

An incurable crisis in Greece: A systemic perspective

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Periklis Antoniou Photo

Facts and Event

“How did you go bankrupt?” Two ways - gradually then suddenly.” If E. Hemingway were still alive, he could have written it about Greece. Those who believe that the economic recession started in 2008 with the dual deficit (fiscal and current account deficit) to reach the point of protected (and not disorderedly) bankruptcy, which was solemnized in the summer of 2010 with the signing of the 1st Memorandum, would agree with him. It is also a fact that Greeks experienced the financial crisis with the first salary and pension cuts at the end of 2010. However, more than half the population of Greece do not agree with the above, or at least did not agree up until recently, because they believe that the bankruptcy is a lie, a deceitful construction, and the memoranda a product of an international experimentation on our country, a plan to plunder the national wealth and so forth. The whole country was polarized: the more powerful anti-memoranda camp, which espouses that the memoranda brought the crisis, vs. the “pro-memoranda” camp, which regards them as an inevitable though undesirable product of the crisis, offers the only exit route from it. The stance of the latter (and unpopular) could be reinforced by a systemic point of view: the crisis invited the memoranda thus they

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imposed strict measures that could not be (or were not desired to be) implemented so the crisis deepened therefore new stricter memoranda were imposed which led to misery and so on, namely, a vicious circle of causation.

Shared Myths

Systemic family thinkers have studied the role of shared myths (ones shared by family members) that affect the present, as well as the future, life of the family (J. Byng-Hall, 1985). Yet, beyond the family, there are also collective myths which influence the social and national identity. For instance, what was the underground Greek Orthodox “secret school” during the centuries of Turkish occupation? What is Greek *filotimo* (a word untranslatable in English)? What is the story of the soldier who wrapped in the Greek flag fell off the Acropolis when the Nazis went up there to raise the swastika? (Notably, long after, at the alleged point of the fall, a commemorative plaque was placed and the mayor of Athens in his speech mentioned that regardless of the historical accuracy, the country has a need for heroes and legends.) How many aspects of the National Resistance (1941-1944) have been exaggerated? Could it be assumed that new myths around crisis-memoranda (or vice versa) have been constructed and shared by part of the population?

Loss-Grief-Mourning

The literature that we have in mind refers to family grief after the death of a member or a beloved one. Mourning has an adjustment quality or in the words of S. Freud (1918): “Mourning has a quite precise psychic task to perform: its function is to detach the survivor’s memories and hopes from the dead.” Mourning goes through stages (E. Kübler-Ross, 1969) and it is not by chance that from ancient times till today memorial services take place at three or nine, at forty days, on the year and the three year mark. Dysfunctional-maladaptive patterns of mourning exist though (S. Lieberman, 1978, D. Kissane, 1994), some of which are:

- Denial
- Idealization of the deceased
- Concealing a secret (e.g. suicide)



- Keeping the deceased as if alive
- Rendering responsibility to and blaming others

Literature highlights two factors in the process of mourning: the support system that the mourners have and the phase of the life-cycle during which the loss occurred.

As to the meaning of loss, it is useful to try to identify the kind which Greeks have experienced.

Is it about loss of income and socioeconomic status? Loss of self-confidence and optimism? Collateral damage of the economic crisis (ethical, moral, humanitarian etc.)? National dignity? Life-style? We could not avoid the assumption that the latter prevails.

How Greeks have grieved up till now? The adaptive but also dysfunctional-maladaptive mourning, which we previously referred to, has been formulated through observation and research on micro-systems (individuals, families, groups). The projection to macro-systems (national population) involves some degree of arbitrariness. In spite of this reservation, we will not avoid the temptation of some isomorphisms:

- The denial of the event was very popular among us, at least during the first years of the crisis.
- The concealment of a secret can be equivalent to the repression of the suspicion that we might share responsibility for the mismanagement having led to the crisis
- The preservation of the dead as if alive can be equivalent to the desire of most of us for the good old days to return
- The attribution of responsibility and incrimination of others can correspond to the anger that envelopes most of us, from the curses to the “loan sharks”, to the “sadist” Schäuble, to Troika, to the punishment of the whole former political system as expressed in the general elections, the referendum, and so on.

Following the aforementioned, we should seriously consider the term “unresolved mourning” for us Greeks. As for grief, it is possibly covered by anger. Grief should not be confused with the psychiatric term “depression”, because none of the



epidemiological studies that have been conducted during the years of the crisis have shown an increase of psychiatric morbidity, with the exception of the significant increase of suicides for the years 2011 and 2012 (Michas, 2013).

Repercussions on Psychotherapy

It is impossible for the issues of the crisis not to intrude into psychotherapeutic sessions. Individuals, couples or families bring them into the sessions and therapists cannot disregard them. Moreover, therapist themselves have personally experienced the crisis. However, in the process of the sessions, a therapist has the option of positive reframing. Under crisis conditions, selfishness, arrogance and materialism are challenged. Family restructuring has often been imposed by crisis. Couples have renegotiated separation or divorce, children have returned home, etc. For the new generation the life voyage starts under adverse conditions, just like two generations ago.

Crisis entails stressful life-events (loss of employment, financial disaster, etc.). They consist of trauma challenges, which could be viewed in two ways: either to predict future distress of the individual, or mobilize resources and promote resilience. The family therapist will be beneficial if he/she conceptualizes the crisis as a source of opportunity. An example from a recent session at the Family and Couple Unit of Eginition Hospital: “The crisis succeeded what we, the parents, couldn’t. Our son stopped asking for money every day, took the job seriously and the house has calmed down.”

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