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## *Legitimacy at Stake: A Short Comment*

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After the ‘golden era’ of welfare capitalism, contemporary western societies experience a steady tendency related with the passage from an ‘ex-affluent’ society to a qualitatively different one, where the dominant characteristics are increasing insecurity and employment deprivation. No matter how one names this uneasy time, the fact is that it induces changes in the social world of work, in the social welfare state and the related policies, and it often does so in brutal and violent ways, as the current European recession shows. It is in this context that the notion of legitimacy should be read, since power holders must convince ‘power subjects’ that the command-obedience relation is ‘rightful’ and legitimate, no matter whether there is a ‘reward’ for compliance (Matheson 1987). This relation rests upon a kind of ‘social contract’ whereby mutual rights and obligations apply to both sides. As Pardo has indicated (2000: 7-8, 13), the cornerstone of this contract is trust, which, he stresses, must work both ways in order to work at all. Hence, we are reminded that trust, in one way or another, determines the level of moral and political legitimacy of any kind of authority.

Be that as it may, it seems that contemporary European societies question significantly the bonds of this contract as people gradually came to believe that the rulers whom they elect lack credibility and exert ‘power without responsibility’ (Pardo 2000: 7). In social terms this means that to the extent that legitimacy is highly contested ordinary people worry about both the status of their citizenship and the condition of their social reproduction. This is more than obvious in the case of the Greek economic recession. Greek governments made the strategic choice to deal with the crisis by implementing a policy of internal devaluation. At the same time, with the support of the majority of the mass media, they tried to convince the public that their choice was correct. So, they undertook to turn the narrative about the economic crisis into a dominant one that legitimated the successive memoranda representing the policy of internal devaluation as effective, necessary and fair. In essence, they attempted to present the recession measures as unavoidable on the basis of two main arguments. It was maintained that, a) these measures would correct the ‘bad habits’ and the ‘pathogens’ that had brought the country to the edge of destruction; and, b) these measures were necessary and fair because all Greek citizens were responsible for the crisis since they kept demanding personal favours from the political system and, consequently, supported the exercise of a populist policy based on money borrowing that made it possible to consume more than the country produced. However, as recent evidence shows (INE-GSEE 2014), this strategy seems to have failed.

According to this evidence, the majority of the people are by no means convinced that the memoranda are some kind of blessing. This is particularly evident in the Athens region, the most populated area in Greece. The magnitude of this strategic failure is significant among those who have suffered most from the crisis; that is, pensioners and housewives. The vast majority of the Greek public opinion has not accepted the view that, thanks to the

memoranda, the crisis offers an opportunity to modernize Greek society and thus improve the lives of Greek citizens.

There is no optimistic climate among citizens living in the Athens region. Significantly, 38% hold a feeling of insecurity and 31% of anger. In other words, it has become clear that most Greek citizens are predominantly animated by ‘negative’ feelings, such as insecurity and anger; they, therefore, approach life negatively, which is not surprising considering that they are far away from exiting the crisis. In addition, one of the symptoms of the current recession is related to the almost universal decline in the value attached to state and political institutions. More specifically, according to the survey, the trade unions, the state, parliament and the political parties have lost citizens’ trust at levels ranging from 84% to 88%. On the contrary, trust in ‘non-political’ institutions (in the strict sense of the term) such as the church and, above all, the family, is growing significantly. This is related also to the fact that the economic crisis has led to a reconsideration of citizens’ values and attitudes. 68% say that they now attach more value to family (16%), friendship (11%), solidarity (9%) and social relations (9%). Citizens therefore put more emphasis and invest more emotionally in interpersonal relations. There is, however, also a shift towards zeroing values, as is suggested by the fact that 32% answered ‘none’ when asked to indicate ‘values that you estimate most after the crisis’.

The narrative produced by the political élite does not seem to have prevailed. At the same time, one cannot say that another coherent, alternative and comprehensive narrative has prevailed. This makes it possible for the economic crisis to turn into a social crisis of trust, thus undermining an element that is essential to social interaction (Pardo 2000, INE-GSEE 2014). Echoing Pardo and Prato (2010), Muro and Vidal (2014) note that in the countries of southern Europe, the economic crisis has turned into a social crisis of trust because political institutions could not bridge, or even manage, the gap between what their citizens were asking them to do and what they are forced to do; a gap that is due both to the country’s participation in the complex institutional system of the European Union (henceforth, EU) and to globalization. According to the World Bank, although people’s economic performance has improved in those countries, they do not believe that they can achieve what they want.

During the crisis, the trust of Greek people did not decrease only in respect to the domestic institutions, but also to the EU. Undoubtedly, most Greeks still trust the European institutions more than the domestic ones. However, it cannot be denied that because of the crisis the relationship of trust that had been built between the Greek public opinion and European institutions since the country’s accession to the then EEC has been severely wounded. According to the Eurobarometer (European Commission 2014), while in November 2009 56% of Greeks had a positive image of the EU, today the proportion of Greeks who say they trust the EU is only 23% — the lowest in Europe. This is directly linked to the fact that: a) 78% of Greek citizens consider the EU as the main responsible for the austerity policy that has existed since 2009; b) more than other Europeans, the Greeks are pessimistic about the future of Europe. This is, however, not a Greek peculiarity. According to Eurofound (2013), since 2009 fewer Europeans trust the EU, domestic governments and domestic parliaments. In

other words, the crisis period, along with the reduction in support for domestic political institutions, has also brought about lower trust in the EU.

This process of de-legitimation goes hand-in-hand with pauperization. According to the aforementioned survey (INE-GSEE 2014), the economic crisis has negatively affected 92% of respondents. The most negative effects concern women, people over 55 and domestic workers. The negative impact of the crisis is on income (95%), consumer spending (94%), entertainment (86%), healthcare (73%) and labour rights (60%). The dominant sentiments are insecurity (especially among women) and anger (especially among men) whereas, as I have said earlier, trust in institutions (the state, the parties, parliament, the trade unions) has fallen greatly. These data seem to be consistent with those produced in the latest OECD survey for Greece (OECD 2014). According to this survey, the average Greek household has been severely hit by the crisis, with repercussions that are particularly evident in the household income, jobs, life satisfaction and participation in public affairs. Especially unemployment has had a significant impact on the level of life satisfaction. Between 2007 and 2013, the proportion of Greeks who said that they were very satisfied with their lives declined from 59% to 23%, the lowest percentage in OECD countries. Citizens' trust in the institutions and the way democracy works has also fallen during the crisis. The proportion of Greeks who say they trust the government declined from 38% to 14% between 2007 and 2013 (OECD 2014).

Taken as a whole, the evidence shows that the crisis has been transferred also to social reproduction, dramatically affecting the biological reproduction potential of the population, adding a greater burden of informal social welfare to the family and to the unpaid work of women and driving a large proportion of the population to question seriously some aspects of the social welfare institutions. Three in four households cannot meet their current needs and find recourse either to borrowing or to using their savings in attempting to do so. One can observe a similar situation elsewhere in Southern Europe, for example in Italy and Spain. There, too, the austerity measures imposed by governments in the wake of the economic crisis have burdened families with added economic and social costs, particularly in terms of social reproduction.

In this context, the level of people's recognition of the legitimacy of institutions and processes that were traditionally unquestioned is clearly at stake. The rise of extreme fascist and populist political powers seems to warn us that a historically catastrophic crisis of legitimacy is *ante portas*. Both political institutions and society at large should heed this warning and take action. First, they should abandon the dominant model that identifies structural changes with fiscal discipline, privatization and the degradation of labour relations and the welfare state. Second, they need to work out a new development strategy that promotes not only fiscal consolidation but also an overall productive restructuring of the European economy.

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