

# GreeSE Papers

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### **Chronic Crisis and the Psychosocial in Central Greece**

**Daniel M. Knight**

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# Chronic Crisis and the Psychosocial in Central Greece

Daniel M. Knight<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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In Central Greece, the 2009/10 economic crisis has lost its eventedness, with crisis becoming a chronic condition with its own set of temporal rhythms and orientations. Even with Greece officially 'out' of crisis, local vernaculars of captivity have come to the fore as people relate to lives deemed without a future, feelings of stuckedness, futility, and an intimate uncomfortable comfort with an endemic condition. As the rupture of crisis becomes a chronic state, people report experiencing a form of societal Stockholm Syndrome, a profound familiarity with routinized axiomatic violence. Contributing to emergent debates on chronic crisis, the psychosocial, and the aesthetics of captivity, societal Stockholm Syndrome provides an alternative framework to understand lives trapped in the spin-cycle of seemingly permanent crisis.

**Keywords:** Chronic Crisis; Psychosocial; Captivity; Temporality; Greece; Stockholm Syndrome

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## 1. Introduction: When Crisis becomes Chronic

In 1973 Jan-Erik Olsson attempted to rob Kreditbanken, a bank in Stockholm, Sweden. During the robbery Olsson took four employees hostage for six days. When Olsson and his accomplice Clark Olofsson were captured and later taken to court, all four hostages refused to testify against them, instead launching a money-raising campaign for their defense. In analyzing the condition of the former hostages, Swedish criminologist and psychiatrist, Nils Bejerot, identified a form of what has popularly been referred to as ‘brainwashing’, later coined by the mass media as ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ (Namnyak et. al. 2008, 5). As well as feeling affinity or understanding for the motives and methods of the captor as a survival strategy, other characteristics of Stockholm Syndrome include wanting to remain in or later return to the place of captivity, maintaining a relationship with the captors, feeling extreme anxiety about life after captivity and futility for the hostage situation.<sup>2</sup> Stockholm Syndrome is existentially paradoxical in that the sentiments captives feel towards their captors oppose the disdain an onlooker might express.<sup>3</sup>

Stockholm Syndrome, it has been argued, can be both a personal psychological condition and a societal issue shared by a group living through the same transformative conditions (Graham 1994). The primary concern in both cases is simply survival. Rather than talking about symptoms, the criteria of *societal* Stockholm Syndrome, Philip Pilevsky (1989) proposes in his influential work *Captive Continent*, can be identified in groups, objects and nations enmeshed in a long-term relationship of dependence and exploitation. It is on these terms that I suggest that Stockholm Syndrome can be used as a “vernacular resource” (Adorjan et. al. 2012) to represent individual and societal reactions to an epoch of chronic crisis, namely the structural austerity experienced in Central Greece since 2009/10. The endemic state of crisis in Central Greece has fostered an experiential framework of societal Stockholm Syndrome marked by an intimate uncomfortable comfort with living in perpetual crisis, defeating hopes for futural change (Knight 2019).

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<sup>2</sup> There is an excellent forum on the theme of captivity – covering topics as varied as international shipping, prisons, animal enclosure, and neurodivergence – published in *History and Anthropology* journal (2019, 30(5)).

<sup>3</sup> A version of this vignette providing historical context for the concept of Stockholm Syndrome appeared online in *Anthropological Theory Commons* ‘Debate’ section (Knight 2020). The concept has been developed at length here based on the feedback received for this blog post. The author holds the copyrights.

After a decade of structural austerity, societal Stockholm Syndrome as vernacular resource provides insight into how people embrace chronic crisis with its own temporal rhythms and orientations. Stockholm Syndrome appears regularly in the Greek print media to frame the experiences of a nation held captive by foreign creditors and inept political figures. Articles discuss how living with crisis has become “naturalized”, the “new normal”, even at times emphasizing the “positives” of living in austerity (increased e-commerce, plastic transactions, and reduced tax evasion) (*Kathimerini*, 27<sup>th</sup> March 2017, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020). Although authors offer politically nuanced opinions on accountability, Stockholm Syndrome as a method to frame endemic crisis adorns the pages of the national press and has become a local vernacular to discuss captivity in crisis.<sup>4</sup> On the ground, justifications for current living conditions are widespread and further illustrate how people have become accustomed to the current status quo, making sense of an era of significantly increased social suffering, sometimes vindicating the actions of the perpetrators. With crisis now endemic, the “mundane background” of daily life (Dole et. al. 2015, 7), many of my research participants have established an intimate familiarity with living under the conditions imposed by their captors – once the so-called Troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund, now unresponsive international markets and deep-rooted structural reform at local and national level. The strangeness of captivity has become ordinary (Lepselter 2019, 535), the crisis that in the early years triggered mass protests in the urban centers, although not on the central plains in which my research is set, is now lived as a seemingly permanent and relatively uncontested status quo.

Contributing to current debates on the temporalities and affects of chronic crisis and to an emerging interest in axiomatic violence, the psychosocial, and the aesthetics of captivity, I interrogate how the perceived permanence of crisis in Greece has led to a form of societal Stockholm Syndrome, a vernacular apparent in everyday conversations and in the mass media that has become a prominent feature to describe life in the confines of crisis. The anti-austerity protests in urban centers that made headline news across the world in the early 2010s are a distant memory as crisis-as-rupture has lost its eventedness, quietly transitioning

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<sup>4</sup> News outlets carrying stories on Stockholm Syndrome span the political spectrum and include *Kathimerini* (Papadogiannis 2017), *Proto Thema* (Stefanadis 2016), *Times News* (Lamos 2020), *AlfaVita* (Unknown 2013), *efsyn* (Vasileiou 2019) and *left.gr* (Balafa 2020).

into an endemic state of affairs.<sup>5</sup> Based in local vernaculars of captivity and confinement, societal Stockholm Syndrome provides an analytic framework to better contemplate how people reflect on lives deemed to be without a future, where maintaining the present takes precedence over breaking free from the crisis-thinking status quo.

## 2. An Anthropology of Chronic Crisis

Much anthropological attention has focused on the social impact of *events* – crisis, catastrophe, protest. There is remarkable underrepresentation of what happens when a dramatic unforeseen social rupture becomes a chronic condition. I am concerned here with furthering anthropological engagement with crisis as a chronic state; when events lose their eventedness and become the status quo. In doing this, I respond to Henrik Vigh’s call to approach crisis *as context*; “a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration” (2008, 8). To better grasp the moral intricacies and practical dynamics of fashioning livelihoods out of a chronic state of decline, Vigh advocates a departure from perceiving crisis and trauma as momentary phenomena in favour of an understanding of critical states as pervasive contexts. In many parts of the world, he argues, crisis is not an “intermediary moment of chaos” but an ordinary state where people are forced to “make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds rather than waiting for normalisation and reconfiguration” (Vigh 2008, 8). Chronic crisis forces “agents to take into account not only how they are able to move within a social environment, but also how the social environment moves them, and other agents within it, as they seek to traverse envisioned trajectories” (Vigh 2008, 18). This two-way relationship between people and their immediate environment of long-term crisis presents curtailed or subverted pathways to the future. Through reflexive routinization, people are able to order disorder, to act and live in it, to gain a modicum of control. Where crisis ceases to be an event and “acquires an enduring hold” (Vigh 2008, 7), people find a sense of what one of my research participants calls “uncomfortable comfort” as they navigate the routinized condition.

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<sup>5</sup> There has been much written on protest and solidarity movements in Greece (Rakopoulos 2016, Theodossopoulos 2013). However, in the region of Central Greece where I work such social movements were never prominent, neither in terms of ideological alignment nor taking place ‘on the streets’. Further, across Greece, the headline protests against structural austerity generally ceased after the 2015 election of the left-wing SYRIZA government.

An event, Slavoj Žižek (2014, 5-6) muses, is “the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme”. It is “shocking, out of joint” and “interrupts the usual flow of things” (Žižek 2014, 2). For Veena Das (1995, 1), certain “critical events” annihilate and recreate the world, while Janet Roitman (2013, 20) identifies crises as basic units of history, in need of explanation. Crises exceed or defeat the expectations of structure, or routine – what is anticipated under normal circumstances. Events occur, Marshall Sahlins (1985, 153) argues, when structure cannot replicate itself in the expected way. But what if we look beyond the usual anthropological preoccupation with the event toward an interrogation of the temporalities and trajectories of life when an unforeseen rupture becomes a chronic state of existence with a sense of permanency? In Central Greece, the 2009/10 crisis has lost its eventedness and crisis-as-rupture has given way to crisis-as-status quo with a vernacular of captivity. Disillusioned with concepts of futural emergence and having learned to negotiate the extreme changes brought upon all domains of social engagement, people on the central plains of Greece, where I have conducted ethnographic and archival research since 2003, have become accustomed to crisis to the extent that they find small spaces for self-determination within the chronic framework, while accepting that the future will not arrive as once expected or desired.

The challenge to address a crisis that has lost its eventedness has recently been taken up by scholars such as Chloe Ahmann (2018) and Stavroula Pipyrrou and Antonio Sorge (2021). In the context of the long-term health consequences of a trash incinerator in south Baltimore where public protest no longer attracts mainstream media interest, Ahmann discusses the normalization of eventedness through the lens of slow violence. In her case, social and environmental degradation is experienced not as a jolting schism but as repetitive erosion of acceptable living conditions. Slow violence unfolds within the “sluggish temporalities of suffering” where the spectacle of an event fades into normalcy (Ahmann 2018, 144). It is the little things, Ahmann explains, that eat away at the person in the new state of normalcy and obscure the view of what once might have been considered ordinary. At first glance, the dramatic, high-impact consequences of crisis may not be visible (no Molotov cocktails, no television crews offering hourly updates) but the gradual brutalities of chronic crisis are often as destructive as the time of rupture itself, as emergent violence becomes structural (Davies



2019, 1, also Holbraad et. al. 2019).<sup>6</sup> Violence associated with crisis is customarily conceived as an event that is immediate in time, being explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility (Nixon 2011, 4). Ahmann critiques this relationship between crisis and temporality, in particular the way a social rupture readily becomes routinized to grind away at the moral apparatus of society. In Baltimore as in Central Greece, once a crisis loses its eventedness, moral outcry becomes less vocal, media attention is turned elsewhere, and the sublime rhythm of crisis becomes the mundane background noise of everyday life.

The (post)eventedness of crisis is the topic of a recent *Anthropological Forum* collection edited by Stavroula Pipyrou and Antonio Sorge who focus on how emergent violence arises from an explosive rupture to become axiomatic. In contexts as diverse as post-Brexit Britain, remembrance practices in Cambodia, and settler colonialist Australia, they argue that axiomatic violence combines “neoteric and foundational violence to lend legitimacy to apparently incontestable categories of domination, disenfranchisement, and epistemological governance” (2021, 225). Extraordinary ruptures become routinized and once divisive political rhetoric, controversial epistemological impositions, and colonial legacies are silenced or overwritten. The ultimate political goal of routinizing violence as axiomatic is to incite resignation through systems of governance by what Peter Benson and Stuart Kirsch term “structures of feeling that promote cynicism about the ability to alter social structures”, eventually making resignation “a dominant mode of political action” (Benson and Kirsch 2010, 474 in Knight 2015, 239). When a crisis has become endemic it generates a new “common sense” about the social environment where a shoulder-shrug is the ultimate gesture that violent events have become embedded in the everyday social milieu (Herzfeld 2016,11; 2019, 133). Over a period of time – more than ten years in the Greek case – violent rupture loses its eventedness, its power structures become uncontested.

The new common sense – or ‘art of making do’ (Goddard 1996, 50; Pine 2012) – is a prominent feature of chronic crisis in Central Greece. Local understandings of working within rather than resisting the exploitative power structures inherent in crisis (Troika structural reform, German political meddling, international corporate investment, foreign cornering of newly privatized

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<sup>6</sup> This is a counter to perspectives of ‘the business of crisis’, where anthropological attention is drawn to situations of rupture only to dissipate when the next ‘event’ arises (see Cabot 2019).

sectors) may seem morally distasteful to some readers, as when someone reports finding an “uncomfortable comfort” in the new normal. However, navigating routinized crisis is not a completely new concept for anthropology, especially outside of the European context and must be considered as one pathway through social disturbances that become epochal. Discussing endemic economic decline in West Africa, scholars such as Paul Clough and Janet MacGaffey have successfully furthered the analytical apparatus for studying chronic crisis as a social condition, demonstrating how local people subvert, embrace, and utilize the tools at their disposal. Accepting a form of captivity to endemic crisis facilitates the navigation of daily life within the parameters of chronic turmoil. For instance, in what was then Zaire, MacGaffey (1987, 1998) highlights how in structural crisis the reduction of state administrative capacity provides scope for opportunistic social mobility. The booming secondary economy rises around entrepreneurial innovation at the crack where state regulation does not meet continued, culturally embedded, demand. From such turmoil, MacGaffey proposes, people identify creative and ingenious ways to deal with the situation and “small initiatives were flourishing as people learnt to fend for themselves” (1998, 37). In the stability of seemingly permanent crisis, small pockets of the population had managed to find means for self-determination amidst endemic economic decline.

The ordinariness of the once extraordinary allows for predictability and the competent navigation of structural economic decline. This leads to what Clough calls the “collective mentality” of chronic crisis navigation; where crisis becomes normalized to the extent it is engrained on the body and mind (Clough 2014, 260; Shevchenko 2009). As crisis becomes routinized and an intimate familiarity with axioms of violence is fostered, the extraordinary becomes pacified and there is a widespread resignation in the face of the overwhelming force of the new reality. This is the societal Stockholm Syndrome effect of being held captive by violence over an elongated period. ‘The Greek crisis’ has become the marker of a generation, an epochal identifier rather than a rupture. This violent ordinariness has led to what Lauren Berlant (2011, 95) calls a general wearing out whereby “deterioration” becomes “a defining condition of ... historical existence”. Livelihoods and futures are oriented according to an atmosphere of chronic decay, where a sense of captivity shapes moral and political action.

### 3. Ethnographies of Future-Fear

“I fear the future”, Aphrodite tells me as we walk through the bustling streets of the Monday market in late 2017. “Years ago, I could not wait to escape this crisis, the pressures of new taxes, the anxiety of constantly pending unemployment, the crazy political talk that surrounds us every day. But now we have all learned to cope”. A self-employed 38-year-old mother of two, Aphrodite echoes the views of an increasing majority of my research participants in the central Greek town of Trikala when she states that people have become accustomed to living in crisis. “We are surrounded by crisis 24 hours a day, seven days a week ... wherever you look”. A decade on from the onset of fiscal austerity in Greece as part of the wider so-called ‘European financial crisis’, the latest episodes of the never-ending saga continue to be played-out around the clock on television and in daily newspapers. “The electricity bill on my kitchen table announcing the most recent tax hikes, my son’s second-hand clothes, when I ride my bicycle to work (Aphrodite sold her car in 2012 as it was too expensive to run), these are the everyday things that remind you that crisis is here to stay”. Aphrodite says that the cloud of crisis is all-encompassing, engulfing every person at every level of society, “from politicians and the media to my retired grandfather and the kids at school ... we are all *still* intoxicated by crisis”.

For Greek youth, a time of crisis is all they have known. The crisis generation have been raised in a world where the vernacular is austerity, memoranda, occupation, neo-colonialism, captivity, Troika; the key affects being suppression, nausea, disenchantment, a sense of vertigo, and more recently apathy and exhaustion toward the future (Knight 2021). The expectations of everyday life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Europe – material accumulation, promised futures – have been defeated in what Lewis G. Gordon (2015, 138) writing on the permanence of catastrophe in the post-financial crisis age, calls a “cultural disaster” that “leads to a rallying of forces against the future. It demands sacrifice of the young”.

In conversation with Aphrodite in 2014 she mentioned how she had “given up” fighting the economic crisis that was infiltrating every aspect of her daily life. For her, and many others, it was a choice between either accepting the status quo or, in her words, “going mad”. “Eventually, if you listen to all the commentators on the television, continue to discuss the crisis with friends, or pay too much attention to the bills on your table, you will fall sick,

collapse, or contemplate suicide” (on suicide in the Greek crisis, see Davis 2015). She says that the crisis is seemingly permanent, “singular” and “the Greek people have accepted that ... We are hostages to great forces that are too abstract to fight ... we have adapted and learned to survive”. Poignantly, Aphrodite insists that she and her friends are now “comfortable” with crisis, that they “know how to navigate” the suffocating consequences of austerity enforced by their “captors” who have “suppressed” them for so long. She has found what Olga Shevchenko (2009, 9) working in a post-socialist context has termed “the competent navigation of a perpetual crisis”. Talk of a post-crisis future, Aphrodite adds, “only makes people more anxious to the point of almost physically vomiting with the fear of the unknown ... we are the captives in a hostage situation and we have learned how to cope”. To stay put in the familiar surroundings of crisis, she solemnly looks me directly in the eyes and shuffles to the edge of the couch opposite, “is the best we can hope for”.

“There is security in staying put, it is a form of Stockholm Syndrome”, Aphrodite explains, “at least we have come to know the occupiers, the authorities (here referring to both international creditors and national politicians) that hold us captive, so well that we can guess their next moves”. Aphrodite echoes what I have heard from other friends and research participants in the field, and what she has also read in the national press; that many people in Central Greece have become accustomed and habituated to the idea of emergence as a repetitive cyclical process that feeds a sense of stasis rather than change. The intimacy felt with the crisis situation means that any discussion of emergence is met at best with apathy, often ridicule, sometimes remarkable fear.

On one of my regular visits to the cafeterias on Asklipiou, Trikala’s Main Street, my long-term friend Popi, a 31-year-old barwoman with a university degree, elaborates on the apathy felt toward promises of emergence and the relative comfort in ‘knowing’ crisis. “It (emerging from crisis) is old news; we have heard it all before, it (crisis) is now part of our natural existence. It has been for ten years or more. Over and over again they tell us that the crisis is finishing, that we are out of crisis. The economy is improving, and the rest of the world trusts us (economically) again. You feel like you are experiencing déjà vu, that the political speeches and people’s everyday lives are stuck and continuously repeating, round and round in circles. It makes you dizzy.” Popi says that people now “know what they need to do to survive” in the “constant atmosphere of crisis” and, fearing that “one neo-colonial program” of

dispossession will simply be replaced by another, she insists that she is “happy to remain” with the current status quo. She also observes that the crisis “happened for a reason”, believing that “we had it coming, after decades of money, living the good life, we needed to be put back in our place. This is our life now, living in the cage of a foreign captor”. She says that she understands why Greece has been forced into over a decade of austerity but does not believe that people have learned their lesson quite yet, “if ever”. For Popi, captivity in chronic crisis is not wholly negative since she believes that lessons can still be learned from the atmosphere of captivity which, for her, has a pedagogical overtone. Her greatest fear is that emergence from crisis will lead to her fellow citizens reverting to their old ways of excess and abundance, resulting in an even more hostile program of dispossession by a new captor.

At first Popi’s views may be deemed to be endorsing some kind of colonial mastery where punitive neoliberal measures take on a pedagogical guise. But, she says, her words are a reflection on a decade of crisis, an attempt to stand back from ideological judgement and think about how patterns of everyday life that were once considered to have been shockingly transformed have become normalized. She acknowledges both the colonial overtones of austerity and its dispossession, but her argument is not political in tenor. She fears for the consequences of not remembering the “time before crisis” and for more punitive colonial regimes over the futural horizon. However politically problematic these reflections on the normalization of chronic crisis might be, it is important not to censor the ethnographic record.

A poignant discussion with a privately employed travelling salesman on an intercity bus service brought home just how political subjectivity has been radically altered since 2009. During a five-hour journey between two mainland Greek cities I met Apostolis. The precariously employed father of one who had once joined anti-austerity protests on the streets of the Greek capital in 2010-11, explained how he had now “calmed down” and learned to accept a protracted crisis that was no longer a dramatic event of rupture, but a normal state of affairs. “It’s ok. Not too bad. You might still hear moaning and anger from some people, but this is generally rhetoric, in my opinion. Most people have learned how to survive, to find their way”. Despite losing his job in the public sector and taking a major hit on his pension as part of the structural austerity imposed by the Troika, Apostolis seems most forgiving, emphasizing that “We can’t blame them really (the Troika). We (Greece) were the bad boys of Europe and had to be put back in our place”. Fifty-five years old, Apostolis once

thought that he would be able to bide his time until the crisis past “like a blustery storm rocking the ship”. Now, he has resigned himself to the fact that he will spend all his life living in crisis, “with somebody else dictating ... long after they declare crisis ‘over’” what he can and cannot do. “And my son and daughter-in-law will (spend their lives in crisis) too. But its ok, I mean, what can you do? I understand the reasons why it has to be like this.” The structural context of axiomatic violence has “entrapped” Apostolis (Corsin-Jimenez 2019, 2021).

The vignettes provided by Aphrodite, Popi and Apostolis represent how people have become exhausted with crisis talk and are trapped in a chronic state, relating to the environment of crisis *as* context as suggested by Vigh. The violence of crisis has become axiomatic, in Pipyrrou and Sorge’s terms, losing its status as an event, transitioning from an emergent to a structural condition, even when Greece has been declared ‘out’ of the crisis years. Their narratives attest to how chronic crisis has bred an uncomfortable comfort with the present and a fear of what lies over the futural threshold – perhaps the next captor will be worse. Justifications for current living conditions are widespread and the level of acceptance for the state of crisis further illustrates how people make sense of an era of significantly increased social suffering, vindicating the actions of the perpetrators, and taking their punishment. Popi is “happy to remain” in the “cage”, caught in the affective, emotional but also pedagogical grasps of her captors. Aphrodite says that “to stay put” is the best that she can hope for the future and directly references “a form of Stockholm Syndrome” when discussing her sense of security in crisis. All three express a level of understanding for why the structural austerity that led to the current circumstances was enforced upon them. All place more faith in the knowable lives of crisis imposed by foreign captors than in promises of emergence pledged by their own democratically elected government. Captivity is now key to local narratives of life in chronic crisis, helping people identify common modalities of living in an era that has a particular temporality with a set of ways to express social experience. Societal Stockholm Syndrome can be employed as a vernacular resource or trope to underscore a sense of captivity as a prominent feature of the affective structure of chronic crisis. It is to this I now turn.

## 4. Vernaculars of Captivity

In the anthropological literature, captivity is often described as a transformative atmosphere or aesthetic which is difficult to define ethnographically (Berlant 2011; Lepselter 2019; O'Neill 2019; O'Neill and Dua 2019). Writing on Pentecostal drug rehabilitation centers in Guatemala, Kevin Lewis O'Neill (2019) employs the work of Gernot Böhme to better portray the situation of captivity, "[one] can be caught by an atmosphere" (Böhme 2017, 2), an aesthetic impression, a "space with a certain tone of feeling" (Böhme 2017, 12). The atmosphere of captivity, O'Neill elaborates, contains "affective, emotional resonances" that are "nebulous and vaporous, that ... are difficult to grasp" for the onlooker. Yet the atmosphere of captivity surely "grabs" those in its vicinity, enclosing them in an inescapable aesthetic (O'Neill 2019, 541). It is in precisely this atmosphere of captivity that my ethnographic analysis plays-out, among people grasped by affective, emotional, nebulous incarceration. The outcome of entangled histories and social relations, the societal Stockholm Syndrome experienced in Central Greece refers to conditions not of a fortified location (e.g. Reed 2003; Scheele 2019) but of the captivity of all domains of social life by an abstract punitive Other, and the disorientation this causes toward futural expectations (Knight 2021).

Alberto Corsin-Jimenez (2021) has recently floated the concept of entrapment as a heuristic of social process. In addition to discussing the mechanic or physical entanglements of traps, Corsin-Jimenez offers 'entrapment' as an alternative to other idioms in social theory to discuss complex social arrangements and assemblages. As well as human actors and their environmental landscapes, entrapment includes haunting presences and uncanny psychosocial affects that hold people, objects, and socio-historical context together. Further, with Chloe Nahum-Claudel, he suggests that entrapment empowers knowledge practices, and emotive and moral forces (2021). For Corsin-Jimenez, physical and metaphorical entrapment provides branches to think through complex socio-historical assemblages. A similar heuristic, 'captivity' helps explain life lived in the socio-historical timespace of chronic crisis in Greece.

Perhaps most pertinent to the Greek case at hand, in his theory of crypto-colonialism, Michael Herzfeld (2002, 2016) has argued for a more forthright recognition of long-term relationships of captivity or entrapment where structural inequality has become normalized. Offering a reading of political structures and social orders that underpin the pretence of modernity,

crypto-colonialism describes a nation held captive by idioms of “cultural and territorial integrity largely modelled on Western exemplars” where social life is “restricted by the practical needs and intentions of the Western colonial powers” (2016, 10). Modern Greece has taken shape within an overarching structure of captivity to the West, where Western powers have revelled in stereotypes of antiquity and political conservatism with the result that the independent nation has been led in a process of “cultural self-purging” in the name of “political purity” (2016, 10). Drawing stark comparisons between the formation of the modern nation-state in the early 1800s and the structural austerity policies imposed by the West in the 2010s, Herzfeld poignantly suggests that the colonized-colonizer, captor-captée relationship is nothing new, but rather our attention has been drawn to it by the event of economic crisis; a structural relationship has taken an emergent form.<sup>7</sup> The underlying crypto-colonial bureaucratic and cultural systems become most apparent in times of crisis when the dynamic between the Great Powers and local communities are brought into sharp relief.

The shoulder-shrug of resignation to live within conditions of structural inequality has deep roots in the ethnography of Greece. Herzfeld pins European Union attempts to plant a “collective cultural consciousness into the mindset” to Greek acceptance of ideological lines that reproduce “a long-standing pattern of bowing to others’ views”. This “vicarious fatalism” is “an addictive form of determinism that says that one cannot do anything about the mess that others have created. Such is the cruelty, as well as the dangerous comfort, of being a victim blamed by the perpetrator” (Herzfeld 2016, 11). Part of the cultural intimacy that shields knowledge from the outsider is *efthinofovia* (fear of responsibility), apparent throughout the history of the modern nation where blame is placed outside of the Self toward the interfering “foreign finger” (Sutton 2003, Knight 2013). At first glance, narratives of captivity in chronic crisis seem to fall into this category of vicarious fatalism, or everyday ‘politics of futility’ (Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2020) where there is performative resignation to be under the thumb of the external Other. But this approach does not do justice to the atmosphere of captivity, in Böhme’s sense, that has foreclosed futures in very real terms, nor

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<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Argenti and Daniel M. Knight (2015) have put forward an argument of neo-colonialism in the Greek economic crisis, arguing that European Union initiatives for new energy technologies are perceived as extractive economies and new forms of foreign occupation.



does it account for the acceptance (rather than fear) of responsibility that resides in the zone of “dangerous comfort” alongside performative resignation.

I have known Christos since 2006 when we met inside the local tax offices where he was waiting to pay the registration fees for a new building plot he had acquired just outside of Trikala. The 48-year-old left-leaning public sector worker embodied the prosperity of a nation, planning his daughter’s wedding and talking of a hope-filled future based on land accumulation and investment in EU business programs. In 2017 he cuts a forlorn figure; he never did build his new home, his daughter has recently divorced, and the EU is now “holding (him) captive rather than offering opportunities”. Since the onset of crisis, he feels that Greece has been “suspended in time”, caught in a perpetual present in what he refers to as “a crisis that has lasted a lifetime”. Crisis time is all that anyone under the age of twenty-five has ever known – there is no experiential reality of adult life outside of this epoch, also adding to the contention that the atmosphere of captivity is more than vicarious fatalism under a shroud of cultural intimacy. “My children”, Christos says, “have written-off their future as based on ‘more of the same’. More crisis, more living in a cage”. Young people, he believes, “have a lack of interest” when asked to imagine a post-crisis Greece. “This is what they are familiar with, they are bound to it, intimately, closely”. The older generations have disassociated themselves with the future as, in the words of another informant in her sixties, “we won’t be around to live it (the future). We will only ever live what we have now (the crisis), so there is no need to prepare for the future” (Knight 2016).

Christos’ stance resonates with Rebecca Bryant’s (2016) concept of the “uncanny present” – the feeling of being trapped in an elongated present where the “succession of nows”, in Heideggerian terms, never presses into the future. Instead, there is hyper-conscious awareness of the continuous presence of the present (Heidegger 1972, x). Crisis, Bryant claims, becomes such precisely because it brings the present into consciousness, creating an awareness or perception of present-ness that we do not normally have: the present becomes uncanny. For Christos, the elongated present provides the cage for his captivity, the trap of his entrapment, the inescapability where there is no futural threshold to cross. He insists that the inscrutable future is no longer a desired destination when considered alongside the knowable present, “we have just learned to adapt” he says “to the radically altered way of life ... the future doesn’t offer me anything. Even with all this suffering around me, today I

have found my own safe place (in the world)". He says that he is "not interested in the future" and that "the world is stuck in permanent crisis and I just have to get on with it, stop moaning, and accept it ... It must have happened for a reason and I now know that I have to accept it".

Christos discusses the future in terms of emptiness and exhaustion, as an undesirable timespace to inhabit. His focus is to maintain the present, despite acknowledging the continued consequences of a crisis which he believes to be imposed by the international community against the will of the Greek people. Christos concludes that "the future doesn't have anything for me ... at least here I have my job, a few Euros for the supermarket, and a roof over my head. I have learned ... all Greeks have learned ... to be happy with that. To get by on what we are given and no longer ask too many questions, even if that means living in a type of captivity". Now, nearly 15 years on and with Greece officially out of foreign-endorsed austerity, apathy reigns supreme.

Aphrodite, Popi, Apostolis and Christos express resignation, apathy toward the future, fear of emergence, identification with those who fashioned the timespace, an intimacy with suffering, and desires to maintain the status quo. They have come to embody endemic crisis. Learning to live with the 'new common sense' of drastically decreased household income, policy attacks on healthcare, energy, and property rights, and yet slowly being able to justify the actions of the oppressors is central to chronic crisis being likened to societal Stockholm Syndrome.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Public Culture of Scalar Captivity

At home with public sector worker Christos one crisp January evening in 2018, conversation turns to the future prospects of his newborn grandchild. With his daughter now living back with her parents, their modest two-bedroom flat in the center of town is becoming rather crowded. I ask Christos how he is to accommodate three generations of kin in an environment which already sees him sleeping on the living room couch most nights. Surely, I enquire, such

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<sup>8</sup> Padraic Scanlan (2019) has argued that after emancipation former slaves of the British Empire were held captive by economic means. Imperial liberalism and the consolidation of global capitalism "was also an ideological and economic regime that took captives and prevented escape". Scanlan's inference that money be the means of enforcing captivity could also be applied to the Greek case.

conditions must be suffocating? His response is a monologue of captivity, scaling the micro-fissures of everyday life, such as confinement to the house for lack of expendable income and the retracted freedom of the youth who now live under the feet of their retirement-age parents, to accounts of how the nation has become reliant on its foreign benefactors.

“Our suffocation is accepted”, he reasons, “there is nothing unusual to see here. We have intimate familiarity with a life of confinement”. I know that Christos has seen the headlines on Stockholm Syndrome and the inability, even reluctance, to break free from the clutches of the axiomatic power games that have been the building blocks of chronic crisis. “It (captivity) is that atmosphere” he says “the cloud that has swept across the country, suffocating us all. From our politicians to the supermarket worker, our old and our young. We are a people of crisis that know no ... can see no different. We breathe it (crisis). It is that something that makes our world go round. You are asking a lot to throw that in the air and say, ‘we will remake the world’”. Christos insists that most people he knows feel responsibility toward their children and grandchildren in a way that the future must be based on maintenance of the current status quo (see Ringel 2018). The “safety net”, he says, “is not there” and thus the only way to help future generations is to “pass on the knowledge of how to navigate crisis, the condition we have here and now”.

Over the course of forty-five minutes, Christos oscillates between scales of crisis that merge the individual and family with the nation-state and international politics. The pivot is a lifeworld in captivity. Regular interjections from his daughter, Stella, now in her thirties, are to reinforce the point that there is a pervasive atmosphere that, although you cannot always quite put your finger on it, means the world make sense; there is a chronic state of affairs that makes one prioritize familiarity and foregrounds coping before resistance. This means, she insists, “getting your head down and getting on with life, understanding why we are in these circumstances, but not dwelling too long on trying to be a hero”. Stella’s point is that not only is there no longer any energy for heroic resistance, the desire has also lapsed since she has developed an uncomfortable comfort with life in the status quo, an intimate understanding of crisis, and overthrowing the current regime means that she would lose all reference points in her adult life.

Christos continues, “Yes, I believe that after all these years there is a comfort in crisis and a fear to break free, even if we could. It is like cutting our umbilical cord, like a link between the

mother and her baby (he gestures toward his three-month-old grandchild). We have become a nation feeding from the teat of our provider and this is all-encompassing, from top to bottom, the average person on the street to the prime minister. Every moment for the past ten years". Crisis is the routine, "we have developed a way to get by and actually life is not so bad, it is dangerous to think that life would be better on the other side of crisis".

The literature on Stockholm Syndrome identifies an atmosphere of captivity with affects, emotions, and pedagogical qualities that can be scaled in similar ways to Christos' proclamations of life in the clutches of chronic crisis to describe non-pathological vernaculars of captivity on a societal level. As I have suggested throughout, the physical and psychological effects of Stockholm Syndrome are not confined to individuals in hostage situations but can be descriptive of relationships between groups, objects, nations and deities on whom someone may be dependent (Pilevsky 1989, xi). Characteristics that may be noticed in societal Stockholm Syndrome and are pertinent to the Greek context include fear of life post-captivity, temporal disorientation, guilt for one's imprisonment, and dependence on and justification of the captor. In the International Relations literature, Stockholm Syndrome as societal trope has been used to define the relationship between Western Europe and the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s where Western European governments were trusting their enemy (the Soviet Union) and questioning their long-term ally (the United States) (Pilevsky 1989). For Pilevsky, Western Europe became, in a profound way, a captive of the Soviet Union; a relationship based on fear and dependence where Western Europe began increasingly to identify with its captor at the expense of the United States.

In the context of the latter Cold War years, Stockholm Syndrome was employed as a vernacular resource that referenced societal relations during a transformative epoch, and it is in this manner that I have argued societal Stockholm Syndrome provides a useful discursive framework to think through the affects and effects of chronic crisis. When Christos describes "paralysis" and Popi and Aphrodite discuss "justifications" for punishment and feeling "security" in entrapment, while all emphasize the fear of emerging from the crisis state, they reference an intimate relationship with their captors, where survival is of foremost concern. Societal Stockholm Syndrome is thus a useful tool in analyzing everyday explanations of crisis and desires for the future, furthering an attempt to populate the affects and orientations of pervasive crisis as context. In employing the term, I do not intend to pathologize crisis in a

way that detracts from the agency and creativity of research participants (cf. Theodossopoulos 2014). To the contrary, societal Stockholm Syndrome takes the lead from local vernaculars of captivity and national media headlines that directly reference the condition. With sovereignty removed, people have invested a great deal of emotion and energy into finding coping strategies that transcend the renegotiated living conditions of often extreme poverty and precarity. They have chiseled-out a space within chronic crisis in which they can survive.

The event – the capture of Greece by international creditors – was supposed to be but a fleeting moment, a temporary digression from progression toward late-capitalist promises of utopia (cf. Dole et. al. 2015). Instead, the event of rupture has become a chronic state of affairs meaning that people feel that they have had to accept their fate, cease protest, and adjust to the long-term prospect of, in Christos’s words “a crisis that has lasted a lifetime”. Like a captor, the Troika created unparalleled stress through unending negotiations and maneuvers, dressing up their most threatening deeds with a human face. The Troika carried out their mission by attempting to provide a human disposition to try to bury the fact that the international politics of the austerity years reflected very little humanity in the first place (cf. Pilevsky 1989, xiii)<sup>9</sup>. To paraphrase Susan Lepselter working with neurodivergent young people, the disorientation caused by the creators of crisis fed a “public culture of captivity” forming a “taste of containment” that has become popularized into an all-incumbent vernacular expressed by my research participants (Lepselter 2019, 534). Captivity is part of the dramatically transformed political subjectivity, diverging the typical as defined by the world at large. For Lepselter, captivity is “an atmosphere of the moment” with multifaceted affective levels; “Sometimes you feel you are held captive by your own mind; sometimes you are held captive by the expectations and structures that never fit. You are held captive by the orientation of a mind to a world”. These complicated nebulous layers form the atmosphere of captivity and contribute to the experience of crisis as epochal.

Working in post-socialist Moscow, sociologist Olga Shevchenko has written a thesis on the routinization of crisis or what she calls “the permanence of temporary conditions” (2009, 62)

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<sup>9</sup> At one point, Greece was offered humanitarian assistance for dealing with the potential social consequences of leaving the eurozone. For a discussion of the violence inherent in humanitarian action see Fassin (2007, 2010), Pipyrrou (2020), and Tickin (2017).

where individual experiences of crisis are scaled to the collective and the epochal. Many aspects of life in Moscow after socialism resonate with the Greek case. Expecting rapid change after the political rupture of the late 1980s, Shevchenko found that for the majority of Muscovites the era brought a continuation of a time of crisis. Akin to how people in Central Greece discuss their concerns that emergence will bring another, perhaps more punitive, politico-economic regime, Muscovites lamented that post-socialism offered no stability, no change, “life was unfolding in crisis all the time” (Shevchenko 2009, 17). Over previous decades Muscovites had, Shevchenko suggests, become intimate with a framework of chronic crisis and socialist captivity within which they had managed to develop an entire infrastructure of intimate coping whose “permanence would match the permanence of crisis and prevent it from disrupting one’s life” (2009, 63). In a stance that resonates with Christos’ worldview, Shevchenko claims that crisis had become the “new habitus” since people reacted to its permanence by fashioning equally permanent ways of dealing with a life in perpetual crisis.

In Moscow the chronic nature of the event had led to a normalization of crisis and rupturing the status quo was undesirable. Within the total crisis framework, the coping strategies had led to people finding their own spaces to determine life within the constraints imposed by outside forces. There were possibilities for life within the remit of chronic crisis. This is very similar to what my research participants report when they discuss having “learned to live” in the timespace of crisis and that they are no longer “fighting the regime” but “finding a way to get on with life, whatever that might now look like”.

This leads back to thinking about the intimacy felt with the perceived permanence of crisis in terms of societal Stockholm Syndrome. The normalization of a time of intense suffering, denigrating livelihood reforms imposed by outside forces, and the fear of change all resonate with this psychosocial analytical category. Alongside concepts of slow violence and axiomatic truths, societal Stockholm Syndrome adds to the anthropological toolkit for understanding life in chronic crisis. Considering crisis *as* context and responding to the need to better appreciate the long-term consequences of navigating a crisis environment, societal Stockholm Syndrome helps explain the overlapping catchwords, affects, and orientations that people embody and that have become signifiers of the era. The aesthetic of captivity runs throughout narratives of chronic crisis in Central Greece. Engaging in conversations with people like

Aphrodite or Christos, Popi or Apostolis, about their desires, their futures, perceptions on emergence and understandings of how and why crisis came to be, one cannot but help draw parallels with Stockholm Syndrome scaled-up not as pathology but as explanatory tool stemming from local vernaculars to frame the shared experiences of endemic conditions.

## 6. Conclusion

In no way am I advocating that people should seek an uncomfortable comfort in living in chronic crisis. Or that the status quo *should* be maintained. Rather, I am interested in what happens when a shocking event takes on a sense of permanence; crisis has become context, and captivity is the heuristic. In Central Greece, crisis is no longer an event of rupture but a normalized condition in which people have fashioned some form of routine within parameters of drastically restricted income, fragmented family relations, and amid an overpowering atmosphere of captivity. Some, like Popi, see crisis as pedagogical, justifying the severity of structural reforms handed down by international creditors. Most people agree that crisis is now epochal, no matter politicians' claims to emergence, and learning to navigate a familiar relationship of captivity is more desirable than risking a future unknown. There is safety and security in crisis; this captor's next move is always predictable. Christos' primary concern is still keeping a job and putting food on the table for his growing family, "not throwing Molotov cocktails" or even "being my neighbor's best friend". His priority is to maintain the daily rhythm of waking up, working an eight-hour shift, and paying his rent at the end of the month. He knows that "even if exploited ... even with a knife held to the throat holding me captive ..." it is "essential to maintain the situation that offers my family security". He states that he has "fashioned a place in the world ... somewhere we have intimately come to know". He quite powerfully declares that one should be "suspicious of life outside of the crisis ... don't ever trust what they offer you" and proposes that "collaboration with the captors, as the past has shown us, is sometimes the only decision".

Like Christos, Popi is proud of how she has learned to survive the oppressive consequences of over a decade of austerity. "You do feel trapped", she says but "we have found minor triumphs. We are survivors". In Herzfeld's (2016, 11) terms, this "new common sense" represents the "dangerous comfort" of people who identify with the mundane task of, Popi

says, “keeping individuals and households alive”. Part of staying alive involves an everyday intimacy with captivity, a deep-grained fear of post-crisis, and justification for current conditions. The post-crisis future is viewed with suspicion, foreboding, and a feeling that the next captors are just over the horizon.

Crisis in Greece has lost its eventedness, becoming normalized, now providing the background noise and directional apparatus for everyday life. Coping with crisis, despite once unthinkable restructured political subjectivity, has led to people molding spaces of compromised self-determination within the confines of permanent economic and political suppression. It is precisely this familiarity, with its navigable star-chart, that people seek to maintain, even when there are promises of crisis-emergence. Societal Stockholm Syndrome as vernacular resource helps scale individual, communal and national-level notions of paralysis, justification for punishment, security in entrapment, and mainstream resignation not to resist that now prevails as crisis has moved beyond the initial spectacular event.

We might recall overlapping ethnographic description of how people trust the structure of foreign reforms that have guided lives for a decade more than they trust their own prime minister’s promises to rescue them from the hands of foreign captors. We can pause for critical reflection on Popi’s statement of how she believes that Greeks have “learned nothing” from living in the destitution of crisis and “had it coming” after decades of “living the good life”. Aphrodite says that she has accepted the status quo of living under the thumb of “foreign occupiers”, while Christos describes having found his “safe place” in the “here and now”, accepting the fact that Central Greece is locked into seemingly permanent paralysis by powers he can “no longer fight”. In all voices there *is* critique of colonial processes and their dispossession but also a deep reflection on how patterns of life once considered drastically transformed have long become the new normal, encased in axiomatic violences. It is within the timespace of chronic crisis that lifeworlds are now fashioned. Intense statements on the atmosphere of captivity permeate everyday life and add to the understanding of how people navigate the normalization of crisis conditions. Trajectories to the future are foreclosed and life unfolds with a sense of uncomfortable comfort amid the axiomatic violences of chronic crisis.



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