

The Grind of Greece's Austerity: Sadness and Hope

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I am aware that much of the Left elsewhere in the world seems to be full of admiration for the radical currents that run through Greek society and urge their own publics to be inspired by the Greek resistance. Maybe if I lived in Athens I might share some of this optimism.

But for Samos and the vast rural reaches of Greece I am not so convinced and feel that too often sympathetic observers of Greek society confuse austerity consciousness and survival with something more grand and progressive. When your income is cut or simply evaporates; when the tax burden cripples the poor and working class; when you see on a daily basis that the rich and wealthy are left free to plunder with impunity; when you see the much vaunted bail outs for Greece providing nothing for the people but everything for the banks... it is hardly surprising that vast numbers here come to see that they live under a social and economic system which is only for the few.



Closed Shops in the Centre of Karlovassi; August 2012

We often use words carelessly so that it can be hard to capture the sheer depth and breadth of despair and above all the relentlessness of this humanitarian disaster which from the standpoint of Ambelos, a Greek village on the island of Samos gets worse month by month.

Every aspect of your life is affected, physically and emotionally. If I was compelled to choose just one word to describe the atmosphere in the village in August 2012 it would be depression. There is a deep and tangible sadness here.

But in Ambelos, Samos we are not in the middle of the maelstrom which is overwhelming so many, in Athens in particular and the other large cities of Thessalonica and Patras. All the Athenian summer visitors to the village make this point without fail, pointing not only to our gardens and our nature (which provides both food and most importantly fuel for the winter) but also to the social relationships of mutual aid and trust which seem to have evaporated in Athens. These are important observations but they should not be exaggerated. After all, as a neighbour recently remarked, 'our tomatoes will never be enough to fill our cars with petrol or to pay for our electricity bills and new taxes'.

Moreover, being on the Greek periphery in the eastern Aegean, on an island where workers are fragmented in small scale tourism or agriculture there is little here at the moment to lift the sense of hopelessness and sadness. Long before the current crisis, mountain villages like Ambelos were slowly dying all over Samos as a consequence of the endless cycles of poverty-fueled emigration, leaving behind a growing elderly and vulnerable population. Of course a great irony here which is never acknowledged by the political elites who are determined to shift the blame for the crisis onto 'illegal' immigrants and refugees is that for decades the slow death of rural Greece has been significantly slowed down by the highly exploitable labour of migrants.

First the Albanians and now the refugees. It is they who pick the majority of the grapes, olives and tend the mountainside farms. And like Maya, our Albanian friend in the neighbouring mountain village, they are now plugging the holes left by a fast disappearing (and wholly inadequate) welfare system. Maya and her young daughter in return for the top floor of the house, a small garden and 200 euros a month provides full time (24/7) care for an elderly farmer who lives on the ground floor. Visit any hospital in Greece today and you will see that much of the 'family' care of patients is in fact undertaken by people just like Maya. They are young, fit, able and being undocumented, cheap and exploitable.

The potential for inspirational change based on the needs of the islanders is quite immense here. Our peripheral status could help in this instance, for the neglect by the centre means that the grip of Athens is not strong nor is this likely to change in the near future as all that Athens can offer under the pro austerity coalition government is more pain, more cuts and more abandonment. Again and again, discussions and conversations reveal a widespread political consciousness that grasps many of the fundamental issues which need to be addressed here. Nobody (at least in my experience in the village) disagrees with the view that what is needed in Greece is a revolution: that the rich and powerful are largely traitors, bastards and thieves; that much of the state is rotten to the core; that we the people could do a whole lot better and so forth. Greece is full of millions who will tell you in great detail about its problems and those of capitalism more generally. This has been the education provided by the Troika. These are now issues of broad consensus.

But despite the political astuteness of the many on Samos there is very little progressive action on the ground. A Palestinian friend who had recently lived for 10 months in Ambelos

and was visiting this summer felt that the lack of activity on Samos, the relative absence of debates, initiatives and resistance is due to the fact that most peoples' energies are now solely directed at physical and mental survival and that these wider questions of social transformation are only of interest to those who know where their next meal and pay cheque are coming from. Furthermore, Raja added, compared with the Palestinian experience in the West Bank and in Palestine 48 (Israel) Greece is still in the early 'trauma' period of coming to terms with the devastation of their lives and society. This will change he said and re-adjustment to austerity will include, because it must, organic developments to secure survival. These he believes, like in the West Bank will in time lead to enduring new forms of solidarity and collective mutual aid where survival as human beings will be a central plank of the resistance. (Michael Lavalette and I discuss this in length in our *Voices from the West Bank* (Bookmarks 2011).

Challenging Traditions and Ideologies

I am aware that much of the Left elsewhere in the world seems to be full of admiration for the radical currents that run through Greek society and urge their own publics to be inspired by the Greek resistance. Maybe if I lived in Athens I might share some of this optimism. But for Samos and the vast rural reaches of Greece I am not so convinced and feel that too often sympathetic observers of Greek society confuse austerity consciousness and survival with something more grand and progressive. When your income is cut or simply evaporates; when the tax burden cripples the poor and working class; when you see on a daily basis that the rich and wealthy are left free to plunder with impunity; when you see the much vaunted bail outs for Greece providing nothing for the people but everything for the banks..... it is hardly surprising that vast numbers here come to see that they live under a social and economic system which is only for the few.

But as the crisis has deepened, at least here in Samos, this deepening understanding has not fed into the kind of collective actions which are needed. Instead we continue to see deepening depression and endless exploration of individualistic strategies whether it is growing new types of fruit crops, or making marmalades and other artisanal products for sale. On such issues as meeting the costs of fuel and tax bills, these are still, despite being common problems are managed by individuals or within households. As a recent conversation with a close friend in Ambelos illustrated these financial problems not only dominate your mind for most of the time but are incredibly corrosive of well being. Maritsa 's eyes were full of tears as she told me that she was utterly consumed by these anxieties and was so frightened of the days ahead. She talked of how even young children in the village were now becoming depressed despite all the efforts of parents to shield them from such horrors. Although she was aware that the problems she faced were shared by the majority here, she felt desperately isolated in her misery.

In exploring this further with our neighbour Angela and her son Chrys, who were visiting the village from Athens , they were trenchant in their views that little would change in the near future on the grounds that the villagers, like many Greeks were far too individualistic and motivated only by narrow self-interest. Chrys described how as a youngster growing up in Ambelos he was constantly frustrated by such attitudes. He talked of how he could garner little or no support for a variety of initiatives which he thought would make life better for the young people here. All he got he said were negative comments about how they would not bring much direct benefit to themselves so why bother.

Nevertheless, he did concede that as the crisis continued, such individualism may slowly erode as it became ever more apparent that individual households and families would be unable to meet their own needs on their own. And, he added, he thought that the tangible sadness of the village was a symptom of this growing realization made worse by not knowing how to change the situation and a deeply entrenched cynicism that people never acted selflessly. That is, if you did something it was primarily motivated by what you yourself /and family would gain for yourselves. Nevertheless, Chrys did concede that the creation of an active volunteer firefighter group in the village involving around 20 younger people in the village did indicate a positive collective initiative with much potential for pointing to new ways of doing things.

Distortions and Dynamics

The fact is we are living in times of change and turmoil. It is ongoing and any judgments and assessments are going to be inevitably conditional. For example, this is being written in August which is the month when people here take holidays and when those with vineyards are busy harvesting their crops and making wine. Ambelos is typical of many villages and towns on the island with its population almost doubling in August as a consequence of family visitors. This in turn leads to an upsurge in social activities and in Ambelos there will be at least 3 all night dances/concerts during August. Village morale is undoubtedly bolstered by the presence of the summer guests and family reunions.

At the same time there is a great sense that this particular August is like living through a few weeks of respite aware that storm clouds of new austerity await in the Autumn. In a country where so many now have nothing, the next waves of cuts in pensions and salaries and the imposition of new taxes, means that it is more than likely that the next six months is going to be explosive and who knows what changes will follow.

Whilst there is much to applaud about the 16 general strikes that have taken place over the past 2 years and countless other acts of resistance all over the country, we should take great care not to exaggerate their significance or take it to mean that some kind of revolutionary fervour is fermenting here. The selfishness and individualism referred to by Chrys and his mother can not be discounted and has long and deep historical roots linked with clientism. Moreover, the crisis feeds another common trait, that of Greek self-pity. You will hear again and again how modern Greek history is nothing but tragedy.

That despite being a 'special' people – a really depressing but commonly held view – on account of Greece being the cradle of [western] civilisation, the country and its people are now vilified and isolated. I listen with a sinking heart to people who I thought knew better, how no other people in Europe have suffered like the Greeks. Underlying this is a profound sense of nationalism, verging on arrogance typified by comments like we have the best fruits, the best wine, the best olive oil, the best seafood and so on in the world! And not least, no one loves freedom more than the Greeks which is why the relationship between the state and the populace is so fraught.

These are the sentiments which the fascist Golden Dawn party is appealing to with some success. But even amongst those who would never support Golden Dawn such views are feeding feelings of resignation and martyrdom and isolation. There is a desperate need now for another story to be told which reveals the manner in which the Greek political élites have for generations manipulated the glorious ancient history of Greece as a means of social control and indoctrination. This much lauded past with all its baggage of Greek 'specialness'

and superiority is actively promulgated within the state schooling system.

It is as if children are being asked to compensate for the chaos and distortions of modern Greece by its ancient past and its legacy and hence consoling the majority of the population who despite their poor and deteriorating conditions should nevertheless be proud to be Greek and feel personally enriched by knowing that they are directly connected to Plato and Socrates and the rest of its archaic stars. These processes and ideologies are inevitably reactionary. It means for example that many young people in Greece have little or no idea about the heroic resistance to the Nazi invasion and occupation of the Second World War and the popular movements in the mountains which saw women secure the vote for the first time, and above all created a social and welfare system that enabled many to survive one of the most vicious and violent occupations of that war. Narrow nationalism has also had distorting impacts across Greek politics with for example, a communist party (KKE) that is so sure of its righteousness that it can learn from no-one. There is often a surprising lack of knowledge of progressive and revolutionary currents beyond Greece, which again follows when you think you are 'special' and can learn little from others.

Need For Vision

It clearer to me from living here, that anger and disgust is simply not sufficient. Of course it is important to be clear about what we are against but in this current context of fear and sadness we desperately need to have hope as well. For all of Greece's much vaunted radicalism and resistance there is so little discussion about what we want, what we dream for and what is worth fighting for. We desperately need some convincing visions of an entirely new way of organizing society, one that does not rely on unqualified growth for a healthy economy and which does not present 'jobs' as the key factor to determine whether you have a reasonable standard of living. All the preconditions are here for such a vision to emerge as the old systems collapse.

Never before have I felt such an urgency to provide tangible examples whether from the landless people's movements of Brazil, the health achievements of the Cubans, the factories with no bosses in Argentina, the various initiatives from the radical village mayors of Spain, the seed banks of the women in India, the fights against electricity privatization in South Africa, credit unions, housing co-operatives and on and on.

We are by no means defeated. The people here, like everywhere else have enormous talents and capacity and we know that we could achieve so much together. But for there to be action we need the 'food' which inspires and energises: which promises justice and security; which is inspired by mutuality, respect and laughter and which is driven by humanity and not by profit. Unless we know and are enthused and driven by what could be we will never see the kinds of actions that will see an end to this torture. This is one of the challenges we face today alongside an educational programme which actively confronts a narrow but deep and widely held nationalism.

Chris Jones first came to Samos in 1995 and has been living in Ambelos full time since 2007. Previously a university teacher and writer in England he now writes about life on Samos under austerity and is co-author with Michael Lavalette of **Voices from the West Bank** (Bookmarks, London 2011).

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