Introductory Remarks

The Greek crisis has had important ideological consequences in terms of political discourse and political communication. The form, the expression and the content of Greek nationalism as well as the changes in the national self-image are an important part of these processes in the crisis context. The interpretive uses of the past as a means of meaning attribution and politicizing the present are also important.

The debate on the so-called historical analogies highlights the importance of history as an interpretive framework and its connection with the negotiation of national identities. In addressing the issue of hegemony, Critical Discourse Analysis has developed the concept of “interpretative repertoires” which are defined as “the building blocs speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena. Any particular repertoire is constituted out of a restricted range of terms used in specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. These terms are generally derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signaled by certain tropes or figures of speech.”

Focusing on the relationship between language and power, “interpretative repertoires” are examined in the context

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of a historically grounded, widely shared—though often contested—meaning\(^3\), and are perceived to combine a cognitive function as far as the attribution of meaning is concerned with a meaningful political function.

In the present paper we explore the ideological function of interpretative repertoires in relation to the construction, reproduction and contestation of national identity and national self-image in the context of-and through-public discourse. Moreover, we explore the construction of “mythscapes” (Bell, 2003) in relation to the transformations of national discourse. Duncan Bell has defined mythscapes as “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly”\(^4\). The concept of mythscape refers to “ideologically heterogeneous and dynamic ‘discursive realms’”\(^5\).

Our principal assumption is that the economic crisis (with the year 2009 as its conventional starting point) signifies a turning point for Greek national discourse and also a rupture in terms of national self-memory and memory practices. As an introductory remark, we argue that the period from the early 00s till the end of 2008 is a period of national optimism succeeded by a period of widespread disillusionment.

The period of national optimism is directly linked to the prevailing economic nationalism that had established a consensus both in terms of elites and popular audiences. The rise in living standards (increase of GDP per capita from 10.087\(^\text{S}\) in 1995 to 14.173\(^\text{S}\) in 2005. Source: OECD) and the rise of consumerism had created a sense of relative prosperity and superiority compared to the neighbouring Balkan countries. This variety of economic nationalism was directly linked to pro-Europeanism as can be easily attested in Eurobarometer surveys. Its most tangible symbol was the substitution of the national currency, drachma, by the common European currency.

This period is also characterized by the employment of distinct memory practices by politicians and mass media on the basis of a memory regime constructed on ‘forgetfulness’ as far as the country’s past socio-economic conditions were concerned. The following statement by former Prime Minister Costas Simitis is a


\(^5\) Christian Karner, “The Uses of the Past and European Integration: Austria between Lisbon, Ireland, and EURO 08”, 404.
typical example: “Today the image of a small and insecure Greece has come to an irrevocable end” 6. In the context of these discursive practices the concept of prosperity did not just describe a present and a future state of affairs, but it was also placed at the core of a hegemonic narration that modified previous memory practices.

This regime of forgetfulness and the consensus built on the expectation of prosperity had also an influence on perceptions of otherness, with the case of Albanian immigrants being the most typical example. The slogan raised against them “You shall never be Greek” with its emphatic denial of Greekness also involved the inability of this particular group to have access to certain living and consumption patterns that seemed to separate Greeks from others.

We should also take into consideration the ideological developments that had taken place during the previous period, which dated back to the end of the Cold War, involves the landmark of the country’s accession to the EMU, as well as a series of episodes of nationalism such as the Macedonian issue, NATO’s intervention in the Kossovo area and crises in Greek-Turkish relations, characterized by the tension between modernizing efforts and nationalistic tendencies 7.

**The Interpretative Repertoires and the Mythscapes of the Greek Crisis**

The emergence of the economic crisis and its rhetorical negotiation by Greek political elites is a turning point as far as the discursive practices involving aspects of national identity are concerned. Prime Minister George Papandreou chose a small island on the Greek-Turkish borders- with the inevitable national connotations that the selection of this particular place entails- in order to announce the government’s decision to appeal to the IMF. Moreover, he argued that the country’s economic problem was also a constraint to national sovereignty (April 23, 2012). This interpretation of the economic crisis as a problem of national sovereignty was incorporated in the political communication strategies of all Greek parties following the country’s loan agreements. For the government at the time, the implications on an external enemy were a means of escaping political costs.

In Greek public discourse the crisis triggered a passionate debate on the concepts of guilt, responsibility and victimization. The present paper explores two

6 [http://www.costas-simitis.gr/content/75](http://www.costas-simitis.gr/content/75)

basic interpretive schemes that gained prominence in public debate and each one is associated with distinct aspects of the national discourse.

The first interpretive scheme can be summarized in the concept of “foreign occupation” and involves the construction of an external enemy who is blamed for the economic and social consequences of the crisis. A typical expression of this sort of reasoning is the anti-German discourse that uses memories and symbols of the Second World War, of Nazism and of Nazi occupation of Greece. Surely this scheme involves elements of continuity with pre-existing stereotypes and belief systems concerning the perception of Germany as well as the historical expressions of Greek nationalism. However, the experience of the crisis was decisive in shaping these pre-existing stereotypes, concepts and memory practices into a coherent discursive construction.

Moreover, the anti-German discourse became a vehicle for anti-capitalist and anti-globalization rhetoric. In this respect, as well as in its discursive formulation, the anti-German discourse has structural, functional and ideological similarities with Greek anti-Americanism of the post-authoritarian period.

In terms of political communication again, on January 2011 G. Papandreou announced his government’s decision to appeal to the International Court of Justice in Hague on the issue of the compensations for the massacre in Distomo invoking the national interest as well as the “particular symbolism of the issue”. Kalavryta and Distomo (Greek villages where Nazi atrocities took place) dominated the printed and digital media agenda. These places were represented as sites of martyrdom followed by emotional narrations and powerful images. In sort, a mythescape of victimization was constructed. However, this discourse on victimization also entailed the element of a potential resistance movement.

Apart from the victimization aspect and the construction of an analogy with the present, these narrations on Nazi occupation also served as a means of restoring national pride emphasizing Germany’s historical - both material and moral - debt towards Greece which was said to overshadow any present Greek debt as far as

10 http://www.ethnos.gr/article.asp?catid=22767&subid=2&pubid=50314948
Germany is concerned. This discursive practice became part of both right-ward and left-ward political culture in the context of the so-called anti-memorandum camp. The instrumental use of the concept of German occupation took various forms in Greek politics such as the founding of the party of the so-called Independent Greeks in Kalavryta.

Another aspect of this discourse is associated with the dramatic deterioration of socio-economic conditions. The symbolic consequence of this deterioration was the shuttering of the memory regime of forgetfulness that had emphasized the image of prosperity and reinstated in public discourse memories of collective poverty. Poverty came back as an organic part of national history; images and symbols from post-war Greece became again visible in mass communication channels. This is another framework in which the reference to the period of Occupation is inscribed; Occupation as a period of extreme poverty. It is in this context, that Alexis Tsipras head of the major opposition party stated that the winter of 2012-2013 was comparable to that of 1941.

The other side to this “return of poverty” as an element of national self-image is the resort to a fictitious memory, to a mythscape where prosperity, the ability to consume and the glamour of urban spaces had been present, to a past that could have become present had it evolved linearly. A symptom of this mood was the reception of a photo of Athens in the 1960’s published for the first time and was widely reproduced by mass media and social media.
A columnist in a prestigious Sunday newspaper edition tried to explain the appeal of this photo in the following words:

“A photo made us nostalgic of a past that never existed…Nostalgia is pain. It is pain because you know you cannot easily go back where you were. Nostalgia is also fraud…there was no poverty, no oligarchies, no schemers, no treasons, there was nothing bad then…”

The columnist persists on the fact that the remembrance of this era involved a “generalized poverty that seemed nevertheless reasonable” 11.

The second interpretive scheme of the Greek crisis is based on a perception of collective guilt that was captured in the emblematic phrase (21/9/2010) of Theodoros Pagkalos- a well known Greek politician and Vice President of the government at that time- that could be loosely translated as “we all did it together”. This phrase gave the title to a book by Pagkalos and also to a website where a sort of symbolic and ritualistic attribution of guilt was performed. The negotiation of guilt was at the centre of the book. According to the author its goal was to “define the concept of mutual responsibility and of complicity of citizens in the party that had been going on. It describes…how the blame is allocated from the top to the bottom”.

http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=491931&wordsinarticle=%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%AF%CF%83%CE%B7
In this sort of reasoning, the blame is transferred from the external enemy to the internal anomalies. Victimization is substituted by guilt and responsibility, thus legitimizing the need for the implementation of reforms. This discursive construction is also characterized by a different conception of temporality; it avoids references to the Occupation period and the war and it uses the post-authoritarian period (the so-called Metapolitefsi, since 1974) as its preferred period for constructing historical analogies. This interpretive scheme has become part of the centre-left, liberal, neoliberal and conservative political discourse.

Nevertheless, both interpretive schemes have been developed embracing, with variations, the ultimate goal of national salvation. It is worth noting however that in the argumentation constructed upon them one can observe the emergence of a divided national or political community, a scheme of two Greces let’s say. In the case of the foreign occupation scheme, the exclusion from the national body is performed through the construction of a traitorous identity; the accused is considered to be a servile agent of foreigners (namely of the so-called “troika” or the Germans) and in complete disagreement with the popular and national will.

In the scheme that prioritizes the concept of guilt combined with a critical perception of the Greek social and economic model a basis for distinction is provided by the concept of a so-called “productive Greece” which seeks to distance itself from the nation’s problematic past and to prevail over the non-productive Greece. This discursive pattern excludes from the national body and from the goal of national salvation the perceived as non-productive Greece as can be attested in the following excerpt from a conservative newspaper:

“Only the productive Greece can be saved. That Greece that all those mentioned don’t let her breathe. She consists from all those who work, produce, create. There are many people who can save this country, but they are covered by all the others, those that today weep that ‘Greece wasn’t saved” and what they mean is that their own bog wasn’t saved”\(^{12}\).

What underlies in this sort of discourse is the belief in Greek exceptionalism, that Greece is somehow excluded and differentiated from a western, idealized standard of normality. As a well-known columnist put it:

\(^{12}\) Paschos Mandravelis, «Which Greece was not saved;», _Kathimerini_, December 1, 2012.
“ultimately the crisis, with all its victims and extremities, might turn us into a normal country”\textsuperscript{13}.

On the other hand, prime-minister Antonis Samaras after his turn from the anti-memorandum camp developed a pro-memorandum narration combined with nationalistic overtones. In this context, the state of affairs deriving from Greece’s loan agreements is described as a parenthesis of “humiliation” in the nation’s glorious history, which ultimately will lead to national regeneration\textsuperscript{14}.

However, the two interpretive schemes interact in public debate creating hybrid narrations that combine elements from both of them. Such a hybrid narrative scheme is the combination of the goal of national productive restructuring with the denouncement of the country’s dependence in terms of patriotism. This tendency is most evident in the following article by a prestigious Sunday newspaper entitled “Only productivity and creativity can wash out the shame of bankruptcy”. In the article it was argued that:

“This process of complete dependence on the dosages [of the loans], on the debts and the ‘goodness’ of strangers can no longer be tolerated...[Greece] should start acting dynamically so she can be freed as soon as possible from this hateful state of submission and dependence...After all that has taken place during the three years of the crisis only an organized movement of production and creativity can wash out the shame of our great debt and bankruptcy. And for its inception and implementation all the combative and productive forces of the nation need to collaborate...It’s the only apt way to regain our country’s and our people’s lost honour”\textsuperscript{15}.

From a series of similar comments it becomes evident that the concept of national production and control over national economy are systematically associated with national pride. Loss or weakening of these elements leads to a perception of contested or threatened national identity which paves the way for seeking explanations based on an external enemy theory.

It is in this context, that the concept of a plan or a plot against Greece - a concept that has been often associated with the discursive expressions of Greek nationalism - re-emerges in public discourse. Setting aside the most extreme,

\textsuperscript{13} Alexis Papahelas, «Pioneers of a new era», Kathimerini, January 9, 2013.
\textsuperscript{14} Speech by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras at Thessaloniki on the 100\textsuperscript{th} anniversary since the Liberation of Macedonia, October 26, 2012.
\textsuperscript{15} http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=485210
conspiracy theories version of this scheme, we will focus on its inclusion in the bourgeois press that had supported the pro-memorandum camp.

In the following comment made by a columnist, the existence of a certain plot against Greece is addressed as a possibility, while economic independence is explicitly mentioned as an element of national identity:

“Bankrupt banks and a bankrupt real economy will go under foreign control through the transfer of the decision making mechanism out of Greece. If certain people think that the concept of national sovereignty is void of meaning, they should know that none of the big countries has abandoned the systematic effort to safeguard a strong national identity which directly depends on its influence on the economic sphere. A Greece where young graduates, if they are lucky enough, they will be working for 400 euros salary in corporations controlled by foreign capitals will actually be a satellite country, a modern colony. Even if there never was a plan to disgrace Greece and to humiliate the Greeks, the emerging outcome looks like a plan.” 16

Another hybrid scheme between victimization and guilt acknowledges the responsibilities and the mistakes of Greek society that led to the crisis, but perceives the response of the international community as unjust and cruel, as a sort of punishment that exceeds the errors committed. This scheme could be summarized as the guilty victim scheme. It is in this mood that the news website Protagon chose the painting by painting of Francisco Goya “May 3, 1808” to describe Greece’s condition.

While emotionally charged, the article stresses that this particular painting was chosen because the idealization of the victims is absent:

“Here war has nothing to do with heroism. It’s just brutal subjection. There are no festivities from the French, but also no effort to idealize the victims. Goya likes the victims. But he doesn’t redeem them…What we are watching is just an incident, a surrender, an inevitable fact. The submission of one country to another. Without shame, without defeatism, without triumphalism. This is how Greece surrenders to the rest of Europeans”17.

16 To Vima, September 2, 2012, p.21.
17 Protagon, October 26, 2011.
Conclusions

The cleavage between pro- and anti-Memorandum camp is just one aspect of the ideological processes taking place in Greece during the crisis. However, this cleavage involves two distinct “communities of discourse” who fight for hegemony and employ distinct and competing “interpretive repertoires”. Though this process the negotiation of national identity and national self-image is performed. The interpretive repertoires presented here and the mythscapes constructed even though they appear as contradictory in public discourse, they do interact and shape hybrid discursive construction. Despite the important ideological differences between the two discursive constructions, it is worth noting that the both acknowledge the nation as an uncontested and principal point of reference, while they both reproduce in a different manner the perception of Greek exceptionalism. Finally, literature on the interaction between crises and national identity issues has established that they tend to transform “a previously (largely) taken-for-granted cultural meaning into ideologically varied politicized opinions”18.