



The Eurozone crisis and the politics of blaming: the cases of Germany and Greece

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Abstract: *The present article investigates the public discourse that surrounds the Eurozone crisis in search for an understanding of the cultural politics that have characterised it. By the means of a critical discourse analysis of media and elite rhetoric, the various ways that both German and Greek citizens, are constructed as prototypical representatives of Core Europe and Periphery Europe, respectively, are explored. Furthermore, the ways that both Germans and Greeks are represented as 'distinct nations' and 'monolithic cultures' and constructed as either 'malicious villains' or 'innocent victims' are analysed and questioned. The analysis exemplifies two main discursive tendencies, namely the trends towards essentialisms and binary oppositions. As is concluded, these two linguistic and intellectual patterns are intimately involved in an on-going process of identity formation with significant political implications for the distinctly normative conceptions of national and European identities. As a second layer, reflections and speculations are offered regarding the psychological dynamics behind these tendencies by looking for insights inside social psychological perspectives, such as social identity theory and social representations theory. These applications reveal the political potential of these theoretical perspectives and the contribution of social psychology to political science.*

Keywords: *core Europe, critical discourse analysis, European identity, Eurozone crisis, Germany, Greece, national identity, periphery Europe, representations, social psychology.*

Introduction: the cultural politics of the Eurozone crisis

The Eurozone crisis has unleashed a vast sea of analyses and commentaries. However, regarding the tensions and disunities that have surfaced in the European Union (EU), most texts have focused on its economic and technocratic components (Fernandes and Mota 2011; Gärtner *et al.* 2011; Pentecôte and Huchet-Bourdon 2012). This is unsurprising, since in a sense that only resembles the focus of the crisis management itself. Eventually, political scientists and sociologists entered the public debate, addressing the democratic failures of the crisis management and assessing the social and political future of European integration (Bosco and Verney 2012; Hughes 2011; Nicolaidis 2012). Nevertheless, interestingly, little attention has been paid to the distinctly 'cultural politics' and national stereotypes that have characterised the Eurozone crisis, despite the rise of nationalisms and Euroscepticism. Such notions are often referenced, but no systematic and theoretical reflection has been dedicated to their respect. Consequently, the ideological implications of such discourses have not been fully addressed.

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The present article wishes to tackle this issue by examining the symbolic divisions that have appeared in the EU, activated by what can be called 'the politics of blaming' or otherwise named in the press as the 'the blame-game' (Bleich 2012; Kutlay 2011; Wee 2012; Weeks 2011). This article argues that this certain kind of politics has put its imprint on the Eurozone crisis, whereby we have witnessed undiplomatic exchanges of threats, ultimatums and insults between European politicians and other implicated professionals. As such, the aim of this article is to capture the flow of antagonistic narratives and pejorative stereotypical formations, circulated in academic, media and political rhetoric during the unfolding of the crisis. Furthermore, its purpose is to reflect upon their political implications, as well as their psychological and emotional underpinnings by applying an integrated theoretical model based on social psychological perspectives.

The analysis focuses on the core-periphery divide, 'a central feature of the crisis' (Becker and Jäger 2011) and the two countries of Germany and Greece that have often been characterised as representative of the two categories. This choice can further be justified by arguing that these two countries have played protagonistic roles on the 'crisis stage', because Germany's strong economic condition has led to its leading role in the Eurozone crisis (Hübner 2012), while Greece has been described as the weakest link in the Eurozone crisis (Kutlay 2011). As such, it could be said that both countries have occupied exceptional positions in current EU affairs, which poses an interest in concentrating on them.

The article begins by presenting this study's theoretical framework and methodological approach. The results of the study are presented in three parts that focus on the narratives of blaming, their implications for national and European identities formations, and reflections on their psychological underpinnings. Some final remarks are offered regarding the emergence of both a German and a Greek question in the EU, as well as the future of European integration.

An integrated social psychological model of identity formation

Social identity theory (SIT) and social representations theory (SRT) belong to the disciplinary field of social psychology. While the first theory focuses on affective motivation and cognition, the latter concentrates on representations and cultural context. As such, while the first theory addresses the psychological processes that underpin identity formation, the second theory analyses the ways people create meaning and its ideological implications. These theories can prove useful in understanding political identities, because as argued (Jaspal *et al.* 2013) social representations provide the background against which people form their own beliefs, and as an extension their sense of identity, which eventually may be the link to action, in this case political action. As argued by some authors (Huddy 2001; Monroe *et al.* 2000; Nisbet and Myers 2011), although these theories belong to the field of psychology, they hold a political potential and have been employed in the past successfully in the context of political psychology. The failures and disenchantments of political science (e.g. the Perestroika movement, Jacobsen 2005; also, see Breeden 2013; Lane 2003; Lichbach 2003; Monroe 2001) with its overreliance on rationalist and

materialist theories, such as rational choice theory, render social psychological theories that provide alternative insights into the human psyche illuminating and effectively complementary in our understanding of political identity formation. In the context of the Eurozone crisis a social psychological perspective can help us speculate on the available spectrum of social representations of various national actors in the EU, and of the EU itself as a collectivity, and how these diverse representations could influence public beliefs, the epicentre of collective identities, regarding the direction of European integration.

SIT was first articulated by Henri Tajfel in the context of his research on stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Tajfel 1959, 1963, 1969). According to SIT, humans have two fundamental psychological needs: certainty and positiveness. To this respect, when it comes to identity formation, people need to define themselves (categorization) and to enjoy positive self-esteem (self-enhancement) (Hogg *et al.* 1995). In terms of collective identities, the individual derives positive self-identity from formal membership or emotional attachment to various social collectivities (Fowler and Kam 2007). In regards to stereotyping, the belief that a specific social quality is correlated to specific identity categories is a stereotype (Hogg and Williams 2000). Such ideas have a normative character since they dictate appropriate rules of conduct depending on category membership, while certain group members are considered more prototypical than others in the sense that they are perceived to embody more successfully the group norms (see continuation of Tajfel's work by Turner's Self-Categorization Theory; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Turner 1985). This creates the possibility for the creation of 'internal others', liminal members that are inside, yet conceived as not fully 'deserving' of belonging or assigned a second-class status.

According to SIT, when groups are ascribed a lower status, there is a perceived identity threat, and their members respond in a variety of strategic relational ways in their psychological effort to manage the inflicted inferiority. For example, low-status social groups can follow strategies, such as social creativity, social change or social mobility (Huddy 2001). The first refers to cases of poorly valued groups that create or construct an alternative identity, the second concerns struggles to alter the devalued group's negative image and the third implies the rejection of one's membership for the sake of moving to a more highly valued group. The choice of strategy depends on people's subjective understandings of the relationship between their group and other groups, which are called 'social belief structures' (Hogg *et al.* 1995; Hogg and Williams 2000).

Tajfel (1981) argues that a full theory of identity should be contextualised in the social milieu that individuals occupy and should address issues of justification, causal attribution and social differentiation. As such, SIT is a theory of intergroup relations, since it postulates that individuals partition the world into ingroups and outgroups and struggle to achieve positive collective distinctiveness through their encounters with 'other' groups, which can lead to ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation (Fowler and Kam 2007; Greene 2004). This creates the possibility that intergroup relations may become ultra-antagonistic and acrimonious leading to social bias, prejudice, negative stereotyping and discrimination.

But where do stereotypical conceptions of social groups come from, how are prototypes created? This is where social representations of identities can complement SIT in productive and meaningful ways.

SRT was first elaborated by Sergei Moscovici (1961) in his seminal work on the diffusion of psychoanalysis in Parisian society. Moscovici investigated how specialised, expert knowledge became everyday, consensual discourse through media communication. This expert knowledge is captured in this article by looking at discourses of academics, journalists and politicians. In this process of diffusion, Moscovici argued that there is a creation of symbolic associations that eventually acquire the illusion of being 'natural' or in other words, become 'common sense'. Such ideas make it possible for humans to classify, compare and explain individuals, groups and situations. As such, social representations concern the accumulated shared knowledge, the collection of floating discourses that circulate in a given social context, that provide a set of constructed 'objects' for interpretation, be it an identity category or a narrative. For Moscovici (1984: 24), this process is psychologically prompted by the human need 'to make the unfamiliar familiar', to arrest meaning and provide certainty, which is achieved by associating new phenomena with previous well-known phenomena (anchoring) and solidifying their meaning by grounding it in specific objects, images or concepts (objectification).

While anchoring entails 'drawing something out of its anonymity' into the 'identity matrix of our culture' (Moscovici 2000: 46) and providing it with a 'name', objectification concerns the 'discovery' and allocation of an iconic quality to an otherwise imprecise or confusing idea or being (Moscovici 1984: 38). Going back to SIT, SRT complements it by providing a theorization of the creation of representations of stereotypes and prototypes (Chrysochoou 2000: 417), which is the fruitful link between the two theories. Additionally, SRT provides SIT with a critical edge, since as argued (Elcheroth *et al.* 2011: 730), SRT's focus on language and meaning formation can address 'the nature of power, and how it relates to political reasoning, communication and social influence, conformity and resistance, collective harmony and group conflict'. As Moscovici (1998: 377) explains, in every representation there is cooperation and conflict; cooperation because the representation itself gives us a common object and code to discuss social reality, conflict because we may disagree about this reality. As put, 'there is a kind of ideological battle, a battle of ideas' (Moscovici 1998: 403).

Methodology: critical discourse analysis

This excursus into the politics of blaming of the Eurozone crisis and of reconstitutions of German, Greek and European identities will be conducted by the means of a critical discourse analysis (hereafter CDA), understood as both an approach and a method (Fairclough 2001; Meyer 2001). As explained, CDA is a critical perspective that focuses on the ways language relates to power and ideology (Wodak 2001a), particularly on the role of language in the production, reproduction and transformation of power abuse or domination (van Dijk 2001). CDA's interest lies in social and symbolic processes of power, hierarchy building, exclusion and subordination (Meyer 2001). In the wider sense, CDA aims at reflecting on the

actual and potential effects of language as ‘action’, as a medium that impacts on social reality in a variety of ways that are subject to critical evaluation. This wider ontological approach renders CDA compatible with Moscovici’s ‘battle of ideas’.

CDA’s procedure is of a hermeneutic character, whereby hermeneutics can be understood as the method of grasping and producing meaning relations, as opposed to the causal concerns of the natural sciences (Meyer 2001). As explained (Meyer 2001; van Dijk 2001), there is no guiding theoretical viewpoint or disciplinary boundary that is consistently used in CDA and a multiplicity of theories can apply. In this case, CDA can be fruitfully combined with social psychological theories, since as argued CDA needs to account for the various forms of social cognition that are shared by social collectivities, such as knowledge, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values (Meyer 2001; van Dijk 2001). Indeed, it is argued here that CDA’s elaborate focus on language is ideal for analysing social representations that are linked to social group’s collective identity formations as part of certain narratives and social roles in these narratives, because language is the raw material that social representations are made of, and through which power is constructed and communicated. Ultimately, these representations are linked to people’s public perceptions and opinions.

For this analysis, a substantial number of texts from academic articles, political journalism, and elite rhetoric in news reports were selected and analysed to the point of saturation when no more new or relevant information was retrievable (Mason 2010). The texts, although written by individuals of different national backgrounds were all Anglophone and selected from a variety of globally accessible online sources, based around Europe, or the world. This sampling strategy allowed for the analysis of texts that were more readily accessible by a wider majority of people in the technological context of the commonly shared ‘global village’ (McLuhan 1964) and the English language’s status as a primary world language. Furthermore, this strategy allowed the analysis to triangulate between the ways national and European actors presented themselves and the ways they were presented by external observers. This international focus addressed the relational character of identities, them being constructed not only by their bearers but also by their onlookers.

In terms of research questions, Wodak’s examples (2001b), designed especially for the study of racial, national and ethnic identities, and stereotyping, were used as a guide. According to Wodak (2001b: 72-73), there are five, carefully selected, questions that can direct a researcher’s inquiry, which are presented here with slight alterations that are specific to the present study:

- 1) How are [German and Greek nationals] named and referred to linguistically?
- 2) What traits, characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to them?
- 3) By means of what arguments do specific persons try to justify and legitimise the exclusion, discrimination, suppression and exploitation of others?

4) From what perspective are these labels, attributions and arguments expressed?
[i.e. moral, cultural, economic, political, etc.]

5) Are the respective utterances articulated overtly? Are they intensified or mitigated?

Wodak's research questions offer a transferable and comprehensive set of questions that can be applied to the study of national stereotypes. As Wodak (2001b: 73) explains, these questions refer to five particular 'discursive strategies, which are involved in the positive self and negative other presentation', whereby strategies are defined as 'discursive practices adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic aim'. As argued it is important to critically examine power differentials between social groups (i.e. national) that are included in social representations, because groups that hold more power can have more means to shape the form of these representations (Jaspal *et al.* 2013). As such, in order to understand how groups may choose to use their power, at whichever social domain this may lie, to form particular representations as part of strategic positive identity formation, we need to interrogate the functions that these representations fulfil for the groups involved in the debate (Jaspal *et al.* 2013).

Of crisis and its narratives

The analysis of the press and academic discourses reveals two dominant narratives regarding the origins and dynamics of the Eurozone crisis. The first narrative attributes responsibility to Greece, in particular, and/or the economically peripheral European countries, in general. The second narrative projects culpability on Germany, in particular, and/or economically advanced European core. It is often the case that authors make sure to note – briefly - that both narratives hold a certain 'truth capital', yet it is most often the case that one of the two is chosen as the 'truer' one, which could be called a matter of 'ideological emphasis'. The two narratives understood here as representational vehicles unfold as follows.

Narrative 1: blaming Greece and the economic periphery

The first dominant narrative has been discursively anchored around the economic acronym PIGS, which stands for the initials of the countries Portugal, Ireland (including Italy if written as PIIGS), Greece and Spain (Prokopijević 2010). What all these countries have in common is their challenged economies. As stated by the first research question regarding linguistic reference, and SRT's anchoring and objectification processes, the word 'pigs' figured as a label and an iconic image for this group of countries. This narrative suggests that the origins of the Eurozone crisis are to be found in the fiscal profligacy of PIGS countries, particularly southern European ones, which are accustomed to live beyond their means and work less than other Europeans (Weeks 2011). This narrative functions as an argumentation that could be used to legitimise these groups' exclusion, as implied in Wodak's third research question. Words

that are most often associated with the PIGS countries are 'lazy', 'profligate', 'irresponsible', 'undisciplined', 'disorganised', 'chaotic', 'corrupted', 'deceitful', 'violent', 'resentful' and 'troublemakers' (Bleich 2012; Prokopijević 2010; Rosenthal 2012). In this narrative, the role of Germans and other Northern Europeans is constructed as the mirror-opposite of the PIGS, and is ascribed characteristics, such as 'disciplined', 'hard-working', 'responsible', 'honest', 'trustworthy', 'well-organised'. These words link back to the second research question regarding traits and qualities attributed to this study's national groups.

In this narrative, the side of accomplished economies and German citizenry, are ascribed the role of the conscientious tax-payer that has been working on low steady wages for many years and is now deprived of the fruits of this labour because of southern debt and EU administered bailouts. Examples of this role ascription can be seen in media text titles such as 'Greece dependent on the patience of German taxpayers' (Costello 2012) or 'German Taxpayers' Association criticizes Greek bailout accord' that project the argument 'why should hardworking Germans bail out countries that borrowed too much and don't work as much?' (Weisenthal 2011), or *Bild Zeitung's* headlines 'Fear for our money' and 'We are no longer the paymaster of Europe' (Young and Semmler 2011: 17). This perspective intensifies impressions of core-periphery animosity and resentment, as well as perceptions of scarce resources and antagonism over them that can lead to Eurosceptic tendencies on both sides. Linking back to Tajfel's SIT, such arguments could lead to the establishment of particular social belief structures that assume certain relations between ingroups and outgroups and as such, could lead to mutual stereotyping and discrimination.

Greece has been conceived as a centre-piece representative of the PIGS countries, or as SIT would term it, a prototypical member of this group category, although at various occasions Greece has been described as exceptional in its downfall (i.e. Schäuble in Spiegel Online 2011) or other PIGS members has sought to prove that they are not 'like Greece' (e.g. Güemes 2012 on Spain), which can be seen as a social mobility strategy of Spanish national identity enhancement by the means of distancing and differentiation. Knight (2013) argues that Greece finds itself subject to a narrative of blame from the countries of the European North, while Greeks are portrayed as the cause of the Eurozone crisis, which inflicts a sense of destitution and persecution among the Greek people (see also Tekin 2012). In such conditions, capable of inflicting damage to a national self-esteem, defensive or even offensive mechanisms of 'saving face' as projected by SIT can be highly possible as part of identity threat management. It is probable that such psychological mechanisms trigger nationalist sentiments and reactivate in precarious ways past cleavages. For instance, one of most vivid responses in Greek media has been the frequent representation of Chancellor Merkel as a Nazi officer, as well as claims for payment of WWII reparations to Greece by Germany, which have led to a public petition, an investigation by the Greek government and a subsequent demand expressed to the German government by the Greek one. These phenomena can be understood as typical of SRT's anchoring processes to previous familiar events, used to interpret the present.

Problematising the use of this acronym, one can argue that it presents us with various peculiarities. What is the political value of using this term and who is doing the using? Interestingly, it is often the case that the term is encountered in texts that actually speak in favour of Greece or other PIGS countries. Such texts make use of the term and its narrative as a counter-argument against German crisis responses or the wider global financial system with its ascribed inequalities, and create an image of countries like Greece as 'victims' or 'underdogs' of the European South (e.g. Augstein 2013). Such discourses are often accompanied by romanticized ideas of revolutionary resistance and defiant national spirit, attributed to social movements like the *Aganaktismenoi* and the *Indignados*. As such, this peculiar use of a negative term in favour of a social group can be understood as a SIT strategy of social creativity aiming to reinvent their identity projection in support of particular political theses, like solidarity to what is judged to be 'the poor and mistreated'. Such blame-shifting arguments have had a powerful effect on the directions public opinion took in initiatives, such as 'We are all Greeks' and 'We are all PIGS' (Common Dreams 2012; Roar Magazine 2012). Such representations of invented identities shared across national groups promote the idea that it is in the interest of all Europeans to resist austerity and neoliberal policies, implying that what happens in Greece can soon occur in other countries too, which aims both at emotional and interest-based, rational appeals.

Narrative II: blaming Germany and the economic core

The second dominant narrative focuses primarily on systemic, structural and macroeconomic considerations and places blame on Germany and its neomercantilistic policies. For example, Lucarelli (2012: 205) states, 'German neomercantilism is at the very core of Europe's descent into a seemingly irreversible phase of stagnation'. In this narrative, the roots of the crisis are found in the expansion of German exports in the EU that created surpluses which in a system like the Eurozone necessarily corresponded to southern deficits because of absence of mechanisms for tax and transfer policies that can equalise and stabilise regional economies (Lucarelli 2012; Young and Semmler 2011). The explanation further holds that high export performance combined with sustained pressure for moderate wage increases and stability provided German exporters with the competitive edge that allowed German economy to dominate trade and capital flows in the Eurozone (Young and Semmler 2011). As such, Germany is seen as the main beneficiary in the Eurozone and the most responsible for the emergence of a two-speed Europe (Young and Semmler 2011).

However, in this narrative, Germany is not only blamed for the cause of the Eurozone imbalances, but also for the crisis management. During the unfolding of the Eurozone crisis, Germany has been attributed various 'accusations': procrastinating, being ignorant and ineffective, stubborn and close-minded, nationalistic and Eurosceptic, promoting its own interests and norms, aiming at punishing Greece instead of helping it, resisting the leadership role, yet seeking dominance of Europe by economic means, as well as profiting from the crisis of others. For example, German leadership is often described as 'obstinate', 'insular', 'insistent', 'unequivocal', 'shortsighted', 'egotistical' or 'inflexible' (Augstein 2013; Hübner 2012; Young and Semmler 2011). This wide spectrum of accusations against Germany can be seen as a multi-

layered national identity threat, as described by SIT that could lead to unfavourable responses towards German nationals, such as stereotyping and prejudice. All of the above are anchored around blaming Germany of being driven by national, rather than European interests and norms, by blocking initiatives like the creation of Eurobonds, national debt relief, debt redemption fund and other suggestions (Hübner 2012). Furthermore, numerous leading German economists, former central bankers and business leaders have produced articles advocating withdrawal from the euro on the ground that 'Germany's policies are incompatible with other members' (Kaletsky 2012). Such representations can intensify impressions of Germany as an 'internal other' in the EU.

Contrary to 'conventional wisdom' advocating Greece's exit from the Eurozone, Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi and others (e.g. Jahncke 2012; Sivy 2012; Soros 2013) proposed that Germany's exit might be more helpful for the management of the Eurozone crisis. Such radical solutions have constructed an even more intensified opposition between the two countries and exacerbated perceptions of core-periphery divides. The reference of banishment from the Eurozone, which in many respects has been equated with Europe (Tekin 2012), prompts invocations of European identities as evidence of support and normative behaviours that uphold the 'common European good' and as an extension, the question of which countries fulfil these prerequisites. As such, a power struggle is formed not only in terms of economic might, but also in symbolic power, as representations of Europeanness, depending on the text, shift from the core to the periphery, and vice versa.

What both narratives of blaming have in common is their purpose to delegitimize each other through various perspectives, be them moral, economic, cultural or political. Representatives from both sides use argumentation and various tactical discursive polemics, such as irony or sarcasm, to prove the other side wrong and illegitimate. The ultimate purpose appears to be the influence of decision-makers towards particular crisis policies (i.e. growth-oriented instead of austerity-oriented). Economically speaking, the debate has been framed as standing between the Keynesian school and the Ordoliberal one, whereby both sides can offer adequate statistical evidence and theoretical reasoning in support of their thesis (Young and Semmler 2011: 4). There is 'truth' to both narratives. Both narratives can be supported and defended. After all, it is a matter of persuasive representation. Yet not one of them offers a fully explanatory framework of what went wrong in the Eurozone. When a crisis occurs, it is usually the case that a variety of multiple reasons and causes have contributed to its occurrence. Nevertheless, it is most likely the case that the people of Europe will not easily settle for a common agreement on the matter, if at all. Ultimately, in socio-political phenomena, as Connor (1994: 37) has said, it does not matter what is; what matters is what people think. Indeed, it is the citizenry that upholds or dethrones narratives and their representatives in any given way: by support, opposition, even by mere indifference that reproduces existing hegemonies.

Of national prides and identities

In terms of national identity threats in the context of the Eurozone crisis, there has been an observable rise of national prides in both German and Greek discourse. This rise of national pride can be understood as efforts of national self-esteem salvation in the face of collective identity threat inflicted by various discursive exchanges. For example, in February 2012, Greek President of Democracy, Karolos Papoulias, unleashed an angry 'Who is Mr. Schäuble to ridicule Greece?', as a response to German warnings about Greece testing Europe's patience and propositions that Greek democratic elections should be delayed. In detail, the President stated:

'We all have a duty to work hard to get through this crisis... I will not accept Mr Schäuble insulting my country. I don't accept this as a Greek. Who is Mr Schäuble to insult Greece? Who are the Dutch? Who are the Finns? We always had the pride to defend not only our own freedom, not only our own country, but the freedom of Europe' (Papoulias in Spiegel Online 2012)

The statement is heavily invested in notions of national identity and invokes an everlasting past of Greek defiance and freedom-fighting, explicitly speaking of national pride and patriotic sentiment. The speaker's selfhood as a particular national is put to the front by the expression 'I... as a Greek', which connotes its primary position in the hierarchy of his selfhood and his will to speak for and in the name of the 'nation'. Moreover, the statement also implicitly aims to connote not only that the German side is 'uncivil' in its insults, but also unaware of what it means 'to be free', a claim that could potentially achieve high emotional reasoning as the idea of freedom is widely valued. Imagining the Greek nation, or any other nation for that matter, as the historical agent of freedom seeking and delivering, can be a powerful idea in the construction of national self-esteem, since liberation has been at the origin of nation-building and upholding.

However, this statement can be interpreted in alternative ways that may inspire ideas of Greek civilizational superiority that can easily be associated with the venerable, seemingly golden, ancient Greek past and the ideas it gave birth to, such as democracy and cosmopolitanism, which resonate with the statement's references to 'our own freedom' and 'the freedom of Europe', respectively. This would not be surprising, since as previous research of Greek and European identities (Chrysochoou 2000) indicates, there has been an awkward sense of inferiority among Greek citizens as members of the EU, who felt that the inability of their national economy to be successful and to contribute to the wider European budget was a source of shame that at times needed to be overcome with declarations of cultural and historical superiority. For example, a Greek participant in Chrysochoou's (2000: 412) empirical research stated:

'At some point Greece was not considered in Europe. We heard this: the Balkans, the Balkans, the Balkans; we were cut from Europe. I think that Greece is in fact Europe. From

here Europe began... if we want to have a historical memory of what does it mean Europe, the centre of Europe is Greece, Europe is not the countries which made a technological civilisation but those which made a historical one' (Greek man, 34 years old, clerk)

Such ideas construct a differentiation between 'historical civilization' and 'technological civilization', which as Chryssochoou (2000: 413) explains, directs to the – equally constructed – question of 'what gives people the right to be included in a successful superordinate group at the cutting edge of civilisation, like the European one, is it a country's contribution to technology, industry, or its contribution to a historical continuity?'. According to social psychology, anchoring the centrality of 'Europeanness' to matters of civilization, heritage and history, serves as a self-enhancement strategy that aims at constructing Greece as a prototypical 'European'. As indicated by previous research (Jones and Subotic 2011) countries in the EU that fail to achieve economic and political power use the strategy of cultural means to achieve positive national self-esteem, which the authors critically call 'illusions of power'. This argument resounds with SIT's assumptions that when a group is assigned an inferior status, its members will strategically attempt to find an alternative source of group self-esteem to reinvent their group and its meaning.

Moving on to the German side, regarding recent events, such as Greek protesters burning German flags and Greek newspapers representing Merkel wearing a Nazi uniform, actions that constitute extreme manifestations of the national sentiments described above, Fleischhauer (2012) commented in Spiegel Online that Germans have become 'the new villains' and stated that:

'...that's how things go when others consider a country to be too successful, too self-confident and too strong. We've now become the Americans of Europe... We Germans are accustomed to having people admire us for our efficiency and industriousness and not to hate us for it... Of course, one can try to make oneself seem smaller than one really is. But this self-denial doesn't work... A giant can't conceal his size for long' (Fleischhauer 2012)

Just like Papoulias, Fleischhauer speaks of and for the nation, using the 'We Germans' expression. This commentary seems to legitimize the divide between core and periphery, so that the avant-garde of economic development cannot be held back by the less economically successful, which was promoted in the mid-nineties (e.g. see Schäuble and Lamers 1994 paper on Kerneuropa). Furthermore, anchoring the Germans to the (North) Americans can be seen as a controversial tactic, since in the eyes of the beholder, the judgement will unavoidably be based on the opinion that this beholder has of the US, which would be fair to say that it has been one of the most severely criticised – often with good reasons – country in world affairs. The statement further invites a parallelism between the US and Germany on the one side, and the Islamic world and Greece on the other, which further promotes civilizational and Euro-Orientalist visions.

Nevertheless, a self-enhancing strategy may also be encountered here. As explained (Giesen 2004), Germans after the WWII suffered a tremendous blow to their national identity because of the events of

the Holocaust. This has rendered feelings and expressions of national pride extremely controversial for German citizens. It has been argued (Steflji 2010) that the German drive for economic success and achievement served as an alternative source of national self-esteem that would overshadow the past. As put,

‘post-war Germany turned to timeless German virtues of ‘honesty’, ‘reliability’ and ‘industriousness’, which were suited for modern organizations but ‘exempted from the changing tides of history, the decay of the German nation-state, and the shame of Nazism’. Taking pride in their economic success, the importance of which has been highlighted, as innovative and industrious citizens – the economic miracle culture (Wirtschaftswunder)– might have allowed Germans to accept group faults and ‘missteps’ in other areas’ (Steflji 2010: 247)

We can observe that both nationals experience an intensely felt identity threat and respond with strategic and reactionary ways that aim at rearticulating the meanings of their respective national identities. In these endeavours, it is often the case that ‘insults’ are spelled out or implied diplomatically, yet sharply. These dynamics have sway on European identities, not only in the sense of European unity, but also in the sense of European belongingness or as SIT would have it, European prototypicality. While titles such as ‘In Greece, We See Democracy in Action’ (Douzinas 2011) and ‘Greece Teaches Europe about Democracy Again’ (Kosyrev 2011), anchor the European project to political democratic values and seek to create the impression that the prototypical European subject is Greece due to its political and historical heritage, the urgency of the crisis and its management or even the mostly economic focus of the EU so far, point to another direction. According to this assumption, the prototypical, genuine European member-state is that which has a functional, liberal, open and productive economy, which has become more important by the crisis. For example, in a recent paper, Tekin (2012: 5) commented that there has been an observed shift in the public discourse of European identity ‘from civilisational/cultural heritage or roots of the European Union to the needs of a properly functioning, genuine market system’.

Of binaries and essentialisms

The major feature of the above narratives is their tendency to construct essentialising ideas of the two nations, Germany and Greece, and the economic regions they were made to represent, implying the existence of an essential national character (i.e. the lazy nation, the industrious nation). As an extension, the separation of the politics of blaming between these two poles of ‘essential nations’ betrays a discursive constitution of binary oppositions. For instance, in the following examples, regardless of the direction they take in the attribution of blaming, we can observe both trends,

'It is noticeable that the Northern European countries seem to be doing well to keep their finances in check whereas in Southern European countries such as Spain and Italy, everything is running out of order' (Becker 2011)

'Lazy, profligate, scheming Greeks versus honest, thrifty, industrious Germans' (Rosenthal 2012)

'These acronyms are catchy and memorable. But they are not helpful. Associating these fragile national economies with potentially derogatory terms reinforces a perception that Europe is divided between the core and the periphery, the central and the marginal, the successful and the needy, the worthy and the unworthy' (Bleich 2012)

The first quotation appears to be congruent with the narrative that attributes blaming to Southern countries, the second one summarises the debate concisely and the third one shares the view that Southern countries have been stigmatised by the Eurozone crisis discourses and expresses support. However, beyond the division between economically functional and dysfunctional countries, there are numerous other binary oppositions that are constructed in the Eurozone discourse and pose false dilemmas; national identity versus European identity, nationalisation versus Europeanisation, backwardness versus modernization, instrumentality versus passion, abstinence versus indulgence, ideology versus markets, politics versus economy, democracy versus technocracy, austerity versus growth, villains versus victims, us versus them.

Looking at these polarizations critically, we can argue that their use, even when judged, ends up reproducing this polarisation and division with uncertain consequences. Ultimately, we can estimate that the two poles are not fundamentally any different from each other, since they employ the same discursive tactics of essentialism and antagonism, with the only difference being the direction of the pointing finger in the game of blaming. As such, they both create a rather one-dimensional reality that fails to acknowledge one of the integral characteristics of the 'political': the plurality of the world (Arendt 1998).

But why has the Eurozone crisis provoked that many stereotypical constructions of essentialist representations of national identities, as well as that many anchorings in binary oppositions? How can we understand these tendencies from a social psychological point of view? And what is their political relevance? According to SIT, the creation of stereotypes and prototypes, as well as the division of the world in binaries of ingroups and outgroups, can reduce subjective uncertainty about thoughts, feelings, actions and self-understanding and provide the illusion of coherence and precision (Hogg and Williams 2000; Huddy 2001; Tajfel 1969). Additionally, fixing of meaning and collapse in a limited number of poles can simplify social reality which in most cases is too complex to grasp, especially at disorienting moments of crisis. In other words, all these perceptive mechanisms and shortcuts can fulfil the need for 'ontological security', especially in the absence of economic, social and political securities.

Conclusions: a German, a Greek and a European question

This article started by presenting a theoretical framework of identity formation, comprised of social psychological theories, and used to shed light in the acrimonious cultural debates of the Eurozone crisis. Through the discussion of the findings, endeavours were made to connect the analysis back to the theoretical framework that was initially presented. This provisional analytic exercise indicated that the chosen theories hold a degree of explanatory power for some crucial dimensions of the crisis, such as intergroup antagonism, national identity threats and defensive discursive strategies in times of transnational crisis. Finally, it can be argued that the polarization of the Eurozone crisis has created both a German question and a Greek question, depending on the narratives, arguments and roles and characteristics ascribed to these two countries, but also a distinctly European question. These symbolic questions need to be thought of in the context of policies and crisis management choices, since it is against these background that such choices can be justified and legitimised.

In terms of the first, Germany has been one of the founding members and protagonists of European integration, although the dream of this unity was always based on overcoming the role of Germany in WWII. Today the dilemma is shaped around Germany's past, combined with fear of recurrence of German hegemony in economic ways, and the need for a strong European leading country that shall provide successful management and resolution to the crisis (Hübner 2012; Patterson 2011). As it stands, Germany appears to be in the most awkward and peculiar position of 'doing no right'; if it leads too much, it will be accused of acting as a European hegemon, if it leads too little, it will be attributed with irresponsibility. However, the increasing dissenting voices inside Europe have rendered German crisis management questionable and demands are made for a 'more European' Germany that would agree to alternatives that are framed as good for Europe as a whole, but not for Germany individually. Will German leadership succumb to symbolic threats to its European identity and adopt a softer foreign policy framework? As an extension, can German citizens manage the national identity threat constructed in denunciations of being framed 'again' as the nation that divides Europe? Would Germany prefer to hold on to its economic might even if that meant an exit from the Eurozone? Can the EU survive the departure of its most gifted economy? Tough questions for both German leadership and citizenry and Europe as a whole.

In terms of the Greek Question, it would be fair to say that Greece's stay in the Eurozone is repeatedly undermined, both by speculations and hard facts. There are no mechanisms for a country exiting the Eurozone, or the EU for that matter. These options were never even imagined for fear of undermining the very idea of European unity and the commitment that had to go with it. Greece was often thought to have been included in the European Community on the basis of its ancient heritage, rather than its suitability by any standards. It has been represented as a 'favor' at worst, or a repayment of a historical debt at best (Barber 2011). Symbolically, Greece has 'a' value for the EU and its political identity as the intellectual root of cherished European values like democracy and cosmopolitanism. However, today Greece's Europeanness and belongingness to the EU are challenged in a variety of ways. Could any intangible identity-based claim ever be enough to keep Greece 'inside', when all pragmatic evidence resonates with

the opposite? A most uncomfortable, awkward, almost embarrassing dilemma to reflect on, especially for the Greeks that are now more than ever before confronted head on with the disappointment of modern Greece. Moreover, would it be better for the economy of the Eurozone, or for Greece in the long term, if a Grexit would materialise? Can the EU survive politically the schism and letting go of one of its southern member-states? Would others follow? Is a two-speed Europe a desirable idea? Equally tough questions to answer, especially for the Europeans as a whole.

However, all these can arguably be understood as false dilemmas or pseudo-dilemmas, since the single most important question, and hard-learning lesson still in progress, is that of European unity: can European nations work together to resolve this crisis? The future of European integration, and the elite and grassroots identification that ideally should go with it, heavily depends on the route chosen for the resolution of the Eurozone crisis. The analysis of the cultural politics of the crisis indicates that there has been a variety of ultra-antagonistic dynamics and detraction from the crucial political questions of solidarity, cooperation and unity, the pillars of European identity, which can pose continuing challenges to the process of European integration, especially since recent negative experiences can function as future anchoring processes, whereby today's national identity threats, cultural stereotypes and strategic reactions to them may be reawakened again and again in the long journey of historical memory and the everlasting 'battle of ideas' on the EU.

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