Surplus Citizens

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Struggle and Nationalism in the Greek Crisis

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Introduction: Squares and Frontiers

After the global financial crisis broke out in 2008, new forms of struggle and uprisings began to spread, reinvigorating discussions around social transformation and left-wing political avenues out of the crisis. But by 2011, it was clear the new sequence of struggles did not have the recognisable form of class struggle: it was not primarily located in workplaces or led by a re-empowered labour movement. New movements occupied public spaces, demanded democracy, practised self-organisation and broke out in riots. In the case of Greece, the most indebted country of the European Union (EU) periphery where the most severe austerity was imposed, social struggles drew attention for their intensity and the graveness of what was at stake each time: supervisory institutions and governments claimed that if protests succeeded in their demands against austerity, then the country would default, and that would be even more catastrophic. Yet, over the years of austerity, which struggles failed to hinder, unemployment rose to over 25 per cent, and, from 2010 to 2013, the average wage purchasing power fell by 21 per cent.[1]

In this context, with little room to move within the shackles of debt, the Eurozone project and the imperatives of capitalist reproduction in the crisis, the struggles resisting austerity in Greece displayed similar characteristics as elsewhere. In the 'Aganaktisménoi' movement of public square occupations, which was inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square and Spain's Indignados and lasted for over two months, party mediation was unwelcome. In the squares there was an attempt to self-organise daily and develop the movement's own language. In the large demonstrations resisting new austerity measures, ferocious riots expanded spatially, numerically and compositionally. After these struggles peaked in early 2012, and a new right-wing-led coalition government was formed to counter the unprecedented electoral rise of the left, international headlines were made by the smaller, but significant, empowerment of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (GD), and by the racist violence it perpetrated. There was an anti-fascist response, yet the energy of 2011 had disappeared, and the prior movement seemed

1. INE-GSEE, *Ī Ellīnikī Oikonomía kai ī Apaschólīsī* (Athens: 2014), 143.

to have been split along political lines. The broader left found itself in a defensive position, reduced to fighting against the drive to legitimise racist victimisation and murder. Political parties were again dominating public discourse, each offering its own solution to the crisis and the management of capitalist reproduction. It is out of this situation that SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) won the 2015 elections.

SYRIZA's victories, and the failed negotiations in the EU with Greece's creditors, invited both optimism for recreating a space for the return of social democracy, and pessimism around the possibility of transforming the EU, leading to demands for reinstating 'full national sovereignty'. The Anglophone discussion on the Greek situation has been dominated by these concerns. It has addressed in depth the causes of debt in the Greek state,[2] the merits and downsides of Eurozone and EU membership, theories of dependency and economic imbalances among European countries,[3] questions of left leadership and the handling of negotiations over Greece's debt bailouts.[4] Writing on social struggle in the crisis has tended to reproduce the same concerns, and either to focus on the rise of SYRIZA,[5] or to describe social struggle by focusing on its conflict with outside adversaries,[6] without drawing out internal conflicts, contradictions, dilemmas and debates. While there are some exceptions to this, for example in the work of critical anthropologists on migrant solidarity,[7] they have not received very much exposure.

Surplus Citizens aims to problematise the principles taken for granted in the mainstream debate: sovereignty, citizenship, democracy and economic growth, accepted as preconditions or even as ends in themselves, and used as yardsticks to evaluate and understand social struggle. It raises often-neglected questions that emerged through the

2. John Milios and Dimitris Sotiropoulos, 'Crisis of Greece or Crisis of the Euro?', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 3 (2010): 223–40.

3. Costas Lapavitsas, *Crisis in the Eurozone* (London: Verso, 2012); Stavros Mavroudeas, 'Greece and the EU' (First International Conference on Political Economy, Rethymno, 2010); Christos Laskos and Euclid Tsakalotos, *Crucible of Resistance* (London: Pluto, 2013).

4. Laskos and Tsakalotos, *Crucible of Resistance*; Kevin Ovenden, *Syriza* (London: Pluto, 2015); Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room* (New York: Vintage, 2018).

5. Costas Douzinas, *Syriza in Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017); Ovenden, *Syriza.*

6. E.g. Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Dimitris Dalakoglou and Giorgos Poulimenakos, 'Hetero-Utopias', in *Critical Times in Greece*, ed. Dimitris Dalakoglou and Giōrgos Angelopulos (London: Routledge, 2018).

7. Katerina Rozakou, 'Socialities of Solidarity', *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 2 (2016): 185–99; Euthýmios Papataxiárchīs, 'Mia Megalī Anatropī', *Sýgchrona Thémata*, no. 132–3 (2016): 7–28.

practices of movements: how movements have dealt with the antinomies of crisis, precarity and extreme levels of unemployment; the role of nationalism and notions of citizenship; their impact on gendered and racialised relations. It communicates critical perspectives elaborated through confronting these problems, and challenges the dominant portrayal of struggles as the democratic protests of Greek citizens against international institutions imposing upon their government – that is, in terms that understand class as nationally circumscribed. It is urgent now to deconstruct the common-sense ethno-national unities expressed when non-European migrants crossed Europe's borders via Greece en masse in 2015–16.

Throughout this crisis period, plenty of commentary talked about 'Greeks' either as a subject of struggle resisting austerity,[8] or as a corrupt and decadent people who cannot manage their finances.[9] The assumption that these 'people' are, or should be, unified, colours dominant analyses of the 'Greek crisis' and of social struggles in Greece, which have reproduced ethnocentric narratives of Greek history, linked to anti-imperialist frameworks of understanding the crisis. These frameworks, despite their critique of 'Empire', reproduce a Eurocentric philosophy of history and an attachment to national production against the international level of finance. This simple opposition between the nation, its people and its territory and deterritorialised globalisation, often identified with 'cosmopolitan elites', is at the root of contemporary nationalist reactions to the crisis.

This has implications not only for understanding relations of class, both in Greece and beyond, which are overshadowed by the focus on power relations between nation-states, but also for racialised relations. The victims of neoliberal crisis management are not the 'Greek citizens', but the subordinate classes in Greece, not all of whom are citizens. These subordinate classes are differentially affected by the racialised management of borders and populations, as they have been since the Greek state's establishment. The nation and citizen-centred lens also has gendered implications. It only registers the gendered impacts of crisis through reproducing the naturalisation of family and patriarchal household as spaces of safety and relations to be protected from social disintegration. Those who do not find safety in this hetero/cis-normative

8. Stathis Kouvelakis, 'The Greek Cauldron', *New Left Review*, no. 72 (2011).
9. E.g. Jeremy Bulow and Kenneth Rogoff, 'Don't Blame Germany for Greece's Profligacy', *Wall Street Journal*, 16/4/2015.

and patriarchal notion of shelter were soon to not find safety in the Greek streets either, as nationalist oppositional discourses were used violently to reaffirm the male 'head of family' as the sole signified of the 'citizen'.

The figure of the citizen in movements with democratic demands, as it has been mobilised in squares and citizens' assemblies, is thus a central concern of *Surplus Citizens*. I interrogate the 'antinomies' and exclusions of citizenship (of class, race, gender), in the sense proposed by Etienne Balibar, exploring the ability of different movements to question them.[10] These antinomies, of course, are not static or inherited in any direct way from the original constitution of the Greek state. There is a continual dialectic of insurrection and constitution involved in the formation of citizenship, the meaning of 'the citizen' and the rights this entails. But we should not limit our conception to struggles for 'inclusion' into an already given regime of rights, especially a regime founded on and delimited by national belonging and the nation-state. This approach highlights not only the forms of domination and exclusion enshrouded by the notion of a unified 'people'. In line with a long lineage of feminist and anti-racist critique, it also shows that political unity cannot be an end in itself. On the contrary, a unity founded on a supposed neutrality and universality – in reality dominated by the white male figure – had better be dismantled before a new kind of collectivity and universality can emerge, one that recognises and addresses these forms of oppression.

Part I thus examines the historical formation, transformation and reproduction of class, racialised-ethnic and gendered social relations in Greece through social struggle, alongside the constitution of these divisions in citizenship and in law. To analyse nation and race in Greece's specific capitalist formation, I foreground the country's material and symbolic position within postcolonial international hierarchies. The analysis also serves as a response to theories of dependency and underdevelopment of the Greek economy and society, according to which Greece 'lags behind' in developments that began in capitalist 'core' countries. Two phases of neoliberal transformation and social struggle against it come to light – the second being the ordoliberal management of crisis pursued by the EU – with different effects on class identity and forms of collective action, as well as on the concept of citizenship. The latter phase has led struggles, especially the movement of the squares, to

10. Etienne Balibar, 'The "Impossible" Community of the Citizens', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 3 (2012): 437–49.

fight against what appears to be at stake: national sovereignty in a crisis of sovereign debt, democracy in the context of neoliberal dedemocratisation and depoliticisation.[11]

But beyond reading neoliberalisation as an instance of cruelty delivered 'from above' – by bankers, capitalists and political leaders conspiring against 'us' – I take seriously the contradictions of social citizenship in what Balibar calls the 'national-social state',[12] as well as the contradictions and limits of political community encountered by the multiple subjects involved in struggle. It would thus be too simple to analyse neoliberalisation as a question of utilitarianism versus equality, linked, correspondingly, to neoliberal versus social democratic governmentality and social ethics. Neoliberalism promotes its own sense of 'equality', based on a biopolitical rationality that manages and sorts populations impersonally based on their market value. The racialised and gendered (not only class) dimensions of market forces are often left unquestioned because of the market's apparent 'blindness' and its contribution to a 'common good': a strong national economy that creates more 'job opportunities'. The social democratic critique of neoliberalism, promoting more regulation of finance and redistribution via welfare based on Keynesian economic principles, does not sufficiently challenge this market principle and thus teeters at the brink of a contradiction: it wants to maintain market capitalism, yet it constantly undermines the market definition of equality and fairness, as well as the right to property and the commodification of labour. It aims to level economic hierarchies and was even thought, at the apex of its success, to have overcome material concerns,[13] yet its combination of full employment and inflationary tendencies is partly what led to the class war waged by the neoliberal turn. Today, governance with a social democratic orientation like that of SYRIZA resorts to creating funds for minimal welfare and advancing a liberal humanitarian discourse, which it cannot but combine with 'attracting investment', a priority incompatible with labour rights in the current international context.

We lack the theoretical tools to understand and question inequalities or exclusions unless we recognise the misery of crisis as caused not

11. Werner Bonefeld, 'European Integration', *Capital & Class* 26, no. 2 (2002): 117–42; Wendy Brown, 'American Nightmare', *Political Theory*, no. 34 (2006): 690–714; Peter Burnham, 'Depoliticisation', *Policy & Politics* 42, no. 2 (2014): 189–206.

12. Balibar, '"Impossible" Community', 437.

13. Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

merely by lack of democracy and redistributive social policies, but by the very fact that, for proletarians,[14] subsistence depends on the wage and the continuation of exploitation – the production and expansion of surplus value, accumulation. In the Great Recession, when this capacity for expanding accumulation has reached a limit, we cannot afford to take our capitalist world system for granted. Dependence on wages under conditions of 28 per cent unemployment and 'conditional' or absent social security is founded on the premise that the production of value (business, investment, productivity) is what human life *must* depend on, and, thus, the life of populations not fully integrated into that system is a matter of indifference, or, worse, an abject social burden.

Superfluity is not conceived here in the Malthusian sense (too many people, too few resources), but rather from the point of view of capitalist reproduction and of integration into the formal labour market. The 'surplus population' is not simply workless, but its activity remains outside the core circuit of capitalist reproduction. There is evidence of an expanding surplus population worldwide, if it is carefully conceptualised. This population is unevenly distributed, relative to the creation of a stratified global labour market reinforced by heavily policed national borders.[15] Thus the meaning of the title, *Surplus Citizens*, is not that the superfluity of Greek citizens is the primary condition around which our politics ought to concentrate. That a great number of citizens of subordinate classes have become surplus, i.e. thrown out of what was previously thought to be a 'normal' wage relation or relatively safe small business ownership, is only part of the picture. Instead, I draw attention to *how* this superfluity of citizens generated identifications with nation, class and, often, masculinity, in the political discourse and identities of movements. This enabled crisis management ideology to externalise social conflict into international relations (the EU, immigrants and refugees), and perceived threats to patriarchal roles and identities.

Equally, it is misleading to see class as in opposition to national unity, since workers' identity has been historically nationally circumscribed as well as often aligning its interests with those of capitalist employers. To explore this, I adopt the critique of labour and the notion of mutual

14. I use the term 'proletarian' throughout in its plain material sense: one who does not have any source for subsistence other than selling one's labour-power.

15. Stephen Castles, 'Migration, Crisis, and the Global Labour Market', *Globalizations* 8, no. 3 (2011): 311–24.

implication between capital and labour.[16] The affirmation of labour in class struggle, which, in this crisis, has translated into the demand for and the defence of jobs, welcomes and supports capitalist investment and accumulation with all that it entails. Proletarian dependence upon capitalist reproduction itself should then be the object of critique, although that poses difficult questions as to what practices of struggle might enact such a critique. As I describe in Part II, this opposition has led to community conflict in Chalkidiki, northern Greece, where flexibly employed mine workers have supported the destruction of a forest in opposition to its local defenders. We see multiple similar struggles and contradictions elsewhere in the world, and, in these contexts, also a special role for women, a role whose ambiguous implications I also explore.[17] Beyond this case, the majority of workers' struggles faced this contradiction in the form of internal hierarchies and a distance between the practices of workplace protest, blockade, strike and self-management.

In spite of this proliferation of social divisions, the idea of a 'commons' is an imaginary that has inspired radical collectives in Greece to construct alternative economic communities of solidarity in the crisis. Emerging from an autonomist-Marxist analysis, this perspective suggests that the crisis is capital's opportunity to appropriate everything that is 'common' – welfare, publicly owned enterprises and land.[18] The future of struggles thus depends on their ability to reclaim those 'commons' and expand communities where the development of non-capitalist social relations would flourish.[19] Yet how the space of the commons can become and remain 'anti-capitalist', as opposed to merely an informal economy for survival, remains a question. George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici assert that a 'common' equally accessible space or resource is not capitalist, as long as it is communal, is regulated through egalitarian decision

16. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 29–43; Théorie Communiste, 'Communization in the Present Tense', in *Communization and Its Discontents*, ed. Benjamin Noys (New York: Autonomedia, 2012), 41–60.

17. Some examples are the resistance of Zapatista and other agricultural communities in Mexico, rural conflicts in China over industrial pollution, the NoTav campaign in Italy and anti-airport protests in France.

18. Midnight Notes Collective and Friends, *Promissory Notes*, 2009.

19. George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, 'Commons Against and Beyond Capitalism', *Upping the Anti*, no. 15 (2013): 83–97; Michael Hardt, 'The Common in Communism', in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 131–44.

making, and is not used for commercial purposes,[20] warning against its co-optation by a capitalist outside.[21] But problems become evident when we examine the practices of solidarity economies, the self-organisation of work, the Occupy movements, struggles to prevent privatisation.[22] Celebratory accounts often do not extend to a critical analysis of movements' compositions and social relations within them, their relationship with their outside and whether they live up to these theoretical aspirations or reproduce the very relations they aim to fight against. In Part II, I examine local assemblies and alternative economies by asking these questions.

Social struggles in the crisis, dominated by the discourse, composition and imaginaries of the squares, took place amid heightened and purposely cultivated national and identitarian insecurity. By mid-2012, governments openly attempted to exploit this insecurity through policing internal and external 'threats', the spectacular criminalisation of immigrants and sex workers. GD's vigilantism was permitted and often praised as an instrument of social control. I explore this conjuncture in Part III. Seen through the lens of biopolitics, reinforcing sovereignty and the relationship between the national citizen and the national state in the crisis came to concern the separation of a 'healthy' political body from a racialised and gendered, 'diseased' and abject marginal body. In this context, the separateness of immigrants' movements, often also from the anti-fascist movement, has been a symptom of the deep racialised divisions in Greek society, and a precondition of ethnocentrism in citizen mobilisations. This normalised social segregation, especially of those visibly distinguished by skin colour, posed a great challenge to movements when GD began to gain popular support.

SYRIZA won the 2015 elections with a nationalist language, but also with the opening of detention camps written in its manifesto, a significant act that was soon reversed. The so-called migrant crisis that peaked in 2015–16 raised vital questions about the possibilities and meanings of solidarity beyond national belonging. It brought an important shift in migrant struggles and the practices and scale of migrant solidarity. Extending transnationally, these movements are the most hopeful developments after the end of the 2010–14 wave of struggles, and stand against

20. Caffentzis and Federici, 'Commons'.
21. George Caffentzis, 'The Future of "The Commons"', *New Formations* 69, no. 1 (2010): 23–41.
22. Caffentzis and Federici, 'Commons', 92–6.

anti-immigration trends in Europe, strengthened structures of border security and incarceration, humanitarian population management by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and everyday racism. Yet movements and migrant subjects can still reproduce the hierarchies and subjectivities cultivated by border regimes. Based on interviews with activists, Part III explores what conditions and initiatives might enable a questioning of such hierarchies.

Surplus Citizens addresses the central question of how the citizens of subordinate classes might avoid entrenchment in national belonging and rigid racialised and gendered identities. This concerns both Europeans and non-European migrants, who frequently organise on a national, ethnic or gender-exclusive basis. Asking this question is the opposite of holding an abstract principle of internationalism or of transcending identity in a voluntaristic fashion and joining a privileged elite of globe-trotting 'social justice warriors' – as populist neo-reactionaries would have it. Instead, it demands a self-critical theory and collective practice that eschews the easy answers of fixed collective identities and the supposed 'shelter' of the nation-state and traditional patriarchal family. These not only fail to protect from the ravages of financialised capitalism, but reproduce deeper forms of brutality, in which immiserated citizens are invited to participate. While struggles cannot transcend these social relations and dynamics at will, they can and do often challenge them, as I hope to show in this book.

A Note on Method, Sources and Presentation

Aiming for an analysis that would document the most important movements in the crisis and bring them into theoretical conversation has demanded both empirical and theoretical research. *Surplus Citizens* is based on participant observation, interviews and analysis of documentary material (websites, posters, self-publishing, self-critical analyses, ideological pronouncements, etc.), which aimed to detect the limits, points of conflict and tensions in the experience of movements. These limits were encountered collectively, and movement groups have been driven to reflect upon them, organising discussions and producing critical texts. Such experiences and reflection were the focus of eight months of participant observation in group discussions (grassroots unions, organisations of the unemployed, alternative economy collectives, anti-fascist groups, prisoner solidarity, social centres), assemblies

(neighbourhood assemblies, the movement of the squares), small protests and large demonstrations in Athens and Thessaloniki. Documentary research looked at movement communications (websites, posters, leaflets, newsletters, self-publishing, self-critical analyses, ideological pronouncements), first-person accounts and opinion pieces by participants in movements.

However, because of its broader perspective, *Surplus Citizens* does not offer the details of social interactions and personal or collective stories that would typically accompany ethnographic work on movements. In doing so, it deviates from common practices and modes of presentation in critical social movement research, which valorises experiences of struggle and the co-production of knowledge. Instead it offers not only less, but also more than would have been otherwise possible: it brings together theory and practice, and micro and macro levels of analysis. Through examining the practices, imaginaries and dilemmas of movements as expressed in their debates, and linking them to a broader historical, geographic and sociopolitical context, it explores the relationship between social action, social reproduction and notions of emancipation in the crisis. Debates within movements and encounters between their practices and the conditions of crisis impinge upon questions of value, exchange relations and the meanings of solidarity; the strength and limits of self-organisation; and the relationships between the 'popular', nationalism, class and racialised and gendered dynamics, in this *specific* historical conjuncture and geopolitical space. This approach is able to detect ambivalence and contradiction in social action and imaginaries, as well as distance and conflict between different forms of practice, revealing new avenues for social transformation and new obstacles to be addressed. This is because the questions posed by struggles, which can ground immanent critique, are not only detectable in their critical discourse and self-awareness, but also in the relation between their practices and the broader capitalist, patriarchal and racialised social relations of their historical context.