

INTRODUCTION

NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: MYTHS AND REALITIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Narratives are present in all societies. They are present in myths, legends, news, rumors, in historical and artistic texts, in politics, in everyday conversation. Stories are able to construct reality. As Roland Barthes suggested ¹ the most important issue is to describe the code by which the narrator and the reader are signified in a narrative. In this sense, an author is not the one who invents a narrative but the one who possesses best the code used by the participants. The different social discourses are supposed to reveal what a society considers as “natural”, as requiring no further explanation (the so called “common sense” used by media discourses). This kind of narrative coincides with the social representations of the audience and even if this is not always the case, the social subjects normally try to reduce the distance between the information received and their attitudes: strategies are thus elaborated in order to maintain a dominant way of thinking.

Narrative analysis has become fundamental for the social sciences, and especially for sociology. Myth cannot always be clearly differentiated from “reality” in the social discourse (fiction seems essential to the “reproduction” of the facts): it is necessary to be understood in relation with the narrated reality. Stories are part of everyday life and constitute means for actors to express and negotiate experience. For researchers, they provide a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience. Narratives are not transparent renditions of ‘truth’ but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story. Placed in their wider socio-political and cultural contexts, stories can provide insights into different social conditions (for instance how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence, re-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities, or bear witness to violence and repression).

This monographic collection of papers aims to record and analyze the myths which narrate the economic crisis in Europe and particularly in Greece, and investigate the ways media and the diverse political and social discourses represent the crisis. If we wish to conceptualize ‘crisis’ in general, we could describe it as a *moment of decisive intervention* and not merely a moment of fragmentation, dislocation or destruction. This formulation suggests the need to give far greater emphasis to the essential *narrativity* of crisis, and the relationship between discourses of crisis and the contradictions that they narrate. The Greek crisis has become the most eminent example of neoliberal economic meltdown over the past five years. In towns across Greece people try to come to terms with drastic changes in their everyday lives and grapple with the complex mixture of politics, economy, history and culture that informs crisis

¹ Roland Barthes (1964) *Éléments de sémiologie*, Communications 4, Seuil: Paris; (1970) *L'Empire des signes*, Skira: Paris.

experience. Political discourses on the other hand (appearing in the press – the rhetorical strategies and linguistic devices deployed by the media in the narration of the events) mostly underline “identities” and the games of power in national and international fields, producing (framing, reproducing or simply adapting) the contemporary beliefs and doxa (on justice, neocolonialism and otherness, primary issues around the economic crisis); for instance, European politicians have focused on the “morality tale” and this in turn makes the structural solutions required for the survival of the euro politically unworkable; the European Commission has used the crisis as evidence of the dire consequences following from lack of reforms. Instead of profligate citizens the Commission sees inefficient states that are potentially creating impediments to growth. Notably, the Commission’s vision of desirable reforms for the purposes of growth reach well into the basic structures of European welfare state, on social policy, pensions, and health care, but this time under the guise of a fiscally mandated adjustment that should be binding on Member State through the process of economic policy coordination.

Many issues (mythic versions) necessitate to be investigated in order to understand how contemporary representations narrate society. Contemporary (logical, common sense or “elite”) narratives of different aspects of “crisis” (due to Debt as well as to changing patterns of Culture and Values) “reinvent reality” in terms related to “economic” or “political” power and relations among national and supranational categories.

Some frames of the contemporary (multiple) aspects of the crisis in Europe (case studies), are further analyzed in the articles of this volume; more precisely narrations of contemporary European issues (such as Eurozone governance, Italian elections, Greek political strategies during the debt crisis, politics in Czech Republic, Latvian economy, Polish ageing perceptions, German press on the crisis), constitute interesting examples in order to investigate the multiple facets of this “phenomenon” which is not only economic, and of course not only “Greek” (despite the dominant contemporary conviction). The importance of these studies is the fact that they cover different cases, each one of them representing emblematic examples reflecting characteristic figures for the dimensions of the crisis: including 3 ex-communist countries (having dealt with post-communist social destabilization), two cases of “South Europe” (differently affronting –because of their different situation- the global European issues of crisis), and finally the case of German Press (representing the hegemonic discourse on economic crisis in Europe). Thus, particular aspects of social narrations of the phenomenon described as “crisis” (as a contemporary characteristic of Southern European and then of all European societies), are analyzed in the articles hosted in this volume.

First of all, asymmetrical power relations within the European Union (especially during the crisis of the Eurozone), may reveal (neo)colonial governance and (post)colonial experiences which are of course not described as such by the official European versions. This analysis proves that the problem of nations’ inequality towards real power determines (above anything else) the European dynamics; any narratives on states’ failure to properly affront the crisis, usually dissimulate this first condition of the “diplomatic game”, making of course political “solutions” inadequate to affront the real problem(s). In the strategy of the official European version are nevertheless totally taken the citizens of the different European countries: attitudes which can be easily understood when we examine the values which support the different kinds of political vote in Italy but also the political strategies in Greece. Values are conceptions of the desirable, are ‘what should be’ for the individuals. So, having a political

representative that defends certain values is more important than his or her coherence with those same values. In approximately the same sense, strategic framing is explored as a tool of delegitimizing the opponent by counter-framing normative rationales (political discourse in Greece) as well as the ways in which people relate themselves to the realm of politics in the context of the post-communist Czech Republic. The recovery of Latvian economy, a narrative constructed by the government and supported by mass media, was quite successful; in the conditions of harsh austerity it allowed government to stay at power by the consent of people (although different stories were told on the Internet).

Apart the purely “political” discourse, media discourses (where the notion of crisis plays an active role) on the active ageing, reveal images of the contemporary culture. Using the example of Poland, an analysis of the narrative of the (welfare) state, community, engagement and inclusion can be interpreted as neoliberal catchwords hiding the withdrawal of the welfare state and the discourse of making citizens responsible for their own wellbeing; thus, *“myths” that underlie the narratives of economic and demographic crises, may be the very same as those relating to the social crisis.*

Finally, the analysis of the recent Financial Crisis (2008) in the German press, shows that the re-articulation of meta-narratives can help to legitimise the oddest excrescences of the latest developments in financial capitalism; for example, *when articulating greed, (which elsewhere is considered as one cause of the Financial Crises), as source for growth and prosperity.* There is a variety of forces that influences the relevance of a position and hence its discursive power, one important force being the institutional power of participants (with which a politician can acquire high relevance in a discourse on social questions).

The above studies show that 1) media discourses related to the problem of the economic crisis as well as the problem of the Greek debt crisis (following closely the political discourses on the European South) observe the analysing terms of the states of power and of world economic interests; 2) local politics follow the game of these interests victimizing states and citizens on their situation of precarity; 3) all the discourses of the welfare state articulate by shaping their principles according to the newly created situations of poverty excluding the possibility of traditional welfare state solutions; 4) this phenomenon, is not a crisis of the capitalist system: on the contrary, it seems to be inherent to this capitalist system, only strengthening the “North” related to the “South” and revigorating their differences.



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