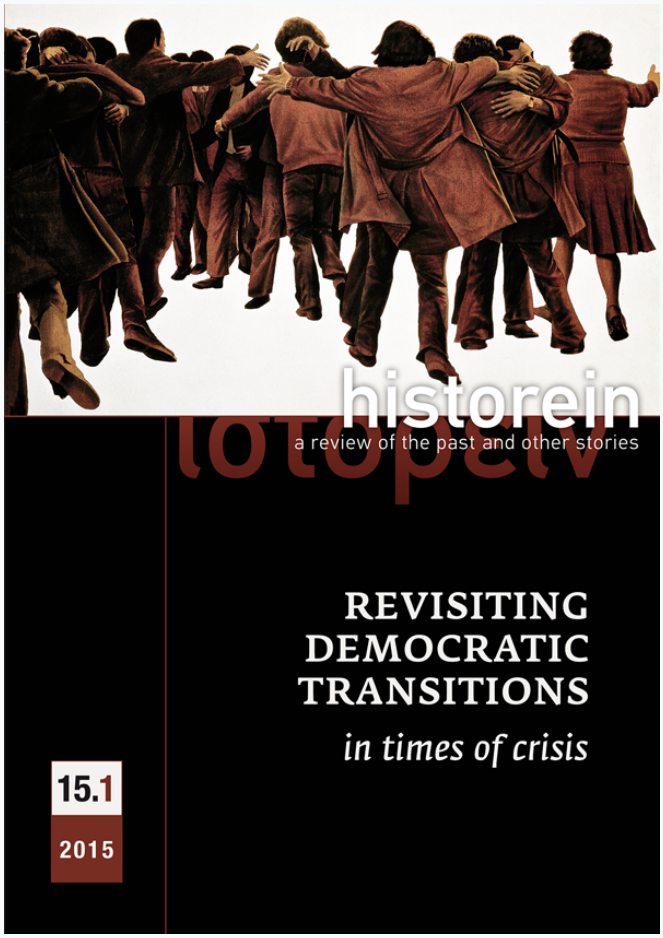
ePublishing

ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ
EKT
NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

Historein

Vol 15, No 1 (2015)

Revisiting Democratic Transitions in Times of Crisis



Narrating the story of a failed national transition: discourses on the Greek crisis, 2010–2014

Hara Kouki, Antonis Liakos

doi: 10.12681/historein.318

Copyright © 2015, Hara Kouki, Antonis Liakos

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0.

To cite this article:

Kouki, H., & Liakos, A. (2015). Narrating the story of a failed national transition: discourses on the Greek crisis, 2010–2014. *Historein*, *15*(1), 49–61. https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.318

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 12/10/2026 16:19:18

Narrating the story of a failed national transition: discourses on the Greek crisis, 2010–2014

Antonis Liakos and Hara Kouki

University of Athens and European University Institute

Following the outbreak of its sovereign debt crisis, Greece received its first international bailout in 2010 and the second in 2012, both of which were linked to major austerity measures such as spending cuts, new taxes, structural reforms and privatisations. At the same time, the period was constantly accompanied by the imminent danger of a "Grexit", bankruptcies and more rescue mechanisms. Far from being a mere economic crisis, this recession – the most severe ever experienced since the Second World War by an established democracy – has had tremendous consequences on Greek society and everyday life. The traditional party system has collapsed, grassroots politics are flourishing, the popularity of the left-wing Syriza party grew out of proportion, while the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn entered parliament for the first time; at the same time, unemployment reached unprecedented levels, more than a million workers are owed back pay, a growing number of citizens are threatened with poverty and hunger, and major parts of the populace – pensioners, women, youth – are experiencing social exclusion.

The events since early 2010 have accelerated the way time is experienced by the citizens of this country in the periphery of Europe, which has been apparently undergoing what can be termed as "history in the making". But history is not constructed of facts; it is constructed in the way we anticipate, perceive, interpret and narrate those facts in relation to our past and our future. Those "historic moments" have produced, thus, conflicting narratives that attempt to explain the causes of this crisis and put a before-and-after sequence on what is perceived as a transition for the country's trajectory over time within the European community. In the first part of this article, we focus on the dominant,

promemorandum discourse that has been propagated by the political establishment and mainstream media since the outset of the crisis and that interprets the current crisis as a crisis of Greek identity: Greece failed to reform where necessary due to the domination of the traditional political culture (over a "modern" one) that is to blame for the failed transition since 1974 to postwar European modernity. The second part of this article situates this dominant narrative within the broader context of scholarly literature and academic discourses that have attempted, in different periods and in diverse ways, to conceptualise and prescribe the transition to modernity followed not only by Greece, but by other societies the world over. By unfolding the creation of this "failed transition" story while examining it in relation to broader narratives and discourses, this brief study forms a vantage point from which to observe how history is experienced by societies in crisis and, thus, witness "history in the making".

1. National and transnational transitions (1974–2014): from authoritarianism to democracy and from democracy to demo-crisis

To begin with, we will very briefly sketch the historical path followed by the country since the end of the dictatorship so as to set the background against which our analysis is conducted.[1] Within the context of this article, the ongoing crisis is understood as a contingent and multifaceted product of national history and local traditions as entangled within broader European developments and global changes.

The period of the "*metapolitefsi*" – a term meaning "regime change" that was used initially for the transition to democracy in 1974 but eventually to refer to the entire third Greek republic – was, on the one hand, one of economic stagnation and deindustrialisation and, on the other, high political and social expectations. The country was sailing in two boats going in the opposite direction: while from the 1950s to 1970s Western European countries experienced the formation of the welfare state, in southern Europe this remained in an embryonic state. In Greece, for instance, the dictatorship period was characterised by state expansion without welfare and, in this respect, it did not constitute a rupture, but a continuation with postwar economic priorities regarding financial stability, wage controls, and foreign or state investments in public works and industrial infrastructure. On the other hand, after the decades-long suppression of social movements and a ban on trade unionism, the *metapolitefsi* was an era of labour and student protests, intense popular mobilisations and increasing expectations of social improvement. Bridging the two through economic policies never occurred, as both conservative and socialist governments opted for state expansion, although they swore by private initiative; the public-sector workforce was expanded and bankrupt industries nationalised so as to counterbalance the unemployment created by economic stagnation. Public borrowing was the only means to offer welfare policies. The increasing vulnerability caused by the rising public debt and the expansion of the state was far from a national particularity caused by social backwardness or domestic mentalities; on the contrary, such a paradoxical reality has been an inherent phenomenon of European politics in the postwar period, characterised by generalised upward social mobility and the conflating of consumerism with the ideas of an affluent society: the widespread social and political expectations of postauthoritarian societies were as vital as the economic ones.

But the recent crisis is not causally related solely to this paradox of the 1980s, but also to the transformations of democracy taking place throughout the 1990s around Europe. It was also helped by European Union treaties such as Maastricht: this decade of globalisation and European integration was a period of economic expansion, low interest rates and credit expansion, which was experienced with increasing optimism, especially by the Mediterranean countries that saw their economies transformed. What actually took place at the same time through the deregulation of the economy and labour legislation, however, was the dismantling of the postwar social contract, which was further challenged by the mass influx of migrants and refugees to the EU. Even if the new landscape appeared tolerant to pluralism and difference, gender equality and the increasing role of nonstate actors in politics, the backbone of the postwar democratic consensus was being dismantled: along with the downgrading of industry, trade unionism was marginalised, political parties became alienated from their constituencies and decision-making was transferred from the public realm to a narrow circle of experts consisting of European Commission bureaucrats and high-ranking officials, think tanks and large banking corporations. The literature has termed this as a shift from participatory democracy to a period of "post-democracy",[2] which came about without any of the ruptures that were encountered in the shift from authoritarianism to democracy. The term "demo-crisis" signifies semantically that the idea of the demos as a progressive social agent became a regressive force, an impediment to the modernising initiatives of the elites.

2. Narrating the crisis as a failed transition to modernity

Notwithstanding this conflation of global and local realities that has generated a crisis that is far from national and much broader than financial, the dominant interpretation since the outset has been telling the story of a predictable crisis that was a long time coming, one that was to be expected from a country that never managed to modernise enough in spite of the opportunities offered through its membership of the EU.[3] Instead, what prevailed were the legacies of a backward political culture fed with corruption and clientelism that can be traced back to the formation of the Greek nation-state but took shape after the transition to democracy in 1974. Greek citizens are to blame, thus, and must implement austerity policies, as dictated by European and international mechanisms, in order to become like the other Western European countries. Based on assumptions that predate the crisis, this narrative[4] was disseminated systematically by international and national economic and political elites and mainstream media from 2010 to 2014. It is important to highlight the role played by the national mass media in this process: corporate Greek media is owned and controlled by big conglomerates, representing powerful economic and business interests. During the crisis, mainstream media magnates have been accused of allowing their own business interests to influence editorial decisions to limit coverage to pro-EC, ECB and IMF agendas and to censor alternative opinions.[5]

2.1 Crisis as an opportunity (2010–2012)

When accused of corruption, one veteran Pasok minister said in 2010 "*Mazi ta fagame*" (we all ate it together),[6] implying that all Greeks were equally responsible for colluding in practices of patronage and petty corruption. The two parties that, alternately, dominated the government of the coun-

try for the past 40 years (Pasok, on the centre-left, and New Democracy, on the centre-right) and which formed the coalition government that was in power from June 2012 to January 2015, have since the outset of the crisis resorted to the argument that all levels of society are to blame. The political system, along with society as a whole, had refused to rationalise, opting to maintain pre-modern practices: public servants were the first to be disgraced by politicians and media outlets.[7] Greek citizens were pictured as young disobedient children who were refusing to grow up and were provided instead with the opportunity from above to reform themselves.[8] The crisis was presented as a supernatural phenomenon, cast on the people, and economics as separate from politics – it was therefore irrelevant to think of causes or alternatives.[9] Moreover, official political discourse and daily media coverage referred to the negative ways in which Greece was being depicted in the foreign media and the decisions that EU representatives were making about the country's future, thus legitimising the dependency of the country on foreign actors.[10] Still, the crisis was represented as an opportunity for the country to finally become modern and for the Greeks to become hard working, competitive and disciplined.[11]

Interlude: 2012 elections

However, things changed rapidly. The development of parallel national crises in Portugal, Ireland and Spain shifted the attention from the cultural particularities of the Greeks towards the systemic nature of the Europe-wide crisis. At the same time, it was becoming evident to more citizens that the austerity measures were disastrous, not only because they generated poverty among the most underprivileged parts of society (women, pensioners and youth), but for actually delivering recession, not growth. During the build-up to the May 2012 elections, the political elites and the media launched a fierce campaign to purge the debate of alternative points of view and eliminate criticism of the memorandums by putting forth false dilemmas: do Greek citizens wish to reject troika policies and live on food coupons? Will Greece remain a part of the European Union or become a third-world country?[12] Sticking with austerity was the only route to survival. However, the small leftwing Syriza party, which took 4.7 percent of the vote in the 2009 elections, won 27 percent of the vote and became the main opposition to a coalition government formed by New Democracy, Pasok and Democratic Left.

2.2 Crisis with no alternative (2012–2014)

While public opinion in Europe began to show more recognition of the disproportionate price Greeks had to pay, in Greece the hegemonic discourse became more aggressive. In this latter state, which lasted at least until the January 2015 elections, and within the context of declining support for the political mainstream, austerity measures could not be, and were no longer, presented as a positive opportunity. Instead, amid what was being described as a humanitarian crisis, deprivation and loss were simply the price that Greek citizens had to pay for their past. As has been the case with other countries in the past, Greek citizens were told that "there is no alternative" (TINA) to this "state of emergency" that brought misery and suffering:[13] the consequences of denying this solution were pictured as even more dramatic and chaotic. However, as decisions were taken by experts, while collective reactions, such as strikes or protests, were stigmatised, each citizen was presented as responsible for him- or herself and should be left alone to deal with unemployment, injustice, depression and anger. Contentious activity was presented as part of an underdeveloped culture im-

peding progress,[14] as reflected in the spread of the theory of the two extremes, which was used to equate collective political protest against austerity with racist violence;[15] the promemorandum coalition government could no longer guarantee the wellbeing of Greek citizens, but at least provided them with a minimum of law and order. The "Greek crisis" repeatedly legitimised the imposition of emergency policies and legislation that circumvented human, political and social rights.[16]

Cleavages and frames

Since 2010, thus, memoranda have become a focal point of all political and ideological debates in Greece: anyone who attempts to articulate a point of view beyond the mainstream finds himself or herself in a position of opposition. As a result, the "antimemorandum" bloc hosts an increasing number of crisis discourses, which are often contradictory. There are cases when self-castigation over the country's deficiencies becomes the flipside of a self-narcissism related to its unique historical heritage: the far right is on the rise. All stories are made up of ideas deeply embedded in the national political psyche and, for this reason, have little causal relation to the actual crisis unravelling in the country. It is not surprising, thus, to discover striking similarities with narratives dominating public discourse also in other countries hit by the crisis. In this sense, the memorandum has evolved into a cleavage in terms of political discourse and serves as a dividing line that cuts across the political spectrum affecting all political groups while providing them with the necessary "toolkits" to clearly define themselves and the "other".[17] Within the same storyline, the *metapolitefsi* has evolved into something much more than a concept denoting a mere chronological period of time or a series of events to become the frame for making sense of what is now at stake, by putting an order on complex temporalities and causalities and providing a before and after. According to the dominant narrative, the country's post-1974 past is to blame for the troublesome present and the uncertain future. It is an interpretative tool, thus, through which a story about the national self and the Western other is told while it is being created and, for this reason, it is also encountered in other southern European countries in crisis. The *metapolitefsi* has turned into a frame, that is, a schema of interpretation that enables individuals to locate, perceive and label occurrences within their life space and world at large, in interaction with the wider political culture, public discourse, values and orientations of society.[18]

Narratives, thus, about the crisis in post-1974 Greece are not merely histories accounting for a linear sequence of facts, but frameworks that define understandings of the self, as well as organise a diagnosis of the problem and dictate political solutions and prescriptive policies.

3. The story of a failed national transition in the national and international context

We examined above how the *metapolitefsi* has been used as a frame to retrospectively criticise the postdictatorial failed transition to a Western European, liberal-type democracy: as we will show below, this idea has been an inherent part of long-embedded understandings of Greece's national history and compatible with broader understandings of what "ought to be", first, a postwar welfare state and, later on, a postwelfare state.

3.1. The predictable backlash of the underdog culture

The great impact the above narrative had on public opinion is related to a deeply ingrained belief in national culture which explains the unfolding of national history after 1974 as a conflict between tradition and modernity. In the early 1990s, Nikiforos Diamandouros, a scholar who had been involved in studies of transition in the European south in the 1980s, described this cultural dualism that was deeply entrenched in postdictatorship Greece as a tug of war between an "underdog" and a modernising political culture.[19] This has since been disseminated to political discourse and has become a reference point for understanding modern Greece and the country's relation to Europe. While the latter of the two cultures is described in an undeniably more favourable light, as compatible with the secularism, rationalism, democracy and free market economics prevalent in the more "developed" societies of Western Europe, the latter is viewed as a predemocratic, nationalist, introverted and highly defensive culture that bears the imprint of the Ottoman tradition and the Byzantine past and favours clientelistic networks of power while remaining phobic of market forces and the West in general.[20] According to Diamandouros, the creation of a modern nation-state in Greece intensified this struggle and generated huge social tensions and dividing lines in Greece, as bureaucratic and rational institutions had to be adopted by "traditional and precapitalist, indigenous structures".[21] The cultural camp, influenced by the Enlightenment and aiming at reform through fostering a Western liberal polity in the country, was constantly hampered by the most traditionalist, underdeveloped and least competitive parts of the society, those personifying the underdog culture that impeded reforms, especially after 1974, and prevented the country from experiencing a successful transition. This distinction is so profound and all-encompassing that elements of both cultures are to be found across the political spectrum, in both the left- and rightwing forces, Diamandouros argued.

Since the outbreak of the crisis in 2010, this postdictatorship "underdog" culture has been roundly attacked, both abroad and domestically, for bringing the country to the verge of economic and political bankruptcy. No matter how exceptional circumstances may appear during the crisis, cultural dualism has been commonplace in the discussion of Greek political culture since the very foundations of the state: its loaded historical background and its unique language differentiated the country from the "barbarian" Muslim East and from its Slavic neighbours, while, on the other hand, this "cradle of civilisation" remained, after all, a poor and economically underdeveloped country different from industrialised Western Europe, where it allegedly "belonged". Modernity in Greece has been equated with Westernisation and was seen as the opposite to the Ottoman past and Byzantine traditions, which were presented as incompatible with modern democratic institutions. The past was contrasted with the present, as tradition was seen as inferior to the future. On the other hand, modernity was harshly criticised, not because of its principles but because of its connotation with "foreign" social actors intervening in internal politics as well as with domestic actors who uncritically praised everything that originated in the "West". Already since the foundation of the Greek state in 1832, political groups and agents instrumentalised national traditions and modernisation prospects in different ways, in a long-lasting effort to come to terms with the past and an always "more developed" West that was equated with the future.

The transition to a parliamentary republic in 1974 seemed to put Greece finally on the long desired path to modernisation, due to the reforms that took place after the end of the seven-year military

junta and the abolition of the monarchy. In a very short period of time, Greece ceased to be an agrarian society; the tertiary sector became dominant, which was followed by rapid upward social mobility. The political and ideological divisions that had persisted within Greek political and social life since the civil war also formally ended with the abolition of the exclusionary state of emergency and the establishment of a competitive political system. Reforms in the education sector, the development of a welfare state, the renewal of political personnel, and the democratisation of public life introduced to public discourse terms such as "equal opportunities", "social justice" and "political rights".[22] Notwithstanding the gradual introduction of the country to the family of European liberal democracies, the so-called particularities of Greece persisted; the country never became a profoundly industrial one, while the "premodern" traits of the national political culture and the "precapitalist" modes of society remained intact: an atrophic civil society, clientelism, grey economic activities and feelings of strong nationalism served to marginalise the country.[23]

The dualism between tradition and modernity has defined the ways in which Greek national identity has been formed throughout the twentieth century and especially after its transition to democracy. In this respect, the concept and the uses of the term "clientelism" was transformed by a generation of scholars into the fundamental interpretative key for explaining political behaviour and state–society relations in the post-1974 period.[24] In an influential book published by the historian and anthropologist John Campbell and based on his research in the Greek mountains just after the civil war, Greek society was on the border of the European world, on the dividing line between rational societies and those ruled by habit, guilt and shame.[25] The sociologist Nicos Mouzelis located Greece, along with the Balkans and Latin America, in a cluster of belated modernised countries, in which traditional clientelism was transformed from a personal system belonging to premodern societies to a bureaucratic one that characterised modern societies, without however putting an end to the state's despotism or creating a robust civil society.[26] Konstantinos Tsoukalas emphasised the role of the state in Greece, which continued to serve the interests of a dominant class by creating state personnel through a machinery serving clientelistic interests.[27] With no clear-cut class divisions and efficient state functions, Greek society is compartmentalised along extensive family ties and clientelist practices that have generated an all-encompassing culture of corruption:[28] this is a structural feature, cutting across society and historically embedded in an inherent rejection of the rule of law, that is attributed to the Greek psyche of resistance to the Ottomans. Diamandouros somehow managed to grant coherence to these analyses by attributing the clash between westernised institutions and traditional parts of society not only to the political system but to the national political culture as a whole.[29]

According to the works of these scholars, when compared to the western patterns of economic development, Greece proceeded to industrialisation and modernity in a belated, dependent and anomalous way, which was blended with anomic patterns, clientelistic relationships, state interventionism and populist political parties. It is a narrative replete with historical absences: Greece never had an aristocracy or a proper working class, did not undergo the Enlightenment or industrial revolution and did not experience liberalism. Paradoxical as it may sound, this balancing between a troubled tradition and an always desired modernity has, at the same time, propelled dominant feelings of Greek exceptionalism. But even if the idea of Greek underdevelopment and, at the same time, exceptionalism cuts across political divisions (and keeps haunting the Greek left, as well), this

does mean that interpreting the past has been a consensual process. On the contrary, as evident above in the way the post-1974 past has been narrated and has given shape to the country's present, interpreting the past has been an arena of rival social visions, class divisions and interests over who is to blame, what is to be done and by whom. As we will show in the next part, such competing narratives regarding transition have not been linked only to conflictual transformations within the country, but also to broader ones regarding the European project and global developments.

3.2. Failed transitions as an inherent norm of modernity

At the same time, there has been a growing field of scholarly work that has challenged this schema of cultural dualism and its overwhelming domination over interpretations of national identity by offering instead alternative perspectives.[30] According to this work, the contradiction between tradition and modernity is seldom so clearly compartmentalised and clear-cut in real life, as it penetrates public life and groups of people, but also the identity of each individual, creating tensions and complexities. On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore the fact that everyday life more than often appears to confirm the tradition–modernity cleavage to an impressive degree. In the last few turbulent years in Greece, binary oppositions set by this scheme re-emerged with a vehemence, both in terms of public opinion and academic and political discourse.

This might be the case as this explanatory framework is far from confined to the Greek case only: the peculiarities represented through cultural dualism have been generally addressed to societies in transition from a premodern to a modern era. Scholarly arguments that dominate academia and political discourse understand modern Greece as being somewhere between a past and a future, the periphery and the centre, modernity and tradition: this is a thesis apparently imbued with the evolutionism that marked social and political theory especially in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s.[31] According to this, in most societies reform processes did not provoke a conflict between new and old, as the new is built upon the old. Modernity, as the process of transformation and rationalisation of human societies, is rooted in tradition, while reform is an endogenous change not requiring abrupt ruptures with the past. This process, however, describes the way industrialised liberal Western European democracies were modernised and, as such, implies a differentiation between those and the rest of the world and legitimises specific patterns of modern development while excluding others. In the case of peripheral capitalist societies, such as Greece, tradition and modernity emerge as conflictual trends in an antagonistic relationship. According to modernisation theory, time evolves in a linear and progressive way and as a result, in the case of countries that did not follow the prescribed path of evolution, it unavoidably brings about radical ruptures with the past so as to restore "normality" in the flow of progress. It is only by uprooting tradition that reform can be implemented so that all societies can become modern. Within this narrative, there are two options: either any signs of traditional particularities are eradicated or the country is alienated from the family of developed societies.[32]

Notwithstanding widespread and lucid critiques of modernisation theory, this has dominated Western social science especially in what regards the field of "transition studies" as a knowledge effect of the Cold War. Schmitter, O'Donnell and Whitehead's 1986 book *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe* triggered a wealth of works trying to frame the collapse of the dictatori-

al regimes in southern Europe, but also Latin America and, some years later, Eastern Europe. It was within this context that clientelism acquired in the 1980s a new, all-encompassing interpretative capacity in relation to southern European peripheral countries and that the Greek passage to democracy after seven years of authoritarianism was read as a "velvet transition" to "normalcy". According to "transitology", what differentiated peripheral countries from those at the core is considered an anomaly, a weakness or an aberration. Research initiatives adopting this approach have offered new insights; yet, they have remained overtly teleological and deterministic: peripheral societies were read in the context of a readiness or lack of readiness for reform.[33] The passage from authoritarianism to democratisation was read ahistorically and in relation with party and top–down politics, while local contexts and cultural traditions, social mobilisations and protest movements were ignored if they were not compatible with a prescribed pattern of later development. Read through the interpretative frame of transition, the history of those countries became loaded with normative expectations and prescriptive policies as to how the past should be read and the future should unravel.

In the post-Second World War context, modernisation theory took the form of development studies, in what concerns the postcolonial field, and transition studies, regarding mainly the ex-communist world: in both cases a new role was ascribed to the developed Western world that was prosperous and stable enough to lead the "underdeveloped" countries the world over towards progress. Postsocialist and postcolonial critique has revealed how the epistemological categories constructed along the axes of tradition/modernity have generated specific representations of the "self" and the "other" and a whole imagery and vocabulary about those being "different". Particularly since the end of the Cold War, European integration and access to EU membership has become the dominant, if not the exclusive, institutional framework and the ultimate paradigm of western modernity. Within this context, countries at the geopolitical and economic centre of Europe, such as Germany, France or the Netherlands, are synonymous with being both "modern" and "European", while countries at the southern and central-eastern periphery of Europe seek to confirm their "Europeanness" by implementing endless series of reforms. As examined above in the case of Greece, the discourse on modernisation internally divides those societies deemed not-yet modern and is internalised by citizens in the form of collective guilt. At the same time, it has been used to divide former colonies and non-European countries from the European core by contributing to the creation of the European canon. What becomes, however, evident through the dominant narrative on the Greek crisis is that this discourse is now further instrumentalised to differentiate and generate hierarchies within Europe itself. The "other" is no longer beyond the civilised European borders, in the "waiting room of history".[34] Transitology now takes the form of an intra-European orientalism, according to which the "other" is internal and has to suffer for his or her sins.

Narrating the past according to this normative view of transition, thus, runs through transitology, development studies as well as the field of European integration. While principally referring to societies in transition from a premodern to a modern era, this cultural dualism ended up forming part of the European canon of history.[35] This frame of understanding not only articulates, but at the same time fosters particular identities, hierarchies and power dynamics in different spaces, contexts and periods. What is currently termed "global governance" is also structured along these lines: in this new sophisticated form of internationalism, according to historian Mark Mazower, formal supra-

national institutions play a relatively minor role while business-like networks of middle-level government officials from different countries get things done. Even if introduced as respectful of notions of inclusiveness, ethics and obligation, global governance yet implies a deep suspicion of formal political institutions, participatory democracy and big government.[36] This new mode of governance has been criticised for bearing the imprint of contemporary imperialism and forms of domination, as it leaves little space for "people" to disagree, demand and resist; no conflicts or actual politics take place. This is related to an overall paradigm shift concerning understandings of state power that has been taking place since the 1980s at an international level. The post-Cold War and postimperial world is experiencing a radical erosion of sovereignty and of the role of "demos" as an agent of change and thus of history.

Conclusion

Narratives on the Greek crisis that depart from a re-evaluation of the recent past can only be understood as part of broader, transnational discourses on modernity and the changing role of the state within them. Departing from modernisation theories of the 1960s and transitology assumptions, while also resonating with the new mode of global governance, the dominant narrative described in the first part relates economic hardships to the passage to democracy in a causal way: populism, corruption, a lack of respect for social hierarchies, endemic protest movements and other traditionalist traits have given shape to an underdog political culture that is said to have become hegemonic since the restoration of democracy, generating profligate public spending and impeding reforms and modernisation. The "memorandum" has absorbed the ever-existing "tradition–modernity" cleavage defining Greek political culture and the *metapolitefsi* has been transformed into the dominant frame for understanding what is at stake in the country. But the need to modernise through imposed, top–down reforms no longer refers to a rationalisation of the state, as it used to when Greece was repeatedly accused of belated modernisation; the country is once again at odds with European standards, but the governing rules have now changed: "demos" now plays a minor, if any role.

According to the dominant explanatory narrative for what is currently happening, this is a crisis of a failed national transition. Still, this convincing story is actually the result of a conflict between competing social and class visions within and beyond the country and the product of broader transformations and of the crisis of the European project as a whole. Apart from challenging ideas about Greek exceptionalism, what is interesting in retracing the construction of this narrative is to observe how history is related to the contemporary crisis. Greek society in crisis has turned with urgency to the national past and re-read its transition to democracy, so as to make sense and render meaningful its troubled present. A product of media representations, business and elite interests and party politics, cultural traditions, national stereotypes but also international developments, popular dreams, anxieties and fears, this revisiting of the past has produced new historical meanings and vocabularies of its own. Exceeding the words or deeds of the individuals or groups articulating them, the stories told about the *metapolitefsi* form a sum bigger than their parts and acquire a life of their own. In this way, they become at the same time a crucial agent in actually creating the crisis, as we now experience it.

Like all historical events, however, the contemporary crisis, as well as the way we narrate it, has not been the result of a well-orchestrated conspiracy imposed from above but is the product of multiple interests, profits, politics, and unexpected encounters of people, desires and contingency. Even if current developments have disempowered people's agency by intensifying a shift to the so-called "demo-crisis", they have also generated the political space and the imaginaries to critically reflect on, challenge and collectively react against it. By experiencing yet another transition, Greece has become an observatory for contemporary radical transformations of all kinds.

NOTES

1 This historical overview departs from Antonis Liakos' lecture on "Greek Narratives of Crisis", given at the Netherlands Institute of Athens, 20 Feb. 2014.

2 Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy* (London: Fabian Society, 2000).

3 This analysis departs from Hara Kouki, "European Crisis Discourses: The Case of Greece," in *Crisis Discourses in Europe: Media EU-phemisms and Alternative Narratives*, ed. Tamsin Murray-Leach, 16–20. Background paper of the Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit of the London School of Economics, 2014, http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/CSHS/pdfs/Crisis-Discourses-in-Europe.pdf. This and all web references mentioned below were accessed on 28 Jul. 2015.

4 Prime Minister George Papandreou's interview with Bruce Clark of the *Economist*, 23 Feb. 2010, http://www.primeminister.gov.gr/english/2010/02/23/prime-ministers-george-a-papandreou-interview-on-the-economist/.

5 See Nikos Smyrnaios, "Οικονομική εξουσία και ΜΜΕ στην εποχή της κρίσης: μια άσκηση χαρτογράφησης" [Economic power and mass media: a mapping attempt], Ephemeron.eu, 26 Apr. 2013, http://ephemeron.eu/943, and Stephen Grey and Dina Kyriakidou, "Special report: Greece's triangle of power," *Reuters*, 17 Dec. 2012, http://reut.rs/U3VgGS.

6 "Pangalos stands by we-all-ate-together statement," eKathimerini.com, 18 Apr. 2012, http://www.ekathimerini.com/140898/.

7 Paschos Mandravelis, "Ο μπαρμπα-Μήτσος από τα Γρεβενά" [Uncle Mitsos from Grevena], *Athens Voice*, 2 Jun. 2010, http://goo.gl/x1aA8a.

8 Antonis Fourlis, "Η ανοχή στην παρανομία" [Tolerating anomy], *Protagon*, 1 Aug. 2011, http://www.protagon.gr/8132.

9 According to research conducted at Panteion University on the media coverage of the crisis. For details, see Afroditi Politi, "TV Κλείστε την τη ρημάδα!" [Turn off the damned TV], *Eleftherotypia*, 16 May 2010, http://www.enet.gr/162334.

10 Extensive coverage followed an issue of Focus, a German news magazine, that said the Greeks were the "Cheats in the Euro Family" on the cover. See *Focus*, 22 Feb. 2010, http://www.focus.de/magazin/archiv/jahrgang_2010/ausgabe_8.

11 See the talk by Peter Economides on "Rebranding Greece", delivered to the 11th conference of the Hellenic Management Association, Nov. 2011, https://youtu.be/GsDaJfNlio8, and its analysis in Yiannis Mylonas and Panos Kobatsiaris, "'Πολιτισμικές' ερμηνείες της 'ελληνικής' κρίσης-χρέους:' Όψεις του νεοφιλελεύθερου λόγου στον ελληνικό δημόσιο χώρο" [Cultural interpretations of Greece's debt crisis:

Aspects of neoliberal discourse in Greek public sphere], in *Η Κρίση και τα ΜΜΕ* [Crisis and mass media], ed. George Pleios, 387–420 (Athens: Papazisi, 2013).

12 Yiannis Pretenteris, "Εκλογές για το ευρώ" [Elections for the euro], *To Vima*, 19 Feb. 2012, http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=444475.

13 Athena Athanasiou, *Η Κρίση ως «Κατάσταση Έκτακτης Ανάγκης»* [Crisis as a state of emergency: critiques and resistances] (Athens: Savvalas, 2012).

14 Cases of state censorship or police violence against journalists have been well documented. See Christos Syllas, "Free Speech takes a beating in Greece," *Index of Censorship*, 25 Mar. 2013, http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/03/free-speech-takes-a-beating-in-greece/, and Daniel Trilling, "Shock therapy and the gold mine," *New Statesman*, 18 June 2013, http://www.newstatesman.com/austerity-and-its-discontents/2013/06/shock-therapy-and-gold-mine.

15 Stefanos Kasimatis, "Από το λιντσάρισμα ώς τη δολοφονία είναι ένα βήμα" [It's only a step from lynching to murder], *Kathimerini*, 19 Sept. 2013, http://www.kathimerini.gr/53836/ or Takis Michas, "Ο κ. Τσίπρας και η Χρυσή Αυγή" [Mr Tsipras and Golden Dawn], *Protagon*, 25 Apr. 2013, http://www.protagon.gr/23980.

16 For instance, on 11 Sept. 2013 Skai TV editor and analyst Babis Papadimitriou called for a coalition between New Democracy and Golden Dawn to secure the country's salvation (see https://youtu.be/SBPDiYbxnsg). A day later, Golden Dawn thugs assaulted Communist Party members in Perama and five days later a Golden Dawn official stabbed Pavlos Fyssas to death.

17 Even if no group is self-contained or coherent, however, for the promemorandum camp, which understands itself as pro-European, the opposite side is "populist" as it combines right and left extreme forces; for the antimemorandum camp, those supporting austerity measures are neoliberals or political agents willing to compromise national independence.

18 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26/1 (2000): 611–639.

19 P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, "Cultural Dualism and Political Change in Postauthoritarian Greece," Working Paper 1994/50, Centro de Estudios Avanzados en Ciencias Sociales, Madrid, 1994.

20 Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruby Gropas and Hara Kouki, "Introduction: Is Greece a Modern European Country?" in *The Greek Crisis and European Modernity*, eds. Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruby Gropas and Hara Kouki (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 1–24.

21 Diamandouros, "Cultural Dualism," 8.

22 Triandafyllidou, Gropas and Kouki, "Introduction."

23 Demertzis, Nicolas, "Greece," in *European Political Cultures: Conflict or Convergence?* ed. Roger Eatwell (London: Routledge, 1997), 117.

24 Antonis Liakos, "Modern Greek Historiography (1974–2000): The Era of Tradition from Dictatorship to Democracy," in *(Re)Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, ed. Ulf Brunnbauer (Münster: LIT, 2010), 351–378.

25 John K. Campbell, *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in A Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964).

26 Nicos P. Mouzelis, *Politics in the Semi-Periphery: Early Parliamentarism and Late Industrialization in the Balkans and Latin America* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

27 Konstantinos Tsoukalas, *Κοινωνική ανάπτυξη και κράτος: Η συγκρότηση του δημοσίου χώρου στην Ελλάδα* [Social development and state: the construction of public space in Greece] (Athens: Themelio, 1981).

28 George Dertilis, *Κοινωνικός μετασχηματισμός και στρατιωτική επέμβαση. 1880–1909* [Social transformation and military intervention. 1880–1909] (Athens: Eksantas, 1977).

29 Diamandouros, "Cultural Dualism."

30 Dimitris Tziovas, "Η Δυτική φαντασίωση του Ελληνικού και η αναζήτηση του υπερεθνικού" [The western fantasy of the Hellenic and the quest for the hyper-national], in *Έθνος–κράτος–εθνικισμός* [Nation–state–nationalism], ed. Despo Solomou (Athens: Moraitis School, 1995), 339–361; Demertzis, "Greece;" Yannis, "Religion and Populism: Reflections on the 'Politicised' Discourse of the Greek Church," discussion paper no 7, Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics, 2002; Liakos, "Modern Greek Historiography;" Konstantinos Tsoukalas, "Παράδοση και εκσυγχρονισμός: Μερικά γενικότερα ερωτήματα" [Tradition and modernisation: some general questions], in *Ελληνισμός και ελληνικότητα* [Hellenism and Greekness], ed. Dimitris Tsaousis (Athens: Hestia, 1983), 37–48.

31 David Apter, *The Politics of Modernization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966); Cyril Edwin Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

32 Tsoukalas, "Παράδοση και εκσυγχρονισμός."

33 Katherine Verdery, *What was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (London: Routledge, 1996).

34 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

35 Antonis Liakos, "The Canon of European History and the Conceptual Framework of National Historiographies," in *Transnational Challenges to National History Writing*, eds. Matthias Middell and Lluís Roura i Aulinas (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), 315–342.

36 Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012).