The Private Life of a Nation in Crisis

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GEORGIA AITAKI, FEB 10 2015

Greece is once again becoming a trendy topic. Since 2009 it has often been addressed in the media as the epicenter of the Eurozone crisis playing a crucial role in one of the most critical periods for the future of Europe and the vision of a unified Europe itself. The victory of the SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) party in the elections of January 2015 and the continuing negotiations about the Greek debt, as well as the intensification of the contacts with the European partners led by the new Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, has rejuvenated the interest in the conditions that unite but also divide the states of Europe. While a political analysis would perhaps exceed the scope of this blog (and my knowledge, for that matter), what I wish to achieve in this short blog post is a brief commentary on popular responses to the economic crisis, in accordance with this channel's inaugural invitation to 'take popular culture seriously'; the aim here is to explore angles of research that could produce valuable intellectual outcomes for the study of pop culture and politics, but also to make aspects of the Greek experience of the crisis known to a wider international public.

My main interest lies in the ways that the recent financial crisis has generated enquiries about whether we can still speak of a common European identity, about what it means to be European, what it means to be Greek etc. It really comes as no surprise that a crisis of such extent became directly associated with questions about identity. It has been argued that especially between 2010 and 2012, some European media started to construct a negative image of Greece, drawing the picture of a country dominated by a number of evils: corruption, clientelism, idleness. The image of the 'lazy Greek', one of the crisis' clichés, was used widely in the game of attributing responsibility, blame and guilt. What was termed as 'Greek bashing' could be seen as an indication of the ways that this crisis was framed as a problem and a failure of a specific country/culture, contributing to drawing a dichotomy between the Greeks and the (primarily Northern) Europeans who were called to their rescue. At the same time, voices in Greece were responding with a demonization of Germany, reaching to the point of portraying Angela Merkel in a Nazi uniform.

Within this wide network of channels that are engaged in the struggle for crisis mastery, to use Bo Stråth's and Ruth Wodak's words, I believe that popular culture provides a valuable resource for studying the various ways that world politics infiltrate the world of fiction. It is all the more interesting, however, to focus on ways which are not visible to audiences and researchers outside Greece; that is, focus on cultural products which are meant for internal consumption and not for export. That is mainly the reason why I am making the connection between fiction, crisis and national identity. If, according to John Ellis, broadcast television is still the 'private life of the nation state', what can we learn from what the Greeks are watching? In what intellectually valuable ways can we approach the cultural products of a nation in crisis?

Given Greece's recent turbulent past, it would be worth looking at how aspects of the multifaceted crisis have appeared in the content of fictional programmes, what kinds of narratives of the crisis have been disseminated privately, what images of 'us' and 'them' have been produced lately. What the Greeks are watching on TV might add another layer to the investigation of how people are experiencing the crisis. I have presented elsewhere the devastating impact of the crisis on the production of television fiction in Greece, but let's have a closer look at one of the TV programmes which had direct references to the recent economic crisis. Very briefly, *Piso sto Spiti* ('Returning Home') offered a comic commentary on the effects of the economic crisis on the Greek household. The plot makes no claims for subtlety, as it depicts a Greek family suffering from financial problems and resorting to the youngest son's girlfriend, an uptight German called Angela, for help. The presence of a German character, who lends a Greek

family money but demands in exchange total control over the internal functions of their home, builds on the conceptualization of the crisis as a problem of cultural difference and lack of communication. The Greeks are portrayed as irresponsible but warm-hearted, while Angela perpetuates the stereotype of the disciplined German. Stories like these illustrate fiction's interest in accommodating moments of crisis as its content, producing or re-producing narratives of the crisis which dominated the domestic public sphere of a country. Such popular narratives should therefore be taken seriously in the sense that, like other types of media, they have an ideological orientation worthy of academic unpacking and at the same time they constitute the cultural products -the 'private life'- of a nation in crisis where processes of self-reflection and othering take place during prime time.

Examples such as the above have reinforced my belief that national television and its various fictions should not be excluded from the study of world politics; although often invisible, to use Brett Mill's idea, to the wider international audience (and to researchers), national television fiction maintains a strong connection with a given culture's everyday experiences and anxieties. Especially when it comes to moments or periods of crisis, popular culture provides a rich resource for analyzing the processes that a nation is led to understand and interpret politics, while at the same time being motivated to renegotiate, rethink and evaluate its own significance.

About the author:

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