

Handshake Nostalgics and Starter-uppers: Restructuring Governance and Citizenship in Southern Europe

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, there is a general process of readjustment of socio-political relations, power geometries and hierarchies within fundamental segments of society. This article tackles precisely such transformations by analyzing emerging practices, legitimacies and struggles around citizenship in south European periphery. Ideologies, representations and deriving practices around models of financial support are deeply engrained within particular production structures, embedded themselves within particular historical social relations, moralities and claims. By looking at two very differently -almost opposed- produced regions, the Industrial District of SMEs in Veneto, and the large electricity production site of Kozani, we ethnographically explore the dialectics between the political meanings attached to “private” and “public”, while inhabiting with our analysis the mutually constitutive relationships between the economic and the political.

Keywords: Citizenship, Crisis, Entrepreneurialism, Greece, Italy, State

Introduction

The impact of the financial crisis in 2008 has deeply affected social realities in ways that have gone far beyond the restructuring and violent reconfiguration of existing economic formations. What went on, all over Europe and the global arena, conjured in fact aspects of what Antonio Gramsci termed an “organic crisis”: an accumulation of contradictions leading to the eventual collapse of economic structures, in turn triggering a domino effect which would determine, one after the other, a crisis of the ruling classes hegemony, of parliamentarism, a general crisis of the state, and, ultimately, “a catastrophic crisis besetting European civilisation” (Gramsci 1919, p. 163). For more than a decade now, we have seen a parallel crisis of political authority, engendering – almost universally – a general process of readjust-

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ment of social-political relations, power geometries, and hierarchies within fundamental segments of society such as political institutions, economic forces, and social groups.

The fact that societal change was everywhere, and everywhere profound, however, does not mean it was everywhere the same. On the contrary, we argue here for a combined use of ethnography, history, geography, and political economy, in order to understand how the transformative momentum of the global crisis created diverse, at times opposed, processes of political economic transformations “when it landed”. In this article, we discuss comparatively how crisis dynamics of change impacted state–citizens relations, and the institutional discourses and grassroots representations that are entangled within the social constructions of the state. Among the plurality of facets through which the state is apprehended and embedded in citizens’ everyday life-experiences, we chose to focus on the area of financial support. In southern Europe, in a context of skyrocketing unemployment and violent expropriation through severe austerity, even limited (supra)state subsidies – together with pensions and a retreat to family welfare (Narotzky 2021) – become cardinal aspects of social reproduction.

By looking at such societal processes in two industrial regions in Greece and Italy (Kozani and Veneto), we address the ways in which restructuring initiatives and the ensuing transmutations of governance have rearticulated moral hierarchies between general (one could say cosmological) categories of social life: public and private, state and non-state, individual and collective, as well as the social dynamics informing the production of otherness. Anthropologists have been studying the manifestations of the “abstract” state in the realm of everyday experience through folk models, popular perceptions, and vernacular ideologies around citizenship (Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Krupa and Nugent 2015; Trouillot 2001). In dialogue with this scholarship, we would aim to avoid implicit risks of methodological individualism, reducing citizenship “to inter-personal relations of ‘individuals’ [...] [and implying] that the relation between social classes and the State is itself reducible to inter-personal relations of individuals composing social groups, and individuals composing the state apparatus” (Poulantzas 1969, p. 70). Rather than opposing a naturalistic and/or phenomenological understanding of the state to an abstract, “realistic”, and structuralist understanding of its formation (and of the relations that animate its action), we adopt a relational approach (Thelen, Vettors and Keebet 2018). This necessarily involves framing local understandings, emotions, and popular categorizations within the historical, processual structure of relations and connections, shifts of capital accumulation and institutional configurations that underlie the everyday experience and perceptions of the state.

Our ethnographic material is the outcome of overall 15 months of anthropological fieldwork in each site between 2015 and 2016 -within the frame of the European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant “Grassroots Economics” project-, and a follow-up research in Greece in 2020. Together with archival research on local industrial histories, targeted interviews with institutional actors, and participant observation of various public meetings and events, 20 middle-income households and their extended family networks served as our analytical window into depicting wider processes of unequal social transformation. We argue that two different – almost opposite – models of institutional response to the crisis emerged in Veneto and Kozani, somewhat altering the ideological landscape and reconfiguring structures of meaning and models of governance

On the one hand, the recent shrinking of private investment, the decline of workflows, and the bankruptcy of small businesses in the horizontally integrated chains of production of Vicenza (Veneto), a booming industrial district since the 1970s, seem to challenge the deeply rooted ideology of self-reliance, individualism, and localism (Diamanti 1996, Hadjimichalis and Papamichos 1990). To be sure, previously dominant anti-state narratives have not disappeared. Yet the establishment and/or operational expansion of social or political institutions, morally re-evaluating the available public resources as crisis-management (as a matter of fact “life-saving” – at times literally) devices, brought to the fore ambivalences regarding the “state as a burden/parasite” and the “state as a source of support/buffer device”. On the other hand, in Greece the mainstream representation of the economic bust as a deficit/sovereign-debt crisis produced the image of the state as a source of corruption and profligacy. Such discourse became even more prominent in Kozani (Western Macedonia), a region economically dominated by the semi-public electricity industry. Shrinking resources and the problem of “too much state” was to be solved through the promise of a renaissance of entrepreneurial spirit, linked to new and older schemes and institutions of transnational governance and financial leverage. European Union (EU)-funded start-up hopes, materialized or not, often brought with them a certain rearticulation of social distinction among historically grounded socio-economic groups, while further problematizing the citizen–state relation in terms of responsibility, redistribution, and blame.

While it elaborates upon two different case studies, our short article cannot be regarded as a comparative study *sensu stricto*: the historical trajectories of the two cases and, most importantly, the organizational patterns of production forces were way too different for us to attempt a strict qualitative comparative analysis. Rather, our goal was to examine together cases of a thoroughly different nature – the small and medium-sized enterprise (SMEs) capitalism of Veneto and the extractivist regime around the large power plants and mines in Kozani – in order to show how specific sets of

ideological formations, representations, and attitudes to the state are historically engrained within, and integral to (1) the particular local structure of production forces; (2) the historically specific sets of social relations derived from the forces of production; and (3) the global historical conditions for the reproduction of such forces. All the differences accounted for, governance in both case studies seems to have become a much more plural and multifocal process, in which a plurality of institutional actors, public and – increasingly – private, seems to take part. Such fragmentation of the field in which governance is exercised seems to have had a (mainly negative and regressive) influence over the capability of modern states to produce citizenship. In other words, the current relation that populations entertain with political orders seems to limit to produce collective subjects, definable through social and economic entitlements. Apart from moments of profound social unrest and agitation, there seems to be a worrying displacement of social/political conflicts towards an intra-class arena (Vetta 2020), or towards the domains of intimate and affective relations, that is, towards the family, the community, or even the body itself (Loperfido 2020; Sarkis and Matos 2020).

Narratives of self-reliance, hard facts of crisis

Lorenzo (55) comes back to his shop from his coffee break apparently in a bad mood. He had just saw Luca, the tobacconist next door, and they had a loud argument. Luca had rudely denied that he owed Lorenzo some money. Lorenzo told him to “piss off”, and came back to the shop. Mariana (55), his wife, who had stayed in for the break, mumbles: “I don’t wanna say ‘I told you’ ...”. Lorenzo tells her off, too, and goes to work in the other room. Mariana lowers her voice and explains what happened. Some weeks before, Lorenzo was asked by the tobacconist to prepare a quote for a new sign, and a technical drawing, to see what it would look like. Lorenzo did that, but then Luca realized he no longer had the money and he would not buy the new sign. Lorenzo, however, had put work into the drawing, and had in mind to ask Luca for just €30. Luca refused to pay, triggering a lively argument that later degenerated at home into a full-fledged fight between the couple. Mariana’s “I told you” referred to her long-standing conviction that her husband should always use the new software she almost forced him to buy for their business. “It’s expensive, but necessary,” she reckoned. It’s a software, she explained, by which you formalize a quote, turn it into an order “with just a click”, and then – just as easily – turn the order into an invoice. At home, she scolded Lorenzo, saying that had he made a “formal” electronic quote on the computer, the quote would then be official, and thus the tobacconist would need to pay for Lorenzo’s service. “But Lorenzo

is very stubborn”, she admitted, as he insisted belonging to a disappearing world where a “handshake was more trustworthy than a contract”.

The scene took place in the fall of 2016 at Lorenzo’s business, a petty family enterprise printing commercial stickers, posters, banners, and producing commercial signs in downtown Vicenza. After graduating at one of the local technical/artistic high schools, Lorenzo had worked for a few years as an apprentice graphic designer in two of the then blossoming industrial district of the Vicenza area, learning to project objects both in gold, and leather. In 1989, he decided to start his own current business. Vicenza was then in full economic expansion and business was going well. Just a year later, in 1990, he proposed to Mariana and asked her to leave her secretary job in an advertisement agency near Padova, in order to undertake administration duties in his new firm. Later, when the crisis erupted, and their business was nearly bankrupted, Mariana turned out to be a real asset; while Lorenzo turned towards despair, she was the one who actively and successfully struggled to keep them afloat.

Vicenza (110,000 inhabitants), has undergone massive socio-economic transformations in the last 50 years. Despite coming from a historical background of poverty defined by its agro-pastoral, semi-mountainous landscape, from the late 1970s it benefitted from a larger process of capital decentralization, which determined the impressive in-flow of capital investments in the region. Industrial growth was sudden and disproportionate, mainly thanks to the specific configuration of its productive structure, later known as “industrial districts” (IDs). The horizontally integrated networks of small, family-based craft industries could more actively respond to the increased “flexibility” demands of global markets. Veneto and the surrounding region of north-east Italy came to embody the recipe for success for so-called flexible capitalism, and became *the* flagship topic in economics, and policy and geography studies in the 1990s and early 2000s. One of the advantages of this model was considered to be the local containment of the division of labor. Crucially, this literature maintained, the above implied the commonality of cultural traits, as production systems shared a specific history of local social bonds (i.e. kinship, friendship, and local identity), allowing for mutual responsibility and trust (Becattini 1992; Piore and Sabel 1983, 1984). This was supposed to induce in workers and firm owners a “natural”, harmonious form of cooperation, given that they were already linked through non-contractual forms of mutual obligation. Such an idealistic view of socio-economic realities assumed the self-regulatory nature of industrial districts (Blim 1990a, 1990b; Ghezzi 2003; Narotzky 2007; Smart and Smart 2005; Smith and Narotzky 2005), implicitly redefining the state as an unnecessary intruder (Hadjimichalis and Papamichos 1990; Narotzky 2001; Smith 1985). Many of our interlocutors, especially in the industrial sector, repeatedly referred to state regulations as an impediment

to an assumed Venetian vocation for “getting things done”. The “growing disconnection between rulers and the ruled” (Pardo and Prato 2016, p. 1) appeared, here, to be deeply engrained within a specific history of the relations of production, in which much of what could and would happen economically was thought to be dependent on virtuous “local” resources (generally opposed to “national” – i.e. state mediated – ones). One could argue that the ideological features of self-reliance, localism, and individualism we found in Veneto, are enmeshed within this deep reliance of the forces of production on non-economic factors of the locality. The territorially and ethnically particularistic expressions of anti-state politics made famous by the populist Lega Nord (a party first constituted in Veneto) may thus be seen as “not just a left-over residual of primordial culture, but a form of class consciousness appropriate to petty producers at a certain stage in the development of the forces of production” (Smith 1985).

As has been shown for similar formations of small industry capitalism, the initial advantages of local development varied from the exploitation of family land ownership (Ghezzi 2012; Yanagisako, 2002) to the (ab)use of family labor (Ghezzi 2003; Loperfido 2020; Narotzky and Smith 2006) to local social capital allowing for social trust between buyers and sellers, mutual cooperation, and access to informal credit (Ghezzi 2012; Narotzky 2007) to ideological homogeneity between entrepreneurs, workers, and local political administrations (Triglia 1986).

Such a detour into the intersections of productive structures and the social relations derived from them is necessary in order to better capture the ideological formations circulating in Veneto. This new cosmology had its own othering dynamics: if the self-reliant, individualistic entrepreneur emerged as the symbolic cornerstone of this worldview, the “dependent” public servant (often embodied by the southern Italian immigrant) and, more generally, the state, became a natural other, endowed with negative moral power. When Lorenzo claims that, in his world, matters are settled with a handshake, he defends a worldview that is shaped by that ideology. The latter situates professional/commercial relations out of the formal market’s domain and outside of the normative space of the contract, which also means outside of “the reach of the normative, regulatory function of the state” (Narotzky 2001, p. 130).¹

However, by the time of our fieldwork in 2015–16, the hegemonic ideologies that were connected to the Venetian economic expansion seemed on the wane. The crisis-ignited credit crunch made visible the high debt exposure of many local businesses, while expansive bankruptcies had triggered an epidemic of entrepreneurial suicides, undermining the image of the entrepreneur as the archetypal model of Venetian self-reliance

1 Our translation.

(Loperfido 2020; Turchi, Cigolini and Ferrari 2015). Alternative narratives seemed to penetrate the social field, promoted, this time, not by academic economic models, but by a number of civic and/or state-funded institutional devices that emerged in reaction to the 2008 economic breakdown. Prominent among these were the STRADE (Servizio Territoriale Relazione di Accompagnamento nella Difficoltà Economica)² help-desk – a service of the non-governmental organization Caritas, funded by both private and state donors; the InOltre service “for the health of the entrepreneur” of the Regione Veneto;³ and the PSIL (Patto Sociale per il Lavoro) of Vicenza Province.⁴ Such institutions seemed to deconstruct the alleged self-reliance of the Venetian entrepreneur by making more visibly available already-existing public resources and welfare support, based on private/public cooperation.

To go back to our ethnographic vignette, the argument between Lorenzo and Mariana displayed the ambivalences among different ideological attitudes around the state, competing over hegemony. Indeed, we met the couple at the above-mentioned STRADE service of Caritas, set up to support families and small businesses on the verge of bankruptcy. When applicants were judged eligible, Caritas could intervene, directly or indirectly: by lending money, by mediating with the public gas and electricity company to restructure debts (Aziende Industriali Municipali – AIM hereafter), by negotiating a debt haircut or by mediating between households/firms and landlords, city halls, and prefectures, in order to avoid evictions. Caritas’ authority in the locality was embedded in a long-term political economy in which, since the early nineteenth century, the Catholic Church had played the role of a quasi-state organization, providing welfare, education, and cash for the rural poor who fell outside the boundaries of state support (De Rosa 1991; Lanaro 1974, 1976). This unmatched reputation allowed STRADE to operate as a broker between the Italian welfare state, other civic institutions, and the local citizens, at times – as we will see – even directly distributing state resources to claimants.

Since 2009, the success of the formula pioneered by STRADE for utilities’ debt repayment, had even led the state-owned AIM to become Caritas donor. As explained by STRADE’s administrative head, the funds given by AIM were way less than the amount they would have lost in bills owed by insolvents without STRADE’s mediation. Beneficiaries, however, had

2 Territorial Service for Support during Economic Hardship.

3 Created by the regional government, InOltre came to the rescue of entrepreneurs who were going bankrupt, who were then in the midst of a pervasive suicide epidemic. The service was known locally as the “*sportello anti-suicidi*” (anti-suicide help-desk).

4 “Social Deal for Labor” is a network of cooperating public institutions, heavily financed by both Vicenza Province and a private foundation, actively operating as a broker between local enterprises and fragile social segments.

to abide by certain conditions: they were compelled to follow financial advice for debt management and “financial literacy”. In the case of small businesses, they would have to give up “risky” off-the-books economic activity, and subscribe to training courses for “modernizing” their ventures. Caritas’s operations in this domain seemed thus to function through a fundamental trade-off between advice/support and formalization. Through the same mechanism, the state, which provided support both via direct funding and debt discount, would obtain greater tax income and debt repayment (Leidreiter 2020).

Mariana, as a recipient of STRADE services, had to attend a training course on the use of particular software for issuing quotes (the one she was blaming Lorenzo for not having used in his transaction with his client). She was indeed defending the rejection of informality in order to get support. Not without complaints: she admitted to resenting the complexities of the quote software and disliked EU-enforced bureaucratic innovations. On the other hand, she seemed aware of the inevitability of them complying with Caritas’s request to recognize the state as a central actor in the administration of economic life.

Private initiative and the profligate state

We do not expect magic solutions from politics. The relationship between state and business must be restored HERE and NOW, and all our politicians must understand that only through private initiative and business will we have a growth perspective, and not through the harshness of the measures taken in recent years ... we admit the mistakes of the past. We admitted them. On the other hand, entrepreneurship has been targeted and dragged down in recent years. At the moment, an anti-business wind is blowing that is constantly driving Greek companies to neighboring countries, and this is certainly not in the interest of our country. You hated the successful. You put a damper on the business with heavy taxes and bureaucratic tricks of the public administration. If the Greek state has to do anything, it is to leave free in a new business environment the healthy forces of the market to do what goes without saying: to take risks, to produce and to create.

These were the introductory words of the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Kozani, at the “Conference for Entrepreneurial Restart” on 12 February 2016. In the light of the highly mediatized Greek crisis, the private sector – as the absolute “other” of the state – emerged in the public sphere as the main hope for preventing a GREXIT and mitigating the general pauperization. In the mainstream hegemonic view, the uncontrolled sovereign debt was understood as a crisis-cause rather than a symptom of more structural uneven development and financialization

(Lapavitsas 2012; Maniatis and Passas 2013; Mavroudeas 2014). The idea of some profligate state and its people living above their means, as well as the constant stigmatization of public workers as parasites, were massively promoted by conservative media (Mylonas 2014), nationalizing and culturalizing the crisis in order to legitimize austerity.

In Kozani, a small district of around 150,000 residents in the mountainous prefecture of Western Macedonia, such discourse took on disproportionate significance because of the heavy economic dependence on the semi-public electricity industry. The tremendous WWII and civil war casualties in Western Macedonia left Kozani politically traumatized and economically deprived. Its postwar economy was mostly based on agriculture, animal husbandry/herding, commerce and remittances from massive out-migration. However, in the aftermath of the global oil crisis of the 1970s, the Public Power Corporation S.A., or DEI, started exploring the rich lignite deposits in the region following the general economic trend of import substitution (Tsotsoros 1995). A massive extractive regime was built around the eight new power stations and open coal mines that, by 2015, stretched over 160 square kilometers of expropriated public, communal or private land. Greece, a country that imports two-thirds of its total primary energy supply (mainly oil and natural gas), was transformed into the fourth biggest lignite producer in EU (after Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic). Kozani's rapid industrialization and massive offer public employment (9,000 directly employed in the region until the late 1990s) significantly boosted the previously impoverished local economy. A combination of strong DEI unions, political favoritism, and a particular post-dictatorial historical conjuncture of redistribution in favor of labor, resulted in comparatively high salaries, pensions, and benefits. This, in turn, fueled consumption and wealth effects but also created deep inequalities in the labor market, giving rise to numerous social conflicts both among energy workers and among those excluded (Vetta 2020). Further antagonisms and high unemployment, derived from longer processes of de-industrialization and outsourcing, and strongly accelerated by current generalized austerity, were mostly attributed to the very public character of the company. At the same time, DEI's eventual decarbonization (according to EU climate change policies) was urgently opening the debate on post-lignite futures (Alves et al. 2018; Vetta forthcoming a). According to recent research, the decarbonization of Western Macedonia will affect 14,275 direct and 8,546 indirect jobs, while another 53,330 people will see their income significantly decreased (Vatikiotis 2020). DEI's industrial monoculture and some derived mentality of state-dependency were to be blamed for the economic dead-ends, stagnation and the massive youth out-migration. The solution laid in economic diversification and entrepreneurialism, an aim that took on quasi messianic tones in an attempt to rebuild the post-crisis middle-class dream (da Costa and Saraiva 2012).

In a period of severe credit crunch, capital for entrepreneurial ventures was to be found within different programs of the Partnership Agreement for the Development Framework, co-funded by European structural and investment funds.⁵ Of course, EU funds were far from new; they were historically situated at the very heart of the EU integration process. From the 1980s, they were intended to help the so-called lagging regions catch up but also to mitigate the deregulation and structural adjustment that the creation of an open European market entailed (Mitsos 2001). “We don’t give you money, we give you responsibility,” underlined the representative of the local development agency running such EU programs, hinting at the ultimate goal of changing society’s productive structures. EU programs involved either competitive direct funding of a business plan or, more recently, the use of alternative financial engineering tools such as financial leverage, revolving on equity financing (bringing in venture capital through the European Investment Bank). Brainstorming for business ideas was an everyday practice for our interlocutors in their 30s, who sometimes approached the ideological label of the entrepreneur cynically – as an arrogant, often corrupt and well-connected opportunist – but other times seriously, drafting business proposals for submission. Many, euphemistically called the “entrepreneurs of need”, had no original will or passion to embark on entrepreneurial ventures. Setting up an SME was thought to be a short-term rescue plan, until better days arrived. Indeed, many of SMEs founded with previous grants survived only for as long as family labor/assets were abundant and subsidies provided some liquidity. The ending of such support left many “starter-uppers” psychologically drained, mentally exhausted from the bureaucratic burdens and often heavily indebted, as efforts to keep the firms afloat implied new loans using their own homes as collateral and an accumulation of unpaid taxes (Vetta and Palomera 2020).

However, while some regretted their choices, others were more enthusiastic about the “opportunities” offered. Such was the case of Nikos (32), born and raised in Kozani. His father, a DEI pensioner-engineer, and his mother, a town-hall administrative worker, sent him to the University of Crete in order to study mineral resources engineering with the ultimate goal of getting a good job in DEI. “This was the family plan for me”, he said, “as it was for many boys of my generation.” However, this aspiration never materialized. Energy liberalization according to EU plans implied a radical restructuring of DEI’s workforce (Vetta 2020). As the company stopped offering stable jobs but instead relied on outsourcing, and after winning a couple of very precarious contracts, Nikos decided to radically change his life-prospects: “I

5 See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds_en (accessed 16 February 2021).

needed a Plan B and so I decided to return to the land.” He got acquainted with EU projects when his family, together with his uncle, got some funding to install photovoltaic panels on inherited land, in his father’s village of origin. This was the time (from mid 2000s) of considerable incentives and public funding for small renewable energy projects, capital’s new socio-ecological fix (Ekers and Prudham 2015). Many households and farmers, particularly during the austerity era, tried to diversify their decreased income, yet recurrent recalculation of tariffs and increasing taxes left many heavily indebted and in despair (Knight 2015a; Vetta forthcoming a). Nikos then started cultivating the land – he decided to be a farmer.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis, the development of the agricultural sector was set as a top priority of EU entrepreneurship programs (ESPAs). The profile of the so-called new farmers was constructed and highly mediatised, pointing to successful educated youth, engaged in innovative for-export cultivation of niche products (such as goji berries, snails, sea-buckthorn). The massive return of unemployed urban youth to their parents’ homes in the countryside appeared as an opportunity for rural repopulation and growth, and Greece’s historically highly fragmented land tenure (Vergopoulos 1975) meant that most owned a small piece of land that could serve as a starting point for new futures.

In the beginning I grew thyme in the village. But I was not just sitting down with my hands folded. I was asking around. I went to the agronomy faculty in Thessaloniki and was told that, in these rocky lands we live in, levanta or mountain tea can have very good qualities.

With family support (in terms of labor and money), Nikos started growing tea together with his cousins on the common family land, and he was in the process of applying for further EU funds in order to construct his own packaging unit. He was already selling his product informally in a few shops and was part of the new anti-middleman movement of food distribution (Rakopoulos 2014), but his plan was to acquire an ISO (International Organization for Standardization) accreditation and a protected designation of origin. Nikos was constantly “seeking for markets”, sending tea samples to various international salons, and planned to develop agro-tourism activities by participating in a tourist network for aromatic plants. He often asserted:

I am a farmer now, and I am proud of that. But I’m not like the old farmers that sit and wait for the subsidy to come [from EU’s Common Agriculture Policy/CAP and state subsidies]. I fall in this strange category of “new farmer” [laughs].... In Greece there is no marketing, nobody knows what branding is. And it’s not just a matter of skills. Greeks have a culture of Raya [slaves in Turkish, this was the name for Greeks in the Ottoman times]. The subsidies

made farmers lazy, you were even told what to grow. They were saying this year durum wheat will be subsidized, or cotton, and we import soft wheat for bread! With vineyards the same, they subsidize foreign varieties, Cabernet, and the traditional local seeds have almost become extinct. But Greeks are submissive, they bend their heads down, they do whatever they are told. And they don't want responsibility. Like at DEI, they go to work and then return home to rest, with no worries. I don't want to be a farmer with the old meaning of the word. I am an entrepreneur; I want to assume the whole process from production, to packaging and distribution. Like they do in France and Italy. They had the same European policy there, why didn't they end up like us here? It's a matter of culture. Here they all just sell their product to the merchant. They hate the merchant but they are looking for him. But we need marketing, new ideas and investments.

This symbolic distinction between traditional and new farmers was a central axis of Nikos's identity and, indeed, to a certain extent, echoed wider and contradictory identity constructions of Greekness and modernity, themselves rooted in culturalized ascriptions of the "rational" West vis-à-vis the "submissive" and/or "rebellious" (according to the narrative) orient/Balkans/Mediterranean (Herzfeld 2005). At the same time, however, such dichotomous discourse was part of a performance of the self (Goffman 1971); it manifested an effort to revalorize agricultural work in a rural context where personal and social advancement through education was a synonym of "escaping from the village" for a white-collar urban life. A cultural stigma around farmers was extremely widespread among my interlocutors. But this was not some purely essentialist discourse. Its power derived from its interlinking with historical processes of state-craft and inter-state social formations, namely state agricultural policies/strategies and the EU's agricultural policy. On the one hand, the agricultural world was historically perceived as an important electoral base of the conservative and socialist party, and an arena of clientelistic relations. So-called traditional farmers were thus seen as a group historically privileged by the state in comparison to other professional categories, as in the post-dictatorial past they had had access to cheap public credit, recurrent debt-forgiveness, and low taxation (Dertilis 2016; Komninou and Papataxiarchis 1990; Louloudis and Maravegias 1999). More often than not, accounts of the historical and social trajectories of agriculture were ideological, reductionist, or decontextualized. As often happens it times of crisis, the past was constantly reworked and reconstructed. Events or experiences distant in time collapse into each other and memories were reactivated or suppressed in order to explain present disruptive situations and project into the future (Knight 2015b; Knight and Stewart 2016). Farmers' perceived trade-offs of the past were now translated to social parasitism (living off of others) and a culture of dependency that fitted so well with the mainstream explanations of the crisis.

Most interestingly perhaps, new funding from EU programs destined to support innovative and extroverted farmers (or, previously, the subsidized investment in solar panels and its horizontal cost socialization through electricity bills) did not fall under the same category of institutional help. Even if, similar to CAP subsidies, they also derived, to a great extent, from a redistribution of tax money, at national and supranational level, they did not share the same negative moral connotations of dependency and inertia. For Nikos, new entrepreneurialism was all about meritocracy, hard work, and responsibility for the future. The best business plan would get funding through competition, and profit should be the fruit of business efficiency, individual effort, and innovation. Curiously, contrary to Greek EU experts advocating for a moral duty to accept the Troika's austerity precisely because of past and present mechanisms of EU transfers (Gkintidis 2016), ESPA recipients felt zero moral obligations towards national and/or EU taxpayers, let alone the EU or the Troika. On the contrary, they joined the mass of voices protesting against austerity and against what they experienced as a colonial Troika regime and a "storm of taxes". After all, as Nikos admitted:

Paying taxes now is useless. The state is a mafia and with all the [sovereign] debt, whatever money comes in goes to the black hole [servicing the debt]. So, I push it [tea] into the black. Unfortunately, this is how the system works. Everybody tax-evades here, the bigger [companies] even more! I'm not gonna save the world now. In any case, taxation is so high that you can't survive as a small producer. What? Are we going to make the state partner in our business?

Pluralization of governance, social claims, and the rescaling of conflict

In the long run of the crisis, the changes our southern European interlocutors faced and lived through did not simply revolve around decreasing workflows, defaulting on payments, the credit crunch, indebtedness, and the strictly economic problems of the breakdown. There was also significant transformation in people's lives and representations regarding their interactions with the institutions in their day-to-day, which were themselves transforming to adjust to the crisis. With this in mind, we focused on the area of economic and financial support, considering it to be – especially in a time of "organic crisis" – one of the interfaces where contemporary states redefine themselves, and are redefined by their citizens' grassroots moralities and practices. In a time and space of declining production and austerity, support and redistribution represented an arena in which new topographies of governance emerged: "an increasingly informal and 'flexible' model,

which blurs the boundaries between state, voluntary, and business sector” (Koch and James 2020). Not only was macro-economic policy predominantly defined (if not imposed) by non-elected supranational bodies such as the Troika or the Euro-group, but also nation states’ historical function of social and economic protection seems to be increasingly externalized to actors and institutions as diverse as the EU, regional and local authorities, development agencies, private donors, charitable and civic organizations (see also Douzina-Bakalaki, Martinez Alvarez and Matos’s contributions to this issue).

However, such devolution of power – no matter how crucial in the restructuring processes that we are attending to – does not imply a general “hollowing out” of the nation state (see also Vetta 2012). Even in the Veneto, and contrary to the hegemonic conclusions on industrial districts’ economies, the state was crucial in the productive reconfigurations that paved the way for “the new economic miracle” of the Third Italy (Ross 2004; Trigilia 1986): public support in the Third Italy’s post-Fordist laboratory was already devolved to sub-state segments, such as local administrations or political parties, the latter already operating in tight collaboration with the Church and the associative world. Similarly, our ethnography highlights the centrality of nation states in both grassroots political imaginations and vernacular cosmologies, in practice mediating the wielding of governmental power through multiple scales. Our interlocutors maintained contradictory and context-specific relations and attitudes as the Janus-faced state represented both hope and repression, protection and expropriation (Jansen 2014). Yet the restructuring initiatives involved in both of the cases presented here, have further complicated, distorted, and obscured the ways in which claims to citizenship mediate the relations between populations and the state.

Informants like Mariana and other “beneficiaries” of public help that we met at STRADE and the InOltre service didn’t seem to acknowledge the help they were given as a right. To be sure, they did indeed become, finally, aware of the public resources the Venetian territory had to offer in terms of welfare. Yet, substantially influenced by the old ideology of self-reliance, our informants still appeared to perceive the support they received almost as “charitable help”. It was not by chance, perhaps, that Caritas, a charitable organization, emerged as the main player in welfare services distribution and coordination. Our informants’ reactions to social support oscillated between gratitude and embarrassment, as if they were receiving charity, rather than having a right to be protected, as sovereign national citizens and taxpayers. Protest against the state was institutionalized in the Lega, where claims were severed from the horizon of citizenship entitlements and embedded in a culturalized framework of ethnic/local values.

In Kozani, where already weak welfare structures were literally erased by the austerity imposed, “support” did not come in the shape of social protection, with the possible exception of the law for over-indebted households, protecting the primary residence against foreclosure (Vetta forthcoming b). To be sure, historically, welfare in Greece was never predominantly understood through rights. It was rather assumed to operate through family support mechanisms and networks, whereas and state social provisions – destined for the most vulnerable – were mostly perceived in terms of charity. In the aftermath of crisis, institutional support via EU public funds was translated, this time, into the idioms of meritocracy and competition. Ironically, much of these funds invested in entrepreneurial programs came from the so-called Junger package of €2 billion of humanitarian assistance, seen by many as the EU’s effort to counterbalance severe austerity. Yet, the start-up economy came along with the ideological corollary of private initiative, and its glorification, as well as the persistent mortification of a profligate state. Being a recipient didn’t seem to define any collective subject but, in a twisted way, this very fact became a property of social distinction. In contrast to stigmatized previously subsidized groups, the “new farmers”, “starter-uppers” and “new entrepreneurs” were supposedly individual adventurers, encouraged to change the productive structures of some rotten over-consuming society.

In both Veneto and Kozani, be it through the lens of charity or meritocracy, the relation of support that individuals, businesses and families entertain with the state and public institutions, does *not* seem to be socially empowering; neither does it seem to allow social claims to be expressed by a collective actor, capable of translating the individual matter of “needs” into the collective language of “rights”. As a result, a general fragmentation of the public sphere (and, more specifically, of the state, as a space of struggle where conflicting orders of interests meet, are mediated and regulated) seems to be occurring, accompanied by its rearticulation within public/private mechanisms in sub/transnational levels. We cannot help, here, but to relate all of this to the enormous amount of personal suffering we encountered in our fieldwork. The progressive disintegration of a space in which collective actors can take shape, and social conflict can be played out, regulated, and potentially solved, seems to engender – as a direct consequence – a plethora of phenomena that could be described as an internalization or even embodiment of conflicts, whose expression in the public sphere becomes more and more difficult. The conflicts tearing apart the relationship between Lorenzo and Mariana, the families left mentally drained by the “audit” reviews with the ESPA program in Greece, the old scapegoating practices towards public servants and immigrants in Veneto, as well as the new othering dynamics between Kozani’s “old” and “new” farmers, not to mention the suicide epidemic within Venetian society since 2008, all of these seem to express the

incorporation of conflict within the more intimate domains of the family, of personhood, and of the body itself.

To be sure, we by no means want to negate the importance of popular demands. In Greece, in particular, there was an enormous amount of social unrest, anti-austerity mobilizations, and solidarity organization, despite the unprecedented violent repression (see Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2020). Popular demands gave rise to extreme-right and fascist groups (e.g. Golden Dawn) and anti-state parties (e.g. the Five-Star Movement, Lega) but also culminated in the first radical-left government led by Syriza, despite the latter's failure to deliver its programmatic promises. In this article, we rather focused on parallel, more implicit and dispersed mechanisms of citizenship production that were of equal importance. One could look at these tendencies of disempowerment not as merely local processes, but as the local manifestations of a larger transformation of global political arenas; a transformation itself driven and implemented by a current change in the structures and parameters of capital accumulation and reproduction. In this larger perspective, alongside moments of social agitation lie fragmentary processes of the public sphere, often compressing one's conflictual relationship to the state within the intimate realms of the personal.

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