



Voices from the Greek Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The Greek socio-economic crisis, now in its fifth year, has become more acute with the collapse of discussions between the troika (EU, ECB, IMF) and the Syriza government, and the calling of a referendum. In concluding my keynote lecture “Life Writing ‘from Below’ in Europe”, at the 4th IABA Europe conference in Madeira in May, I noted that one constant theme of such writing had been the demand that hitherto unvoiced experiences be heard by society, in defiance of discourses which belittled and denigrated those on the margins. By telling truths about a way of life unknown to a wider world, these authors hoped to receive a sympathetic understanding, and perhaps achieve social justice. That need continues today. I cited the ATD-4th World project “The Roles We Play”, which explores the roles played by those living in poverty within their families, communities and society at large, so as to highlight their efforts, validate their achievements and challenge the negative attitudes often held towards vulnerable and excluded families (see <http://therolesweplay.co.uk/>).

The Greek crisis affects a nation currently being positioned as “on the margins”, or “on its way out” (the ugly neologism Grexit) of the wider European community. In response to this situation, the British newspaper *The Guardian* has published short interviews with 100 Greek citizens (see <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2015/jun/30/greece-euro-referendum-100-greeks-give-their-view>). Many of these interviews take the form of life writings: capsule auto/biographies of how the writers, their families and friends have experienced *i krisi* (as it is constantly referred to in daily conversation).

To read these life stories en bloc is a sobering experience. The writers, though divided in their attitudes to the EU as well as the specific question of the referendum, depict a society under acute pressure: conditions, in the words of one, “unthinkable, unimaginable”. Wages have been cut, and may go unpaid for months; overtime is not remunerated; working conditions lack proper protections; many work for nothing just to hold on to a job. Young people cannot enter the labour market; older workers who lose their jobs have no prospect of finding new employment; many who are highly trained work in jobs that make no use of their skills. Family life is disrupted; several adult members may depend on a single income, often enough that of a pensioner (though pension levels have been significantly reduced). Sometimes, a single detail speaks starkly: the decision to forego a yearly Pap test to check for early signs of cervical cancer (ironically, named after a pioneering Greek doctor) because it cannot be afforded.

Beyond these immediate struggles of daily living, broader themes emerge. Constant stress, accompanied by a feeling of powerlessness (several writers mention instances of suicide among their own acquaintances). Fear, and a sense of a growing aggressiveness in society: “you feel threatened, worthless and weak”, comments one. Above all, the loss of a space for ambition, and the possibility to have dreams for the future. This becomes concrete in two ways. Several writers mention the impossibility to consider starting a family. And many point to the high levels of emigration: as an individual possibility (whether longed-for escape, or regretted necessity), but also as the flight of a generation which will leave Greece drained of skills and talent.

Some writers are sharply critical of their own society: of successive political leaderships, which have failed to carry out necessary reforms; and of themselves and their fellow citizens for continuing to support such a politics. Others stress the generosity and creativity which have developed in the spaces of civil society, providing food and medical care for those who cannot afford it. All agree on the need for substantial reforms to the structures of Greek society. But collectively, their stories resist what one describes as the stereotyping of “lazy, tax-evading Greeks”. Such stereotyping underlines the point: what can be done to a group within a single society can be done to a nation within Europe.

Earlier economic depressions, above all that of the 1930s, produced life narratives which sought to articulate the experience of unemployment and poverty. Innovative forms were pioneered to collect and publish these stories. In Britain, these included Mass Observation, Penguin New Writing, the Left Book Club. And academic researchers on these topics have used life narratives alongside documentary evidence and statistical data: from the early Austrian classic study of *Mariethal: the Sociography of an*

Unemployed Community (1933) (see <http://agso.uni-graz.at/marienthal/e/study/00.htm>) to Glen Elder's *Children of the Great Depression (1974)*, an analysis of the long-term impact of the Great Depression on the life-chances of the generation entering the labour market around 1930 (see <http://elder.web.unc.edu/>).

Today, the Web enables a newspaper to collect and publish life stories of economic crisis with a new immediacy. Will they be heard, and heeded? *The European Journal of Life Writing*, like many such transnational research projects of the past 25 years, sees part of its role as making a contribution to the creation of a shared European civic space of exchange and discussion. As many of these Greek voices articulate, *i krissi* is not just a Greek affair; it poses sharply the question: what sort of Europe is this? Stereotyping is never only about the group it explicitly refers to; it is always also an effort to “discipline” the rest. These Greek voices, in describing the “unthinkable, unimaginable”, challenge their readers to think, to use their imaginations.