The ambivalence of anti-austerity indignation in Greece: Resistance, hegemony and complicity

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The ambivalence of anti-austerity indignation in Greece:
Resistance, hegemony and complicity

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This article engages with a contradiction that can help us appreciate the ambiguity and complexity of indirect resistance as this is articulated in informal everyday contexts: many citizens in Greece boldly challenge the antisocial austerity measures that have plagued their lives, highlighting how these represent a hegemonic imposition led by foreign centres of economic power. Their anti-hegemonic critique, however, often recycles a dislike for foreigners and xenophobia, echoing more pervasive hegemonic narratives (e.g. a crypto-colonial identification of Greece with the West). To deal with this contradiction, I stress the need to (1) de-pathologise local indignant discourse (avoiding the orientalisation of anti-austerity discourse as emotional or inconsequential), and (2) acknowledge that indirect resistance may represent an astute critique of visible inequalities, but is not isolated from overarching hegemonic ideological influences that shape local interpretations of historical/economic causality.

Key words: indirect resistance, indignation with austerity, financial crisis, hegemony, defensive nationalism, Greece.

I have recently discussed indignation with austerity in Greece as a master trope of protest that communicates a concern with accountability (Theodossopoulos 2013a, 2013b). In this article I extend this analysis beyond the figurative, interpretive or exegetical dimension of indignation-discourse, to evaluate its emancipatory potential and its ambivalent relationship to power (or its complicity with it). The case of anti-austerity indignation in Greece allows us to evaluate the transformative potential and effectiveness of indirect resistance, but also its limitations. For example, to what
extent does local discontent depart from previous established hegemonic narratives? What is the relationship between indirect resistance, defensive nationalism and electioneering populism?

I address these questions with reference to the increasing voicing of indignation with austerity (as a measure of economic recovery) in Greece, focusing on local indignant narratives that represent an everyday form of indirect resistance to neoliberal economic priorities. This timely example of widespread popular discontent provides an opportunity to explore the transformative power of indirect resistance, the challenges it poses to the priorities set by the financial establishment, but also the constraints of indignant discourse and its relationship with defensive nationalism. In this exploration I use as a point of departure the influential work of Scott (1985, 1990), to analyse anti-austerity indignation as a form of indirect resistance, yet one that does not represent an autonomous social field (Keesing 1992, Gledhill 1994, 2012, Moore 1998), untouched by pre-existing hegemonic master narratives.

On the one hand I acknowledge that indirect resistance encourages a great deal of critical thinking that engages with the structures of power in creative ways (including irony and innovative adaptations of previous arguments and ideas). Rhetoric, irony, ambiguity and metaphor play an important role in negotiating the causality and eventfullness of political life (Carrithers 2009, Herzfeld 2009, Fernandez 2009), and may even destabilise—as Greek indignation demonstrates—pre-existing political structures. Yet, on the other hand I recognise that indirect resistance is often constrained by pre-existing explanations of causality in politics—including ethno-nationalist narratives—an observation that encourages us to depart from Scott’s (1990) vision of subaltern discontent as an a ‘hidden’ transcript independent of power-holders. In the case of anti-austerity indignation in Greece, indirect resistance often stumbles upon, and becomes confined by (or complicit to) nationalism, ethnocentric interpretations of history, political party rhetoric, and electioneering campaigns.

These limitations pose the following analytic problem: how can a social analyst reconcile the obligation to expose and deconstruct defensive nationalism (or political party interests) that may figure prominently in indirect resistance, with the equally important commitment to acknowledge the logic of local anti-hegemonic narratives and the astute awareness of inequality among peripheralised subjects (who may also be complicit in reproducing nationalism or political party lines)? Anti-austerity discourse in Greece—which is anti-hegemonic in its orientation, but still partially complicit to hegemonic narratives—provides us with a very good opportunity to explore this challenging dilemma.
The anthropological analysis that follows does not attempt to explain the causes of the crisis or summarize its consequences within a single, unilinear narrative of events. I privilege instead some local views—fragmented and unofficial—that capture the frustration of local actors with the official policies of austerity that have been presented to them as a remedy to the financial crisis. These local views come from Patras, a medium size Greek town in South Greece, and for me, a site of ongoing fieldwork since 1999. My indignant respondents are middle and working class citizens from Patras (the Patrinoi); they have shared their explanations of political and economic life with me during this and previous crises (see for example, Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000, 2003; Theodossopoulos 2004, 2007a, 2007b; Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2011a, 2011b), and recognise me as a locally born academic and a mirror—the anthropological listener who occasionally provokes—through which they reflect upon timely issues. Their arguments have provided me with a partial but nuanced account of the local indignant discourse, the ambivalences that it engenders, and the aetiology of the crisis as this is debated in everyday, unofficial social contexts (see Theodossopoulos 2013a, 2013c).

De-pathologizing Indignation

Far from denoting merely a sentiment, indignation in crisis-afflicted Greece is a potent metaphor that links different narratives of accountability together. In local conversation about austerity, indignation conveys messages and supports arguments about austerity; some remain unsaid but locally understood, while other arguments rely on indignation’s figurative potential. In either case, the image of injustice so vividly conveyed by indignation becomes an opening and closing point in many conversations: ‘I am indignant because ...’ [argument] ‘... hence, we are indignant’.¹

In appreciation of this metaphorical rootedness, and drawing from Fernandez (1986), I have previously referred to anti-austerity indignation in Greece as a trope that communicates a variety of indirect, but also straightforwardly expressed messages

¹ My use of the term ‘indignant’ as equivalent of ‘aganaktisménos/oi’ bears tribute to the Spanish indignados, who started the movement that inspired the respective ‘Greek indignant movement’ (Kinima Aganaktismenon Politon). This connection, as well as subsequent use by protestors, protesting authors, and journalists has widely established the terms indignation/indignant as the English equivalent of the Greek ‘aganaktisi’ (noun) and ‘aganaktismenos’ (adjective), and this translation is favoured by most dictionaries. Anthropologists, in an attempt to capture the polysemy of the term, have used alternative terms to discuss Greek indignation: ‘exasperation’ (Herzfeld 2011, Kalantzis 2012), ‘infuriation’ (Theodossopoulos 2013), ‘rage’ (Panourgia 2011). In fact, the terms outraged, exasperated and infuriated translate in Greek as exorgismenos, exagriomenos, ekneyrismenos, a lack of definitional precision, which facilitates the figurative and all-embracing relevance of indignation as trope in everyday conversation.
(Theodossopoulos 2013a, n.d.). The powerful imagery of the powerless indignant citizen—victim of ‘the mistakes of others’, ‘those bankers, politicians, unscrupulous capitalists’, as my respondents say—validates a moral standpoint for eliciting a critique of the consequences of austerity in everyday life.

Therefore, indignation frames local discussions about austerity, but also invites an explanation of the crisis. Indignant conversations about austerity have an interpretive dimension, one that is almost existential, in the political sense. Such an exegetical orientation in local conversation—especially conversation about timely developments in politics—has been noticed and analyzed by anthropologists writing about Greece before the debt crisis (see Herzfeld 1992, 1997; Sutton 1998, 2003; Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000, 2003; Papadakis 2004; Kirtsoglou 2006; Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2010a, 2010b). Herzfeld (1992) in particular, has referred to the secular theodicy of the ordinary Greek citizens: their search for explanations and meaning against the indifference of bureaucracy and the injustices perpetrated by politicians or state officials.

Evidently, as Herzfeld (1982, 1992) himself has stressed, local commentary in Greece may embrace a good deal of defensive nationalism—a problem I will address later in this article—especially when local actors attempt to exonerate themselves by targeting more or less powerful cultural Others (see also Theodossopoulos 2003, 2007a). However, the anthropological emphasis given to the creative adaptations and irony of blame-oriented discourse also highlights its alternative (non-hegemonic) orientation (Sutton 2003) and subversive potential (Kirtsoglou 2006), and the ability of peripheral subjects to cut down to size and discuss as equals those perceived as more powerful than the Self, including powerful nations such as United States (see Brown and Theodossopoulos 2000, 2003; Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2010b).

In all these respects, the anthropology of informal political discourse in Greece has established a tradition of studying blame without turning the study of blame into a practice of blaming (Theodossopoulos n.d.). This has contributed in de-pathologising vernacular political discourse, by encouraging social analysis to move beyond the functional instrumentality of blaming—or its denigration as irrational or pathological in ‘pseudopsychological terms’ (Sutton 2003: 197)—highlighting instead the cultural worldviews that render justice and injustice meaningful on a local level. In this respect, the de-pathologisation of local commentary about international politics opens the way for appreciating its contribution to processes of resistance, as in the case of indignation with austerity, which presents us with a good example of indirect resistance.
In the *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott (1985) marked out the concept of indirect resistance as a legitimate sub-topic of resistance studies; most manifestations of resistance, he explains, take a less dramatic form. For example, those Greek local actors who resist austerity discursively—by denigrating powerful politicians who impose on them harsh economic policies—can be seen as following a tactic quite similar to the Malaysian peasants studied by Scott, who subvert the power of their landlords through slander and character assassination. From this perspective, ordinary citizens in Greece who evaluate timely political or economic events in peripheral conversational contexts, indirectly resist the imposition of undesirable measures on their lives, arguing from the relative safety of—what Scott (1990) describes as—autonomous contexts of social life (of subordinate groups), or what Herzfeld (1997), much more aptly, calls contexts of cultural intimacy.

Those powerful politicians or institutions that do shape economic policy—for example, with respect to Greece’s recovery from debt—are seen by local actors as choosing to ignore local indignation for being too sentimental or apparently irrational, and prioritize instead what my respondents call ‘the cold language of numbers’. In sharp contrast to the rationality of budgeting and spreadsheets, anti-austerity discourse, as this is voiced in unofficial contexts, often promotes alternative narratives about the crisis that prioritize social concerns and a focus on accountability. In this respect, indignation with austerity operates as an alternative ‘sense-making’ practice (Sutton 2003: 192) that challenges dominant—presented as ‘transparent’ (Sanders and West 2003)—discourses about economic recovery. For example, many Greek local (and indignant) actors insists that austerity is not the only possible route for escaping from the crisis, while austerity is probably the path that bears the most undesirable social consequences. Such views often reflect an astute awareness of the systemic inequalities that shape economic policies, yet their vernacular and emotion-laden articulation encourages their easy dismissal by the elites.

A restaurant owner in Patras, exasperated with the widespread dismissal of public indignation, reflected upon this:

‘Who listens to what we say? Those who take the decisions about the economy do not care about you and me, the [ordinary] people (*ton laoutzíko*)—they speak another language; the language of the technocrats and say that the Greeks want to take out their own eyes; the Greeks are crazy, they say... what do *you* think?’

**The spectre of austerity: reification, subversion, transformation**

Austerity has a name in Greece: ‘*Mnimónio*’. The term itself means ‘memorandum’, and when used in ordinary prose carries an overtone of de-humanizing...
bureaucratization. It has been used to refer to the particular memorandum that outlines the Economic Adjustment Programme for Greece, a bailout aiming to save the country from bankruptcy, or ideally to lead towards economic recovery. In everyday discourse ‘mnimónio’ is taken to signify an agreement imposed on Greece by its foreign lenders, and is seen as representing a foreign imposition. As such, it is detested, or at best, tolerated, at least by the overwhelming majority of Greek citizens, who refer to it frequently in day-to-day conversation. Often, and especially in heated debates, the mnimónio, is treated in a reified manner, as a societal force that haunts the lives of the poorer citizens (Theodossopoulos n.d.).

In its reified use, mnimónio is treated as the source of all evils that come with austerity: the cancelation of one’s dreams, the difficulties in providing for one’s family, the lack of employment opportunities, or the threat of losing existing jobs. Mnimónio, the spectre of austerity, is seen by many in Greece as a perversion of the natural order of things: it negates a basic expectation in post-Second World War Greece: the idea that life becomes more comfortable over time, as succeeding generations move further away from the difficulties of the post-war period. The young adults of today, for example, expect to enjoy a life much better than their grandparents (the generation of the 50s and 60s), ‘even better’ than that of their parents (the generation of the 70s and 80s). Sadly, the unexpected arrival of mnimónio—the spectre of austerity—has thwarted this unidirectional (and naturalised) perception of improvement in one’s (or everyone’s) life.

The effects of such a grand scale cancellation of ordinary expectations is discussed by many citizens in Patras in terms of comparisons of life before and after mnimónio. Until recently, university graduates invested in postgraduate studies abroad hoping to qualify for a ‘better job’; in the life after the mnimónio, ‘there are no jobs’. Before the mnimónio the employed expected a raise in salary, or a promotion; now ‘there are only salary cuts’. In the years before the mnimónio those who ran small or larger business dreamed about expansion or new opportunities; yet now, after the imposition of austerity, business are shrinking or closing down. Until a couple of years ago, pensioners had a smaller income than their employed children; nowadays, the old are providing for the young sharing their reduced pensions. In these and so many other respects, my respondents argue, mnimónio has overturned ‘the course of their lives’.

No wonder then that austerity has inspired so much indignation. In fact, since the beginning of the crisis, growing discontent with austerity has transformed a previous empty and bureaucratic term, the mnimónio, into a concept that denotes not merely austerity, but also points towards the direction of responsibility. As such, the term mnimónio, loaded with meaning derived from the concrete experience of austerity in everyday life, is used in conversation as a versatile discursive weapon to criticise the
idea of austerity and its sources: politicians, political parties and foreign institutions and all those responsible for unleashing the mnimónio-monster and its unsociable consequences. Some citizens may reluctantly tolerate this newly introduced austerity—in the guise of neoliberal economic rationality—but an overwhelming majority question if its imposition was absolutely necessary. Many conservative and left leaning respondents in Patras argue that there can be no economic recovery based on austerity. So, the mnimónio was an unnecessary evil!

Having closely studied local discontent with neoliberal politics in Greece in the period preceding the financial crisis (Theodossopoulos 2010; Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2010a), I was accustomed to the critical spirit of local political discourse, but I had also underestimated its potential for stimulating direct political change. Before the financial crisis, local discontent appeared to offer only ephemeral and rhetorical empowerment. Independently of how critically local actors discussed neoliberalism and Westernisation in peripheral contexts, the political party landscape in Greece remained fairly static for at least 30 years: two major political parties, the conservatives (New Democracy) and the socialists (PASOK), dominated official politics, and took turns in exercising the power to govern and provide their supporters with favours (which further cemented their electorate support).

Anti-austerity indignation has challenged this constellation of political power, leading to the partial restructuring of official political representation in the parliament, as this emerged from the elections of May 6 and June 17 2012. The subversive potential of massive popular indignation led to the collapse of one of the two political parties, PASOK, which happened to be the party on power when the truth about the dire financial situation of Greece was announced to the (unaware) Greek public, and the first austerity measures were introduced. Thus, we may say that the monster called mnimónio crashed this mighty political party, which has not yet recovered from its association with the first wave of salary cuts and unpopular reductions in Greek social infrastructure. Another political party, SYRIZA, has absorbed a substantive proportion of PASOK’s electoral support and has become the official opposition in the Greek parliament. A central feature in SYRIZA’s political campaign is its firm anti-austerity (anti-mnimónio) stance, which has captured (and benefited from) the public’s growing indignation with the consequences of the crisis.

SYRIZA’s sudden and spectacular rise to power (from 4.6% to 26.8%), representing primarily indignant voters oriented towards the left or centre-left, was paralleled by the unexpected electorate success of two anti-austerity political parties from the right wing: a politically conservative-cum-nationalist party (‘Independent Greeks’) and an unashamedly fascist political formation (the infamous, ‘Golden Dawn’). Golden Dawn, in particular, ‘soared from 0.29 per cent in the 2009 elections 6.9 per cent’
(and 18 seats in the parliament), while most recent opinion poles show a further increase in the party’s projected popularity (Kirtsoglou 2013). Interestingly, the results of the 2012 elections demonstrate that the build up of public discontent can subvert existing political structures, and bring about change in politics that might affect anti-austerity politics. Indignation, in this respect, is a transformative political ‘weapon’ for crisis-afflicted local (and peripheralised) actors in Greece.

Yet, to complicate this picture further, I will briefly reflect on the commentary of my respondents in Patras, who maintain that the electorate transformations outlined above partly mirror the previous political landscape, with SYRIZA, as they say merely replacing PASOK, to restore a two party political structure. A communist supporter summarised this position by stating that ‘the new SYRIZA is the old PASOK’. Critical evaluations such as this, which are also shared by conservative citizens (arguing from an opposite, but equally critical angle), allude to the history of PASOK, which entered the Greek political scene as a radical political party, critical of Western hegemony (Verney 2011), but after its first electorate success, shiftily transformed to a moderate social-democratic party (unable to challenge, as my communist respondents argue, the neoliberal status quo).

Local critical commentary of this sort, had led me to argue in a recent article (Theodossopoulos n.d.) that the spontaneous and anti-structural spirit of the first wave of Greek anti-austerity indignation, has now become appropriated by (and complicit to) political-party politics. The ‘officialisation’ of indignation via parliamentary representation (following the 2012 elections) sharply contrasts with the public protest of summer 2011 (mostly in front of the Greek parliament), which was, as with the Spanish indignant movement (Postill n.d), initiated by social media (Papailias 2011, Theodossopoulos 2013) and communicated indignation in dialogical form, mostly beyond the narrow constraints of political-party priorities (Gourgouris 2011, Panourgia 2012, Dalagoklou 2012, Theodossopoulos 2013).

The original anti-structural spirit of anti-austerity protest may now contrast sharply with formalised political party indignation, a contrast that is most visible in the case of the fascist party, which has appropriated public discontent to promote sinister anti-migrant provocation (a topic I will discuss in the following section). However, several respondents in Patras do not see the emergence of the new political parties as the replication of one structure by another. Those who support SYRIZA, for example, explained that their new party represents a new dynamic that will bring into power a new generation of politicians (néa prósopa) who will subvert or cancel the mnimónio. Some even admitted that they hope that SYRIZA will transformed itself into a less ‘radical’ party—as did PASOK in the 1980s—but one strong enough to deliver them for the plague of austerity (Theodossopoulos 2013b). ‘We don’t care if SYRIZA is
the old PASOK’, said the owner of a small commercial business, ‘we want SYRIZA to take power and stop austerity for ever!’

**Anti-hegemonic indignation meets defensive nationalism**

Having already outlined some layers of cultural meaning negotiated by anti-austerity indignation, I will now confront an analytical problem that has troubled me from the first moment I attempted to write about the social consequences of the debt crisis in Greece. This relates to the relationship between (a) anti-hegemonic discourses that expose inequality and (b) defensive nationalism, including populist narratives that exploit anti-hegemonic sentiments for electioneering purposes. While hegemonic power is perceived as representative of foreign tutelage, anti-hegemonic discourse may incite nationalist sentiments, including ideological associations or arguments representing ‘patriotic’ or deeply conservative ideological positions. The latter can be easily unearthed and introduced in current conversations that criticize the role of foreign powers. This etiology of blame, as Herzfeld (1982, 1992) has perceptively observed, can be manipulated in local conversation to exonerate the ethnic self and transfer responsibility by blaming ethnic Others.

The problem I have sketch out poses serious challenges for the social analyst, who is often called to walk the thin line that separates two contrasting features of indirect resistance: (a) a critically predisposed local awareness of inequality (expressed as a desire to challenge a world of post-colonial relationships) and (b) a uncritical recirculation of nationalist arguments and xenophobic tendencies. In everyday discourse, and especially within the context of anti-austerity indignation in Greece, these two tendencies co-exist, and manifest themselves simultaneously in unofficial narratives and dialogues articulated in informal contexts. In fact, the two features of indirect resistance mentioned above articulate with each other, as very often the visible power inequalities in international politics fuel defensive nationalism.

One of the central causes of exacerbation for my crisis-affected respondents in Patras is the realization that austerity is imposed hegemonically by foreign centres of power—for example, the European commission and the IMF—and implemented in a top down manner by Greek government bureaucracy. The overwhelming majority of the indignant narratives I witnessed in Greece implicitly or explicitly challenge hegemony. Yet, this predisposition towards indirect resistance—which reflects an awareness of the systemic inequalities of international politics—communicates and often articulates with blatant manifestations of defensive nationalism, or even, as in the case of ultra-right discourse, with a generalized mistrust for both powerful and powerless ethnic Others.
To complicate this problem further, indignation with foreign hegemony in Greece has been adopted and used as a political agenda by anti-austerity political parties that represent leftist, but also rightist (and extreme right) positions. In fact, some ultra-right voices protest against the patronizing interventions of EU or the IMF (or German and French politicians) in a manner that resembles—and borrows from—the analytic sharpness of a leftist critique. Such narratives are often manipulated to fit the purposes of political party rhetoric, but inspire, in turn, through the circulation of political party views in the media, local adaptations of anti-hegemonic (but also xenophobic) arguments. These are creatively adjusted to fit the purposes of particular discussions in the everyday, and are voiced by citizens that may not be closely affiliated with extreme rightist parties.

‘I am not racist’ many citizens would say before blaming directly or indirectly the foreign migrants, who are now ubiquitous in Greece, and often become a convenient scapegoat for the ills of the economic crisis (see also Herzfeld 2011). I have heard many times the ‘I am not a racist, but ..’ construction during fieldwork in Patras, a town which attracts great numbers of illegal migrants hoping to embark on ferries departing for Italy. These desperate migrants, whom I have seen running behind lorry tracks so that they can cling onto the undercarriage (and thus pass the border control at the port undetected), live in deplorable conditions in segregated areas and derelict buildings. The overwhelming majority of my respondents in Patras—indeed their political affiliation—are threatened by the presence of so many destitute people in their hometown, and would not hesitate to accuse them of contributing to (what the Patrinoi perceive as) a generalized ‘feeling of insecurity’. Even Patrinoi involved in charitable activity in support of the migrants, would not hesitate to charge the latter for all sorts of misbehaviour or petty crimes. ‘Our town has changed’, they argue, due to this ‘serious problem’, ‘the problem of the migrants’.

‘It is a problem created by the powerful of Europe’, commented a forty-year-old woman, who is a SYRIZA supporter: ‘the rich countries in the North have left Greece unsupported to deal with the consequences of the illegal migration’; and after a brief moment of reflection she added: ‘this is how the powerful perpetuate inequality’. Her interlocutor, a moderately socialist woman, in her thirties, added: ‘I am not a racist, but the migrants are an unbearable problem; the Europeans expect us to support them with the very little we have.’ Citizens of conservative predilections would share this generalized view, but switch it to serve a more nationalist agenda: they focus on the perceived ‘injustice’ of seeing Greeks being unemployed or suffering from severe cuts in their salaries, while government bureaucrats (and the rich nations of Europe) ‘keep the migrants on their doorstep’. ‘They do so to destabilize our nation’, said a Golden Dawn sympathizer, ‘it is all part of larger plan’.
Citizens inclined towards the Left dissociate themselves from Golden Dawn with principled and confident disdain, but they also use the ‘destabilization argument’ to explain the crisis, and the insists: of Northern politicians to promote austerity—although evidently austerity withholds economic recovery. As a communist friend confided in me, ‘the Golden Dawn supporters (oi hrysaygítes) have twisted some of our arguments to serve their sinister purpose; the problem is not the migrants, but capitalism’. ‘The stronger nations of the North create problems for the South’, said a sixty year old doctor sympathizing with the left, ‘they brought the austerity measures to cripple our economy, to colonize us, for ever! How do they expect us to recover when we face so many austerity measures!’ Even Patrini with conservative views will not completely disagree with the idea that austerity is a foreign imposition; many of them maintain that ‘Europe’, and in particular German politicians, are imposing on Greece ‘harsh’ measures, that partly serve Northern or German interests; ‘we have not seen Germany suffering’, said a committed Conservative Party supporter, ‘they get stronger and stronger’.

Carnivalesque caricatures of Angela Merkel and Wolfgang Schäuble.

When my respondents search for a convenient joke to relax the tone of conversations about austerity, or a concrete image to punctuate their arguments, they frequently employ familiarly mediatised figures of foreign politicians, such as the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, the IMF director, Christine Lagarde, or the German Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble. Enormous wax caricatures of the aforementioned figured prominently in the carnival of Patras (in 2013), paraded as satirical representations of the harshness and unsociable nature of neoliberal economics: ‘the monsters of austerity!’ (see photograph above). ‘Merkel and Schäuble are indifferent to the sufferings of the ordinary people’ remarked a couple of bystanders. In the context of everyday conversation, Angela Merkel in particular, has been the recipient of an avalanche of ironic remarks, mostly used as punch lines of critical arguments focusing on the unrelenting economic policies pursued by the
German Chancellor. Many Patrinoi, from both leftist and rightist political affiliations, regularly refer to Merkel as ‘Hitler’ or ‘the godmother’ (alluding to a female version of a mafia leader).

Impersonations of the Greek prime minister and the German Chancellor in Nazi uniform in the Carnival parade; the sign ‘DIAPLOKI’ can be translated as ‘intertwining interests’.

On other occasions, associations are drawn between foreign politicians, and their Greek counterparts. In most cases, local commentary criticizes, often with humorous but pointed remarks, the subordinate position (shesi ypotélias) of Greek politicians and their perceived lack of power to challenge externally imposed dictums of austerity. The current and previous prime ministers of Greece (Antonis Samaras and George Papandreou, respectively) have been the targets of such criticism (the latter even by disaffected supporters of his own party!). Nevertheless, shrewd local commentary that unravels systemic inequalities and patterns of hegemony is not solely expressed by citizens affiliated with the left. An increasing number of right wing crisis-afflicted citizens articulate a critical predisposition towards Western hegemony, one that does not target neoliberal policies, but rather the historical role of Germany and other Western nations in shaping the fate of Greece.

Conveniently, the German occupation of Greece during World War II provides ample opportunity for drawing metaphors or ‘lessons from history’, a practice to which David Sutton (1998) refers as ‘analogic thinking’. In this particular version, the German military invasion in the past is compared to the imposition of austerity in the present, ‘an invasion of harsh economic measures’. These are implemented, some of my respondents argue, with ‘characteristic German harshness’, ‘just as in the war’, without consideration for ‘the non-combatant civilians’, that is, the poor, the old and the underprivileged. ‘Germany destroyed Greece during the war’, argued a respondent who is moderate conservative, ‘they took the nation’s gold, and never paid the war reparations’. I have recorded similar variations of this argument in the
narratives of respondents from literally all political affiliations, but also in the rhetoric of politicians from most Greek political parties.

Remarks with nationalistic overtones—that frequently rely on ‘naturalised’ stereotypes (for example, the ‘harshness’ of the Germans) or lessons from history (for example, the ‘unjust’ treatment of Greece by foreign nations in previous eras)—provide a platform for the convergence of leftist and rightist arguments, allowing interlocutors from different political affiliations to draw a more amicable closure to a discussion; one that may underline the perceived hegemony of the West, and the interference of foreigners in the attempts of Greece to achieve economic recovery. Citizens leaning towards the left might use arguments with nationalist overtones to conclude on the unscrupulousness of Western capitalism, while citizens from most political affiliations do not hesitate to highlight a perceived sense of loss of sovereignty in Greek economic policy. Finally, those who appear to be partially sympathetic to ultra-rightist rhetoric issue patriotic warnings against all foreigners: the economically powerful Westerners, but also the destitute migrants who live next door.

**Conclusion: anti-hegemonic indignation confined by hegemony**

In my first accounts of the Greek anti-austerity indignation I attempted to shed some light on the ambivalence of local discontent and its many contradictions (Theodossopoulos 2013a, 2013c). These become apparent in the ambivalent—and, in Herzfeld’s (1987, 1997) words, *disemic*—desire of so many Greeks to remain in the Eurozone (and in the consumerist sphere of the West) but defy the constraints imposed by the EU, the IMF, and the international financial establishment. To capture ethnographically this ambivalence, I engaged with the complexity of the emerging indignation—the internal politics and fragmented (often self-critical) views of those afflicted by austerity—‘filling in the black hole’ (Ortner 1995: 190), the interpretative vacuum created by homogenising depictions of the crisis. An anthropological approach, with its attention on the local diversity of views, can contribute to the de-orientalisation (and de-pathologisation) of indirect resistance, by moving beyond its easy dismissal as irrational, incoherent, or inconsequential.

In this article I have argued for the need to explicitly de-pathologise local discontent with the financial crisis. Far from representing an inchoate, emotional or irrational

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2 Even supporters of the communist party (which has retained an honest and steady anti-neoliberal orientation for decades) use nationalist arguments to the dismay of a few older fellow-communists who have been indoctrinated to an internationalist (class-based) vision of comradery.
discourse, indignation with austerity promotes a sustained critique of visible inequalities in the World economic order. Thus, moving one step further from my initial interpretative analysis, I am now—two years after the first wave of popular mobilisation against austerity—in a better position to fully acknowledge the transformative potential of local anti-austerity discourse, and its ability to unite diverse (even international) social groups in discontent with the World economic order (see Theodossopoulos 2010). Indignation with austerity is not merely a trope, a figurative communication of meaning, but also a guiding principle of emancipatory imagination (Appadurai 1996, 2001) leading towards (or requesting) change in social life. Testaments of its transformative power are the dramatic shifts in political-party politics in Greece that I have outlined earlier.

Considerations such as this allow us to appreciate that anti-austerity discourse does not only offer discursive empowerment in peripheral conversational contexts, but also frames local anti-hegemonic narratives within an everyday pursuit of accountability. This persistent search for meaning may provide alternative readings of causality—e.g. via the exploration of recurring patterns in history (cf. Sutton 1998, 2003; Stewart 2012; Knight 2012a, 2012b)—which lead to explanations of the crisis that differ from hegemonic narratives; for example, ‘the powerless should not pay for the mistakes of bankers or politicians’, ‘austerity is not the only way out of the crisis’. In this emancipatory role, indignation with austerity represents a very timely example of indirect resistance: it proliferates in unofficial, everyday contexts of social life, sometimes beyond the direct observation of power-holders (Scott 1985, 1990). However, unlike Scott’s view of indirect resistance, anti-austerity indignation in Greece directly aspires to communicate a message to power-holders (critically engaging with the exercise of power, especially with regard to economic policies).

It is also important to acknowledge that indirect resistance to austerity may realise its most creative and original forms in informal contexts, but it is not merely an ‘off-stage’ discourse, confined to—what Scott (1990) perceives as—autonomous contexts of subordinate sociality; in fact it is doubtful if such isolated social contexts really exist (Gledhill 2012). On the contrary, anti-austerity indignation (so far) has been informed by, and has also inspired political party rhetoric; it has been voiced in public protest and championed by elected politicians; it has numerous advocates among left leaning highly educated elites; and, far from being independent (or autonomous) from wider ideological, political or economic visions, it plays a formative role in the imagination and reproduction of such visions, often moving—via social networks—beyond national borders (Postill 2013, n.d.; Papailias 2011).

3 See, Theodossopoulos 2013a, 2003c.
In all these respects, anti-austerity resistance provides us with scope to reflect upon the pervasiveness of hegemonic narratives, even within anti-hegemonic critique; an issue underestimated by Scott in *Hidden Transcripts* (1990). Even though indignant (anti-austerity) discourse consciously confronts hegemonic master narratives, it remains constrained by overarching ideological influences, which are not uncontaminated by hegemony. For example, anti-austerity indignation in Greece, despite its explicit critique of Western imperialism, is confined to a nationalist (and hegemonic) conceptualisation of history, which, as many anthropologists have pointed out, has been originally inspired by a Western vision of classical Greece, and imported to Greece as a nation-building construct (Herzfeld 1982, 1987; Just 1989, 1995; Faubion 1993; Stewart 1994; Hirschon 2000, 2003; Brown and Hamilakis 2003; Theodossopoulos 2007a). The resulting idealisation of classical antiquity in Greek nationalism represents a good example of colonised historical consciousness—an example of what Herzfeld calls crypto-colonialism (Herzfeld 2002). Crypto-colonial narratives, ‘appear to resist domination, but do so at the cost of effective complicity’, often through ‘the aggressive promotion of their claims to civilizational superiority or antiquity’ (Herzfeld 2002: 902-903).

In consequence, Western hegemony is deeply embedded in the identification of the West with classical Greece, an identification adopted and reproduced uncritically by Greek national narratives. Trapped within such a persistent (and pervasive) conceptual framework, Greek anti-austerity narratives, although critical to Western power, do not completely escape from Western hegemony (which has so effectively colonised Greek national consciousness). The unconstrained xenophobia of the Greek ultra right provides the most unattractive example of how nationalism springs from indignation with foreign intervention, yet nationalist undertones are also hidden in the anti-hegemonic critique of left leaning indignant citizens. Anti-austerity political parties (from the left and right) have capitalised upon this fusion of nationalism with anti-hegemonic critique, and have adapted their rhetoric accordingly, to fit electioneering purposes.

The analytical trajectory I have outlined so far opens the way for resolving a dilemma I posed earlier in this article. This emerges from the contradictions inherent in indirect resistance, and in particular our commitment (as social analysts) to acknowledge the critically astute (non-pathological, and often radical) nature of indignant narratives,

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Herzfeld has used the notion of ‘crypto-colonialism’ to refer to countries whose national ideologies and ‘modalities of independence have been defined by outsiders’ (Herzfeld in Byrne 2011: 147), often by placing such countries and national cultures ‘on high cultural pedestals that effectively isolate them from other, more brutally material forms of power’ (Herzfeld 2002: 902).
while simultaneously confronting the proliferation of nationalism (old-fashioned, banal and hegemonic) within the same narratives. Clearly, the solution lies in acknowledging that indirect resistance, even in its most creative form, is not completely isolated from overarching ideological influences and culturally established patterns of explaining causality. In vernacular political discourse, pre-existing interpretations provide the building blocks for new challenging explanations of timely events (and their relationship with power).

In his earlier work, Scott (1990) attempted to isolate the narratives of discontent within ‘hidden transcripts’ and autonomous context of subaltern sociality. The example of anti-austerity indignation in Greece shows that this compartmentalisation is not a wise analytic strategy, a point that echoes previous critiques (Keesing 1992; Gledhill 1994; Moore 1998). Indirect resistance is not immune to the recycling of wider (and occasionally hegemonic) ideological narratives (Keesing 1992), as does not exist in a power vacuum (see Gledhill 2012). For this reason, it would be wise to complement our analytic de-pathologisation of resistance with an equal commitment to avoiding its idealisation (Abu-Lughod’s 1990, Keesing 1992, Ortner 1995), an approach to which I refer to the introduction to this issue, as the de-exoticisation of resistance. The ambivalence of anti-austerity discourse in Greece lies within the very conditions that make it meaningful and persuasive at the local level: its embeddedness in social relations, cultural expectations and previous ideological narratives.

References


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