

FRAGMEX – Fragmentation & Exclusion. Understanding & Overcoming the multiple Impacts of the European Crisis

**Imagined communities and People's voices.
Greek and German popular perceptions of selves and others around the
Greek debt crisis and the third rescue package**

Deliverable 7

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February 2016

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Imagined* communities and People's voices: Greek and German popular perceptions of selves and others around the Greek debt crisis and the third rescue package*

1. Introduction

If the Greek debt crisis has proved an issue that has like hardly any one before in the history of the EU policy and decision making processes moved popular sentiments and public affections, then this holds true with regards to the decision agreed upon in the Euro Summit (12.07.2015) on a new ESM (European Stability Mechanism) programme, and ever truer in the case of public discourses in Germany and Greece, two countries that have somehow come to represent in the European public space the vicissitudes of coming to grips with the problem of providing for more sustainable grounds for the monetary union to function properly. Indeed, hardly a matter of European concern before the current refugee crisis has so intensively preoccupied the attention of ordinary citizens, social initiatives, interest groups, and a wide array of decision-makers and opinion leaders, animating public spirits in a hitherto unknown and for European affairs rather vehement degree. This has undoubtedly also to do with how the efforts of the European crisis management have been refracted by national institutional forms of public communication, bent as the governments of the EU-member states have been to present their contribution to forging a common European strategy against the impacts of the finance crisis as the most appropriate way to safeguard national economic interests, thereby making sure that the costs and burdens of the stabilisation policy would not weigh too heavily on the shoulders of their own public financial resources.

* The notion is deployed in the sense of social construction of (collective) identities.

* The following comparison is based on material from internet discussion/opinion forums. The sources drawn upon are

1) the SPIEGEL-ONLINE FORUM [<http://www.spiegel.de/forum/politik/bundestag-beschliesst-drittes-hilfspaket-fuer-griechenland-thread-341230-1.html>] (19.08.2015); last accessed: 08.02.2016], and the SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG FORUM [<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/wirtschaft/ihr-forum-wie-bewertensie-das-neue-sparprogramm-der-griechen-1.2559753>] (10. 07. 2015, last accessed: 18.02.2016),

and

2) reader's comments in the newspaper KATHIMERINI (online edition) [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/823403/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/xreiazetai-mia-nea-arxh>] (13.07. 2015); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/823402/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/h-koinh-moira-elladas-kai-ee>] (13.07); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/824017/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/to-dakry-ths-aristerhs-paidoylas>] (13.07); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/827395/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/ta-dontia-toy-laikismoy>] (16.08); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/827394/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/h-deyterh-eykairia-mas-kai-o-soimple>] (16.08); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/827393/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/oi-provlhmatikoi-ths-eyrwphs>] (16.08); [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/824236/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/enas-neos-e8nikos-stoxos>] (19.07.), and [<http://www.kathimerini.gr/824233/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/prwteyei-politika-h-koinwnikh-anamorfwsh>] (19.07) [last accessed: 08.02.2016].

On the citations in brackets: P1, and P2 refer to German discussion forums, P3 to the Greek; the subsequent numbers refer to the line numbers accorded the comments by the Qualitative Data Analysis Software Atlas.ti.

This has indisputably been one of the main characteristics of communicating the crisis management efforts undertaken by the German government, which has taken particular pains to set the stage for a public crisis discourse centred around such notions as (assuming responsibility and exercising authority for a Europe-wide) stability culture, fiscal discipline, budgetary surveillance, European Governance, and last but not least ... taxpayers' interests. Against this background and especially as concerns the latter point on the agenda of political information policies it comes as no surprise that forms of public communication such as those observed in the new social media platforms and internet discussion forums are replete with (and reverberate) echoes of central pieces of the government discourse focussed as this is on providing persuasive reasonings about the legitimacy of the course of rescue packages embarked upon.

Take for example the way in online comments individuals consider themselves entitled to exercise criticism on the majority decision of the parliament to approve the third rescue programme. What at first strikes the eye is the strong assumption or firm belief that the subjective positions taken on this issue hold firm ground by reason of appealing to exactly those arguments deployed by the Merkel-led coalition governments to justify the continuation of the rescue policy, namely the objective of safeguarding the financial interests of Germany in general, and those of the ordinary tax payer in particular.

2. German collectives

2.1 Taxpayers & Citizens

The identification with the figure of the tax payer, or better, coming to take the argumentative position from which the ruling parties are taken by their word and by the same means drawn to responsibility, expresses a recurrent perception pattern in the online forum communication. In order to better observe what kind of subject position and argumentative self this kind of appeal to the programmatic commitment of the government to safeguard taxpayers' interests constitutes, one should take a closer look at a) the content of how the taxpayer-self (S_t) articulates its self-understanding and b) against what it turns its self-righteously raised claims on deserving the respect of the state/government.

Turning at first to the former, one observes that in order to further sustain the legitimacy of its claims (S_t) takes recourse to additional self-ascriptions, such as ordinary, "low-class" [P1: 439] mindedness, "decency" [269], "hard-working industriousness" and "conscientiousness" [230; 524; 597], thereby inscribing itself to the greater, more inclusive collective subject of loyal and law-abiding citizens (citizen-self = S_c): [$(S_t) \rightarrow \leq (S_c)$] This subsumption seems to

carry much more argumentative force and pragmatic persuasiveness, since it illuminates and makes explicit one of the founding legitimisation sources (S_c) provides for the state, namely the fact that the functioning of the modern democratic state depends on being (via taxes) resourced by its citizens.

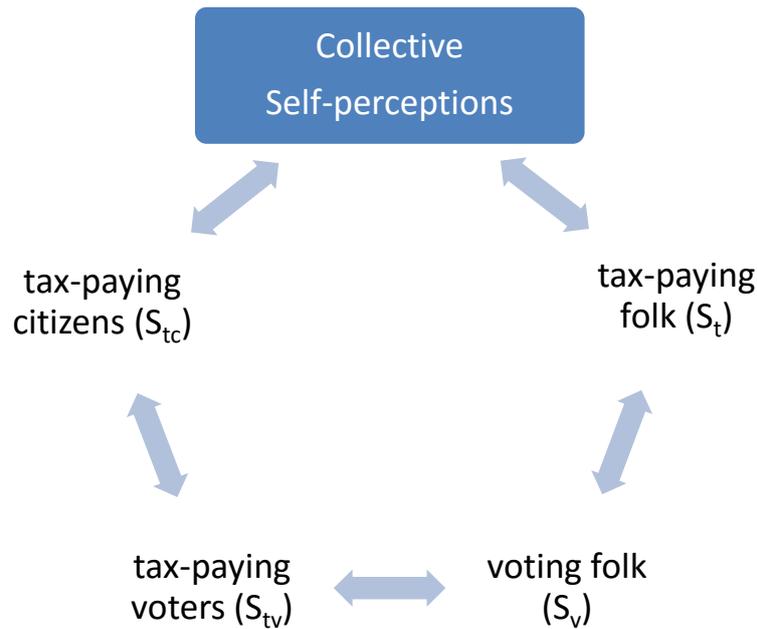
Given this fundamentally determining conviction of being the sustaining basis and driving force of public finances it comes then as no surprise to see $[(S_t) \leq (S_c)] = (S_{tc})$ taking a rather hostile attitude to what it perceives to be illegitimate indebtedness on the part of the state, as with acquiescing to the third rescue package the elected representatives and government decision makers are held to be setting forth debt policies detrimental to democratically legitimated demands and the social commons resting upon taxation. (S_{tc}) can therefore castigate the generation of debts accruing to the continuation of the rescue policy embarked upon by the German government (and the EU as a whole) as damaging to the public interest on account of the following argumentations:

a) To begin with, (S_{tc}) mobilises the evidence of the hardly disputable fact that whereas the German state has over the past ten years followed at home a rigid course on public finances, cutting down public expenditure and investments in the field of common infrastructure, thereby (allegedly) fighting for the cause of reducing state deficits, it has nonetheless yielded all too easily to making of the EU a mechanism of (financial) resources transfer [457; 707], alimentering¹ as it were a state such as the Greek one [592], which ever since it constituted itself in the 19th century has always been tilting on the verge of bankruptcy, and sometimes suffered that too [P1: 438].

According to a stronger version of this argument, which lays emphasis on stressing the fact of politics of expenditure cuts and austerity long holding sway in German economic governance at home, thus not only causing a deterioration of public infrastructure [see also P1: 92; 225; 230; 392; 416; 433], but also bringing about an increase in social inequality and poverty, it is hardly justifiable to burden (S_{tc}) with further debts, which after all – for all that one knows – are used to bail out some ‘too-big-to-fail’ banks, on the one side [P2: 59; 134; 146; 151], and the “corrupt Greek elites” [P1: 269], or the Greek corrupt clientelistic system, on the other [P2: 23].²

¹ The credit loans to stabilise the faltering Greek economy are thus compared to the unemployment benefits for long-term unemployed, the so-called Hartz IV laws, at home [P1:11].

² This holds even more true for another way of criticising the policy of the rescue packages, as these are perceived to be of no avail, since in the view of some commentators the relation between state and people in Greece is in such a bad shape – with the supposedly left SYRIZA doing very little to bring about real change –, that instead of loans the citizens of Europa and Germany should better support direct humanitarian and other forms of relief aid [P2: 11; see also *ibid.*: 91; 118; 158]. As far as the argument about something rotten in the state of Greece is concerned, one of the main pieces of evidence offered refers to the



- b) Worse still, in the face of what is perceived as crying discrepancies regarding the social security systems in the two countries, somebody could argue that instead of considering oneself part of the collective (S_{tc}), thus indirectly abiding by the rules of financial transfer [729] and misappropriation of the public funds in favour of the better-off Greeks, one could quite as well lay claim, as the latter do, on certain entitlements, as for example that one to early retirement [597]. Last but not least,
- c) it can reasonably be argued that under the circumstances of the two previous rescue packages not having quite the effects desired, there is little hope that the new credits supplied by the ESM will bring any noteworthy impetus towards a firmer consolidation of the Greek economy [44]. On the contrary, it becomes even more probable that the European rescue policy degenerates into the hopeless undertaking of wanting to start all over again on the basis of the same false premises and dubious results [163], the whole slowly resembling a carousel [594; 284] gone mad³ – or evoking the theatrical qualities of a circus [336]. If therefore the

citizens' lack of tax obedience, which is also picked out by Greek commentators when explaining the low levels of social trust in the country [P3: 109].

³ There might be a kind of method in this madness though, for the credit assistance provided by the European institutions and the IWF could also be thought of as exceptional development aid, lest the eventually bankrupt Greek state slips into the condition of becoming a 'failed state'. Furthermore, considering the European rescue policy as development investment could carry the connotation of pursuing the goal of geostrategic stability in the region – in the face of the troubles in Near East certainly no small objective [P1: 606]. However sound such an explanatory rationalisation of the continuation of the rescue policy might be, for many comments the 'insanity' of heaping debts upon debts must be terminated – someone should in the end pull the reins in: Would not in this case the German Minister of Finance be the suitable person? [P2: 124]

will to continue the rescue policy flies in the face of all previous evidence as to its effectiveness, and furthermore German government and EU decision makers alike are bent on breaking the rules of the Treaty of the European Union [368; 707], then it is not quite pointless for (S_{tc}) to surmise that the mislead political will to ‘rescue’ Greece at all costs must but provoke the resolute reaction of the electorate, re-establishing as it were the prerogatives of the people as the source from which all political power is derived.

This is the point at which the self-understanding governing (S_{tc}) need but take recourse to that community collective-self capable of and entitled to assert its rights against state power in the name of people’s authority, the respect of which belongs to the democratic responsibilities of the people’s elected representatives – high time, therefore, that self-perceptions of the kind of (S_{tc}) give their place to such of (S_v), the self-understanding of the collectivity of voters: (S_{tc}) \leftrightarrow (S_v). Indeed, surveying the online comments one observes that the decision of the Merkel government (MG) to extend the bailout programme for three years, in a manner running obviously counter to what a considerable part of the ruling party of the Christ Democrats itself thinks about the issue, seems to give rise to an extensive rhetorical exercise of the ability on the part of (S_v) to bravely defend the legitimate interests of the electorate [363], supposedly being ignored by the decision making will of the rulers. Before exploring the ramifications of how the community of (S_v) argumentatively defends the rights of the Folk against European rescue policy perceived as preposterous though, it is worth looking more closely at what it turns against, i.e. what the German government’s policy towards Greece, defying popular will as it is perceived to be doing, consists in.⁴

One way [$(S_{tc}) \leftrightarrow (S_v)$] = (S_{tv}) can make a rhyme out of what it sees as blatant disregard of taxpayers’, citizens’ and voters’ interests is to assume that even the most steadfast, hard-headed and hard-riding supporters of a tough course against over indebted Greece, as for example the head of the Federal Ministry of Finance, have somehow succumbed to the pressures of the world of finance, giving away to the demands of the bank system [P1: 163; 420]. What this assumption obviously draws upon, is the widespread conviction that politics has nowadays lapsed into such dependency from the (whimsical) workings of financial markets – or for that matter, the aristocracy of money [P2: 184] –, that even the most ardent and reasonably founded policy is doomed to share the fate of being ignored, discarded and overthrown. Lest this sound exaggerated, suffice it to point out that succumbing to the imperatives of the big finance is what

⁴ In this sense, one could also claim that the European rescue policy, which the German government ardently pursues, is essentially bound up with domestic politics, namely, to the extent that the German coalition government underlies the suspicion of accepting bad compromises for the sake safeguarding the unity of the common European currency space at all costs – even to the disadvantage of (S_{tc}) [P2: 37].

a great deal of social and political discursive perceptions of the sovereign debt crisis consists in, focussing as they do on the fact that the rationality of political action has to all intents and purposes surrendered to the imperatives of the financial markets, thereby letting the volatile logic of financial wishfulness dictate its will on government policies.

Perceptions of such submissiveness rest on the assumption of a kind of diffusion of the market logic in the realms of political decision processes, the understanding of which notion of diffusion in turn articulates itself in the belief that the accountability of the state to [(S_{tc}) ↔ (S_v)] erodes, namely to the extent that the binding force of the political constituency of the latter comes to be replaced by the accountability of the (debt) state to the constituency of creditors and international investors.⁵ The submissiveness of politics to financial markets grows out of certain aspects of political governance and budget policy the most important of which in this context is the sovereign-debt problem: By becoming over-indebted states lose their autonomy and fall prey to the whims of financial markets – in this sense there seems to be no substantial difference between the over indebted Greece, on the one hand, and Germany trying to keep the debt consequences of the rescue programmes at bay, on the other [see also P1: 774].

2.2 Citizens & Voters

Now, the discrepancy (S_{tv}) believes to observe between what the state and the government authorities should (in principle) do to safeguard taxpayers' interests and how they actually act, setting forth as they do the accumulation of debts that results from the continuation of the rescue programmes, without providing any convincing assurance that loans and guarantees under the financial support programmes will one day be returned [P2: 87] – this discrepancy must but provoke hefty resentment. What at first sight looks paradoxical – for it has been the MG in the first place that has in all possible ways propagated the merits of coupling the financial assistance to Greece to the implementation of consolidation and austerity policies –, becomes somehow more comprehensible, if one pays heed to a kind of dialectic at work between how the German government has communicated the justification of the rescue policy, on the one hand, and the public reception and understanding of this justification, on the other.

Accompanying, as it has over the course of the crisis, consent to the multi-billion heavy credit facility programme with the assurance that this kind of solidarity action shall be strictly bound to the Greek government taking measures to guarantee the effectiveness of the rescue

⁵ On this double register of accountability see W. Streeck, *The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2014.

policy by embarking firmly on the path of solidity, the MG (in the view of most of the online comments) has aroused expectations it can hardly meet and issued assurances it can scarcely keep, since too all appearances the liquidity needs of the Greek state are comparable to a bottomless barrel [314; 274; 416] and furthermore, it is (allegedly) a well-known fact that the Greeks have considerable dexterity in letting (European) money disappear [P1 37; 606].

At this point, (S_{tv}) gets angry – not without reason, as it seems. To want to justify the politics of rescue-billions with the pledge to commit itself to ensure their being paid back one day, although it can offer no guaranty that the solidity course forced upon the Greek government will bear any fruits⁶, means ultimately that the MG has compromised itself in the eyes of the German electorate. Now, surveying the ways (S_{tv}), taking the government by its word on the issue of taxpayers' money, articulates moral outrage, upright indignation and protest against what it perceives a political mendacity and a blatant disrespect of peoples' will, one observes two perception patterns: According to a rather strong version of the accusatory stance, what MG has actually done when it committed itself to bailing out the Greek bankrupt state amounts to state treason [P1 274; 383]. Far from securing the interests of the German taxpaying folk, it has violated its oath of office, which obliges it to avert damage to the German people, and consciously, purposefully helped set up a kind of snowball system, in which for the most part new debts were only heaped upon old ones [515]. For the communal self-understanding of (S_{tv}) this can but only denote that the MG and the political class in general

- a*) have either distanced themselves from the electorate body [P1: 524; 230] to such an extent that political decision making processes nowadays tend to resemble rather the autopoiesis of self-referential circuits and the operational closure of societal subsystems, and/or
- b*) are doing what politics since the dawn of modern times is fond of indulging into: misleading the (voting) populace by discarding (sometimes even the most rudimentary) institutionalised standards of truthfulness.

Besides drawing upon widely assumptions about politics' dependency from and submissiveness to the functioning of finance markets (S_{tv}) seems to want to substantiate *a*) by means of taking recourse to a variation of the thesis of post-democracy having apparently gained a firm hold over German politics [396], degrading political actors, as it were, to hirelings of big business and high finance [P1: 274].⁷ That the main centres of power have under the post-democratic

⁶ This argument resurfaces in the Greek context: see P3: 212.

⁷ Such phenomena of political despondency seem also to hold in another realm of political disempowerment, which often draws the anger of the collective self-perceptions of (S_{tv}), namely the fact of MPs being increasingly subjected to the regime of disciplined legislative voting that forces upon them the obligation to follow the party whip – regardless of what they might deem reasonable and politically responsible [P1: 556; 294].

regime have retreated to the backstage of lobbyist networking is in this context backed up by the belief of mass media's complicitous role in disseminating whatever has been decided upon by backstage power agents. No wonder then, that the rightful wrath of the politically dispossessed and economically disadvantaged (S_{tv}) must (uncompromisingly) articulate itself in protest acts of reclaiming people's sovereignty, thereby flashing out its democratically legitimate discontent with a decision that (in all likelihood) saddles the folk with additional debts, without having provided any bearable proof of the efficacy of the rescue policy [P1 230; 304; 341; 363; 439; 490; 556].

If perceiving the discrepancy, which (S_{tv}) believes that governs the relation between the democratic constituency of the people and the accountability deficit characterizing political decision making processes, involves (in terms of argumentation) referring to the political sphere becoming increasingly subservient to the imperatives of the logic of financial markets and other powerful economic actors, the second perception pattern, the one that relies on the traditional rhetoric of decrying political mendacity [P1: 719; P2 14], seems to operate with less demanding argumentative means. The main thrust of what (S_{tv}) reproaches government action for with regards to consenting to the third rescue package [P2: 171] consists in the claim of MG wilfully deceiving German citizens about the scale of indebtedness, as this – so the argument goes – confines itself not to participating in the current stability mechanism, but extends to highly probable financial transfers in the future [P1: 594]. Vilifying the current loans from the member states of the Eurozone to Greece as covert financial transfers to the disadvantage of the German fiscal stability goes expectably with denunciation of the prison house of the common currency, forcing at the latter is perceived to be doing countries such as Germany to shoulder the debts of others [idid.].

2. 3 Others, Greek affairs

This seems not to be the whole picture though, for along with collective self-perceptions centred on the community of tax-paying voting citizens (supposedly) called upon to shoulder the costs of the European rescue policy, there are assertive stances carried by beliefs about viewing the Greek debt predicament situated in the context of certain structural imbalances troubling the common European economic space, the main of which are of course diverging levels of competitiveness and economic performance. Viewed in this frame, the indebtedness of the Greek state should among others be attributed to that economic policy pursued by the German politico-economic elites in the context of the European single market, which prioritises the goals of

economic growth, raising competitiveness and securing jobs in the export-oriented industries, thereby generating structural dependencies that express themselves in the asymmetry between creditors nations and structurally deficient importing countries [P2: 95; see also *ibid.*: 07], or in such indicators as the polarity between excessive debts and huge surpluses.

The argument of deepening imbalances through export aggressiveness is sometimes coupled with the critique of the austerity policies propagated by the ruling monetary and fiscal doctrine in Germany [P2: 64], as the latter is perceived to exploit the exigencies and mechanisms of the crisis management to impose a kind of disciplinary regime across the whole Eurozone, which purports to cement existing uneven/imbalanced structures as a means of firmly establishing the two-speed Europe [P2: 95]. Even if one is willing to concede that

- a) the determining factors of the solvency crisis in Greece lie in the domestic political economy, and moreover
- b) in terms of fiscal policies Germany has been in a good position to meet the challenges of the financial crisis,

one should nevertheless by no means be oblivious to the fact of Germany pursuing in some ways an increasingly nationalist course running contrary to what a coordinated, pan-European strategy calls for [P2: 181; see also *ibid.*: 205]. Furthermore, as far as responsibility ascriptions around the issue of sovereign debt crisis are concerned, it should be recalled that the casino was opened not by the bankrupt debtors, among the first to come under the wheels of financial crisis, but by the solvent creditors themselves [*ibid.*].

Making such comments with the purpose of setting the picture of the Greek crisis' embeddedness in the European economic context right does not mean however that a definite aspect of this framing and certain home-grown structural crisis-generating factors are not critically touched upon in the online comments. As far as the former is concerned, it is pointed out that the EU has somehow tolerated Greece cheating its way in the Eurozone [P2: 06; 23; 118]. As regards the latter, the emphasis is laid on what among commentators seems to be an indisputable fact, namely that the greatest part of the responsibility for the current desolate state of affairs must be attributed to the Greek ruling parties, Conservatives and Socialists alike.

Criticising the Greek political establishment confines itself not in bemoaning mismanagement and false economic policies though, for the deplorable shape economy and society are presently in can be traced back to deep-seated malfunctions of the state apparatus. According to the strong version of this critique, scolding the contemporary Greek state in rather drastic terms, as some comments do, is considered justified on the grounds of what can be termed as

archaic structures and mentalities reigning over contemporary Greek realities [P2: 36]. Somehow less severe are those perceptions that specify aspects of what is perceived as determining the deficient statehood in Greece, namely tax injustice, inefficiency in the public sector, diffused corruption and the all-pervasive patronage system [P2: 17].

Taken together, all this – according to some comments – hardly justifies Greece remaining in the Eurozone – at least unless the country has undergone deep-going adjustments and structural state reforms [P2: 23], thereby putting to place some basic essentials of what nowadays means to run a modern state [P2:36].⁸ In general terms, this line of argument follows rather the official policy of MG, insisting as the latter does upon the Greek state consolidating public finances as indispensable precondition for the European rescue policy of the credit loans, although some times the pressure for urgent reforms is being associated with the briefly launched plan of the Federal Ministry of Finance for a temporary ‘Grexit’ [P2: 23; 127]. For other comments, on the contrary, not only forcing Greece out of the monetary union constitutes an unmistakable sign of a control regime of disciplinary coercion, but also the very form of what solid consolidation is meant to consist in, namely austerity, makes up a great deal of what the alignment of the mob and the elite in Germany sees as crisis emergency solution [P2: 73].

Forging an alliance between political crisis management and popular resentments, folkish animosities and nationalist outbursts, not only provokes mirror-image reactions on the part of those perceiving themselves subjected to external determination [P2: 95], but is bound to have on purely economic grounds the contrary effects from those intended: To impose a restrictive, spending cuts policies in order to meet at all costs the requirements of fiscal contraction brings about a massive reduction of purchasing power und consequently an under-consumption crisis thus aggravating the already severe recessive tendencies that in turn let the tax income of the state collapse, which in turn makes things much worse, the economy plummets further and so on and so forth – one can study the disastrous outcome of such an austerity course in the historical context of the last years of the Weimar republic [P2: 130; see also *ibid.*: 135].

⁸ Such considerations make up a great deal of how in the Greek case expressions of collective consciousness refer to the need of a new start: see below [P3].

3. Greek collective self-perceptions

Leaving aside the question of how critical one should be against both the possibility of the imposed option of ‘Grexit’, but also the disciplinary, sanctioning import of the austerity measures associated with the process of fiscal and economic consolidation as well, there is no doubt that the interminate criticisms and self-criticisms accompanying the course of the Greek crisis since 2010 can be said to have culminated in the wide-spread social awareness of experiencing something like a watershed in Greek contemporary history. Assuredly, living through crisis times is usually bound up with the astute apprehension of ruptures, turning-points, opportunity time-windows, and the like. However, what apparently sets (lived) experiences of the crisis juncture in the Greek context apart from those expressed in the frame of European and German crisis discourses, are acute perceptions of what it really means to embark on the consolidation course demanded for by members of the Eurozone. Surveying online readers’ comments about the agreement on the new loan of ESM one quickly comes across perception patterns strongly resembling those observed in the parliamentary debates⁹, and especially those that concern the acknowledgement of the fact that in the face of the crisis hitting hard on economy and society alike the need for and exigency of a collective effort to remodel and rebuild almost every dimension of public life has become unavoidable.

3. 1 New-starters

So, what complying with the modalities of the debt backed consolidation imperative is perceived to entail is taking the multifarious phenomena of a crisis-ridden society as but just compulsive signs of inescapable revisions, shifts and transformations. Although acknowledging inevitable turnabouts and reorientations is sometimes linked to recognising the significance of the new Memorandum of Understanding as (possibly) triggering reform changes [P3: 105; 183; 220; 234], this is not what most of those attitudes in support of a radical new beginning start from. Now, whether this new beginning should have taken off by means of the consequent implementation of the first adjustment programmes [620; 234], or rather, on the contrary, the whole austerity based rescue policy could but have no positive impact whatsoever [211], the necessity of responding to the chance for change posed by the crisis seems to remain untested though [115].

⁹ See K. Maras, *Discursive constitutions. Constructing selves and others in the framework of parliamentary debates on crisis in Germany and Greece*, (Jan. 2016). Available at: <http://www.fragmex.eu/deliverables.php?lang=en> [last accessed: 23.02.2016].

Equally unquestionable seems also to be that contemporary perception, which portrays the present juncture with the insignium of a fateful fissure. For this shape of crisis-consciousness the present state of affairs in the country should descriptively be rendered as standing on the threshold of new times, which can be circumscribed by Gramsci's famous dictum: "the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters" – fortunately without the latter; nevertheless, the weight of the historical challenge remains considerable and correspondingly inexorable is the demand of the times for the subjects to commit themselves to remodelling both themselves and the socio-political environment as well [165].

Which subjects though? Or to pose the question more precisely: From what subjective positions, stances and attitudes is such an (crisis-induced) awareness demand being acutely perceived? Although bits and pieces of the societal self, called for to commit itself to change (S_{ch}), are discouragingly scattered in the online comments under examination and accordingly it is somehow risky to try to distil a unified account of a collective subjectivity (to be seen) as the bearer of the change needed to come, it does not however appear to be a faulty line of reasoning, if one tries to sketch out the outlines of (S_{ch}) in such a way that the characteristics observed and then worked out can satisfy the proof of sustainable evidence.

To begin with, (S_{ch}) is unmistakably perceived as the self-constituting agency of a thoroughgoing *renewal* and *reformatory recommencement*: (S_{ch}) \rightarrow (S_{re}). Resetting the stage for a new start (S_{re}) comes in many flavours: As societal re-education process [316], start-off with other political and social leading agents [118; 137], wringing oneself out of the deep-seated traditions of populism [179], renouncement of debt-backed consumerism [405], re-establishment of the reasoned rules of common sense [586], cutting the state apparatus down to (minimum) size [560; 576; 630], overcoming the ostensibly deplorable state of a society deeply sunk in decadence [486; 646] – or even nation restart and redefining the very notion of national identity cum national goals and ways of achieving them [408].

Now, subscribing to (the necessity of) the imagined collectivity constitutive of (S_{re}) is one thing – showing how concretely it shall be able to express itself in socio-economic and political action another. So, when (S_{re}) embarks on the task of coming up with a rough scheme of those collective agencies, social groups and committed individuals to be empowered to carry out the refounding work, it seems easier for the self-conception of (S_{ch}) to make out who must be ruled out right from the start, than it is to provide evidence of already existing economic and social potentials suitable for the overriding objective of all-round renewal. Talking about potentials, what at first strikes the eye is that what is missing from the forces to be activated is the part (usually) the political class is entrusted with. Indeed, references to the possibility of political

actors playing any determining role are rather scarce, if not to say almost negligible – to all appearances the delegitimation of concept and practice of political representation in the country has made considerable progress.¹⁰

Comparing expressions of popular discontent with the how the political sphere is perceived to handle issues of high public interest, what seems to distinguish the Greek case from the German one, is the extent to which trust in politics has ostensibly diminished in the course of coming to grips with the impacts of the finance and state debt crisis. Whereas in Germany the decrease in trust has to all intents and purposes been the result of considerable parts of the populace coming progressively to distrust the avowed assurance of the MG that the rescue policy is so designed as to safeguard national interests, questioning as they often vehemently do the efficaciousness of the European policy to keep Greece – perceived more often than not as a hopeless case – in the Eurozone (at all costs), public/popular disgruntlement in Greece directs itself not against particular government policies gone astray, however grave these are perceived to be, but targets something one more layer deep. Assuredly, critical voices on how the SYRIZA government has handled the negotiation process leading to the agreement on the new ESM loans abound, most of them disparaging it for displaying an irresponsible and adventurous fervour combined with incapacity and inconsistency [9; 55; 61; 105; 169; 527].

However, how aberrant and light-minded the crisis management of the government might be, it is nevertheless equally true that in general the trust put upon political actors to show a way out of the present quagmire is very little: At the end of the day, so goes the argument in many comments, neither the traditional parties, not the ones that have quickly gained momentum in the course of the crisis have lived up to the expectations of (S_{ch}) – let alone those of (S_{re}) [11; 55; 79; 123; 508; 583; 630]. Given this dismal state of (political) affairs, with the country sinking even deeper in hopelessness [486], it is no wonder that the societal forces (S_{re}) deems necessary to be activated in order to kick-off the much wanted restart seem to be rather meagre.

For one thing, the call for radical renewal, if it wants to show up with credible suggestions, must point out that the notion of (almost) starting from scratch requires taking recourse to human resources unspoiled by the traditional political culture [143], for example people with a) successful economic careers before turning to politics [126], and b) character traits detrimental to those so far governing political behaviours, i. e. personal enrichment and securing privileges [24; 137], as well as, generally, forms of socio-collective consciousness unburdened by the

¹⁰ Things seemingly not going to get any better, since it is believed that the radical turnabouts entailed in the consolidation policy shall be carried out by the very delegitimated political class responsible for the present misery in the first place: P3: 506; see also 102.

conventional inertness, disinterest, narrow-mindedness [316], and credit-financed self-complacency [405; see also 323]. Activating such human potentials under the circumstances of politics and society believed to be in decay [46; 416; 323; 470; 506; 527] might be a rather strenuous task to accomplish though.

3. 2 Self-conceptions

If that which (S_{re}) as the imagined community of new-starters refers to looks rather vague or indefinite¹¹ and at any rate seems to fall short of what one would expect from such a radical longing for renewal to come up with, then it is reasonable to surmise that this has something to do with the self-conceptual antecedents or presuppositions sustaining it in the first place. Put in other words, what [$(S_{ch}) \rightarrow (S_{re})$] takes as essential for the task of thorough-going alternation relies heavily on how it perceives the features constitutively pertaining to what it takes to be its own make-up. This in turn means that what it *is* for these features of its self-conception to be essential is for [$(S_{ch}) \rightarrow (S_{re})$] to take or *treat* them as essential – to *identify* with them. Talking about of identification in these terms stresses the act by which what it is *in itself* depends (in part) upon its attitude towards these features, what they are *for itself*.

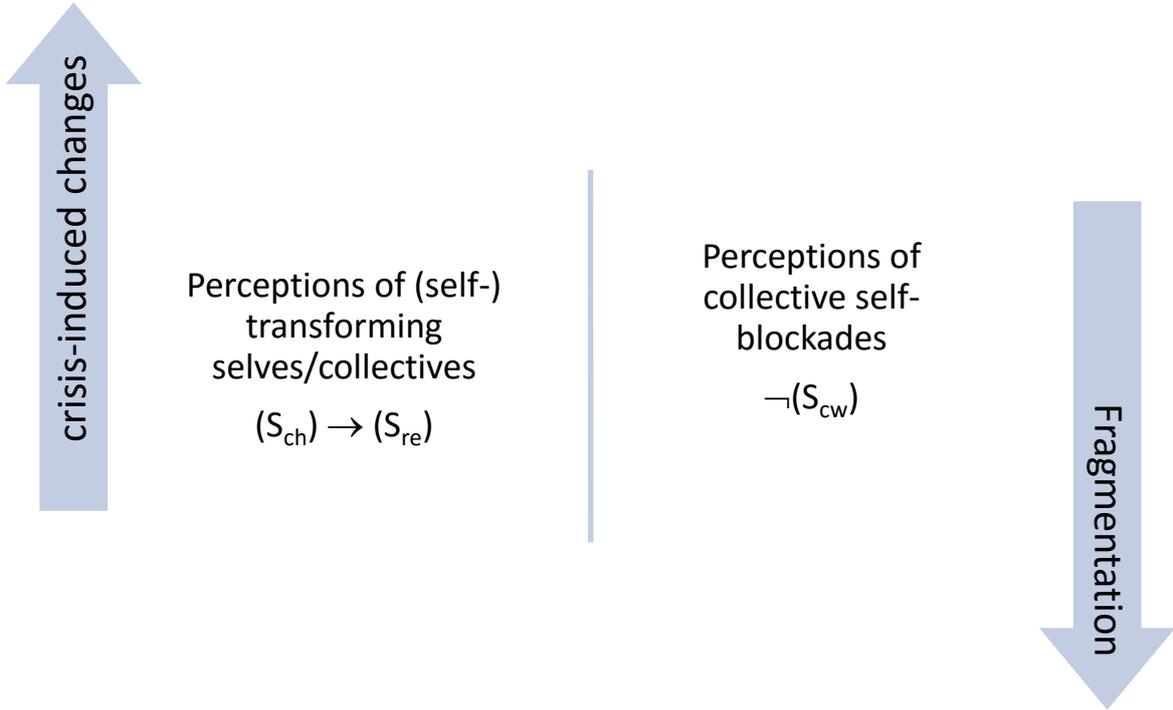
Consequently, to say that the features are *for it* essential, i.e. constituting (partly) what it is *in itself*, entails that an alteration in self-conception, i.e. how it takes them to be essential, carries with it an alteration in the self of which it is a conception. Now, in order to make good on the explanatory advance these remarks promise, one must look at what identity presuppositions (S_{ch}) makes and what features of self-conception (beliefs, normative attitudes, motivational forces, etc.) it takes resource to in its effort to constitute itself in times of crisis. ‘Effort’ is the right notion to deploy in this context, because what the impression one gains by examining online comments (for example the ones under examination) is of a ‘free-floating’ intentionality of alteration, a kind of diffused awareness of urgent self-transforming of subjectivities, collectivities and institutional setups [123; 162;].

One moreover, which seems to be oscillate between various identity self-ascriptions, or better, self-constituting features of what should count as a (robust) collective self-understanding capable of shouldering the commitments (S_{ch}) is bound to. In comparison with the collective self-understandings expressed in German online discussion forums, where self-conceptions revolve around and gravitate towards collective identities such as tax-payers, voters and citizens,

¹¹ Leading to perceptions of a national collective that over the past decades has completely failed to attune itself to international environment surrounding it: P3: 162.

in the Greek case the self-reflexive pondering over what kind of self-transformations the economic, political and social crisis has forced upon self-conceptions [123; 230] takes the form both of a global questioning of action motivations, subjective attitudes, social stances, behavioural habits, and the like, and of ruminations about how a new type of social contract between politics and society should look like, as well. To begin with the latter, what certainly $[(S_{ch}) \rightarrow (S_{re})]$ diagnoses as the most serious stumbling block in the way of constructively overcoming the impasse Greek society is stuck in, is the absence of what commonly is referred to as *volonté général*, that collective will capable of entitling individuals, groups and other action agencies to share the common belief certainty of belonging to an overarching and consensus-based frame of action coordination – one, that is, that provides animating answers to such questions as ‘what are we’ and ‘what do we want to do’ [409].

What on the contrary the imagined community of (S_{ch}) sees itself confronted with, are pervasive phenomena of societal fragmentation and communication blockades – the negation, as it were, of the collective self of unified purposive common will $[\neg(S_{cw})]$. This negativity expresses itself in multifarious ways, which can, for the sake of brevity, be grouped together in two categories, circumscribing features of the socio-economic action framework on the one hand, and subjective habitual attitudes on the other. Turning now to the former, one of the pillar reasons underlying perceptions of fragmentation feeding on $[\neg(S_{cw})]$ is that the prevalent forms of socio-economic interest articulation follow patterns of a narrow particularism, thereby not



only generating considerable unfairness or injustice with regards to the system of remunerations holding between various occupational groups [59; 183; 517], but also deepening the sense of the fundamental lack of collective self-consciousness directed (as this normally is) to the fulfilment of objectives of general interest [408].

Echoing arguments expressed in the framework of parliamentary debates this way of perceiving $[\neg(S_{cw})]$ focusses on the negative, disintegrative character of the kind of social contract governing the relation between state and citizenship over the past decades: Summed up under the notion of populism [70; 112; 177; 213; 261; 517], the ‘contract’ regulating the system of responsibilities and entitlements, performances and rewards, has (falsely) identified the objective of meeting general socio-economic needs with the particularistic satisfaction of an extended array of interests articulated by trade organisations, professional associations, guilds and other (often incompatible) group demands. The ‘contractual’ symmetry thus established by the populist ground consensus has put on stage the interplay of a state-based responsibility to be attentive to all sorts of satisfaction claims, however detrimental to the common/public good they may have been, on the one side, and the socially wide-spread conviction of group interests being unquestionably entitled to see their claims summarily satisfied, on the other [260; 275].

Now, the second aspect of factors reinforcing $[\neg(S_{cw})]$ concern those individualistic basic attitudes, which in a sense are subjective side of the coin of collective social consciousness perceived as fragmented. Socially diffusive selfness displays two facets, depending on what perceptions of social fragmentation put the focus on. Firstly, behavioural habitus and subjective dispositions as substrative correlates of the action patterns based on selfish group-interests: attitudes, stances and lifestyles characterised by an excessive claims mentality are but people’s share in the populist arrangement of getting the variegated demands of the entitlement culture satisfied [112]. The negative side of this gratifying setup is – besides the aforementioned awareness of injustices being promoted – the decrease of social trust, as the various group interests are, constitutively as it were, distrustful of whether the populist gratification system will manage the job of meeting some demands not to the expense of others.

Take for example the issue that looms large in the German context, namely tax payers’ interests being discarded (by the Greek rescue policy of MG). The Greek version of this focusses rather on the relation between peoples’ propensities to tax evasion and the state as distributive apparatus: What guarantee can be supplied that the state’s tax pool will not be but just another resource to be tapped for the demand satisfaction along clientelistic lines? If to all appearances common taxpayers’ money is rechannelled by the nepotistic state [55; 213] to benefit all kinds

of particularistic interests, why should one not take the rational choice of utility maximisation, and instead of letting it go to waste, simply evade the taxes? [110; see also 248; 267]

Add to that ubiquitous corruption [109; 112; 159; 234], and (the perception of) $[\neg(S_{cw})]$ reveals another aspect determining contemporary self-conceptions: To the extent that the dominant social contract consists in conferring upon an (more often than not conflictual) heterogeneity of social demands guaranteed entitlements to interest satisfaction, the resulting antagonism around strategies of securing privileged positions of interest-fulfilment can have but disintegrative effects upon social trust. With the level of social trust in turn decreasing, the social identity of individuals is forced to revolve around such certainties as perceived to remain stable, for example those of personal self-confidence and family firmness [319].

If, therefore, social agents (individuals and groups alike) see no reason to doubt that they (are compelled to) act in a socio-political environment of disintegrative dispersion, characterised as this is by enduring distrust, a permeating claim mentality and various communication blockades [110; 409], then it takes no wonder, that the wide-spread phenomena of self-righteousness, inert contentment and aggressive individualism [323] should equally be considered part of the contemporary society crisis. As far as that individualism in relation to the crisis-ridden contemporary Greek self is concerned, also not rare are perceptions according to which such character traits and behavioural attitudes as competitive mentality, cunning self-assertion, distrustfulness of everything 'foreign', unreliableness, ingenuity coupled with servility [283], enviousness and resentment in interpersonal-social relations [53], are all of them (somehow) traceable back to both the long history of Ottoman occupation and the long-lasting absence of the enlightenment rule of public reason, but also to the exigencies of making one's way through the vicissitudes marking the aforementioned socio-political context.

At any rate, whatever the causing factors and determining influences for such habitual dispositions and patterns of social conduct may be, they are perceived to be detrimental to and adverse of society and individuals meeting the crisis-induced demands of self-alteration. For $[(S_{ch}) \rightarrow (S_{re})]$ seeking ways to dispel the hold $[\neg(S_{cw})]$ has on contemporary social realities this is a gloomy picture indeed. Equally discouraging seems to be the quest for those cohesive potentials that a collective consciousness of self-identity could supply. What form the effort to overcome existing disintegration trends could take, is not always clear, but the comments addressing this issue head on tend to evoke the national identity as a kind of substratum capable of providing resources for social cohesion, political consensus-building processes and something like a common will [408]. Somehow more concrete shape takes national common identity as that concord that transcends political affiliations, religious allegiances, economic life-styles

and family loyalties and establishes a corporate alliance between all productive forces of the country [411].

Anyway, whatever workable pattern this commonality of self-identity might take, (S_{ch}) is carried by the conviction that the driving force to and the responsibility for fundamental reorientations must originate in efforts undertaken by the people themselves: Of course, under the condition that the recognition gains ground that what has brought the country to the present impasse has home-grown causes [267] and therefore it both futile and deceptive to blame others – the Germans for instance. Surveying the perceptions expressed in the comments on the subject of the German European policy in relation to the Greek crisis one observes stances: The first one – in line with the dominant social discourse – focusses a) on the hegemonial position the GM has attained in European politics, in general, and b) the determining role it has come to play in internal Greek affairs, reducing as it has – so goes the argument – the Greek decision makers to mere executive organs for the implementation of the austerity policy (imposed upon them), in particular [190; 253]. The second one contains a more favourable attitude towards the German policy on Greece, for it points out that it is not the Germans to be held responsible for that system of corruption that has hold sway in the country over the last forty years and must now in the framework of the consolidation policy be brought down with measures that should long ago have been taken [196; 267]. True, it is always convenient to put the blame on others, yesterday the imperialist Yankees, today the German-led EU, and tomorrow somebody else [230] – but does this make things any better? [111]