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Economy, Morality and Customary Legitimacy in the Greek Countryside: An Informal View of the Greek Crisis[1]

Dimitris Giannakopoulos
(University of Ioannina)
dim.yannakopoulos@gmail.com

In the rural area of Agrinio, in Western Greece, monuments and infrastructures, along with the narratives of ordinary people, reveal the deep connection of the area with the cultivation of tobacco. Although the European Union's agricultural policy, as implemented by the Greek governments, resulted in the termination of local tobacco production in 2006, the uncertainty that was generated by the economic crisis led people to turn, once again, to tobacco farming. The economic crisis incapacitated the Greek economy and many tobacco farmers, even today, prefer to sell their product without any intermediation and involvement from the state – notably the taxes it imposes. Skipping the need for middlemen between the growers and tobacco-industries, households today produce tobacco and create family-based networks to market their product and secure their income. Research conducted from 2015 to 2017 indicates that such transactions require a large socio-culturally informed consensus regarding the practices of informality. Conflicts can emerge between what is officially considered 'legal' and what ordinary people would customarily consider legitimate. Informality may be addressed as a potentially normative agency, through which ordinary people moderate economic uncertainty and implement their conceptualizations on morality and legitimacy.
Keywords: Tobacco, legitimacy, economic crisis, morality, Western Greece.

Introduction

Since 2010, the people of Agrinio and its surrounding areas, as was also the case everywhere in the country of Greece, have been facing unexpected changes in their daily lives. Back then, the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) launched a 110-billion-Euro bailout loan to rescue Greece from sovereign default, conditional upon the implementation of austerity measures, structural reforms and privatization of State assets. In the next years, two more bailout programs would follow (Krugman 2015). As a result, a neo-liberal economic agenda of austerity was implemented by the Greek government, acting on the mandates of the European Union (EU). Amongst other things, such impositions reduced both agricultural subsidies and the welfare State. Therefore, the term 'Greek Crisis' also refers to the rising unemployment, the diminution of income and the decomposition of the welfare State. In this unstable socio-political context, the struggle of ordinary people to avoid unemployment, impoverishment and secure their means for self-preservation, brought the emergence of informality (Hart 1973, Ledeneva 2018) within a set of unreported economic practices. As a result of the ensuing unemployment and/or diminution of income, unlicensed tobacco growing on a household level became a common part-time occupation for the population of the region. The concomitant heavy taxation imposed on cigarettes by the Greek State led, in turn, to the high demand for raw tobacco and its trafficking from the fields to Athens and other big cities.

The rural way of life is defined by an unobtrusive and unseen existence. This intensifies during crises, as it underlines many customarily established practices, justifications and

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discourses affecting the social activity of rural populations. Such practices rarely leave a structural imprint, but denying their significance would mean to restore the relations of power they oppose (Scott 1990). What follows aims to examine how informal and formal market moralities intertwine in an environment of crisis and how legitimacy is defined by official law as much as by informal, yet socially valid, norms and institutions. This discussion commences with a presentation of the context in which the tobacco growers practice informality.

Growing to Succeed

The main informally produced local commodity is *Tsembeli*, a tobacco crop cultivated in the area for over 150 years. Its cultivation was directly associated with important aspects of social life, notably class consciousness[2] and the integration of some 2,500 refugees from Asia Minor, following the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-1922.[3] Considered both a resource and a local identity-defining symbol, tobacco has influenced the region's culture so significantly that Agrinio is often called 'tobacco-town'. Besides, in the past, the product was integral to the national economy. After the Second World War, and particularly between 1960 and 1980, the significance of tobacco exports as a revenue source for the Greek State resulted in the formulation of a protective framework for tobacco farmers. Until the beginning of the 21st century, tobacco farming was an occupation that carried a linear understanding of life, an understanding dominated by aspirations of seamless improvement of both family and communal life.[4] Women and children played a crucial role in every stage of production.

This condition started to change in the 1990s. Following the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Greek governments changed the production model of tobacco once and for all. As a consequence, the whole rural economy — including tobacco cultivation — moved from the family farm system to contract farming, wherein farmers were treated as agents, embedded in the free market and 'free' of state intervention.[5] Therefore, they had to negotiate the quantity,

[2] Tobacco-workers created the first trade-unions, attempting to improve their living standards. Clashes between them and police forces, or even the army, were frequent and violent. In August 1926, a pregnant tobacco-worker, a refugee herself, was killed and became the symbol of the workers' struggles in the region.

[3] '1.5 million refugees who left Turkey and settled in Greece as a result of the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922 and the subsequent Greco-Turkish exchange of populations of 1923 — known in Greece as "the Asia Minor Disaster" — brought about not only a major demographic change but also a social transformation in Greece, especially because the influx represented a quarter of Greece's indigenous population' (Kitroeff 2012: 229).

[4] Although farmers have rarely realized it, tobacco-growing has been overlong their link to the surrounding, national — and global — economic and political activity. In a different social and economic environment, tobacco-producers in Kentucky are facing similar problems due to the reduction of the production and the deregulation of the tobacco-market. Ann Kingsolver (2011) describes them as disappointed and unwilling to adapt to the new reality which is marked by the absence of tobacco.

[5] Contract farming is an alternative model which provides that, by contracting out production to smallholders, agribusinesses avoid having to acquire land, avoid the problems of displacement, and allegedly create 'win-win' outcomes for local communities and private investors. Nevertheless, in this

quality and price of tobacco as 'independent' businessmen. However, they had to deal with powerful tobacco-trading companies, notably Philip Morris, and with (similarly unregulated) brokers, who imposed their terms aiming to profit.

Subsidy cuts, coupled with the expropriation of tobacco-growing licenses originally provided by the state, resulted in the production of tobacco diminishing, as the Common Agricultural Policy stipulated. Data from the year 2004 compiled by the Hellenic Statistical Authority revealed that some 14,572 families in the region abandoned the cultivation of *tsembeli*. From 1997 to 2004, in more mountainous areas, the decline affected 96.2% of the people. Until then, approximately 2,500 families had been engaged with the processing and trade of tobacco (Kamberis 2016). By 2006, people were already talking about 'the end of tobacco' in the area of Agrinio. Life had to go on, but the attempts of cultivating different crops required investment of valuable resources which, in many instances, failed due to insufficient preparation and know-how. Consequently, the farmers were left with no viable solution against the crisis and were facing social marginalization.

For obvious reasons, people in deprived rural areas resorted to the practices of the informal economy (Matsaganis and Flevotomou 2010). The unemployment and poverty that came to the fore collided with past expectations, formed in conditions of prosperity and economic growth. Hence, the experience that followed varied, depending on the person, the family and — to some extent — the neighbourhood. Ethnographic data demonstrates how tobacco-growers revised their perceptions of the economy as the expectation of perpetual economic growth proved to be delusionary. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that, in the current economic circumstances, many of these people, traditionally identified as tobacco-growers, turned to what 'they have always been doing', as an interlocutor said. Making use of connections that they had established during the times of household farming, they resorted, once again, to the cultivation of tobacco. However, in order to do so, they had to do business within an 'informal/grey' economy, within which they took the risk of undeclared cultivation and trading of tobacco. In such socio-economic context, as Pardo put it (1996: 20), ordinary people are prompted to operate in the 'grey area' between 'legality' and 'illegality', without becoming or viewing themselves as 'real criminals'. Social acceptance and participation in informal markets indicate the configurations of a large local (even national) consensus.

Operating on the margins of the law has become a familiar scenario to these people. In Greece, the informal economy represents approximately one-third of the overall economic activity (Schneider et al. 2010). This phenomenon, best termed 'unreported farming', constitutes 53% of the total agricultural production (Vlachos et al. 2016). Agrinio locals have engaged in this form of production, selling their tobacco in periods of crises since the beginning of the 20th century. This culture of informality is embedded in the collective memory; it is constantly revalidated in narratives and emerges in response to the popular demand for social justice and dignity. Opting for this informal practice is rationalized as a subsistence technique,

model, smallholders carry a disproportionate share of production and market risks (Adams et al. 2018, Hall et al. 2017).

yet it presents several moral and cultural particularities which influence the economic, social and political context. With the farmers drawing from the experience of previous regarding (informal) modalities of dealing with crises, all cultivable plots in the region are viewed as tobacco fields — *kapnochórafa*. This representation plays a pivotal role in dictating particular strategies which collectively aim to mitigate adversities. Collective memory demarcates the use of space, consolidates spatial interrelations and challenges the heterogeneity of the present. Consequently, the act of tobacco-growing is treated as a cultural and symbolic creation, a constant re-validation, through various agents' interaction.

Informal Encounters

Informal economy, also known as 'underground economy', 'shadow economy', 'parallel economy', 'grey economy' or 'unofficial economy', is usually considered marginal to the modern, capitalist and formal economy (Hart 1973). However, the idea that the two spheres of economic activity, formal and informal, are totally separated has been criticized as a rather narrow one (Pardo 1996). Instead, scholars have stressed the need to examine the dialectic between the two poles, scrutinizing the construction and contestation of norms, legalities and values in empirical cases, seeking 'credible answers', which 'can only be inspired by the in-depth knowledge of the reality on the ground' (Pardo and Prato 2018: 3; see also Pardo 2004, Pardo and Prato 2017). In recent years, studies on informality have broadened their geographical scope, to the extent that informality is considered to be present, although in different forms, in both the Global North and Global South (Ledeneva 2018, Williams et al. 2017) and has been recognized as a powerful analytical tool for the studying of societies in transition (Spyridakis 2013, Rakopoulos 2014, Knight 2015, Polese et al. 2015). Informal activities, equated in some cases with illegality, are deeply rooted in locally informed, customary norms adopted by communities. Nevertheless, research on the rural informal economy has not yet been given the full attention it merits (Conroy 2013, Weng 2015).

In our case, the term 'informality' describes off-the-books tobacco farming and selling. This particular type of tax evasion is socially accepted and morally legitimized. Hence, a moral economy emerges as the result of collective representations coupled with the affected social groups' demand for social justice and dignity.[6] The notion of moral economy (Thompson 1971, Scott 1976) is usually employed to explain social responses to unfair policies, such as implementing austerity measures during and in the aftermath of a sovereign debt crisis (Kofti 2016). Emphasis on the 'moral' (Fassin 2009, 2012) and 'economy' (Hann and Hart 2009, Langegger 2016) has been successfully utilized to anatomize informal practices which emerge as economic breaches in times of social rupture. Some have suggested that the invocation of morality arises from the demand for 'everyone's survival' and originates from the communal ideal where all community members must be secured against unexpected, externally imposed turbulences and threatening situations (Nitsiakos 2016).

[6] Narotzky (2016) notes that moral economy has become a powerful analytical tool that can be applied in different contexts. For a comprehensive overview of the term 'moral economy', see Götz 2015.

In anthropological inquiry, crises are often considered as 'breaches' in the state of being (Bear 2015, Bryant 2016; Knight 2015). However, as Powers and Rakopoulos (2019) stress, 'austerity's history needs to be narrated, seeing crisis as longue durée' (see also Blyth 2013). Hence, following Benjamin's (1999: 248) insight, that 'the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule', seems more appropriate than considering crisis as an exceptional situation (Agamben 2008). Departing from an understanding of crisis as a momentary and particularized phenomenon helps us better understand and interpret how people cope not *through* crisis but *in* crisis (Vigh 2008).

The tobacco farmers of our study experience a crisis marked by the implementation of austerity (Rakopoulos 2018), coupled with CAP's free-market policies. This ends in uncertainty, which in turn compels diversification and the adoption of short-term, opportunistic solutions.[7] Simultaneously, the state and its apparatus have proven to be incompetent –or unwilling– to impose rules regulating the situation in a balanced and fair way. In this view, as Pardo put it, legitimacy is a highly contested concept as, 'actions that are ordinarily undertaken at grassroots level and that are not always strictly legal may enjoy legitimacy in the eye of the actors and their significant others because they are morally consistent with their value system' (Pardo 2018: 57; see also Pardo 2000; Pardo and Prato 2018) and new forms of it have been produced, as actors attempt to define notions of justice, righteousness or illicitness.[8]

This raises a series of issues concerning people's relations with the State in moments of crisis. It requires taking into account the rupture of the existing social contract, as tobacco farmers consciously and actively turn their backs on tax-paying and reinvent more familiar ways of economic organization and social solidarity. At the same time, as large parts of the Greek people see informality as the only way out from deprivation and exclusion, official bureaucrats promote their own interpretations of belonging, enforcing an image of a well-organized –but increasingly authoritarian– State. Yet, at the end of the day, informality seems to be useful as an equilibrium point to both –common people and State officials alike– in order to avoid vulnerability and social unrest. The cultural affluence and broad social consent that such behaviours invoke is representative of a stance with a clear political message.

Unlike other instances (for instance, the production and circulation of drugs in Latin America or elsewhere), tobacco growing in Greece is not illegal as long as there is a contract with a tobacco company. During the 20th century, its production was rigorously (and entirely) regulated by the Greek state. At times, the revenue from tobacco exports represented half of the state's GDP. Contrary to other forms of tax evasion, tobacco must be cultivated in open fields, transported and sold and, of course, smoked. The cultural background of tobacco cultivation in the region makes it easy to justify its informal production. In addition, the economic crisis renders this informal economy socially acceptable and morally meaningful.

[7] Knight studies the 'irrational' and opportunistic investment of valuable resources in renewable energy programs, especially photovoltaics, in Thessaly, Central Greece, during the crisis (Knight 2015).

[8] On the relationship between legal, illegal and semi-legal, and on legality and legitimacy, see Pardo 2000.

The following analysis is based on research findings from 2015 to 2017. Given the informal core of the economic activity in question, participant observation in the villages was necessary to develop trust relationships – a key value to the research process. Familiarity with community events, such as weddings or annual fiestas, was essential. Snowball sampling gave access to family circles and economic networks in and around Agrinio. In sum, such occasions and resources enabled the researcher to understand the cultural, economic and political specificities of the social setting conditioning the practice of informality. Research reveals that the informal production of tobacco in the region has broader ramifications with diverse impact on political behaviours, economic practices and cultural repertoires.

Official Law vs Customary Legitimacy?

An informant said:

> 'They have driven us here. That's why we do such things. If 'they' were right, we wouldn't be starving. 'They' are more illegal than we are and that's why we're acting like this!'

According to Greek law,[9] tobacco cultivation must be reported to the state. Producers have to sign a contract with a tobacco-trading company (notably, Philip Morris) and report the precise location of their plantation to the State. Tobacco's importance as a source of revenue for the Greek state (85% of the price of a pack of cigarettes is tax), along with the interests of powerful economic agents, creates tensions. Selling raw tobacco may be punished by fines, seizures, even imprisonment, depending on the intercepted amounts. That said, no penalty has ever been imposed in Agrinio for unreported tobacco growing. The locally symbolic meaning of tobacco seems to form a space where rules become flexible. Archival research in the newspapers and court records as well as oral history reveal that producing and selling undeclared tobacco has been an effective strategy in similar circumstances and periods of crises since the beginning of the 20th century. Restoring the practice of family production seems to be the 'easiest way' to cope with the challenges of labour deregulation and social marginalization, as it does not imply a retreat from the market to a subsistence economy but represents a way to continue participating in it.

'We've always grown tobacco! And we keep on growing it now, with the crisis!' In this sense, producers choose to turn to a past that was not easy, but offered enough security for managing hardships.

Contrary to previous theorizations of rural space, recent studies have begun to treat it as a field of continuous change and dynamic diversification. According to such reflections, resilience and persistence characterize the countryside and its people, along with their ability to cope by diversifying their livelihood.[10] However, what has rarely been studied is their influence

[9] Ministerial Decision No 593/49825/14-04-2014.

[10] For an account of production-diversifying strategies deployed in rural Greece and their outcomes over the last years, see Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2013.

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in the discourse on the legality-illegality continuum,[11] as they struggle to insure themselves against dire economic conjunctures. It should not come as a surprise to mention that there are several activities which, although considered as formally illicit, are nonetheless popular throughout — (at least) in the Greek countryside. Such activities involve the informal employment (mostly of immigrants) in the plantations, poaching or illicit logging. In June 2015, during a discussion with a group of tobacco-growers in a village near Agrinio, one of them stated:

> 'We are told not to grow tobacco yet we risk having trouble with the police. But if my children are starving and I can't feed them, I'll grow it anyway. This is above the law!'

The rest of them nod in agreement and clink their raised glasses in a toast. These words offer a comprehensive outline of how the locals consciously decided, in 2011, to move the boundaries between formal and informal. As Pardo and Prato put it, 'Across society people do not necessarily equate what is moral to what is legal (…) they often clearly separate the legal from the legitimate' (2018: 7). Thus, legality is not merely a mesh of rules and obligations, it is something that emerges through practices and ideologies, as a composition of interacting political, economic and cultural values, producing what people consider as legitimate. There is not a 'natural' line separating law from unlawfulness. The border is imaginary. As conceptions change, so do borders (Nordstrom 2007: 85). What is interesting is to examine how people think about and exploit the law, often according to its spirit, but sometimes against it. Informal tobacco-growers emphasize the acceptability of growing and selling tobacco, claiming that this practice allows them to survive in an unjust and corrupted socio-economic environment. In such a way, it seems that tobacco-growers are operating 'on the margins' from the point of view of the State, but 'acting within the norm', according to the local customs and values (Roitman 2005: 21).

Among the growers and traders, any definition of the law is constantly disputed and reshaped. It is pointed that understanding the importance of notions such as 'right', 'morality' or 'value' in everyday life reveals the way power relations are forged (Pardo 1996, 2000; Parry 1989). While the State and the tobacco industry attempt to enforce their conceptualizations, farmers try to mitigate inequality by redefining the same words with competing meanings. The result is liquidity; any definition is contextual. Thus, the same farmers who, during a conversation, insist that, 'We're not doing anything illegal', might as well later end up saying: 'They brought us to a point where we have to become outlaws to survive'.

[11] Alternative conceptualizations of law, especially in rural areas, are generally understudied in Greece. However, some important studies and in-depth analyses have made the development of an essential theoretical framework possible. See in particular Herzfeld 1985.

Tobacco's Free (?) Market

An informant said:

> 'I would have loved to be protected by the State. I hear, from a cousin I have in Sweden, that there's an unemployment benefit there of 1,000 Euros per month. And much more… But such things don't exist here. So, I'll just grow some tobacco to sell. This way I feel free. I don't have the State, nor any company as my partner. I'm my own boss!'

The notion of the market is crucial to the examination of the aforementioned practices. Informal tobacco-growers often refer to their practice as '*free-selling*' or just '*selling*', juxtaposing this trade with '*giving*' the tobacco to a cigarette company. By the use of the term 'free', they do not identify with the 'free market' persistently promoted over the last decade by international organizations and Greek governments. However, the argument in both perceptions is (ironically) the same. Being aware of the State's gradual retreat from any regulatory role, farmers create a 'grey' market, non-existent in official statistics and regulated by custom, as well as by the laws of supply and demand. The collapse of the social welfare system during the present economic crisis amplified the 'legitimacy' of this change. Thus, the growers might seem as accepting neoliberal imperatives but interpreting them in a discretionary manner. This requires considering, as Ong has noted, the notion of neoliberalism, 'not as a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes, but as a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts' (Ong 2006: 3).

Informal economies are often perfect manifestations of the supply/demand principle and in the context of market fundamentalism there has been a gradual erasure of the limits between the informal and the illegal, regulation and irregularity, order and organized lawlessness (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006: 5). Of course, 'great profit is to be made in the interstices between legitimate and illegitimate commerce, between the formal and underground vectors' (Mbebe 2001: 73). It is thus interesting to examine the rivalry among informal tobacco-growers. Such rivalry can be explained as an adaptation to free-market principles.

Nevertheless, it may be more interesting to focus on what might cause the deprecation of such practices within the milieu of tobacco-growers and how is it justified on a moral basis. Customarily, the identity of the tobacco-grower comes with a feeling of self-worth in the community (Spyridakis 2010). The word for this situation is *nikokyris*; that is, a person dedicated to his family's well-being. Simultaneously, buying informally produced tobacco is also socially acceptable, because fellow farmers are supported. But when the objectives change and profit replaces decency, farmers instinctively realize the critical disruption of the moral base of their activity. This deviation is instinctively considered dangerous as it can dissolve the moral superiority of informal trade and therefore cannot be tolerated. When one grows and sells tobacco simply aiming to maximize profit, the moral character of the activity is lost and all that remains is greed. Of course, there are also more practical reasons: in a limited market, as provincial towns usually are, buyers are also limited. When a producer claims a disproportionate 'piece of the pie', his behaviour is stigmatized as immoral and corrupt. Also,

there is a well-founded practical fear that, if the situation spiralled out of proportion, state mechanisms would tighten their surveillance, jeopardizing this crucial source of income.

Tobacco farmers sell their product for a price that ranges between 15-40 Euros per kilo. The official price offered by tobacco companies is no higher than 3.5 Euros per kilo. The price depends on the distance between the site of production and the site of selling. Generally, it is lower if the tobacco is bought near Agrinio and goes up far away from the city. A four-member family can, in a good year, produce up to a ton of dry tobacco. The hardest part is building a network of potential sellers and buyers. Only if this precondition is fulfilled can a tobacco-grower feel safe. For such a network to be created, a farmer must take advantage of any family and/or friendly relations with people who live and work outside the community borders. Big cities and remote places are their main goals.[12] As a tobacco farmer said:

> 'The hardest part is finding buyers. You need a 'chain' of supply. How could someone in Crete know that you're selling? So, you need help. I have a cousin who lives in Athens and helps me find buyers. So it is… Family first!'

The informal production and circulation of tobacco, although embedded in the game of supply and demand, is mostly based on the non-productive relations within the family or the local community. Therefore, it utilizes various 'helpers' — from taxi or bus drivers, to university students, people who visit regularly and maintain social bonds (usually familial) but live or work away from the villages. Usually, a farmer sells a few kilos of tobacco which these transporters aim to re-sell for a small profit of their own. The household is the production reference unit. If the household's network includes members in diverse line of professions, with a concomitant number of connections, even better. As Spyridakis, studying a different, but similar context observes, 'family networks play a crucial part in ensuring the terms of social reproduction, locally' (2010: 250).

In this connection, the family, as the basic unit of production in rural Greece, has been characterized by its ability to modify production, consumption and work. In essence it always attempted to achieve subsistence within the market economy without being completely embedded in it. Historically, the Greek family tended to adopt differentiated livelihood strategies (Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2013). A core feature of the Greek rural society is its historical openness and interconnection with urban centres.[13] In the present case, the provincial town of Agrinio serves as the main market where raw tobacco, among other goods, is informally merchandised. In fact, the notion of a supposedly static 'traditional' rurality is simply inappropriate here. The countryside is not to be considered as isolated or 'backward' regarding

[12] An in-depth analysis of the term 'network' and its significance to anthropological thought is not in the scope of this article. However, as Narotzky proposes: 'The two fundamental properties of networks are multiple interconnections and chain reactions. Moreover, it is interesting to note two ideas that accompany the network concept: strategies and transactional social relations' (1997: 75).

[13] For further analysis on the historical interconnection between rural and urban areas in Greece, see Damianakos et al. 1997 [in Greek].

social transformations but as a part and parcel of an interwoven network within which the city is actively included.[14]

People participating in the informal market seem to be fully aware of the moral concepts thriving in this kind of environment, such as rivalry, risk, even greed (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006, Ledeneva 2018). However, informality allows them to attempt the regulation of such – morally questionable– aspects of the economic activity, which threaten to dissolve social order. From their point of view, such a strategy highlights, on the one hand, the State's inability to provide a safe socio-economic environment, and, on the other, their independence and their ability to cope without committing to State policies (Theodossopoulos 2013). In this sense, informality is a normative agency, aiming to regulate the economic activity, to protect from economic marginalization and to secure a livelihood.

Crisis and a Moral Economy

An informant declared:

> 'It's all right, what they are doing. Anybody can see they're poor. And, at the bottom line, they're just helping other poor people who, otherwise, couldn't even afford their cigarettes. What if it's illegal? Is this actually unlawful? How about those people 'above'? Are they lawful?'

In a situation of imperfect competition, people draw, often successfully, from socially shared moral values, achieving self-improvement and a rational use of resources (Hart 2000; Graeber 2011). The particular environment of chronic crisis and severe austerity in which rural informality thrives, calls for a connection with the broader crisis-dominated economic activity. The main factor which allows, if not imposes, the shift in what is considered legitimate is the economic crisis – a result of both the Greek State's counter-productive character and the wider restructurings of global capitalism. Both these factors enable the exploitation of sovereign debt as leverage for the implementation of neo-liberal policies (Blyth 2013, Graeber 2011). The word 'crisis' describes not just a time of great significance, but also a prolonged period of economic dislocation, with severe and unpredicted consequences (Roitman 2014). Over the last decade, severe cuts in public spending were imposed in Greece; schools were suspended, roads poorly maintained, while pensions and benefits were curtailed. The public health system inevitably deteriorated and provoked wry comments of dismay such as: 'Sure, there is a hospital, but there are no doctors in it!' As Spyridakis notes, 'Vulnerable people are not just found in the middle of the complex relation between the local and the global but they also experience its devastating effects on structural adjustment programs entailing increased poverty and restrictions on public spending' (2018: 4).

People feel this degradation goes together with the sense that the State has abandoned the rural sector. The State cannot assure the rural population of any kind of future economic perspectives. In the previous forty years, mostly after the accession of Greece into the European

[14] Raymond Williams' sharp analysis (1973), and his arguments on the need to consider the country as inextricably related to the city, remain topical.

Union, the Greek State adopted a paternalistic role towards the countryside, through the distribution of EU funds. In medium-size cities like Agrinio, the welfare State — similar to what Ginsborg observed for Southern Italy — took the form of direct cash transfers to families rather than public services (2001: 4). A significant part of such beneficences — usually in the form of subsidies, allowances, or benefits — were, however, given under false pretences: invalidity pensions were awarded to people whose health was excellent; subsidies were given to 'farmers' who performed no actual agricultural activity. The politicians, in search of legitimacy (and votes), deliberately built relationships based on clientelism between the country's centre and its periphery, trading state subsidies for electoral loyalty. As a result, household spending margins and the local markets were relatively buoyant. Public services operated but never to their full potential. Such attitudes and State practices justified tax evasion in the eyes of many, as they harboured the belief that any taxes collected would not be really allocated to the welfare of the deserving, but to the pockets of the undeserving.

In this moral context, tobacco has been a commodity that all Greek governments saw as a great source of revenue. Considered a 'luxury product', it has also been the subject of consecutive taxation during the crisis, with its price skyrocketing between 2009 and 2015 with a 58% of tax increase. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to discover a broad consensus among the locals regarding its illegal trade. Informal tobacco-growing and trading is not only tolerated but it is widely accepted and even actively supported. As E.P. Thompson (1971) has argued, such a consensus is grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor.

The primary concern for tobacco growers appears to be the justification of their involvement in this informal activity. As might be expected, the reality of poverty is a fundamental argument used to justify such practices; poverty, in fact, makes the informal activity in question a respectable response. They emphasize on their low income from tobacco and their –generally insecure– livelihood, which underpin their claim that, in the absence of this resource, subsistence would be impossible.

Social scientists studying rural populations have suggested that the constant invocation of the demand for 'everyone's survival' originates from the communal ideal wherein all community members must be safe-guarded against unexpected, externally imposed turbulences and threatening situations.[15] Tobacco's symbolic power in Agrinio drives that dominant and perpetuating perception that farmers produce a harmless and therefore legitimate commodity. They fully understand the negotiating stance they obtain, due to the broad acceptance of such arguments. They strategically choose to attach moral weight to their practice, aiming to make it locally recognized as legitimate.

[15] Nitsiakos (2016) proposes the study of 'traditional' forms of reciprocity and stresses their potential functionality in revealing the long-term cultural and economic reality of rural societies.

Conclusions

Tobacco-growers have realized that the applicable law serves the production and perpetuation of injustice. From their perspective, the law has never accomplished its proclaimed function: to ensure justice and equality. Farmers suspect the systematic use of law by ruling elites (which are represented, in their accounts by the word 'they'), as a weapon to elicit their consent and ultimately marginalize them. Instead of limiting the interests of strong actors (political or economic) and allowing weaker ones to seek the help of the law to assert their rights, as in its traditional and highly positive justification, the rule of law becomes an agency of oppressive social processes, abandoning its function, as a shield for the weak and is transformed into a sword in the hands of the strong (Mattei and Nader 2008: 55).

Reacting to this situation, the former instinctively move towards an alternative interpretation of the dominant narrative and turn to the informal 'grey' economy. This choice offers a foundation upon which a broad consensus is built. The latter is soon equated with a legitimizing tolerance, which is both openly expressed and morally justified. This view reveals an interesting picture where farmers do not appear as passive puppets in the hands of superior, fate-controlling powers, but as active agents, who shape socially and culturally valid structures to define (more than) their livelihood.

Appropriation of fundamental neoliberal imperatives, like the trust in free-market and rivalry, means that informal tobacco-growers understand the terms of the ongoing (before and during the economic crisis) social and economic shift. However, their choice to defy State law informs their detachment and desire to avoid economic marginalization. They remain in a threshold where, under the pressure of vital necessities, they act, not as ideologists but as farmers. They settle somewhere in the middle, by accepting an opportunistic strategy even if it is not entirely pleasant to their respective moralities. The pragmatism that informs such choices may be the cause of their disinterest towards collective, organized action. In this manner, control over a familiar resource allows them to situate themselves in a space where subsistence income is ensured, relatively free of any regulatory surveillance.

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