

The Greek Catastrophe: “Economic Progress” Built on Rotten Political Foundations

Three Generations of Greek Workers

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Introduction

As Greece enters the sixth year of Europe’s worst economic depression, with 30% of its labor force unemployed and over 52% of its youth jobless, the entire social fabric is unraveling; a suicide rate are skyrocketing and close to 80% of the population is downwardly mobile. Family and inter-generational relations are deeply impacted; previous certainties evaporate. Uncertainties, fear and anger evoke daily mass protests. Over a dozen general strikes have drawn Greeks from middle school pupils to octogenarians in a desperate struggle to conserve the last shreds of dignity and material survival.

The European Union and its Greek collaborators pillage the treasury, slash employment, salaries and pensions, foreclose on home mortgages and raise taxes. Household budgets shrink to one half or one third of their previous levels.

In a growing number of households, three generations are living under one roof, barely surviving on their grandparents’ shrinking pensions; some households on the brink of destitution. The prolonged – never ending and worsening – capitalist depression has caused a deep rupture in the life cycle and living experiences of grandparents, parents and children. This essay will focus on grandfathers, fathers and sons due to greater familiarity with their life experiences

The intergenerational rupture can best be understood in the context of the contrasting ‘life experiences’ of the three generations: The focus will be on work, political, family and leisure experiences.

Work Experiences: The Grandfathers

The grandfathers’ families in most cases migrated from rural areas or small towns during the post-civil war period (1946-49) and many settled in the poor suburbs of Athens . Most barely finished secondary school and found poorly paid employment in textile, construction and public enterprises. Trade unions were non-existent, ‘semi-clandestine’ and subject to harsh repression by the US -backed rightist regimes into the early 1960’s. By the mid to late 1960’s the grandfathers gravitated toward the ‘center-left’ parties and the revival of trade union activity. This was especially the case among the growing assembly plant and public sector workers in the electrical, telecommunication, seaports and transport industries. The US-backed coup in 1967 and the resulting military junta (1967-1973) had a dual impact: Outlawing trade unions and collective bargaining, on the one hand, and stimulating foreign investment-led economic growth and corporate style clientelism on the

other.

The clandestine anti-dictatorial struggle, the student uprising and infamous massacre at the Polytechnic University (1973) and the collapse of the military dictatorship following its abortive coup in Cyprus, radicalized the grandfathers. Legalization of political parties and trade unions led to a surge of trade union organizations, struggles and social advances. Wage increases accompanied the fall of junta. Entry into the European Union and the large-scale influx of 'social cohesion funds' led to an expansion of public sector employment and increased political party clientelism extending well beyond the traditional right-wing regimes.

Job security, pensions and increases in severance pay created a relatively secure and stable labor force except in the manufacturing sectors, which were harmed by imports from the more industrialized EU 'partners'.

With the election of the Pan Hellenic Socialist Party (PASOK) in 1981, populist welfare legislation and wage increases served as a substitute for any consequential socialization of the economy. The economic and social security gains were steady, cumulative and led to rising living standards. The grandfathers joined trade unions, their leaders negotiated wage and workplace improvements and they faced the future with relative optimism: A comfortable retirement, better educated children and a modest paid-up apartment and small automobile. They looked forward to enjoying leisure time with family, friends and neighbors. Or so it seemed in the run-up to the Greek Catastrophe of 2008.

As we shall see Greece's economic progress was built on rotten foundations - on EU loans that were secured through fraudulent accounts, a public treasury pillaged by bipartisan kleptocrats and public 'investments' in large-scale unproductive clientelistic activities with corrupt business 'partners'. In a word, the 'golden years' of the grandfathers' comfortable retirement was based on the illusion that a half-century of work and social advances would translate into a respectable dignified life.

The Fathers: Work and Play and Play Later

The fathers were urban born, better educated than the grandparents and highly influenced by the consumer ethos that permeated Greece. They entered the labor market in the early 1990's. They saw themselves as more 'European', less nationalist, less class conscious and less involved in social struggles than the previous generation. Interest in sports and celebrities and their own social advancement precluded any engagement in the great social struggles of the grandfathers. They experienced rising salaries through top-down negotiations. They paid no attention to the grotesque enrichment of the kleptocratic socialist political elite and they ignored the growing debts, both personal and public, which 'funded' their overseas vacations, the second home and the imported German cars. They paid handsomely for tutors to prepare their children for the University entry exams. Their future was assured by ever more optimistic (falsified) government data and the positive assessments by EU experts. Trade unions and business associations focused exclusively on current increases in salaries, revenues, cheap credit and access to the latest techno toys.

The fathers spoke English, welcomed ever-greater European integration and discarded the doubts and criticism that the grandfathers directed at NATO and Israeli wars, inequalities within the EU and the effects of economic liberalization. They ignored the criticism of the close ties between the PASOK kleptocrats, local and overseas bankers, ship owners and

millionaire plutocrats.

Cynicism was their 'modernist response' to pervasive corruption and growing indebtedness. As long as they got theirs why challenge the status quo? With the onset of the Greek Catastrophe, the fathers lost it all – jobs, social security, homes, cars and vacations. The 'Europeanists' among them suddenly became virulent critics of the Euro bankers – 'the Troika' –, which mandated that the fathers should sacrifice everything they possessed in order to save the kleptocratic rulers, the millionaire tax evaders and the indebted bankers. The economic catastrophe gradually eroded and finally shattered the 'modern European' consumerist consciousness of the upwardly mobile middle and working class fathers.

First they suffered successive salary cuts and then they lost their job security, followed by massive firings with and without severance pay.

Dismay, fear and uncertainty were followed by the recognition that they were facing the financial firing squad. They realized they were trapped in an unending free fall. They took to the streets and discovered that their entire generation and their entire class was uprooted and discarded. The fathers discovered they were worthless and they had to march and struggle to reaffirm their self-worth.

Sons: 'Who Works?'

The vast majority of sons are unemployed: Over 55%, by the beginning of 2013, have never had a job. Each day and each week their numbers grow as entire families are impoverished and households disintegrate. School attendance has fallen off, as the prospects of employment disappear and the specter of long-term large-scale unemployment haunts everyday life. The prospects of establishing stable couples and new families among the young are non-existent.

'Street culture' has multiplied and the video arcades are more often places to meet rather than to play. Attendance at 'pop concerts' has fallen while the sons now turn out in greater numbers at mass protest marches. The growing politicization and radicalization of the sons now begins in the middle school and deepens in secondary and technical schools and the university.

Many, by their late 20's, have never had a job, never moved out of their parents or grandparents home and cannot envision a future marriage or family. The lack of work experience means a lack of workplace comradeship and union membership. In its place is the centrality of informal, peer group solidarity. Perspectives for work focus on emigration, hustling for a miserable odd job or joining the struggle. Today they wander the streets in anger, despair and deep frustration. As the years pass, the sons increasingly vote for the Left (Syrian) but are fed-up with the ineffectual parliamentary opposition, the ritual marches and the inconsequential social forums, featuring local and overseas radical lecturers who spin theories about the crisis but who have never lacked a job or missed a paycheck. The vast majority of the young unemployed feel that 'words are cheap'. The intellectuals, new-left politicians and overseas Greeks do not resonate with their day-to-day experience and offer no tangible solutions. Sons have joined with anarchist street fighters. So far few of the unemployed sons have responded favorably to the neo-Nazi appeal of the Golden Dawn. But they are hardly enthusiastic over the Left's embrace of immigrant job seekers, especially when their neighborhoods are victimized by Albanian, Middle Eastern and Balkan drug dealers and pimps

Political Experience: The Grandfathers and the Radical Legacy

The grandfathers' political trajectory differs sharply from their progeny. Many of their own parents were partisans in the Communist-led million-member national liberation movement (ELAS-EAM). They fought the Italian fascists and the German Nazi occupation army and took an active part in the civil war. Following the Anglo-American intervention and defeat of the insurgents, hundreds of thousands of Greeks were sent to slave labor/concentration camps, where many died. Villagers and farmers were savagely repressed and driven off their land.

Property was confiscated and millions migrated to the cities in search of anonymity and employment. When the Communist Party was outlawed, many members and ex-members joined 'progressive parties', the United Democratic Left (EDA) in search of an alternative.

The grandfathers came to political age with the revival of 'populist politics' in the early 1960's, promoted by the Center Union Party. After the 1967 coup, they faced six years of US-backed military rule (1967-73). Under junta rule, some grandfathers engaged in clandestine political and trade union activity. With the collapse of the junta, most grandfathers joined the newly formed Socialist Party led by a radicalized Andreas Papandreou.

The post-junta 1970's were a period of intense political debate and the proliferation of previously suppressed Marxists books, lectures, journals, forums and popular cultural events. Mikis Theodorakis, the great Communist composer, drew tens of thousands to his concerts, many of them workers, evoking scenes similar to Pablo Neruda's poetry readings to the thousands of workers and peasants in Chile. In the election of 1981, the grandfathers voted overwhelmingly for the Left: PASOK won over 50% of the vote and the Communists received close to 15%. Almost two-thirds of Greeks, and over 80% of Greek workers, voted for socialism (or so they thought!).

The grandfathers celebrated the defeat of the far right and over a half century of Nazi, US and right-wing military rule. The grandfathers had great hopes that Papandreou would fulfill his promise to 'socialize' the economy. They saw the electoral ascendancy of the Left as a prelude to a break with NATO and as a transition to an independent socialist welfare state. Despite several massive socialist and trade union conferences on 'worker self-management of a socialized economy' and the bankruptcy of scores of indebted private firms, Papandreou argued that 'the crisis' precluded an 'immediate transition to socialism'. He argued the right wing's capitalist recovery and only afterward could 'socialist' policies be implemented. He ignored the fact that it was the very capitalist crisis, which led to his election! Many grandfathers were disappointed but,

Papandreou, with the skilled speeches of a populist balcony demagogue, proposed a series of substantial wage increases legalized and expanded labor rights and implemented and increased social welfare and pension payments. The grandfathers settled for the populist reforms and the de-radicalization of the political process. From mid-1980 onward, the grandfathers continued to vote Socialist, but now exclusively with the goals of economic gain and expanding social coverage in health and pension benefits.

Under Papandreou, PASOK degenerated into an inconsequential 'gadfly' within NATO. Its enthusiastic entry into the EEC and its maintenance of US military bases eroded the last vestiges of anti-imperialist activity among the grandfathers. They narrowed their focus and looked toward PASOK as a clientelistic political machine, necessary to secure employment and guarantee their pensions.

With the onset of the Economic Catastrophe in 2008 and the savage social cutbacks implemented by the utterly inept, corrupt and reactionary George Papandreou, Jr., the grandfathers felt the first shockwaves of instability and the threat of losing their secure and living pensions. By 2010, the grandfathers totally abandoned their support for PASOK. Revelations of corruption and the slashing of pensions by 35% drove the grandfathers into the streets in massive protests. Later, a majority voted for the new leftist SYRIZA Party.

The grandfathers have come full circle: Re-radicalization has accompanied the return of authoritarian rightwing rule under the colonial dictates of the European Troika.

But now the grandfathers' pensions have to support three generations. Once again, the search for a new political party is as urgent as during the period immediately after the fall of the military junta.

The Fathers: The Politics of Downward Mobility

The fathers came to political age at the height of electoral clientelism. During the 1990's they voted PASOK, without any of the ideals or illusions of the grandfathers; nor did they engage in any historic struggles. They voted the candidates and parties who provided access to credit and low interest loans and offered lucrative concessions or promotions within a highly politicized public administration. The fathers rarely addressed larger ideological issues. They saw the 'capitalist versus socialist' debates as an anachronism of the past. They studied English and Anglicized their speech and writings. They no longer paid attention to the negative consequences of Greece's affiliation with NATO and the European Union. The big issues were Greece's sponsorship of the Olympics and how to cash in on the spending spree and cost overruns. PASOK leaders set the example by taking their cut off the top of every building contract, cooking the books, evading taxes and consulting with Goldman Sachs on how to accumulate debts and convert deficits into surpluses.

When the economic crisis hit, the fathers were caught unprepared. At first, they rationalized it, hoping 'the crisis' was temporary; that new loans would flow in to the rescue; that they - especially those in the public sector - would not be affected. As the Catastrophe ensued, the fathers abandoned their apathy and indifference: Political decisions now affected their salaries, their wages, their social benefits and their ability to pay their mortgages and credit card debt. Cynical conformity was replaced at first by uncertainty and anxiety.

As the PASOK regime lowered the boom and signed off on the massive layoffs of public sector workers and salary reductions, the fathers first protested to 'their' leaders to no avail and then punished them via the ballot box. Most turned to the Left, joining SYRIZA, in hopes of regaining the past as much as constructing a new socialist future.

Sons: The Politics of No Future

The sons have come to political age having no prior experience of struggle or of upward mobility. They are stuck at the bottom or are in perpetual descent. Never having a job or any opportunity, they take action to affirm their existence, their presence and their capacity to act against wave after wave of savage EU-sponsored assaults on their everyday life. They join their fathers and grandfathers in the huge marches: inter-generational solidarity.

But they alone carry the burden of never having been a member of a political party or a

trade union and never having experienced 'the good life'. They never received loans or political favors, but they are now expected to sacrifice their future in order to enrich the creditors, the tax evaders and the kleptocrats. Their political wisdom is rooted in their gut recognition that the entire political class is rotten; they have their own doubts about those politicians who abandoned PASOK, joined SYRIZA and now claim to be their saviors.

They turn away from those academic political philosophers and journalists who speak a language and elaborate a discourse totally divorced from their everyday experience. They frankly question whether the Aesopian language of a dead Italian philosopher (Gramsci) can lead them out of this catastrophe. The overseas theorists may come and go, but life becomes ever more desperate. Some sons believe that only those who hurl a Molotov cocktail can bring temporary light into the dark tunnel of their everyday life. The most combative of the sons engage in street fighting and join the black bloc. The less audacious scan the Internet for ways to relocate, to emigrate: They reason that it would be better to emigrate to the imperial centers than to suffer a lifetime in this ravaged and plundered colony.

Family: Grandfathers and the Return of the Extended Family

The Sunday dinner was a hallmark of Grandfather's time: A family gathering with roast lamb and potatoes, a peasant salad with feta cheese and olives and sweets for desert.

The grandparents upheld that practice until the Catastrophe put an end to another 'fine family tradition' - like everything else that was pleasurable. Three generations living together, under one roof, on one source of income (grandfather's shrinking pension) is a situation not conducive to sustaining good relations. Savings diminish, debts accumulate and frustration leads to conflicts and resentments. Anger is occasionally directed against those closest to one's heart. The loss of independence leads to arguments; family loans never get paid back. Meal times become moments to relate hardships. The easy banter, good humor and storytelling disappear in a miasma of worries over the next meal, the precarious household budget and the fruitless search for employment.

Meals have become a time to mull over the stresses of everyday survival.

Fathers: Families - A Precarious Safety Net

The fathers ask: 'What will happen when my father dies and his pension disappears?' 'How can five of us survive when the regime, under orders from the Troika, has reduced my father's pension by half?' 'How can two families live on 500 Euros a month?' The last barrier to utter destitution for many fathers is the extended family, as social cuts reduce unemployment payments and savings are exhausted.

Prior to the Catastrophe, the fathers took their wives out to a taverna with other couples on Friday or Saturday night to hear the bouzouki and enjoy a full meal with mezedes, a carafe of good wine and plenty of laughs. Unlike the grandfathers, who patronized the neighborhood butcher and baker, the fathers shopped in multinational supermarkets and at malls, signs of European modernity and 'cost effectiveness' and paid with their credit card.

The vacations to London have become a distant memory. The family house in the Aegean is long sold, the proceeds spent to pay off debts. At most they can hope for a trip to the crowded, polluted beaches of Attica to escape a sweltering August weekend.

The Sons: Families are Where You Find Them

Family has become a grim affair, not a relief from the hopeless outside world: At home, it's always 'grieving time'. The sons come and go. They listen to music alone. Who wants to bring a girlfriend into a cramped bedroom with a grandmother's disapproving look and sour faces everywhere. They walk to the corner, take a trip downtown to Exarchia and hang out in a doorway, a video arcade or shoulder a black flag in a march against the entire rotten mess, against the thieves, bankers and creditors. If their teacher dares to talk about 'democracy and civic duties' – and very few do, because even their jobs are in jeopardy – a lone giggle turns into a tsunami of laughter and insults; classes break-up and schoolmates meet to share a few moments of intimate friendship so lacking in the grim austerity of their disintegrating households.

Who cheers for their football team? Who jeers at the phony Papandreou, the porky face of Venizelos, the blood-sucking Stournaras and Samaras ... Politicians smell like the putrid fish that even a starving cat wouldn't touch. The sons attend meetings of SYRIZA. It's all high minded and fierce denunciations with calls to action – but another march? Another call for 'engaging the youth'? But the sons think: Here we sit; we are never in the front rows; we listen to them; they seem to know each other; they talk in codes that only they understand... So we wander out and smoke a joint or cadge a beer or meet friends and talk our own talk.

Paternalism, patriarchy and filial piety are all dead. Casual relations with no long-term perspectives are the new reality.

Leisure: Grandfathers: The Café as Refuge

The grandfathers have their own favorite neighborhood cafés. They walk past boarded-up businesses – over 160,000 bankruptcies since the onset of the Catastrophe. Nowadays, a cup of black coffee is the ticket to a table, a deck of faded cards that still show some of the colors of the kings and queens. There was a time, when in the course of an afternoon, a grandfather could order glasses of ouzo and plates of mezedes – Kasserli cheese and olives – for his card-playing comrades. Then the crack of the dominoes and the rapid movement of the backgammon chips would echo in the noisy, smoke-filled café. Now a waiter moves among the clientele looking for a stray tip. Even professional waiters are at a loss to survive in a crowded room of survivors. Where is the generation that will replace the grandfathers? The fathers won't have any pension to pay their way to a cup of coffee and a seat in the café.

The Fathers: The End of European Leisure Time

The fathers once spent endless hours on the Internet, reading consumer ads to a background of pop music with English lyrics while planning weekend excursions. They watched televised football games on Sundays for discussion at Monday lunch with workmates or colleagues. It was not a luxurious life but it was a comfortable routine. Leisure time, spent with friends or family, with workmates and neighbors, was an enjoyable break from the stress of everyday work, a drive to the shore or to a pleasant outdoor country inn for a weekend dinner.

With the Catastrophe, leisure time is now enforced and plentiful: There are no stressful jobs; there are no jobs and no cash. Coins jingle deep in the pocket, perhaps enough to buy a

liter or two of petrol to knock on closed doors that do not answer – or have nailed bankruptcy notices. So whom do you see and where do you go?

There is another political meeting where one can wave at friends, envious of those who still hold a job or those who pass out flyers for a meal. There are protest marches and the warmth and solidarity of the moment. There are the explosions of jeers at the well-dressed kleptocrats, holed up in the Congress or creeping out the backdoor after signing another death warrant – called an Order of Austerity – condemning another dozen to suicide for the coming week. Leisure-time now is not pleasure, it is worry: Who will pay the grandparents medical bills, the insulin injections, the son's school fees, the car payments? Right, the mortgage payments are no longer an issue: The apartment has been repossessed. The father is 'free' from that obligation which is why he sleeps with his wife in a spare room at the grandparents. Those evenings of lovemaking are now sleepless nights of deepening anxiety. Restless sleep evokes nightmares of paranoid – or real- pursuit through dark labyrinths, running everywhere without direction or familiarity with the streets, the buildings or the people! The purpose in life is gone, along with the memories of happy excursions and future plans. Now, the overriding reality is finding a job – that dominates everything. The father faces the end of his unemployment payments. Will he and his family join a soup line: Will it be SYRIZA's or the Golden Dawn's? Whichever party offers a piece of chicken leg in the soup?

The Son: Leisure: Light, Blight and Street Fights

It was great fun, hanging out after school: The jokes, the joints, the public hugs and kisses. The ferry trips with back packs and the time spent studying with friends ... the exams, difficult courses and the anxiety of having to choose a career in a few years. Those 'worries' have disappeared: The catastrophe eliminated the 'problem course', the difficulty of career choice ... now even the teachers have left the classrooms – involuntary release – firings have thinned the offerings. The sons face a blighted future ... any 'career' will do. '

The biggest crooks do not rob a bank, they own one' – a philosophy student told a crowd of sons as he demonstrated how to make a Molotov cocktail. A math major calculated the number of times local and overseas revolutionary scholars have mentioned the 'crises' in an hour and come up with an equation, which equaled zero positive outcomes. The loss of future perspectives and the burden of a grim home life are eroding all respect for a political and legal system that imposes destitution, indignities and humiliation in order to pay foreign creditors. 'We pay them, so they can squat in the sun on our beaches, buy up our homes, eat our food, swim bare-ass in our ocean and then tell us we are lazy and deserve what misery we are getting.'

The timid, playful or fearful sons are growing up fast. Maturity begins at fifteen. The marches started earlier. Radical political loyalties followed. What next, 'little man'?

The sons are a growing army of unemployed and maturing quickly. Today they are dispersed. Some want out – leave Greece ... But most will stay ... Will they organize and move beyond the current electoral opposition and fashion a new radical movement breaking with the rotten repressive electoral system?

Can they become the militants for a new heroic resistance movement? Whose grandson will climb the walls of the Parliament and defy the colonial collaborators and their Troika masters.

Who will raise the flag of a free, independent and socialist Greece ?

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