



The Greek Cultural Crisis

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Extensive coverage has been given to the political/economic crisis in Greece. Often neglected or minimized is an evaluation of the long-term effects of the crisis on popular and artistic culture. Directly and indirectly taking on that task are four very different endeavors released in 2017. In *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry*, Karen Van Dyck presents an anthology focused on poetic responses to the austerity created by the ongoing crisis. A close look at the music scene dominant among younger people is presented in *Sounds of Revolution*, a feature length video by Bill Mousoulis. Helena Sheehan's *Syriza Wave* deals with the mass base of the Syriza phenomenon while *Dogs of Democracy*, a video by Mary Zournazi, takes a broad view of Greece's relationship with contemporary Western culture.



The New Greek Poetry

Karen Van Dyck's anthology¹ presents poems mainly written since 2008. All the poets are under the age of 50 and write in Greek. She notes the sheer volume of poetry published is as great as that immediately following the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 and that there is a strong presence of women. Her selection is designed to reflect the entire range of contemporary poetic expression rather than establish a hierarchy of literary merit.

The first group of poems is titled “Tradition and the Individual” and offers seven poets who mainly publish in literary magazines. The following section, “Myth and Medicine,” presents eleven poets who publish in small press magazines and books issued by small publishers. The “Unjust Punishment” section features seven poets who publish on-line and “Story Telling” features eight poets who are performance artists. Ten poets who read in bookstores, cafes, and sites in the provinces comprise the fascinating “Outside Athens” section. The collection concludes with “Border Zones,” seven poets who live in the diaspora, have multi-ethnic identities, or are non-Greeks residing in Greece.

Van Dyck’s inclusiveness is extraordinary and innovative. She says she was surprised by how many of the poets had no idea of what other poets were doing. Her own fidelity is underscored by her decision to augment her own translations with translations by active poets. This means that any stylistic bias or theoretical orientation of Van Dyck’s is minimized as the translators all have their own style and chose poems that particularly appealed to them. Van Dyck underscores that this approach reflects her desire “to get everyone into the conversation.”

Past political and economic crises in Greece have generated poetry with overt social content. Clandestine anti-Nazi poetry circulated widely during World War II, and poets were political actors in the late 1950s and 1960s. Another burst of political poetry followed the fall of the dictatorship. That kind of direct political engagement is rare among the poets in *Austerity Measures*.

The new poets usually refer to the crisis indirectly, often with individualistic images and commentary. They are more concerned with psychological and sociological syndromes than political agendas. Some of their poems are quite powerful and innovative, but their specific Greek context is secondary or non-existent. The poems could have been written in many European countries or even the United States. *Austerity Measures* adds Greek voices to this concern regarding identity, thinking beyond national borders, and pondering the nature of organized society. But these universal concerns are not presented in the context of national culture in the manner of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* or the *Ulysses Gaze* of Theo Angelopoulos.

In many of the poems, the despair of the mind overcomes the optimism of the heart. Rather than shouts of defiance, the poets are troubled by what seems the never-ending despair of humanity. In that sense their tone reflects contemporary Greece more faithfully than politically focused poetry which is so often laced with wishful thinking. The new poets have real passion and seek healthier social relationships. Their work is filled with rage. Where those emotions and thoughts will lead them remains to be seen. Van Dyck has performed an enormous service by offering a look at where and how that dynamic is developing.

Songs of Revolution²

Bill Mousoulis's video has a stricter artistic focus than Van Dyck's literary collection. His *Sounds of Revolution* deals primarily with the "underground" music common in areas such as the Exarchia district of Athens. The instruments, formats, and tempos in the music are unmistakably Greek, but the musicians have been influenced by American rap and Hip-Hop culture.

The despairing lyrics of many songs are repeated again and again like a prisoner's fingers desperately scratching the wall of a prison cell. Typical of the phrases which abound are "lost my joy," "our days are always cloudy," and "we live with a darkness of the soul." One singer humorously declares "all Greek cars are gray;" Another repeats the lamentation, "Woe is me."

The musicians often take part in parades, occupations, and rallies, but their message is more a call to consciousness rather than a call to arms. They openly embrace generic anarchism or anti-authoritarianism but without the broad societal change outlined by Kryptokin or Malatesta. The anarchist strain can also be strident. In one concert, a band shouts to the audience that are no innocent police, no innocent clerks, and no innocent bystanders. All have to face a violent confrontation.

A criticism of American rap and Hip-Hop is the frequency of indulgent self-despair, artists honoring themselves for their advanced sensibility. The same pretention occurs in some Greek counterparts. Singers' eyes occasionally suggest they may be reveling in their bitter expressions of betrayal and resentment.

American Hip-Hop and rap often seeks to sound authentic by using offensive misogynist statements alongside pleas for liberation. The Greek musicians are largely free of sexist language and very disdainful of musicians who allow themselves to be "marketed" as "bad guys" by commercial interests. The musicians speak fiercely about the plague of authoritarian culture and chastise fellow Greek musicians who have authoritarian habits.

My own sense from viewing this footage is that the Greek scene is similar to that of America's coffeehouse counter-culture of 1950s and 1960s which was related to but distinct from the political culture represented by Students for a Democratic Society. The Greek musicians are extremely talented and retain their Greek identity even though connecting to worldwide musical movements. Their fierce contempt for authoritarianism is a much-needed tonic in Greek society. Although the musicians lament the world they did not make, they refuse to distance themselves from it. They are clear about what they reject even if they remain vague about specific alternatives. Their culture seems a tinderbox that could be ignited by a random spark.

The Surge and Crash of the New Greek Left

Helena Sheehan's *Syriza Wave*³ moves from artistic culture to the mass culture that created and then abandoned (or was abandoned by) Syriza. The author, an Irish journalist and political activist who visits Greece frequently, offers a unique view of the Syriza phenomenon. The first of her six essays was written in 2012 and the last in 2016. Since the essays have not been revised, they convey the euphoria and heartbreak of the movement as they were occurring.

Syriza Wave focuses on what Sheehan heard and saw on the ground rather than official statements by Syriza's leaders or party documents. Her observations have considerable verve and contain telling nuances regarding the rise and fall of Syriza. Sheehan is a socialist and hoped Syriza would be successful as that success would inspire similar parties in Ireland and throughout the EU. Over the long run, rather than the EU bankers dominating the economy, these socialist parties would create new European political and economic norms.

That Syriza's activists had little governing experience is confirmed as we meet people who go from non-political jobs to positions in government and then withdraw. Sheehan underscores that mainstream Syriza activists never thought of themselves as belonging to a revolutionary party but to a coalition able to contain and manage capitalism. Considerable publicity was garnered by various vanguard parties within the coalition, but most decisions reflected the thinking of former PASOK personnel who are traditional socialist democrats. The average voter rallied to Syriza on the assumption it would clear the swamp of Greek corruption, contain the excesses of the Greek oligarchs, and stand up to impossible EU demands.

Rather than lacking ideas, Syriza was filled with many ideas, sometimes contradictory, sometimes half-formed, always vigorously debated at the base. Anti-authoritarian ideas competed with traditional concepts of a Leninist party. These differences never coalesced into a single program or form of organization agreeable to all.

The muddled planning of the Syriza leadership is clear. It thought that countries like Spain and Italy that had movements similar to theirs would support them. They didn't seem to realize that the actual governments of such nations were to their right and the last thing they would do was support Syriza as a Syriza victory would energize their own dissidents. The Syriza leadership was also bluffing in that it made strong demands without a backup plan should those demands be rejected. Syriza was playing David to the EU Goliath. It had a slingshot in hand but no rocks.

Increasingly Syriza's stated goals evaporated as its leadership accepted that they must surrender to the goals set by the EU. Their main tactical concern was to negotiate

the best terms possible. Prime Minister Tsipras initiated a dishonest course of action when he called for a national referendum to accept or reject the demands made on Greece. He wanted and expected a Yes vote in order to justify his capitulation to the EU's financial dictates as obeying the will of his people. On the other hand, Syriza had risen to power based on its promise not to capitulate. Given that reality, the Syriza leadership officially backed a No vote and directed its cadres to achieve that goal.

The unexpected OXI win and Tsipras proceeding as if it had never happened lead to some of the most interesting accounts of Sheehan's book. Better than any other single author, Sheehan captures the profound disillusion felt by Syriza activists, a sense of being deceived that has fostered a disgust with politicians in general. Sheehan also demonstrates that the anti-Tsipras forces in Syriza were not well organized. They have since degenerated into a score of minor parties that mainly promise that if elected, they will carry out the original Syriza program as they conceive it. Voters and activists have mainly reacted by saying: fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

The mood Sheehan's records is not that of being defeated in a battle but betrayal laced with considerable despair. Activism on the ground has become sporadic or focused on a single issue. Many community groups have disintegrated. Rather than demonstrating in the streets, more than half a million Greeks, mainly younger people with college degrees, have emigrated, most choosing the EU or Australia as their destination. Whether this brain drain will ever return is unclear.

The long-term consequences for Greek political life, whatever one's orientation, is negative. A whole generation feels political activism is a waste of time and that voting is all but irrelevant. That same sense is reflected in the poetry collected by Van Dyck and the songs recorded by Mousoulis.



The Dogs of Democracy⁴

Mary Zournazi's *Dogs of Democracy* skillfully uses visual metaphors and unexpected twists to explore the culture of contemporary Greece. Her film begins by acquainting us with the stray dogs of Athens. We see them fed irregularly by various persons, including Greeks who are themselves being fed by social agencies. We witness people keeping the dogs from harm's way but not housing them or offering regular care. The dogs are seen wandering about, visible yet "not seen." We learn they have a short life span due to malnutrition and their living conditions.

In a very subtle manner the images of the stray dogs and their experiences merge with the lives of Athenians struggling through the crisis. The camera doesn't plead for them or depict them as helpless. It just shows the prevailing patterns of everyday life. Midway through the film a middle-aged man states, "We are the stray dogs of Europe." In short, Greece is visible to Europe, but "not seen." Enough aid is given to forestall random violence. but the Greek standard-of-living is allowed to deteriorate without much hope for change.

Near the end of the film, Zournazi investigates how stray dogs are faring on Mytilene, an island flooded by refugees from the Middle East. Seeing the camps of the stranded refugees, the viewer is left thinking that the refugees are also like stray or abandoned dogs. Even though their conditions are due to actions taken by Western powerhouses, the aid extended to them by the EU is minimal and they are not allowed to settle in permanent homes.

Dogs of Democracy has a hero: Loukanikos,⁵ the dog who achieved fame by marching with anti-austerity protestors. Without prompting, Loukanikos voluntarily came to the head of marches and faced off against the police. We get many shots of him, often barking at police but not growling or biting. *Time* magazine honored Loukanikos by featuring him on one of its covers. A touching moment in the film involves an elderly protestor fleeing advancing police lines. She cannot walk rapidly and feels vulnerable. Loukanikos comes to her side, slows his pace to hers and acts as her bodyguard. Shortly thereafter, another protestor gave him a home. We see other Greeks taking in other stray dogs. We learn that despite being well-taken cared for in his final years, Loukanikos soon died from being kicked by the police and from breathing excessive amounts of tear gas and chemicals used against demonstrators. The protesters consider him a martyr. One man compares him to Che Guevara. Another more thoughtfully states, "Loukanikos was the symbol of revolt and purity."

While *Dogs of Democracy* has many dark moments, it illuminates the resilience of the Greek character and leaves a hope that Greeks will indeed ultimately find their way out of this crisis. If they are indeed Europe's dogs of democracy, they also have the spirit of Loukanikos.



Conclusion

None of the works summarized in this essay are by homeland Greeks. Karan Van Dyck is a Greek American scholar long associated with Columbia University and rightly distinguished for her previous work on Greek poetry. Bill Mousoulis is an Australian independent film maker who has directed 100 films of various lengths. Mary Zournazi who also resides in Australia has family roots in Alexandria. She is an independent filmmaker whose next project centers on rebetiko music. Helen Sheenan is professor emeritus at Dublin City University and has authored several books on politics, culture, and philosophy.

That the writers and directors of these projects are not permanent residents of Greece may have kept their observations free of the particulars and individual heartbreaks of recent struggles. I think this is similar to the reality that the best films on Greek America have been made by homeland Greeks. In both cases, sympathetic “outsiders” provide cultural insights the homeland people are not yet ready to confront or voice.

In their different ways, these looks at various sectors of Greek society reveal a complex culture that goes beyond despair. To be sure, Greeks, especially the young, are disheartened and feel betrayed. They see no hope of immediate change on the immediate horizon, but they reject the prospect of authoritarian governance from the left or the right. Their rancor to the EU administration is based on economics, not culture. They are relieved that they are able to cross European borders without a passport and given the opportunity to reshape their lives as best they can.

The immediate Greek surge for fundamental reforms has been defeated, but not intellectually vanquished. More than any time since the fall of the dictatorship, Greeks

seem to understand that their society must be transformed. This doesn't mean the modernization and efficiency of the German model, but new, societal and governmental behavior on the national and regional level. Momentarily, they see no mechanisms to achieve such change, but hearing people speak from various cultural spheres one senses a rage that will not remain quiescent.

¹Karen Van Dyck (ed.), *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry* (NY: New York Review Books, 2016) 496 Pages. Paperback. The poems are presented in Greek with the facing page in English. Each section has a short intro and there is a short biography of each poet.

²Bill Mousoulis (director), *Songs of Revolution*. 118 minutes video. English subtitles. www.songsofrevolution.com. The images feature nightclub scenes, concerts, and other formal presentations. Many sequences and interviews, however, were shot explicitly for the film.

³Helena Sheehan, *Syriza Wave: Surging and Crashing with the Greek Left* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 2016). 247 pages.

⁴Mary Zournazi (director), *Dogs of Democracy*. 57 minutes video. In English with Greek subtitles. [Http://www.epfmedia.com/dogs-of-democracy](http://www.epfmedia.com/dogs-of-democracy).

⁵ Exactly who named Loukanikos is not known but he was very fond of the Greek sausage of the same name. That particular pork sausage is laced with orange peels and fennel seeds. Depending on the region the sausage may have other seeds and herbs.

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