

## **Remembering post-dictatorship consumption politics and ‘lifestyle trauma’ in Greece during the current economic crisis (2009-2015).**

**Panagiotis Zestanakis**

**(University of Crete, Greece)**

This paper questions the (re)negotiations of the pre-crisis consumption politics in Greece in the last five years, focusing on lifestyle. Contrary to its international sociological definitions, in the Greek context, this term refers to discourses that emerged in the 1980s and experienced success in the succeeding decades. These discourses were advocated by journalists, mostly those born after 1960, who were working for media organizations that played crucial roles in the reorganization of the country’s mediascape from the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Lifestyle highlighted conspicuous consumption, sexual liberalization and increasing participation in the growing economies of pleasure. Most lifestyle media enterprises closed after 2011 mainly because of the crisis in the advertising industry.

Following Gerard Hauser, I conceive public sphere as a discursive space where individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest.<sup>2</sup> As the formation of public spheres reflects cultural, political and economic interests, controversies and power relations within each historical juncture, unsurprisingly the Greek public sphere is a case that has attracted international interest in recent years. As the toughest version of a wider European economic crisis that started in the very late 2000s the Greek crisis is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully described here: briefly, Greece lost around 25% of its GDP between 2008 and 2013, social inequalities broadened, unemployment increased and living conditions worsened.<sup>3</sup> New political powers came to the fore: The Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) that had stayed in authority for 21 years between 1981 and 2012 lost almost 90% of its support between 2009-2015 getting 4,68% in the 2015 national elections. In the same period, the radical left-wing coalition SYRIZA multiplied its power by nine getting 36,34% of the votes in the 2015 elections. ‘Golden Dawn’, a far-right party evolved into major political contender getting 6,97% and 6,28% in the elections of 2012 and 2015 respectively. <sup>4</sup>

The mediascape was characterized by polarization, reflecting a politically divided society. Austerity measures led to the supplanting of the political opposition between the left and the right (which had marked postwar Greece) by a new dividing line between those in favor of and those against the so-called memorandum politics - stringent austerity measures imposed by Greece's creditors as a condition of financial bailout.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, hate speech became a variable of public discourses.<sup>6</sup>

I resonate with contemporary media theorists such as Henry Jenkins who have argued that contemporary mediascapes are supplementary, and that 'traditional' and new, interactive media collide.<sup>7</sup> Unavoidably, approaches that focus on mediascape components, as this paper does, are partial. Nevertheless, since the crisis years saw the familiarization of broader audiences with the web as an outcome of social media dispersion, I choose here to emphasize webnographical research findings examining how post-dictatorship consumption politics and lifestyle are discussed within participatory web cultures finding that this topic combines problematizations of crisis with thoughts on internet uses in times of crisis. I draw on two primary sources: readers' comments below articles devoted to the collapse of lifestyle and on a pertinent large discussion in a popular web forum mainly addressed to men.

### **Webnographical narrations**

The crisis years saw the publication of many articles about lifestyle that can roughly be divided into two categories: first, those discussing the decay of lifestyle media written by people who had previously worked that area; second, in articles written by journalists working for media-affiliated organizations or belonging to political parties.

The posts can similarly be separated into two categories: those arguing that lifestyle was part of the transformation of the Greek mediascape as result of the more systematic contact of its agents with international media after the late 1980s. These users argue that despite ending a key encouragement to excessive conspicuous consumption, the industry's collapse is a negative consequence of the crisis as it contributes to the rise of unemployment. On the contrary, the authors of posts in the second category damn lifestyle welcoming its collapse as a positive development. Often using irony and moralistic tones, they argue that the lifestyle's success

constituted part of the alienating consumerist utopia of the 1990s and the 2000s when many Greeks became accustomed to living above their means. Thus, lifestyle is discussed as one of the main causes of the crisis and as a(n) (im)moral phenomenon. In both cases, lifestyle is identified with PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement), the political party that stayed in authority for 21 years between 1981 and 2011, and Petros Kostopoulos, a journalist and publisher member of the 1970s and the early 1980s. Since 1987, Kostopoulos directed *Click*, a lifestyle magazine that experienced big success until the mid 1990s. In 1995 alongside with other businessmen Kostopoulos established IMAKO, a successful lifestyle media company that shut down in early 2012. The first two extracts represent the first category of Internet posts and the following two the second:

...60,000 enterprises will close in 2012. The problem is not if IMAKO [...] or if Kostopoulos was spending money on bullshit [...] [The problem is] what the fuck is going on with this state and us as [a] society. We are sinking and instead of swimming we smother those who swim next to us'<sup>8</sup>

Even if I was not agreeing with lifestyle [...] I think that we don't need so much dissipation. These people and their businesses collapsed like all entrepreneurial activity in the country.<sup>9</sup>

[Petros Kostopoulos] thanks for your priceless gift to our generation. Your contribution to our critical thinking, our taste and culture pays off in our current situation'<sup>10</sup>

May I have a copy of the PhD of this crypto-intellectual? It will help me sleep better in the nights after the collapse of the scoundrel with the raised eyebrow.<sup>11</sup>

A pertinent discussion in a thread in a web forum mainly addressed to male users is characterized by a comparable distinction.<sup>12</sup> Some contributors identify lifestyle with the political hegemony of PASOK castigating it as a morally harmful set of discourses. As most authors are men, some comments place emphasis on transformations in performances of masculinity. Lifestyle's success is discussed as a development that led to the alienation of 'positive' elements of the previous, 'desirable' identity of modern Greek men such as industriousness and indifference to conspicuous consumption.

Kostopoulos. PASOK's curse that maimed [the] Greek man's DNA. After PASOK [the party] of Andreas [Papandreou] and Kostopoulos came into power the grafter and reflective Greek man was transformed into the scummy, noov person of nowadays [...] For this reason we went morally, politically, socially and economically bankrupt.<sup>13</sup>

[Kostopoulos] is one of Papandreou's<sup>14</sup> favorite children and [...] promoted the style of PASOK's nouveau riche who [...] fucks everything, goes to bouzoukia with chicks, spends a lot of money, has a Rolex [watch] and a [Porsche] Cayenne. Contemporary Greece's comedown [...] is the result [of the activities] of Kostopoulos and his friends. [...] Before the 1980s [...] when someone was a hustler people were spitting on him. Afterwards, if you were not a hustler they were calling you idiot. Beforehand if a girl was not a slut people were telling her 'well done' and she was in demand as a bride. Now there aren't [any] virgin teenagers. Beforehand they were saying well done to the homemakers who were saving money for their old age. Now people say 'well done' to those who spend a lot to show their cunningness.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, other discussants underline that lifestyle media succeeded, at least up to point, through people's selective choices; lifestyle is thus described as a set of discourses that serviced new needs in a period of prosperity.

I remember that the magazines were sold at the kiosks... Nobody bought these titles at gunpoint. I also remember – because I was young and I used to buy lifestyle magazines as a teenager –nobody advised us to take loans to give ourselves airs or to sell our grandmothers' fields in the village to [buy] better cars. [...] The magazines showed us a way of life but we were not obliged to follow this path [...] Sometimes we were buying these magazines to see a piece of ass or to see if any new clubs had opened. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s there was no Internet and such magazines provided useful information on these topics.<sup>16</sup>

I don't sympathize with Kostopoulos and I never bought his filthy magazines. But we can't charge him with the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. Before the 1980s Greece was more or less an isolated country. [...] After the 1980s the political situation became more stable, new models [of consumption] came from abroad and the Greeks followed them as other people had previously done in other countries. After many years of poverty the Greeks started to dream. These magazines started in the 1990s when we were watching movies on CNN, BBC and the French TV5. We were watching how other Europeans were living.<sup>17</sup>

These things are combined. He [Kostopoulos] had lived abroad, was reading such stuff and thought to publish such magazines here [in Greece]. New products are dynamic in a new market. Especially when they flatter [the audiences]. [Kostopoulos] was [a] buddy [of the political system]. [...] Bumpkin and smart arse. But beyond a few slickers, the rest of us, we were benighted; we were admiring whatever was polished. [We were a] backward society recently liberated at that time..<sup>18</sup>

Many discussants use vulgar words. Nevertheless, although in the discussions there are several moments of tension, it is thought provoking that many contributors (especially those writing long posts describing their personal relationships with lifestyle in the past) attempt to formulate arguments based on historical facts. In effect, sometimes, their texts are less polemical than articles written by professional journalists. Interactive, social media provide to the users unprecedented opportunities to develop alternative discourses to those circulated by mainstream media. During the crisis, various media damned lifestyle describing it as a phenomenon associated with PASOK's political hegemony and one of the reasons that the Greeks lost their hardworking identity. Such articles were published in media affiliated to various political parties.<sup>19</sup> Although this approach is hegemonic in mainstream media, many Internet users do not reproduce this narration in their texts. This happens not only in comments published in the websites of acknowledged newspapers that are usually somehow filtered by the moderators but also in forums characterized by a lenient policy towards aggressive and sexist vocabularies. Nevertheless, such possibilities are not always employed and several users do often reproduce the arguments and the style of 'traditional' media.

This is an interesting point regarding the relations between Greeks and the Internet. Greece is a latecomer to the use of Internet media. Before 2008 most internet users in Greece were mainly young, middle and upper class well educated people of the big cities, a condition that changed in the last years.<sup>20</sup> According to media scholar Vassilis Vamvakas, this democratization of Internet use coincided historically with the popularization of use of social media during the crisis years, a historical coincidence that created the conditions for a repoliticization of the public sphere. Overturning the climate of leisure and limited interest in politics that had characterized Greece in (at least) the last two decades before the crisis, one of the consequences of the crisis was that it introduced new groups of citizens to politics: thus, to a degree, the public

sphere polarized because audiences who previously were not accustomed to develop political arguments did so for first time in their lives.<sup>21</sup> However, these effects were not always dominant. Although lifestyle represents a noticeable discussion topic and many internet users conceive it in various political hues, often accepting that the crisis signaled the end of a “socially detrimental” consumption utopia, the tones of the discussions are however not very dramatic and not as polarized as in comparable discussions about other phenomena that led to the crisis such as political corruption. In effect, many post contributors seem less politically passionate about lifestyle than some professional journalists.

### **Instead of an epilogue: a culturally traumatic experience?**

But why is lifestyle so much discussed? I suggest that these discussions are not only the outcome of the collapse of the lifestyle media industry but that they refer in general to the end of the ‘consumption utopia’ that characterized the 1990s and the 2000s. But, does this collapse represent a culturally traumatic experience? The concept of cultural trauma has been employed to examine the relations between subjects and painful past events. As sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has argued, cultural traumas occur when members of a collectivity feel that they have been subjected to horrendous events that leave indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.<sup>22</sup>

Although the concept has been usually employed for the examination of historical events entailing extensive human losses such as wars and physical disasters, serious economic crises are arguably also culturally traumatic events. I suggest that the traumatic status of the Greek crisis can be located around feelings of disenchantment with the ways in which many Greeks dealt with Europeanization in recent decades. As the cultural convergence between Greece and Western Europe remained largely at the level of consumption, improvement of living standards paved the road for the expression of showy performances of consumption. Lifestyle systematically associated Europeanism with showy performances of consumption. At any rate, many users recognize the important role of lifestyle media as sources of information in the emergent economies of pleasure especially prior to the web era.

Many discussants do not accept that they were following lifestyle media. Some posts begin with the author's statement that he did not find lifestyle media interesting. Given the large number of posts in these discussions,<sup>23</sup> the fact that so few users accept that they were following the lifestyle media systematically may be shows the traumatic load that the concept of lifestyle carries. As mentioned before, ways of living and consuming related to lifestyle are blamed as one of the main causes of the current economic situation. Consequently, some of those who had adopted some of its features in their everyday life choices avoid acknowledging this even in conditions of anonymity such as those offered in the web. We could then argue that the transformation of consumption standards during the crisis represents a 'fateful event' in Giddens's terms, namely a moment that interrupted individuals' pleasant consumerist certainties, affected the organization of memories around experiences of the past and redefined some past practices as 'shameful'.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the traumatic character of the end of the consumerist utopia is based on its function as 'restoration tool' of a legacy of divisions that had marked the first post civil war decades. As Greece experienced the gradual healing after war and civil war, prosperity emerged as a crucial referent of the 'European' identity of the country.<sup>25</sup> Sentiments of security around this identity intensified in the early 2000s when Greece joined the Eurozone and organized the 2004 Olympic games in Athens. It was exactly this 'European' identity of the country and its European future that came into question during the crisis as Euroskepticism gained ground: only 23% of the Greeks trusted the European Union and its institutions in late 2014 instead of 56% in the beginning of the crisis, in late 2009.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the end of the 'consumption utopia' signified not only changes on living conditions but also the deconstruction of persistent variants of Greece's contemporary national identity. As Alexander argues, traumatic statuses can be attributed to events overturning the emotional and cultural expectations that provide subjects with a sense of security and capability.<sup>27</sup> Debates about lifestyle reflect the public negotiation of the passage from a period of optimism when prosperity and expansion of consumption worked as recognizable variables in narrations of success and stability to a new stage where emotions of insecurity dominate the public sphere. These public anxieties about the potential outcomes of the influence of this earlier narration are

widely expressed through interactive media that emerge as a pivotal terrain for the formulation of opinions about what did (and didn't) 'go wrong' in the recent past.

<sup>1</sup> See analytically: Manny E. Paraschos and Thimios Zacharopoulos, *Mass Media in Greece: Power, Politics and Privatization*, Westport Connecticut: Praeger, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Hauser, 'Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion', *Communication Monographs*, 65/3, 83-107, here: 86.

<sup>3</sup> For these issues see analytically: Alexandros Afouxenidis (ed.), *Ανισότητα στην εποχή της κρίσης. Θεωρητικές και εμπειρικές προσεγγίσεις* (Inequality in the era of crisis. Theoretical and empirical approaches), Athens: Propompos, 2012; Stella Zambarloukou and Maria Kousi (eds), *Κοινωνικές όψεις της κρίσης στην Ελλάδα* (Social aspects of crisis in Greece), Athens: Pedio, 2014; Efi Avdela, «Το φύλο στην (σε) κρίση ή τη συμβαίνει στις “γυναίκες” σε χαλεπούς καιρούς» (Gender during the / in crisis or what happens to the 'women' in hard times), *Σύγχρονα Θέματα* (Contemporary Issues), 115 (2011), 8-17; Thomas Maloutas, 'The Archeology of the Decline of the City Centre: Residential Location Choices of Affluent Groups', in Mirto Tsilimpunidi and Aylwyn Welsh (eds), *Remapping 'Crisis'. A Guide to Athens*, Winchester: Zero Books, 2014, 26-42.

<sup>4</sup> See analytically: Giannis Voulgaris and Ilias Nikolakopoulos (eds), *2012: Ο διπλός εκλογικός σεισμός* (2012: The double electoral earthquake), Athens: Themelio, 2014; Michalis Spourdalakis, 'The Miraculous Rise of the "Phenomenon SYRIZA"', *International Critical Thought*, 4/3 (2014), 354-366; Antonis Ellinas, 'The Rise of Golden Dawn: The New Face of the Far Right in Greece', *South European Society and Politics*, 18/4 (2013), 543-565.

<sup>5</sup> Vassilis Vamvakas, *Ο λόγος της κρίσης. Πόλωση, βία, αναστοχασμός στην πολιτική και δημοφιλή κουλτούρα* (The discourse of the crisis: polarization, violence and rethinking in politics and pop culture), Thessaloniki: Epikentro, 2014, 16. The first Economic Adjustment Program for Greece was signed between the Greek government, the Eurogroup, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund in May 2000 implying 107.3 billion euros of financial assistance. In March 2012 this program was superseded by a second economic adjustment program signed by the same institutions. This program comprised the undistributed money of the first program, plus 130 billion euros for the period 2012-2014.

<sup>6</sup> Gina Moscholiou, «Μια βία όχι και τόσο πολιτική» (A violence not so political) in Xenia Kounalaki et al., *Η βία* (Violence), Athens: Polis, 2013, 121-148.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Comment by ‘μπουρζουά’ below the article by Petros Kostopoulos, «Η ώρα του απολογισμού» (Time to account), *Lifo*, 18 February 2012, [http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/29087?comments\\_page=3&comments\\_order=o#comments](http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/29087?comments_page=3&comments_order=o#comments)

<sup>9</sup> Comment by ‘Angelos’, below the article: «Αριστερός Ψάλτης» (Left Chanter), «Ο Κωστόπουλος και το ψέμα του πράσινου lifestyle» (Kostopoulos and the lie of the green lifestyle), *Antinews*, 27 November 2013, <http://www.antinews.gr/2013/11/27/236059/> (accessed 23 March 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous comment below the article: Aris Terzopoulos, «Ο Άρης Τερζόπουλος γράφει για τον Πέτρο Κωστόπουλο» (Aris Terzopoulos writes on Petros Kostopoulos), *Lifo*, 30 March 2012, [http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/29735?comments\\_page=2&comments\\_order=o#comments](http://www.lifo.gr/team/readersdigest/29735?comments_page=2&comments_order=o#comments) (accessed 23 March 2015). Aris Terzopoulos was the owner of Terzopoulos Editions, the company that launched the magazine *Klick* in 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Comment by ‘Antonis Evangeloulis’ below the article: Panos Papadopoulos, «Ο άλλος Πέτρος Κωστόπουλος. Μια προσωπική μαρτυρία» (The other Petros Kostopoulos. A personal testimony), *Το Βήμα της Κυριακής* (Sunday’s Forum), 1 March 2012, <http://www.tovima.gr/media/article/?aid=446160> (accessed 23 March 2015).

<sup>12</sup> In March 2014 the website had more than 144,000 users, ‘clones’ included.

<sup>13</sup> «Κωστόπουλος, Κωστόπουλοι: η αλλοίωση των χαρακτηριστικών του Έλληνα» (One Kostopoulos, many Kostopouloi, the alienation of the identity of modern Greek man), <http://www.bourdela.com/forum/index.php?topic=136668.0>, post #1 (16 December 2011), user: jstar

<sup>14</sup> Andreas Papandreou established PASOK in 1974 and was the prime minister of Greece in the years 1981-1989 and 1993-1996.

<sup>15</sup> Post # 1578 (15 September 2014), user: Drclaw

<sup>16</sup> Post #16 (16 December 2011), user: str81977

<sup>17</sup> Post #1583 (16 September 2014), user: Bet Rantaplan

<sup>18</sup> Post #110 (16 December 2011), user: Obiwan (all posts accessed 23 March 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Indicatively: «Αριστερός Ψάλτης», «Ο Κωστόπουλος και το ψέμα του πράσινου lifestyle»; «Η έλλειψη ιδανικών βλάπτει την πατρίδα» (The lack of ideals damages our homeland) , <http://www.dimokratianews.gr/content/13404/η-έλλειψη-ιδανικών-βλάπτει-την-πατρίδα>; Evgenia Loupaki, «Σε φτύνω, άρα κολλάς» (I ignore you, so you stick), *Αυγή* (Dawn), 10 September 2013, <http://www.avgi.gr/article/912874/se-ftuno-ara-kollas>; Giorgos Anandranistakis, «Πόσο μ' αρέσει να βλέπω τον Κωστόπουλο να εξευτελίζεται» (I enjoy so much the humiliation of Kostopoulos), *Αυγή*, 26 November 2013, <http://www.avgi.gr/article/1372443/poso-m-aresei-na-blepo-ton-kostopoulo-na-exeutelizetai>; Giorgos Mastoras, «Η θλιβερή περίπτωση Κωστόπουλου ως δείγμα κοινωνικής παρακμής» (The drear case of Kostopoulos as a case of social decline), *Χρυσή Αυγή* (Golden Dawn), 27 November 2013, <http://www.xryshaygh.com/index.php/enimerosi/view/h-thliberh-periptwsh-kwstopoulou-ws-deigma-koinwnikhs-parakmhs> (all articles accessed 30 March 2015).

<sup>20</sup> See analytically: Παρατηρητήριο για την Κοινωνία της Πληροφορίας (Observatory on information society), *Η πορεία προς την ψηφιακή Ελλάδα. Πρώτη ολοκληρωμένη μέτρηση των δεικτών e-Europe* (The way to digital Greece. First full survey of E-Europe Index), Athens, 2005; Παρατηρητήριο για την Κοινωνία της Πληροφορίας (Observatory on information society), *Ταυτότητα χρηστών Internet στην Ελλάδα* (Identity of internet users in Greece), Athens, 2010

<sup>21</sup> Vassilis Vamvakas, *Ο λόγος της κρίσης*, 9-14.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma' in Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (eds), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2004, 1-30, here: 1-3. see also: Emmanuel David, 'Cultural Trauma, Memory and Gendered Collective Action: The Case of Women of the Storm Following Hurricane Katrina', *NWSA Journal*, 20/3 (2008), 138-162.

<sup>23</sup> For instance the thread used in this paper started in December 2011 and contained more than 1600 posts in early 2015. See also the endnote no 12 in this paper.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity. Self and Society in the Modern Age*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 113.

<sup>25</sup> See: David Close, 'The Road to Reconciliation? The Greek Civil War and the Politics of Memory in the 1980s' in Philip Carabott and Thanasis D. Sfikas (eds), *The Greek Civil War. Essays on a Conflict of Exceptionalism and Silences*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, 257-278.

<sup>26</sup> *Τακτικό ευρωβαρόμετρο* (Regular Eurobarometer Survey) (2014), 82 (Autumn), 1-4.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', 10-11.