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THE DARK AGES OF THE GOLDEN DAWN:
ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE OF THE GREEK CRISIS.

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The effects of the economic crisis on Greece are many and multifarious, while their analysis and proper evaluation is by no means an easy task for anthropologists. This comment is being written in the shadow of two deaths of Greek university students in the provincial town or Larissa due to carbon monoxide poisoning. The students, who could not afford to pay for central heating, had regularly been using an impromptu charcoal burning brazier that eventually turned to be lethal[1]. Less than two weeks before this incident, Britain's Guardian newspaper, drawing on EU data, warned its readers that Greece is a country in serious poverty with a considerable proportion of its population facing moderate to extreme material deprivation[2]. Greece has been hit by an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, the effects of which are still difficult to measure and appreciate.

At the same time, a different but equally severe kind of humanitarian crisis is unfolding in all major Greek cities. It concerns a large category of people colloquially termed 'illegal immigrants' (*lathrometanástes*), but in reality affects every person who is not –or does not *seem* to be-Greek. Refugees from countries like Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, asylum seekers, sometimes students and even tourists become victims of racist violence daily on the streets of Athens, Thessaloniki, Chania and Patras. Most of these assaults have been attributed to 'Golden Dawn'(*Chrisí Avgí*), a neo-nazi political party whose share of votes soared from 0.29% in the 2009 elections to 6.9% in the elections of 2012 and translated

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[1] See newspaper *Ethnos* 02/03/2013. For English version see
http://dawnofthegreeks.wordpress.com/2013/03/02/
[2] See Guardian 11 February 2013. For online version see
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/11/greece-humanitarian-crisis-eu

into eighteen seats in the Greek parliament. The party's provocatively fascist public statements and the criminal assaults that have been attributed to their members—including the fact that their spokesperson while in a TV show physically attacked on air a woman MP of the communist party—have not prevented Golden Dawn from increasing its popularity. The latest opinion polls (February 2013) estimate its support to be between ten and twelve percent and they surmise that should elections be held now, Golden Dawn would become the third political power in Greek parliament.

As with every other aspect of the current political and economic climate in Greece, the rise of the Golden Dawn is a hugely complex, multidimensional phenomenon characterized by great complexity. While we may know who constitute the eponymous corpus of *Chrisí Avgí* and the inner, military-like organized circle that compose the party's main structure –and we may equally dispute their wicked ideological and political character- we, as anthropologists do not know why thousands of anonymous Greeks seem to be offering support to this neo-nazi group. Many journalists and public commentators prefer to literally explain away the phenomenon through the claim that radical nationalism is not a new occurrence. According to this view, supporters of the far right have always existed. They where thus far hidden in mainstream political parties and they have now merely become an apparent force as a result of the disintegration of changes in the local political scene. Such an explanation would be tempting, if it was not for the fact that it confines thousands of Greeks into the uncomfortable and generalizing category of the 'fascist'.

Another popular explanation a contrast to this, is to argue that the Golden Dawn became strong solely in the context of and as a result of the economic crisis. In my opinion it would be a tremendous oversimplification to claim that *Chrisí Avgí* can be explained simply in terms of and as a result of the pressure that the economic crisis has exerted on the Greek public. The people who are coming closer to the Golden Dawn day by day are not making this political choice solely because they view the party as an anti-systemic political alternative that will put the final nail in the coffin of the old regime. Rather, it seems that support for the

neo-nazi radicalist discourses is not just an innocent message against the post-war political system of corruption and feckless governance. I suggest that partly it is its product.

The economic crisis and the humanitarian crisis that have hit the Greek people operate as a context and as a *field* (in the sense that Bourdieu theorized it) for the rise of extremism in Greece. Extremism is certainly fuelled by an embedded nationalism that has been systematically cultivated through education and in the public sphere since Second World War as has been so well documented in the anthropology of Greece[3]. Xenophobic and extreme right wing discourses find great support in the familiar idea of the 'enemy within', which has been an instrumental concept in Cold War politics in a country whose "geopolitical importance in Cold War years constituted foreign intervention not an exception but a consistent pattern in Greece's relationship with the West" (Kirtsoglou 2006: 80; cf. Clogg 1992: 146-7). This notion of the *enemy within* – what we might call a hollow category in itself (cf. Theodossopoulos 2007)- refers to the 'foreigners' (*allodapoi*) as sweepingly today as it did in the past when it was used to discriminate against communists, proving that political rhetoric produces multivalent tropes that are easily manipulated in their very perseverance.

One of the main political arguments that the Golden Dawn routinely puts forward –with success- relates to fundamental cultural differences between 'foreigners' and Greeks. Based on the claim that most of the immigrants come from Muslim countries, *Chrisí Avgí* cunningly plays with a number of social representations that were born and methodically nurtured in the context of the 'war against terror' in the aftermath of September 11. Images of backward 'Taliban' who beat women in the street—shown in international networks and reproduced by local media— have encouraged a view of the world divided in terms of a'clash of civilizations' paradigm, which is a simplistic perspective even if it is not alien even to the academic world, as the work of authors like Huntington (1996) demonstrate (cf. Brown and Theodossopoulos 2003). The very reasoning that the United States

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[3] See indicatively but not exhaustively: Theodossopoulos (ed) 2007; Karakasidou 1997; Brown & Hamilakis (eds) 2003; Cowan 2000.

deployed in order to gain support for intervening in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan – arguing that it was restoring democracy and human rights in those countries - is coming to haunt democracy and human rights in today's turbulent Greek politics.

Another important dimension of an anthropological explanation of the rise of the Golden Dawn relates to the character of the nation-state as the 'fullest institutional expression of human solidarity we have to date' (Wilkins 1992: 26).Currently the nation state operates as the *ultimum refugium* for an uneasy and confused ethnos, which –despite its pricey commitment to the West- has always been like an interior exclusion in the West itself (cf. Kirtsoglou 2006), its 'asymmetric partner' (cf. Stefanidis 2002). What is going on is perceived in Greece as a distinctive lack of European support and a punitive attitude from their European partners, and it is steadily transforming the content of yet another hollow category, that of Anti-Americanism. This concept operated for years as a cultural metaphor for felt and lived power asymmetries in the international political field. Now anti-Americanism is giving way to anti-Europeanism, and haphazardly but steadily sustaining collective feelings of closure and xenophobia (cf. Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos 2010). This is especially true vis-à-vis the rules of the Shengen treaty on immigration that are forcing Greece to become a huge detainee camp[4] whilst the country struggles to effectively guard its vast coastal areas. The lack of European and international support to the Greek people and the extreme neo-liberal focus on debt-reducing economic policies that treat the *state* and its *inhabitants* as one and the same entity, are encouraging Greeks to further identify with the nation state and provide support to nationalist ideologies. Cosmopolitan attitudes and discourses appear to a great number of Greek people not only as irrelevant, but as a luxury that only elites can afford. As my Greek informants and fellow citizens often bitterly point out, a suburban lifestyle –even today- guarantees that the 'foreigners' (*allodapoi*) that the upper class fraternizes with tend to be their domestic servants and not the destitute Pakistani refugees, or

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[4] See indicatively newspaper *wall street journal* September 15 2012. For online version see
http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444450600457761738313200476.html

Somali prostitutes that cross paths with the disenfranchised inhabitants of the centre of Athens.

The actual role of the local elites is of course hugely important, particularly in its historical dimension and depth. The anthropology of Greece has amply documented the processes through which, for several decades after the Second World War, local elites specifically cultivated nationalist sentiment through education policy and public culture. As I noted, extreme right wing discourses were systematically promoted in post WWII Greece and supported by the Cold War climate. Elsewhere (2006) I have considered the role and power of the para-state apparatus (*parakrátos*). This is also something that cannot be understood outside the context of international Cold War politics, flourishing and culminating as it did under the US-supported military junta that fell in 1974. Post-1974 Greece however, saw the rise of another kind of elite that reached its peak of power and influence in the 1990s. James Faubion has captured the character of this 'socially conscious member of a literary new wave' in his 1993 *Modern Greek lessons,* in the person of Loukas Theodorakopoulos, a supporter of homosexual rights in Greece:

> Both his education and his experiences were solidly international…
> he [conformed to] the pattern of the Greek 'modernizer' […]. They
> were "students who had studied abroad"… and who brought what
> strategies and technologies they had acquired back home with them
> after the junta's demise (Faubion 1993: 234).

Academically educated –mainly away from Greece- and exposed to a self-conscious cosmopolitanism and tolerance, the representatives of this new elite with its mostly upper middle-class background, yet whichnevertheless cannot be reduced to its class position, fervently supported the project of deconstructing Greek nationalism, theoretically, analytically and in practice. This was a globally conscious literary new wave – to which I see myself as belongong –and it undertook the enormous task of looking nationalism in the eye and uncovering its heinous role in the formation of local political selves. Sadly, our communal

effortsweretoo frequently removed from lived history, from the embedded memories of older people like those who crashed on Greekshores in refugee boats after the Asia Minor Catastrophe[5], or of those who fought the Axis powers in 1940. Our –dare I say, elitist- approach was very much disconnected from the feelings of the general population, people who had acquired considerable consumer power, who *looked* and *behaved* like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, but who had received a nationalist and formalist education (cf. Mouzelis 1978: 145), which was of dubious usefulness since outward appearances notwithstanding, their professional future depended largely solely on the clientelist networks of political parties. In a country where 'connections' are the only means to 'get things done' (cf. Sutton 2003: 200), where the social contract proves to be a fragile myth (Kirtsoglou 2006) and belonging to an international community as an equal partner turns out to be a mere folly (cf. Clogg 1992; Argyrou 2002) citizens are left with what cultural metaphors they can trust; namely kinship, the state-as-kinship and the nation-as-kinship (cf. Just 1989).

The rise of the Golden Dawn demonstrates –but does not exhaust- the amplification of at times extreme nationalist sentiments in Greece, but it also indicates the multi-level failure of this reformist movement to institute real change in Greek political culture. We, as anthropologists[6], might have succeeded in recording the voices of minorities, and in exposing oppressive and exclusionist strategies that required our immediate anthropological attention but we have not succeeded in making a real difference in the ideological fabric of Greek society. This failure can be mostly attributed to the fact that we were not always careful in the way we tried to *see the world from the informants' point of view*, taking local discourses seriously. In our hastiness to deconstruct the larger workings of power, we acted like Galtung's scientific colonialists; we assumed that 'we knew more about Greeks than Greeks knew about themselves' (Galtung 1967: 13; cf. also

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[5] I am referring here to the defeat of the Greek Army in the shores of Asia Minor in 1922 . For more details see Hirschon 1989.

[6] This comment does not exclude other academics (historians, archaeologists and so forth). It focuses however on anthropologists because of the specificity of our methods which will become evident in the next sentences.

Argyrou 2002), and we often located "the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation… outside the nation itself" (1967: 13).

The growing influence of *Chrisí Avgí* among the middle and lower income groups of Greek society on the one hand, and the refueling of radical nationalism generally on the other, are political phenomena that we can no longer afford to analyze from the comfort zone of our desks. For real people are being losing real lives on the streets of Greek cities; and these people are sometimes Greek and more often non-Greek, but in all cases disempowered, materially deprived, scared and disenfranchised. They are historically situated selves and we need to appreciate *their histories* instead of seeing them as 'anomalies' in hegemonic discourses of "progress" (Asad 1991). If we cannot take our informants seriously, if we cannot relate to their painful histories and if we cannot produce grassroots analysis of their fears and apprehensions, then we can never represent them anthropologically and we will never allow their voices to be heard. That task will continue to be undertaken by a group of dark-minded thugs who –ironically- call themselves 'The Golden Dawn'.

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