

**Daniel M. Knight, *History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp xvii + 210. Cloth.**

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### Book Review

It has been almost two years since the publication of Daniel M. Knight's *History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece*, a study based on the many years of ethnography in Greece that the author conducted for his doctoral research at Durham University, UK. I therefore had the opportunity to read some other reviews before starting my own, since I was indeed left perplexed by this ethnographic portrayal of modern Greece during the current debt crisis. Trained as I am in "Greek anthropology" – a self-reflective discipline grounded on questions of ethnography-at-home (Madianou 1999) – I was confronted with an example of a style of speaking about the ethnographic Other, I long believed to have been abandoned, a style that Robert Layton praises in his foreword to the book, which he describes as a "vivid and truly Malinowskian case study" (p. xi).

*History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece* is an ethnographic account of the first years of the implementation of austerity measures in Greece due to the debt crisis. The book is set in Trikala, a relatively small city in the Thessaly region of central Greece with a significant agricultural history and a largely rural population. Knight explores the stereotypical ways that the Trikalinoi (as the city residents are called) understand this austerity

in the context of their personal histories of former wealth, state patronage and clientelism. In other words, the book focuses on the ways they manifest their experiences of job loss and unemployment, heavy taxation and falling income in the "public sphere," and their ideas about the European Union and Germany in particular (chapters 3, 4 and 7), food and eating (chapters 4 and 6), leisure and lifestyle (chapters 7 and 8), as well as honour and status (chapters 7 and 8). The primary theoretical concern, which follows from the heuristic device of "cultural proximity" that the writer employs, is the extent to which the traumas of past experiences inform local perceptions of the current state of affairs. In the face of "financial crisis," the Greek subject from Trikala animates collective memories from earlier deplorable living conditions, and, thus, weaves the imaginary of the forces responsible for the debt crisis (attributed to the European Union, Germany and corrupt Greek governments).

Within this theatre of inscriptions and re-inscriptions of memory, the writer argues that some periods and events matter more than others. Specifically, he points to the period from the 18th century to the first decades of the 20th century, when the landlords (the *tsiflikade* - a term derived

from the Ottoman *çiflik*) of the late Ottoman and early modern Greek periods governed the economic life of the area with taxes. Memories of that period, he says, inform the sense of being “occupied” and “colonized” today (that is since 2010) due to the fiscal politics of the so-called *troika* of lenders (International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank). Likewise, he argues, the embodied memories of the great famine during Nazi occupation in World War II that decimated the population (mainly in Athens), created the sensescape upon which fears of an uncertain future and a whole web of signs and references about food and hunger have accrued affective value. On the other hand, he states that the Greek “civil war” (as it is styled by leftists), or “guerilla war” (as it is known to nationalists) – all in quotes since the writer tries to relativize this “White” against “Red” terror (p. 85-90) – is not *culturally proximate* to the Greeks of the debt crisis since it does not play a great part in today’s collective memory of suffering. Indeed, the writer’s main concern is in understanding the awakening of past traumas within the conception of present misfortunes.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of theorizing the mnemonic reorganization of the present for understanding “economic crisis” and Europe today, the writer fails to provide a consistent account of the relation between affective memory and everyday life, and instead ends up accepting the most banal stereotypes about the Greeks, ignoring any particular correlation between affects and the circulation of debt around the world. In addition, the “financial crisis” (which is the debt crisis of the 21st century) is presented *as such* without any reference to international processes or an examination of the politics of austerity (see Butler and Athanasiou 2013, Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2017). Specifically, the “absence” of civil war memories is shown in examples where the discussion of this *national* historical event – I emphasize “national” since collective memory is to a great extent repeated through state and government mechanisms, a condition that the study is not able to highlight – is shifted according to the emphasis placed on hardship. For example, the experience of the troika-prescribed taxation of private property ownership (*haratsi*) is equated with the memory of the *tsiflikades* ruling the land, and it does not reflect the crisis of the Civil War (p. 99). I find this to be a very linear conception of the relation between memory and “history,” one that ignores the political complexities that led to the Greek Civil War, which indeed still resonate, and fails to grasp the civil war’s immediate aftermath in the personal histories of his informants. For ten years after the end of the civil war in 1949, Greece experienced a peculiar regime later named the “Stone Years” – a very well-documented period (Mazower 2000) – where a smothered peace was paternalistically imposed in order for society to “forget.” This memory of forcibly forgetting is absent from Knight’s ethnography on memory.

The civil war is indeed “culturally proximate” to the Greek society of the debt crisis. The absence of narrations and the deliberately shifted discussions on the civil war regarding the experience of austerity, as portrayed in the writer’s ethnographic examples, somatize memories of the Stone Years when the Greek people were forced to suppress their divisions for the sake of progress (see Kostopoulos 2005, Panourgia 2009). That was all the more evident in the Greek bailout referendum of 2015 on the question of whether the Greeks agreed with the (German) EU fiscal measures or not, when, hoping for a better future, Greek society did indeed face dilemmas associated with those past ideological divisions. This awakening of memories that occurred the same year the book was published does not reside within the hermeneutic horizon of the study. This incident is more important than it might seem at first glance. The prevalence of (the leftist) “No” in the referendum, which was in stark contrast to how the civil war evolved, and the relatively “painless” release of those repeated affects of division, in spite of

the tension that preceded the referendum, reveal much more about the relation between memory and “history” than what the writer aspires to show.

The writer uses his informants’ narrations of suffering to create a collective perception of responsibility (Germany’s imperialistic politics and Greek corruption are the main signs of reference). From that narrative motif, as reality, he then goes “back” to the past in order to discover similar affective formations. History, thus, exists in this study insofar as it justifies the narrative motifs he encounters. This structural-functional understanding of memory becomes frustrating when one realizes that British intervention in the Greek Civil War – the UK funded and utilized the “nationalists” and triggered the initial conflict (Papastratis 1984, Richter 1985, Iatrides and Rizopoulos 2000) – is completely missing. To be precise, it does not even have to exist in order for Knight to justify his argument. Hence, what is being repeated is not, on the Greeks’ part, a (static) feeling of colonization due to external rule (as the writer argues) but, in the writer’s view, the exoticization of Greek accusation (particularly towards Germany) and an ethnic stereotype of state corruption and avoidance of responsibility. Joost Beuving (2016: 264), in his review of the book, commented: “Rather than understanding the consequences of the current economic crisis in its own terms – largely a result of lax financial controls following from a failing political overlordship [*tsiflikades*] – ordinary Greeks routinely explain their economic predicament with reference to dramatic highpoints in its modern history.” Such an uncritical response is indicative of the study’s inability to grasp the complex relations between memory and history, affective formations and the debt crisis. On the contrary, what is being implicitly acknowledged is the role of Germany as the country that imposes suffocating economic conditions and the banal image of corruption in Greece and the country’s inability to make progress.

Similarly problematic is his explanation of the relation between the fear of hunger and of food scarcity due to the “economic crisis” and the memory of the wartime famine. This is so because his examples do not justify the existence of such fear but rather show the intensification of already existing notions about wealth, hospitality, and eating rituals in times of uncertainty, notions whose existence he denies (p. 80). Mediterranean cultures, and certainly Greek, place a high value on hospitality and eating (Herzfeld 1997), yet the writer does not mention even once an occasion of a table full of food where he had to eat until he burst (not that he ought to). However, he does mention an incident where he was urged to eat – since “we don’t have a famine” (p. 80) as his hostess confesses – and he correlates it with an affect of fear for a future food scarcity, thus ignoring all rituals of hospitality and the Greek traditions on eating. Such literal reading of the everyday metaphors on food permeates his most important examples. The example of a “fast food” meal he shared with a group of informants (p. 82) is indicative not only of this literal reading, which compresses (and exoticizes) cultural difference, but also of this unreflective hermeneutic that conceals the historical presence and cultural presuppositions of the writer.

The fact that his informants gorged on a fast food meal he brought, even though he intended to keep part of it for later use, becomes the ethnographic material for weaving a narration of voracious consumption within an ethic of storage based on a fear of a future food scarcity, which is triggered by collective memories of famine. He dismisses any local notions about “health food” or “regular lunch” based on national fantasies of quality Mediterranean cuisine, which certainly informs the Greek rituals of fast food and the memory of its materiality (literally *fast* or *dirty*). On the other hand, the selection of such an ethnographic account prompts me to question the theoretical weight of his ethnographic

observations. Why would such an example contribute to his argument? Is fast food considered a “regular lunch” suitable for storage and later use in the UK? Is storing fast food such a strong and established norm in the UK in order for Knight to use the example of its immediate consumption as a case of people “making the most of what they have got, whilst they have it” (p. 82)?

The exoticization of the narrative concerning “Germany’s imperialism” and the normalization of the image of “inefficient Greeks” reflect both the dominant impression of the EU’s transformation into an economic vehicle for Germany and the British identity claiming a former glorious past – indeed the imperial past that feeds the imagination for a “vivid and truly Malinowskian case study.” Theodoros Rakopoulos (2016: 1027), another reviewer of the book, makes the following observation: “Throughout the narration of crisis, illustrated through evocative, telling, and often touching reflections of Trikalinoi regarding their collective fate, there is not much reference to the historically significant processes that recently have been taking place in Greece – a thoroughly political and often politicized set of events that have situated the Greek crisis in the center of global lay and scholarly attention.” Certainly, Greece is treated like an isolated Trobriand island.

Knight’s *History, Time, and Economic Crisis in Central Greece* poses a very important question about memory and the perception of the present in times of crisis, a question whose significance resonates not only in Greece, but the UK, the rest of Europe and the world. Unfortunately, despite some picturesque descriptions of everyday events and some interesting references to other writers (such as Mazower, Serres, Seremetakis, Stunton and others), this study fails as an insightful account of everyday life in Greece of the current debt crisis. Rather, it makes unfortunate connections by misrecognizing metaphors for reality, and, thus, recycles the most banal stereotypes about Greeks as “unable to understand the real reasons for the crisis,” “lacking in entrepreneurial rationality,” “caring only for ephemeral wealth,” “fighting each other,” and “showing off.” The reader of the book should evaluate the study together with other accounts of Greece in order to derive benefits from the ethnographic observations. Above all, s/he should have in mind that this study is first and foremost aimed at British academics.