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*Dysfunctional Cultures and the Making of Homo Economicus:  
Expert Personas and Liberal Consent in Austerity Regimes*

# DYSFUNCTIONAL CULTURES AND THE MAKING OF HOMO ECONOMICUS: EXPERT PERSONAS AND LIBERAL CONSENT IN AUSTERITY REGIMES

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### **Abstract:**

Since the early years of the debt crisis that begun in 2010 in Greece, a large part of Greek liberal intellectuals and public commentators has argued for an interpretative framework with the notion of 'national identity' as the root of all Greece's troubles. Among other, their narrative presented the crisis as an opportunity for Greeks to rediscover themselves and acquire a more 'Western' and market-friendly outlook while austerity policies are realized. Here, the crisis was read as an outcome of a 'deviant culture' that now has the opportunity to recover. In this article, we focus on how the discourse of media personas who are 'non-political actors' -a philosopher and a marketing guru- popularized this framework especially between the years 2010 to 2013. We argue that these discourses, working to shape new social identities of flexibility, mobility and competition, compatible with the requirements of neoliberalism to overcome the crisis, work more effectively when voiced by supposedly 'neutral' agents.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, governmentality, economic crisis, liberal intellectuals, national identity, Greece

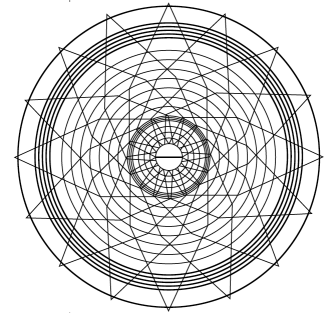
### **Introduction**

During the ongoing economic crisis in Greece many liberal intellectuals, policy makers and public personas put forward an interpretative framework with the notion of 'national identity' at its very core. This framework emphasizes some characteristics of the

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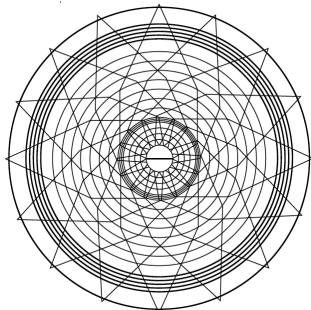
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Greeks, presented in an essentialist and an exclusivist way (Platzos, 2017: 211). These include an alleged Greece's non-European, or para-European status, the Greeks' somehow unique over-dependence on traditional familial structures, their emotional character prone to outbursts, their dogmatic treatment of history, the Greek people's supposed generalized tax evasion practices, their frenzied consumerism and an often irrational way of thinking and decision-making. The latter traits are not only thought to be in radical discordance with the values of a modern Western state and its civil society but are also portrayed as the main reasons behind the economic downfall. In this sense, the economic crisis and the neoliberal reforms proposed to alleviate it (such as austerity policies and privatisations) are here presented as an opportunity for Greeks to rediscover themselves while austerity is realized, as the 'bad citizens' have the opportunity to redeem themselves through introspection and to acquire a more Westernized identity, leaving their deviant self behind.

This discourse is in many ways constitutive of the ideology of the liberal political spectrum in Greece and elsewhere, related to what has been described as the 'extreme center' (Ali, 2015), or, the hegemony of the political Right (Dyrberg, 2005; Davidson, 2016), and its claim to represent a 'realistic' political horizon beyond the typical modern political distinctions of the left and the right, while explaining social issues in seemingly non-political ways. Indeed, a technocratic approach to political life that sees 'experts' as the appropriate agents to 'manage' it, views the poles of the modern democratic horizon, the left and the right, as outdated and even 'dangerous' for socio-political life. The danger they potentially pose primarily concerns the demands of the globalized, late capitalist economy, which since the late 20th century, has progressively assumed an increasingly central role in all aspects of social life, under Fukuyama's hegemonic "end of history" narrative that became the prevalent ideological doctrine across the world in the downfall of the Soviet Union. According to that, liberal democracy and free market capitalism form the final, the best and the only available system to organize all human affairs (Prozorov, 2009: 8). The hegemony of the 'extreme center' (or, the (neo)liberal Right), foregrounds mainstream economic theory as a 'scientific knowledge teaching



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politicians and citizens that true justice is market justice' (Streeck, 2016: 75). A key development of classical liberalism to neoliberalism concerns the definition of the market function itself, which under the neoliberal understanding, is defined not by exchange, but by competition (Dardot & Laval, 2014: 83). In a vulgar Darwinism, competition emerges as a 'natural' and defining feature of life itself, as well as a key political value and imperative to be safeguarded and promoted by policy interventions, and an individual ethos for inclusion, development and in the retreat of welfare, survival.

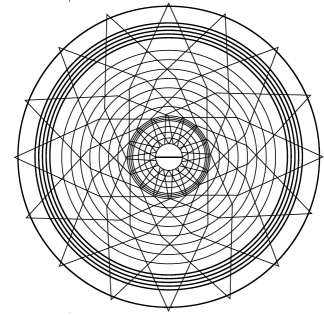
In this article, we explore how the specific ideological assemblage becomes particularly effective when stemming from expert personas and non-political actors (i.e. persons that do not represent a 'party-line' and are experts in their respective fields). We explore two very characteristic cases of this kind drawn from the recent Greek socio-political experience, the pop-philosopher Stelios Ramfos and the branding guru Peter Economides. Both these figures received wide attention in the Greek public sphere especially during 2011, and for a period became key media personas authorized to suggest solutions in dealing with the social and economic disintegration of the country. Partly through the prestige and presumed independent voice of these figures, the idea that the crisis is the outcome of a people's habits and dispositions (the culturalization of the crisis) acquired legitimacy to the point of attaining the status of a truth regime.

Employing the framework of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2010; Rose, 1998), which emphasizes how political power is exercised not only through the state but also by experts and non-political agents, we argue that these types of discourses work to shape new social subjectivities of flexibility, mobility and competition, compatible with the requirements of neoliberalism to overcome the crisis in capital's favour. Neoliberal governance is not only exercised as a conscious and calculative practice of the state; drawing on Foucault and others (e.g. Peck, 2010), we see neoliberalism as both a material project of dispossession (moving resources from the poor to the rich) as well as social constructionist project and governmentality as an adjacent rationality conceptualized both within and outside governmental practice by institutions and social assemblages that may not be always conscious when exercising it (Foucault, 2010: 2).

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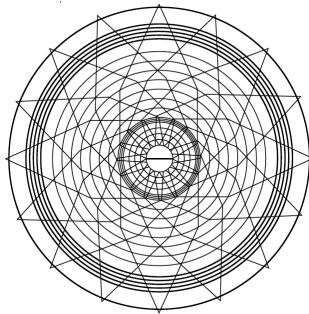


The framework of discourse analysis is useful here for exploring the nodal signifiers of the culturalist interpretative framework.

### 1. Capitalist Crisis and Neoliberal Restructuring

Since 2010, Greece has caught the attention of the world's media; a country that contributes only 0.2% to annual global GDP seemed to put the global economy in danger. For the mainstream media and economic elites, the so-called Greek crisis became a manageable discourse possessing certain exceptional characteristics (Mylonas, 2019); the 'bad' qualities of Greeks, mentioned above, but also the systemic dysfunctions of the Greek state organization (in what was often termed 'the last Soviet state' [*sic*] despite the fact that Greece has traditionally been part of the Western geopolitical formation). Within this framework, already existing stereotypes came to be re-purposed, promoting the idea that a crisis of capitalism was the outcome of a local, dysfunctional particularity. Due to its position in the epicenter of the EU crisis, Greece has been represented as a *sui generis* case. Mainstream media operationalized cultural prejudices mixed with cases of corruption, often generalized and decontextualized, producing a coherent narrative on the nature of Greece as a 'rogue' or 'failed' state. The category of 'Greekness', crystalized in a concrete homogenous whole, became, in this narrative, the 'villain' in, what Badiou (2018) – drawing on Debord– described as 'the spectacle of the crisis'. As such, culturalist explanations prevailed, organizing the villain as an objectified and known entity, responsible for its own suffering. These 'ontological' shortcomings of the 'Greek character' (Žižek, 2010: 86) surpassed issues related to unequal power relations between centre and periphery, socio-historical context, or internal contradictions and divisions of the Greek society.

Contrary to this narrative, many scholars saw the economic crisis of Greece as a local expression of a broader crisis that the capitalist system is currently undergoing (Harman, 2009; Fuchs et al, 2010; Harvey, 2010, 2014; Mavroudeas, 2014). In a broader sense, for Hardt and Negri (2009: 143), there are objective and subjective aspects of



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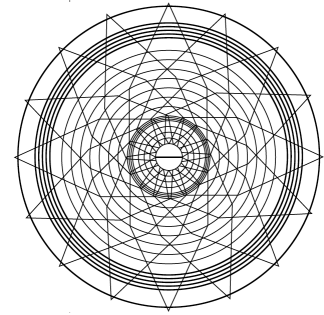
capitalist crises. The objective aspects concern crises in the production, circulation and realization processes of capital (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 142). The subjective concern crises of control (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 143), related to the insubordination of workers to politico-economic demands related to the changing requirements of the reproduction of the capitalist process. We hold that both aspects, which also relate to different traditions of Marxist critique, are valid in the exploration of the current crisis. We ground our analysis on the 'objective' factors producing the current systemic crisis of capitalism, with regards to a dropping level of profit rates and the constant difficulty (or, impossibility) for continuous capital growth (Harvey, 2014: 235), while focusing on the 'subjective' element in order to foreground the importance of control and disciplinary strategies in human populations objectified as labour forces, due to the key position of living labour in the capitalist valorization process.

A prolonged state of exception was politically organized in countries that were discredited by international financial institutions, bracketing liberal democratic, political, social and human rights. Following Foucault and Agamben, Athena Athanasiou (2012) argues that the state of exception becomes the norm of neoliberal politics, a system and a rationality of social politics. The politics that were followed by national governments across crisis-struck nation states (with the possible exception of Iceland) are meant to develop a post-crisis accumulation process through such exceptional policies. For instance, emergency laws, taken on the premise of the ontological threat that the economic crisis poses to nation states, attempt to fully reshape all aspects of everyday life, disciplining it to the emerging authority of economistic governance. Carrying this line of thought, Douzinas (2011: 64) argues that the emergency austerity measures imposed on Greece are an unprecedented and deep bio-political intervention in society's structure. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, political power and its exercise, as Foucault argued (1995), is mainly organized in relation to the disciplining of populations and bodies. Institutions, methods of scientific regulation of populations and hegemonic discourses, organized the preferred lifestyle, morals and life conduct for the subjects of the sovereign power, who further internalized and self-developed through individual

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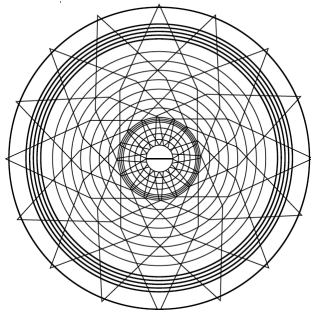
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conduct, and prevailing regulations characterizing normality and the obligations, rights and demands of individuals. The glorification of these expert liberal discourses by Greek mainstream media, as we will see later on, becomes, in this sense, part of a generalized bio-political intervention to gain the consent of the citizens in relation to the application of otherwise unpopular measures.

While disciplined and productive bodies are sovereign power's main objectives, as Deleuze (1992) and others (Brown, 2003) argued, late capitalist society goes a step further, attempting to control affects, desires and a series of more intimate aspects of life than its earlier stage. Brown (2003: 3) argues that neoliberal rationality aims at extending market values to all institutions and social action. In a neoliberal perspective, the market becomes the key denominator of state activities. The state is meant to produce and protect policies that will ensure the vibrant function of the market. The subjects of the sovereign state are further required to organize their individual conduct according to the rationalities, values and premises of the economistic configuration of society. Neoliberalism constructs and interpellates subjects to become 'rational economic actors' according to the neoliberal configuration of the earlier liberal mantra, as individualistic, consumerist, mobile, flexible and entrepreneurial subjects, with rational action and moral responsibility fully equated (Brown, 2003: 6). Social, political and economic power is depoliticized while the citizen of a neoliberal order is politically passive, expected to provide 'individual solutions to systemic contradictions' (Bauman, 2001: 23). The 'culturalist interpretation' then foregrounded by the expert media personas, as we will see below, motivates individual action on technical matters (correction of the self and its image), rather than action on systemic inequality.

To sum up this section, Greece and later all the European South, became seen as 'deviant mentalities', posing a 'threat' for those who do not embrace the TINA (There Is No Alternative) doctrines of neoliberalism and continue - to use a regularly invoked phrase - to 'live beyond their means'. On these threatening grounds, 'pre-emptive action' could be justified (Massumi, 2010), that is to say the implementation of austerity measures so as to avoid the catastrophe of 'becoming like Greece in the future'. As Jodi



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Dean puts it, the capitalist governments around the world have all repeated the same story: 'the people's excesses are the problem and the solution is to beat them back into submission' (2012: 44). The neoliberal project that set out to privatize state assets and intensify labour through the crisis in Greece and elsewhere was to a large extent based on this narrative. The 'exceptional case', was and is used as a political vehicle not only to distract the public from systemic questions regarding the global and political nature of the crisis but also to expand in a much more brutal way the very regime of accumulation in which this crisis occurred in the first place. At the same time, a laboratory is created for the construction of a neoliberal form of polity that –as mentioned earlier- will be compatible to the requirements of post-crisis capitalism.

## **2. The Making of Neoliberal Subjectivities in the Greek Public Sphere**

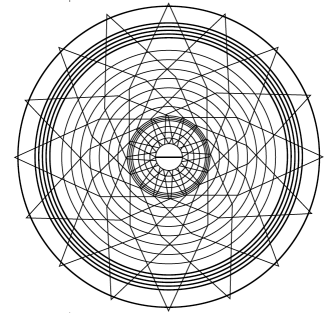
Situations of crisis imply a potential breakdown of a shared horizon and therefore open up the 'the possibility of conceptualizing political space and subjectivity in different ways' (Doyle, 2010: 128). As far as the Greek case is concerned, there are rival discourses attempting to hegemonize the social terrain. The liberal discourses examined here, framing the crisis as a result of national identity and culture, bears strong affiliations with the hegemonic crisis rationales adopted by the EU's politico-economic elites and mass media.

The publicly discredited image of the two main governing parties (Pasok and Nea Dimokratia), which were successively in power for over thirty years in the country, both of which were in support of austerity, made their cynical crisis-responsibility claims suspicious for the general public. Casting responsibility on the citizens so as to justify the current austerity measures that result in a drop in living standards were a rather unsuccessful strategy, resulting in public protest, often violent, against the politicians of these parties, particularly during the first years of the crisis (Douzinas, 2013: 62; Kioupiolis, 2014: 153; Gkintidis, 2016).

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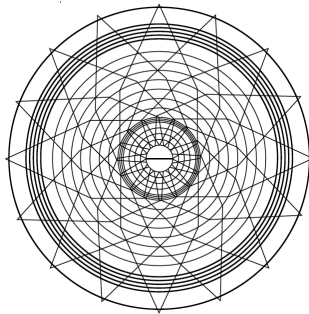
In turn, the most important point that we wish to emphasize is that when non-political actors, often thought to be ‘neutral’, become the agents of such discourses they can grant higher legitimacy and status to the neoliberal project. We draw attention to two liberal intellectuals that publicly emphasize the issue of transforming the national identity as a means to overcome the crisis. The philosopher Stelios Ramfos and the marketing guru Peter Economides come from non-political backgrounds and enjoy wide popularity as experts in their fields. As we discuss, they have in many cases provided the ground of argumentation as they have been recited by politicians, media experts, journalists, and a variety of groups and individuals articulating crisis discourses in the Greek public realm.

We look at the public statements of these figures mainly in the period between 2010 and 2013. As regards to Ramfos, the material that we analyze includes two of the books that he has published during that time, *The Logic of Paranoia* (2011) and *Time Out: The Greek Sense of Time* (2012) as well as two TV interviews that he gave that have been viewed several thousand times on social media. As regards to Economides, we examine his most popular lecture *Re-branding Greece* and one interview he gave on the occasion of this lecture. The samples we chose to analyze encapsulate the most significant points that these figures present on public discourse, and, provide some of the most recognizable cultural texts of the liberal-culturalist strand of thought they represent in the Greek public sphere.

### **3. Analytical method: Discourse theory and analysis**

In our analysis, we deploy concepts from post-structuralist discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1996; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007), such as ‘hegemony’, ‘antagonism’ and ‘chain of equivalence’ in order to analyse the selected empirical material. Discourse analysis is primarily a critique of ideology (Laclau, 1996b: 203), which in its post-structuralist perspective aims to foreground the political nature of all forms of social constitution (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 67). By ideology we refer to the prevailing or





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hegemonic logics that naturalize a given form of social construction and legitimize its forms of governance (Vincent, 2010: 17).

Hegemony, a concept of Antonio Gramsci, signifies the political strategies and interventions that can produce social orders, structures and identities. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 105) understand hegemony as a primarily discursive process. The work of hegemony is to articulate the dispersed elements of signification in specific discursive formations that organize common social meanings. Elements of discourse are units of signification that are transformed into equivalent moments of discourse (a chain of discursive equivalence) through the process of articulation, which is centred at a nodal point of discourse, consisting of the key concept/idea/signifier of that discourse. The stabilisation of floating signifiers in a chain of semantic equivalence is organized in accordance to the main discursive moment, a nodal point of discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 112). The nodal point is a necessary but arbitrary point that is hegemonically constructed as an order-producing centre (Stavrakakis, 1999).

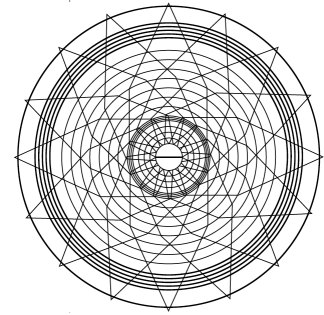
Laclau and Mouffe stress the contingent nature of articulation as all signifiers (the units of discourse) are 'floating signifiers', linguistic constructions whose meaning is never fully realized because they are fixed in a system of differences. 'All discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity which overflows it' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 113). Signifiers or the elements composing a discourse can never be fully stabilised. Discourse theory rejects that behind signifiers there is a 'true' essence of meaning. Hegemony attempts to fix meaning in 'moments' of a given discourse, producing the identity of the signifiers (and the symbolic or material entities they refer to) and naturalizing particular discursive constructions as 'objective', 'common sense', 'natural' and 'true'.

The elements of a discourse are thus only conditionally turned into moments and are always subject to dislocations and re-articulations. Difference marks the limit of semantic fixation of a signifier, and provides the premise for its constitution (Laclau, 1996: 52). Therefore, a signifier can never be fully fixed as it is ontologically dislocated and can only be partially constituted through hegemonic discursive interventions. The experience of this limit of the full meaning fixation and objectivity marks the presence of antagonism

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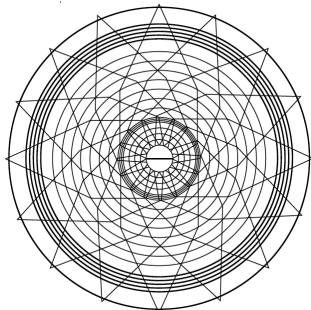


(Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 122). Antagonism and exclusion are constitutive to all meaning-making processes, marking the limits of a context and the terrain of its possibility. The presence of difference (or, 'otherness') marks the impossibility of one's full completion and at the same time is also constitutive to one's identity construction, as semantic identification processes are produced in relation to the aforementioned, diverse field of discursivity producing social formations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 125). Moments of rupture (such as the aforementioned subjective and objective crises) can allow the possibility for a form of antagonism to emerge in political terms, due to the disruption of the hegemonic order. The economic crisis itself is such an event, as the hegemonic, mainstream economics framework could not foresee it and did not have an adequate vocabulary to analyze it (Dahlberg, 2014: 260).

Signifiers denoting 'Greece' and 'Greekness' constitute the nodal points of the discourse studied. The concept of 'reification' is used in order to address the unequal power relations as well as the exceptions and exclusions that are present in neoliberal discursive constructions of identity. Developed by Georg Lukacs (2004/ 1921), 'reification' helps us understand how signifiers like 'Greece' and the 'Greeks' in the hegemonic framing of the crisis are produced as stable and objective totalities that conceal internal divisions and contradictions. The position of the 'Greek' as a 'villain' in the Eurozone results from such an objectification of 'Greeks' as a palpable, known entity that can be grasped cognitively, but also strategically instrumentalized for political goals of economic governance. Critical political economy and critical cultural theory are used to address the political and systemic issues that concern the understanding of the crisis suggested at the texts studied.

### **4.1 Stelios Ramfos and the Omni-potentiality of the Markets**

During the last five years, the (previously unknown to the general public) philosopher Stelios Ramfos was branded by mainstream media as one of the greatest



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contemporary thinkers and specialist in matters of the so-called Greek psyche. In 2011, Ramfos, often introduced as an ex-Marxist and an acquaintance of the left-wing philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, published a book called *The Logic of Paranoia*, which quickly became a best seller and was for many weeks the best-selling book in the country. The book has exceeded its 30<sup>th</sup> edition, something almost unheard of for a book written by a modern philosopher in Greece. Since 2011, Ramfos held very regular TV appearances in most mainstream television channels, mainly in MEGA (now bankrupt) and Skai, both owned by prominent Greek tycoons, being invited as an expert-philosopher to explain the cultural roots of the economic crisis. In July 2015 the high-publication Greek magazine *Status* declared that Ramfos is 'a living legend with big influence in what can be called the spiritual and political elite of the country'.<sup>1</sup>

According to his own words, Ramfos 'tries to approach the esoteric dimension of our collective wreckage in our perennial anthropological characteristics' (2012: 7). Thus, during the years of the crisis Ramfos turned from a relatively obscure philosopher to a nation-wide celebrity and his discourse was at a large degree influential in the formation of the liberal ideological arsenal for interpreting the crisis and suggesting opinions in its overcoming. His opinions seem to be particularly popular to a part of the population that seeks a more modernized version of national identity by assembling 'floating signifiers', such as progress, prosperity and development around the nodal signifier of 'Greekness'. It is the view of this paper that this seemingly liberal rhetoric often conceals a type of provincialism and orientalism (Chibber, 2013: 285), by reinstating hierarchies of power which are singularly addressed in national terms. For instance, in the excerpts below, which are very characteristic of his views, Ramfos addresses the collective 'we' in exclusively national terms, understanding the crisis as an outcome of a pathological national character that has to be healed:

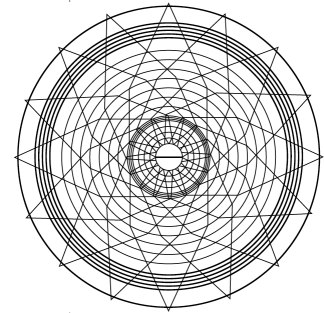
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<sup>1</sup> See 'Ο Στέλιος Ραμφός στο Status' – 'Steilos Ramfos in Status Magazine'  
<http://www.rebetiko.gr/arthra.php?article=423&highlight=%DC%F5%EB%E7#highlight>

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We are weak to embrace universally. We can see this in other levels: in favoritism, in the state structure, in unionism, in clientelism, in all these phenomena that are dividing. They are phenomena of partialities. If we could address this we could overcome the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

For Ramfos, the Greek politico-economic crisis is a symptom of a deeper and fundamental crisis of identity. This concerns the objective Greek identity and its limits in the (objective) (late) modern world and its position in the West in particular. This fundamental Greek identity is incompatible with modern developments and for this reason the broader socio-political framework of contemporary Greece is in crisis. The objective cultural and national characteristics of Greeks are consequential with and reflective of the religious 'inscriptions' of the country and its culture, notably its 'Orthodox past', which have installed in its collective psyche forms of thought hostile to reality and pragmatism. These inscriptions, according to Ramfos, are responsible for a tendency, which he discerns in Greeks, as the root of all problems, namely the tendency to interpret reality through subscribing to a kind of mythological thinking with no actual footing on actual events.

In one of his most well-read texts he writes:

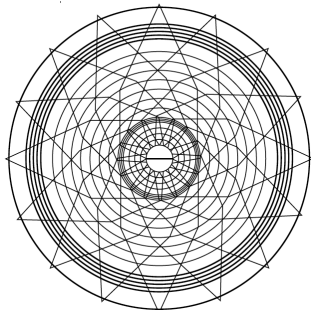
By being stuck on what he already owns, the Greek maintains and reproduces the psychology of a small child that finds security- but not adulthood- in the paternal protection of statism, partyism.<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor of the child in the body of an adult, who refuses to grow up in the proper way, is telling not only of its self-colonizing tendencies but also of the direction in which the solution is sought: the acceptance of the harsh austerity measures becomes, in this sense, a 'bitter but necessary pill' for reaching recovery. Needless to say, this discourse creates and reproduces hierarchies of power, in which the experts of the IMF and EU are seen as the incontestable authorities for fixing the situation. The drive for global competition, inherent in the capitalist system, is overlooked, and a blind eye is equally turned to the ways that global economies are fundamentally interdependent and

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Σέλλα, Όλγα, Στην Ελλάδα προέχει η συναίνεση πάση θυσία', Sella Olga, 'In Greece consensus should come first' (2011) [http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_ell\\_1\\_02/07/2011\\_447957](http://news.kathimerini.gr/4dcgi/_w_articles_ell_1_02/07/2011_447957) (in Greek)

<sup>3</sup> See 'Κίνημα 10: Η ευκαιρία της κρίσεως'- 'Movement 10: The opportunity of crisis' (2011) <http://www.protagon.gr/?i=protagon.el.article&id=7109> (in Greek)



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determined by political and geopolitical power relations and centre-periphery asymmetries.

Moreover, while this view presents itself as liberal, and as somehow free of nationalist rhetoric, it is predicated upon an utterly essentialist idea of the nation, a type of *Volksgeist*, that somehow emerges unalienated throughout the centuries. As in every metaphysical attempt to produce an undivided *Volksgeist*, similarly here, the idea of the nation is glued together by selecting particular references and practices deemed as 'national', while excluding others. In Ramfos, as well as in other neoliberal commentators, the idea of 'Greeks' as irresponsible and uncaring, conspicuously ignores all these activities where mutual solidarity, caring and aid have been extensively practiced in the Greek social space in the past thirty years, that is to say the numerous alternative, mainly anarchist and left wing collectives, like autonomous social centres and self-run refuge support zones. In reality, the perpetrators of this discourse not only ignore these initiatives, but usually take a position against them. As a case in point, according to Ramfos, the pathological weaknesses of the 'Greeks' are becoming particularly obvious in the irrationality and populism of the Left, which he regards as the most 'short-sighted and belated element in Greek society' that 'suffers from infantilism'<sup>4</sup> holding the nation hostage and is historically responsible for 'the national dichotomy'<sup>5</sup> existing in Greek society.

The 'belated Left' rhetoric, portraying the Left as a small child endlessly complaining to the parental figure of the expert technocrat, gives legitimacy to its opposite: the market forces that seem to be wise and prudent. Thus, Ramfos reinstates the authority of the markets as all knowing Gods in every opportunity. In a TV interview in 2010 for Greek national television, Ramfos mentions:

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<sup>4</sup> See 'Το Ελληνικό πρόβλημα. Ένας μεθοδικός και συστηματικός ευνουχισμός'- 'The Greek problem. A methodical and systematic castration' (2012)

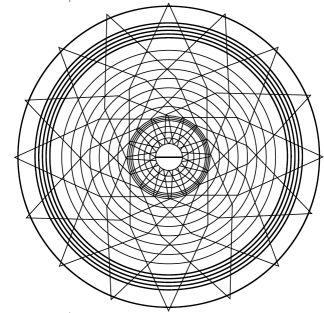
<http://www.megatv.com/article.asp?catid=14680&subid=1#toppage> (in Greek)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ibK4DG7nfs> 11.56

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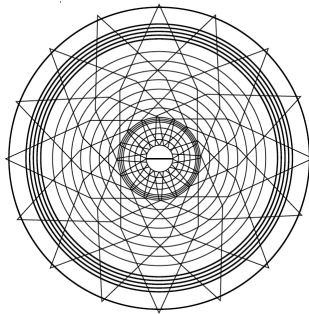
We are not interested in self-awareness. ..The crucial thing to see is that this is the point where pathogenesis is born. As soon as we understand this the yield spreads (the difference in percentage between the credit quality of Greece and Germany) will go down. The yield spreads are right to be where they are because they know that we are not capable of managing ourselves. Despite all the speculative games, this is the deepest truth. We have an unmanageable self...<sup>6</sup>

This is an example of extreme neoliberal rhetoric (often even difficult to find among neoliberal economists themselves), where the markets are not only capable of understanding the *Volksgeist* and its intentionality, but can punish it, i.e. with austerity measures, if they understand that it is ‘malfunctioning’. In this quasi-theological interpretation, the yield spreads assume the qualities of a supernatural force, able to account and take action in relation to the everyday habits of the people. One may wonder why did the same markets not punish the Greeks during the booming years of the Greek economy in the 2000s but instead “congratulated” them? Rather than confronting such questions, Ramfos’ narrative suggests that the crisis now is expressed through what ‘we’ failed to do in the past, an accumulation of national pathologies whose symptoms become manifest. Thus, after arguing that ‘the reason of suffering is predominantly our choices and actions’ (2012: 11), in his most recent book, *Time Out: The Greek sense of Time*, he states that:

...the unbearable weights of the new Memorandum agreement are not going to pay off, even if we sustain them solidly; they are going to pay off only when, we, the protagonists of this catastrophe, are going to acquire a clear image of ourselves so as to carry on responsibly and prosper (2012: 12).

The ‘protagonists of the catastrophe’ need to look inwards in order to find the cure and regain a prosperous life. In other words, if “us”, the national subjects, become more rational, prosperity will follow. While this statement contains a true part (the idea that self-reflection can lead to some sort of personal transformation) it utterly ignores questions of power in its economic, political and geopolitical guises and, even more problematically, it leaves out issues of inequality, exploitation and uneven income distribution. As a voluntaristic exercise, where the subject (or the ‘national subject’ in this case) transforms

<sup>6</sup> See ‘Συνέντευξη στην ET 1 με τον Στέλιο Ράμφο, *Το Αδιανόητο Τίποτα*- ‘Interview with Stelios Ramfos in ET1, *The inconceivable nothing*’ (2010) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGnKC09ymYs> (in Greek)



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itself through the power of its will, somehow unrestrained from coercive structural conditions, transformation becomes nothing more than a buzzword. Even worse, from the point of view of constructing a fairer society, this buzzword raises a smokescreen that prevents a more profound understanding of the ways power works as well as the mobilization of the oppressed in relation to it.

While Ramfos claims to have no party affiliation, in the 2012 elections he supported a small party called *Drasi* (Action) publicly stating that it is ‘the only progressive party in Greece’.<sup>7</sup> *Drasi* criticized the hitherto ruling parties for corruption and for receding to the micro-political vested interests of unionists while promoting the entrepreneurial ethos and values. At the same time, it was in favour of the IMF structural adjustments to the Greek economy that include privatizations, market deregulation, flexibility and devaluation of labour. In November 2014, Ramfos was invited as a keynote speaker and expert commentator to a major event organised by the new-born neoliberal party of *POTAMI*. Similarly to *Drasi*, this party employs an anti-corruption rhetoric and advocates policies of market reform. The political line of both these parties is that the crisis can be overcome through introspection and the guidance of liberal political authorities in order to reach a more Western identity and liberate the nation from its pre-modern state.

### 4.2 Economides and National (re)Branding

It will not be an overstatement to argue that the above narrative of the ‘dysfunctional culture’, popularized by Ramfos, has been one of the most widely-used weapons in the arsenal of liberal journalists, commentators and like-minded citizens within the Greek public space and elsewhere. Even if one does not directly quote him or refer to one of his texts, the general outlines of his perspective are more than frequently present in public discourse. Moreover, his status as an expert-philosopher granted

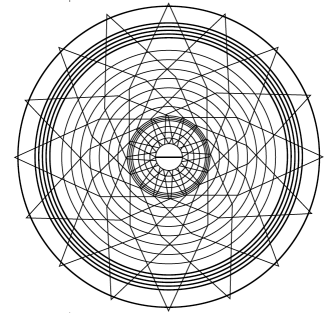
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<sup>7</sup> See ‘ΔΡΑΣΗ: Διευκρινίσεις αναφορικά με δημοσίευμα’ – ‘DRASI: Notes regarding a publication (2011) <http://www.euro2day.gr/news/highlights/121/articles/694903/Article.aspx> (in Greek)

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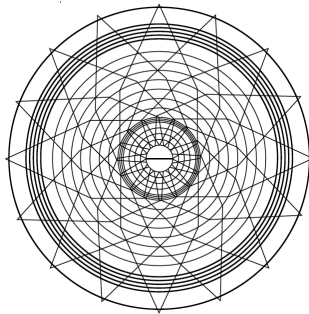


legitimacy to his views, and offered an orientation point and survival kit to liberal ideology during the destabilizing times of crisis. Thus, it came as no surprise that within the framework that Ramfos suggests (the dysfunctional culture that has to be healed), a number of more practice-oriented experts were given voice, and attained, even for a short time, widespread publicity. On many occasions, such as the one we shall see below, these experts not only expressed their opinions, but wished to intervene in issues of public policy and the ways that this had been hitherto exercised by the Greek state.

A sector of public policy strongly associated with the discourse of the ‘dysfunctional culture’ is the so called ‘national branding’; in fact national branding can be in some ways theorized as the application of the thesis that a so called ‘problematic culture’ can heal itself through the image it communicates, transforming the latter according to the market imperatives of competition and touristic demand (Jansen 2012). Perhaps the most famous national branding expert, rising to fame during the crisis and especially during the years 2011-2013, is the marketing guru Peter Economides. Economides is regularly (self) introduced as a former collaborator of Steve Jobs, the former general manager of the Apple Corporation, and in his personal interviews and speeches glorifies Jobs as a visionary who radically transformed the ruined Apple Company. This constant repetition of the presumed affiliation with Steve Jobs not only offers Economides the credentials of expertise, but -by making the frequent implication that Apple was saved by Steve Jobs the same way that Greece can be saved by a marketing guru- elevates Economides to the status of a potential national saviour.

After being introduced as an expert in marketing and branding affairs, Economides became for around a year a media celebrity. He was invited to speak on Greek mainstream TV channels, as well as at numerous other sites from neoliberal think tanks such as the *SAP Forum* in Athens to technology entrepreneurial institutes such as the online community of *ITPRO Dev Connections*. Coincidentally, in 2012, Economides was also invited for an interview on the weekly TV show ‘Protagonistes’, whose presenter later founded *POTAMI* (the one that also invited Ramfos). In this sense, Ramfos and Economides, and their respective discursive articulations, were part of the same





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ideological terrain, that of neoliberalism, whose proponents, at least in the initial years of the crisis, were looking to enrich their ideological basis with fresh perspectives and orientations. The latter have been strongly traumatized by the shock of austerity measures and the popular resistance against them.

Economides argues for the idea that Greeks should urgently ‘rebrand themselves’ in order to develop the strategic position of the country within the global tourist industry. Economides argues that “Greece is one of the greatest brands that has never been branded”, suggesting that the brand ‘Greece’, similar to Apple when Steve Jobs became its general manager in 1997, should not only adopt a new narrative in terms of its image, but also “believe” that its “product” is indispensable for the rest of the world (in fact, Economides in most of his public talks foregrounds the idea that Greece is the ‘Apple of the Mediterranean’). This can happen only if the national subjects start believing that they are something different from what they now are (or from what the world believes them to be). In this sense, Economides’ narrative is very close to that of Ramfos: the crisis can be overcome if the national subjects change their cultural habits and dispositions.

As Economides puts it in one of his most well-known passages:

Zorba is a problem; he is Dionysus and the Germans are Apollonian and they don’t like Dionysus...We need to park Zorba, we need to put him aside, he has a problem right now, he has an issue<sup>8</sup>.

Stereotypes connected to popular culture and the tourist industry are used as metaphors to define the Greek identity as problem and as solution. His talk ‘Re-Branding Greece’, from where this passage is taken, became viral on YouTube, achieving more than five hundred thousand views within a few months, a very high number of views for a lecture in the Greek-speaking cyberspace. The main idea in this talk is that Greeks should try to challenge their stereotypical image so as to potentially appear as more interesting to the tourists and to debunk their somewhat tired and worn down archetypal, “Dionysian” image of a laid back, consumeristic, hedonistic and promiscuous national Greek self. The particular talk has been embraced and repeatedly

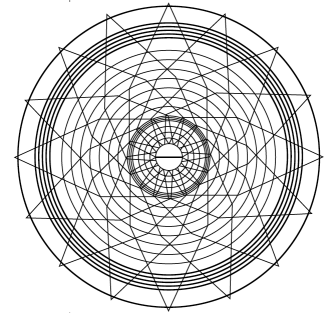
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<sup>8</sup> See ‘Peter Economides, *Re-branding Greece*’ (2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvyq5AHVrhM>

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praised by the mainstream media having been described as ‘the best synopsis of the Greek problem of the past few years’, and as ‘a very influential, but perhaps too progressive lecture for the majority of Greeks’<sup>9</sup>.

In Economides’ narrative we can observe the invocation of a constant threat- that of the country being rejected as a tourist destination-, a threat assuming the status of a bio-political apparatus of self-control. Within this apparatus, the citizens are interpellated and called to take action according to what is the best for the tourist industry. He thus opens his celebrated ‘Re-Branding Greece’ talk by wondering ‘is it rebranding Greece or rebranding Greeks? ...the brand is made up of individuals’. And, likewise for Ramfos, the solution to the crisis comes from our own effort to change our own personalities:

It may be an economic crisis but the way out of it is to solve the image crisis, the reputation crisis, the how we feel about ourselves as Greeks.

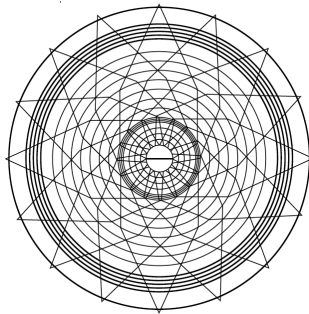
Because:

We have become the “bad kids”. We are to blame for that, and I keep saying this, WE are to blame for that.

Similarly to Ramfos, national identity should be objectified in terms of behaviours and personality traits as well as in terms of history and past events, although Economides –as a marketing specialist- focuses on the more ‘successful’ historical narratives than Ramfos –the ‘philosopher’- does. In order to make such a complex concept as national identity an ‘object of study’, Economides promotes certain series of such historical and other events that supposedly have a direct continuity and shape, in this case, the ‘eternal spirit’ of Greekness. This, again, entails the essentialization of the national identity into a

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Κοροπούλης Μελέτης, *Economides Peter: Ο απόηχος του Rebranding Greece*’ – ‘Kourouplis Meletis, *Economides Peter: The reverberations of Rebranding Greece*’ (2012)  
<http://www.ough.gr/index.php?mod=articles&op=view&id=600><http://www.ough.gr/index.php?mod=articles&op=view&id=600> (in Greek)



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selective lining up of references that are supposed to have a positive and straightforward continuity to each other (Platzos, 2017), and altogether form the Greek *Volkgeist*:

Greece is on the verge of bankruptcy. But we are *not* a bankrupt nation. We are Greeks. People with the power to imagine. People with the intelligence to turn imagination into reality. We imagined democracy. We imagined the Acropolis. Now is time to imagine the future.<sup>10</sup>

And in a more recent interview:

Greek DNA is constituted by human measure, the concept of earnestness, the perfection and the straightforwardness of Parthenon. Plus the craze that we carry. We have the potential to think differently.<sup>11</sup>

This pastiche of ancient, modern and contemporary stereotypical references, bringing forward a reified notion of Greekness, becomes the founding stone of Economides' discourse. The use of biological metaphors (the 'Greek DNA' [sic]) are grounding essentialistic features of 'objective' identity traits and authenticity. The essentialist Greek identity construction articulates elements as diverse as the 'human measure' and the 'Parthenon' around the nodal point of 'Greekness'. Thus, as Sue Curry Jansen notes, while nations are complex and heterogeneous entities, national branding is 'a practice that selects, simplifies and deploys only those aspects of a nation's identity that enhances a nation's marketability' (2008: 122). The idea of a desired national identity, according to this narrative tends to be linked with popular culture, entrepreneurialism, smart ideas and economic-orientated creativity, while issues of civic participation, democracy, emancipation and equality, are being neglected.

By activating the idea of national community as an image that always communicates, antagonisms are disavowed and the nation is portrayed as an object that can be immanently reborn and glorified, communicating positive messages where it should, the way it should. Economidis refers to 'all' Greeks, as problematic in a unifying discourse of reform that does not form open ideological fronts. As Sue Curry Jansen

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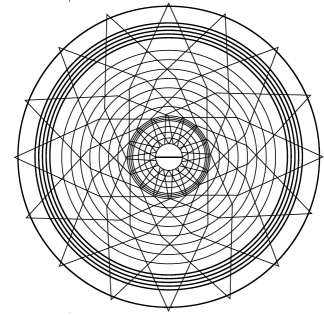
<sup>10</sup>See 'Peter Economides, *Re-branding Greece*' (2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvyq5AHVrhM>

<sup>11</sup> See 'Peter Economides, *Χάσαμε το πάθος μας για μια Prada- We lost our passion for a Prada*' <http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=446885&h1=true#commentForm>  
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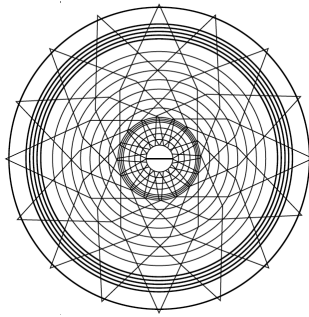
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comments *'nation branding transforms national identity into intellectual property'* and *'transforms civic space into 'calculative space': space that is constituted by marketing data and decision making'*, producing a "new type of reality" (2008: 122). At the time that Economides presented his views during 2011-2012, this 'new type of reality' was shaping itself against a background of labour devaluation as well as intense police brutality, the establishment of a police state and daily neo-Nazi attacks on immigrants and on leftist political activists. As regards to the latter, the unproblematic essentialization of national identity and the establishment of a 'calculative rationality' within the public sphere can dangerously feed xenophobic passions, by drawing distinctions between the undesirable poor and the desirable rich immigrant. What is of further importance is that the identity reforms suggested are overdetermined by a prevailing Western-centric gaze (concerning Economidis' 'Appolonian' understanding of the Germans that the Greeks should also assume and imitate), and Ramfos' aspiring Greek potential of modernization and entrepreneurialism. Both Ramfos and Economidis views are guided by a 'Westernizing' aspiration, which fails to take into account the political economy that organizes the ideological and the material relations between the center and the periphery, the impossibility of the periphery to compete with the core, and along with them, the states of underdevelopment and dependency on the (semi)periphery (Wallerstein, 2006: 65).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The examined discursive articulations anchor themselves around a notion of 'Greekness' in explaining the crisis. 'Greekness', or, 'Greek identity', 'Greek psyche' and other related signifiers formulate a nodal point of the discourse studied here, imbuing with meaning to the whole narrative that problematizes Greece from a (neo)liberal point of view. As Howarth (2004: 159) explains, 'the major aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilize systems of meaning or 'hegemonic formations' which, on a societal level, are organized around the articulation of nodal points. The latter are



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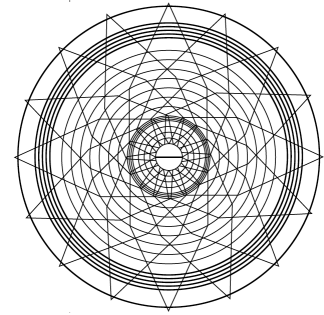
defined as privileged condensations of meaning that partially fix the identities of a particular set of signifiers'. The 'Greek psyche' and its genealogical 'deviances', are presented as a common denominator of 'all Greeks'. The political, economic and social space of the crisis is bracketed as something objective that 'we' have to accept and cope with. Instead, the crisis (and subsequently, austerity) is proclaimed as an opportunity for improvement, promising a bettering of 'ourselves' and 'Greece', through changing individual habits and committing to positive thinking. Thus, the overcoming of the crisis takes the form of a personal quest and a personal struggle. In that sense, these articulations dismantle the possibilities of political voice and agency for the lower social classes, which experience the most pressures 'to reform' under austerity regimes (Jacobsson & Ekström, 2016).

Within the highly antagonistic terrain of the Greek public sphere after the so-called Greek crisis emerged in 2010, the hegemonic narratives studied have been particularly influential in the effort to demonize certain socio-political practices from the social body. During the first years of the crisis and the political events leading up to the leftist, SYRIZA-led Greek government in 2015, a hegemonic antagonism was taking place in the Greek public sphere between 'liberal' agents supporting austerity reforms for the sustaining of Greece in the EU and as vehicles of modernization, and agents questioning neoliberal rationales and policies such as austerity and privatisations. Such an antagonism reflected a broader hegemonic discursive framework seeing Greece as Europe's Other, a narrative that reflects what critics described as the 'crypto-colonial' construction of modern Greece (Hamilakis, 2016, Platzos, 2017), where powerful orientalist discourses overdetermine the identity of the country and its citizens. Based on such master narratives, liberal intellectuals (e.g. Diamantouros) within the country have advanced simplistic accounts that frame the Greek society to be dominated by an 'underdog culture' reflecting the Ottoman, Byzantine and socialist-populist cultural background of the country. This underdog culture is an obstacle to the 'reforms culture' which stands for the minor but dynamic group of Europeanist and truly modern Greeks (Mitralexis, 2017: 126). Ramfos and Economides are part of the 'liberal' intellectual-

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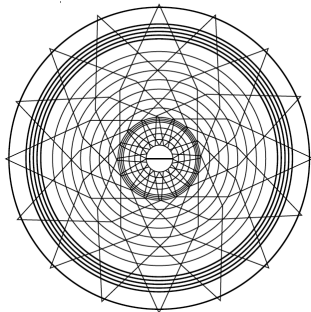
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ideological camp, holding powerful economic, political, social and cultural capital in the country, as it is tied to Greek and EU elites and mainstream media corporations manifesting the particular crisis rationales and policies. The authors studied helped to consolidate a narrative in which the ‘flaws’ of the Greek mentality were deemed historical and manifesting in practices resistant to austerity, such as protesting, boycotting and unionizing. The latter had to be replaced by introspection, obedience to the government rules and the development of, what they called, a more responsible self.

Ramfos’ discursive constructions produce the identity of an antagonistic front that needs to be countered, while speaking in the name of ‘us’ as ‘Greeks’ in a problematic perspective. This antagonistic front concerns the Left, presented as an active force sustaining the flaws of ‘Greekness’ that Ramfos identifies through the authority of his ‘expertise’, that is sustained through his regular presence in mainstream media and the regular references to his expert status by journalists, (neo)liberal politicians and mainstream media pundits. Economides diagnoses similar symptoms but does not foreground an antagonistic socio-political block within the domain of ‘us’. Departing from a different position of vocation and expertise, the genre of his discursive construction is a marketing-orientated one, with a prevailing positive and non-conflictual rhetorical mood (Fairclough, 2003: 115).

Both discursive constructions studied attempt to interpret the crisis and provide normative frameworks for the way out of it, striving to construct possible forms of social consent. The forms of social consent here relate, on the one hand, to the acceptance of the so called structural reforms that the IMF and the Eurozone demand and on the other to create new forms of subjectivities that will be productive within these contexts. Moreover, in these narratives the nodal point of ‘Greekness’ is constructed through the selective lining up of signifiers so as to help build a coherent narrative and suggest solutions based on this narrative. In both cases that we have looked at, this discourse seems to be able to provide an interpretative vehicle through a selective citation of ‘national characteristics’ that are supposed to compose a ‘national DNA’. This invented essence of the ‘Greek’ in the above cases responds to, is in dialogue with and is shaped



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by, imperatives of market economy, such as competitiveness, growth and profitability. Thus the discourses that we examine can be seen as ideological manifestations of capitalist political economy, disguised as neutral and 'scientific'.

In relation to the latter comment, we need finally to emphasize that these discourses work better and are more convincing when articulated from non-political actors, who are seen by the public as experts in their fields. Posted under an interview of Peter Economides in the Greek mainstream newspaper 'To Vima', the comment below is reflective of this tendency:

'I keep an eye on him through Facebook and I believe in him more than I do in all politicians together! Be strong...'<sup>12</sup>

To close with an anecdotal remark, when we attended one of Ramfos' speeches given for the political party *POTAMI*, we encountered an individual who was insisting that this was the biggest event in the political history of the country as, according to his views, politics and philosophy were coming together for the first time. Why, someone would ask, had this individual not taken notice of the (literally) countless times that left wing parties or collectives had invited philosophers or cultural theorists to speak about public affairs? In his narrative, but also in every mainstream public appearance of Ramfos (and Economides) it is the combination of expertise with non-political affiliation, the 'brilliance' of the expert and the 'neutrality' of the unaffiliated that offers the credence of objectivity and endows the opinions made with the effect of 'truth-telling'.

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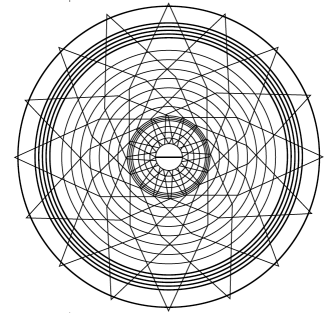
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<sup>12</sup> See comments under 'Peter Economides, *Χάσαμε το πάθος μας για μια Prada- We lost our passion for a Prada*' <http://www.tovima.gr/society/article/?aid=446885&h1=true#commentForm>  
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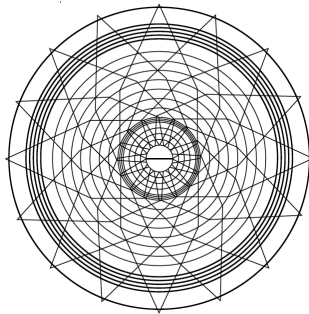
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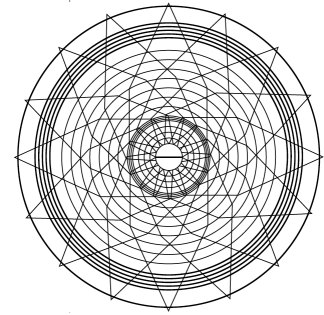
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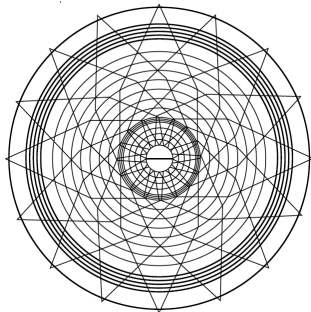
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### Культуры в состоянии дисфункции и формирование Homo Economicus: эксперты и либеральное согласие в режиме жесткой экономии

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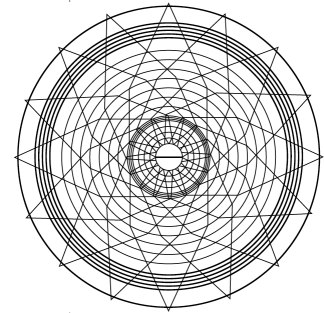
С самого начала долгового кризиса 2010 года значительная часть либеральной интеллигенции и общественников Греции рассуждали о том, какая объяснительная модель больше всего подходит для понятия «национальная идентичность», в котором они усматривали корень всех проблем. Они представляли кризис как возможность для греков в процессе реализации политики жесткой экономии по-новому взглянуть на себя и сформировать более «прозападный» и ориентированный на рыночную экономику облик. В этой связи кризис рассматривается как результат «неправильных установок культуры», которые теперь можно исправить. В данной статье делается упор на то, что медийные личности, такие как интеллектуалы и гуру маркетинга, которые условно находятся вне политики, популяризировали эту объяснительную модель, что особенно активно происходило в период с 2010 по 2012 год. Мы полагаем, что эти высказывания, направленные на формирование новых социальных идентичностей гибкости, мобильности и конкуренции, согласующиеся с требованиями неолибералов по преодолению кризиса, наиболее эффективны, когда их озвучивают агенты, которых принято считать «нейтральными».

**Ключевые слова:** неолиберализм, властоментальность, экономический кризис, либеральная интеллигенция, национальная идентичность, Греция

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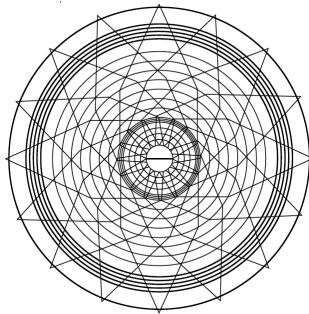
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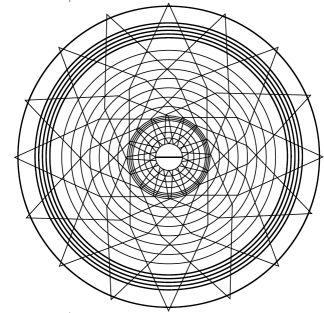
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