘corrupt’ all who want to join their group, diffusing ‘serious’ intents and motivations. ‘Corruption’ is not merely rhetoric; it is a process, it involves people, things, and time. ‘How long before we corrupted you?’ is the measure of belonging.

Other inflections of self-criticism are intended to mobilize into action. Despite informality and open aversion to politics, the discourse is deeply political, embedded in mainstream critiques of the European project, neoliberalism, and late capitalism. Lemnian activists are connected, informed, and keenly aware of the world beyond their shores. In their eyes the crisis is not merely caused by failing to live up to the ideal of rational citizenship as advocated by Eurocapitalist modernity. The crisis exposes weaknesses, contradictions, and hypocrisies, uncovering this project as exploitative, or as one person put it, more concerned with ‘accounting development’ than ‘genuine economic development’. Furthermore, people caught in this project become apathetic, passive, blinded to other options, neglectful of their power to act on the immediate conditions of their own lives. As one of our collaborators put it, playing on the term ‘κρίση’, which signifies both crisis and judgment in Greek: ‘Why do we talk about crisis as a bad thing? What crisis? There is no crisis. It’s not that situation out there, but the crisis (judgement) we have in our heads. We do not have crisis.’

The humorous negativity salient in cultural intimacy is more than rhetoric. It is social poetics in praxis; affective, effectual, and materialized (Herzfeld 2005). For the Lemnian activists, irony, and self-deprecation functionally reconcile contradictions into coherent schemes of action for the present. Marginalization incites agency and crisis foments opportunity, paving common ground for ‘shared sociality’ (Herzfeld 2005 and this volume); a ‘fellowship of the flawed’, but also a community negotiating links with the past, imagining a legacy for its future, and publically claiming its position in the here and now through action intended to bring about pragmatic changes in everyday life.

### Acknowledgements

For the time they spent discussing our ideas with us, and for their comments, patience, and constructive criticism, we would like to thank M. Herzfeld, A. Leontis, V. Lambropoulos, L. Talalay, R. Schroeder, and G. Tsimouris. In the end we are both equally responsible for the contents of this paper and share its authorship. We would like to thank our collaborators on the island of Lemnos who have embraced our project with eagerness and warmth for the past two years. This paper could not have been possible without their invaluable contributions.

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