

703: Modern Greek Seminar

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Topic: “Media Representations of the Greek Crisis”

Introduction

Stathis Gourgouris introduces Maria Kakavoulia, Associate Professor of Communication, Media, and Culture at Panteion University in Athens, Greece.

Presentation

Maria Kakavoulia thanks Stathis Gourgouris and the Onassis foundation; her talk is on a difficult but popular topic, media representations of the Greek crisis. The main sources of the data she will present come from print media in Greece, the UK and Germany. In her introduction, he brings the audience back in time to the etymology of the word crisis which is, ironically, a Greek term. *Crisis* comes from the Greek word κρίνω, which means “to judge, decide, distinguish, determine”; thus it involves a lack of predictability of the future. The second meaning, which is often forgotten, “disturbance.” Prof. Kakavoulia explains that only the negative sense of the word survives. Her talk will keep this second meaning close at hand while looking at media representations, which focus on the former meaning.

Prof. Kakavoulia gives a summary of the crisis and its reception. The crisis began in the mid-late 2000’s, and by 2010 the country was on brink of default. Dangers included the threatened collapse of Eurozone. Common discourses arose in the media that described Greece as both perpetrator and victim and these spread to the political sphere. Various politicians shared what they thought should have been done. While some supported Greece leaving the Eurozone (and as a result the term GREXIT was coined by business trading people), others supported the implementation of austerity measures, and thus the term GREKOVERY emerged. The per capita income of Greeks fell, unemployment increased, riots became frequent and Golden Dawn, the far right political party, began gaining power. Political movements took place in Constitution (Syntagma) Square, which were joined by many who had never been involved in political movements before. Nea Demokratia and PASOK formed a fractious coalition, and were blamed for the collapse of the economy. The crisis, which was financial, soon turned political, and so emerged

various acronyms for the southern European states with economies in crisis (for example, PIGS)

Two metaphors of Greece's place emerged during the crisis. The first imagined Greece as the weakest member of the EU family, while the other described Greece as the starting point of a chromosomal mutation; both were used to explain the crisis. Others, such as Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, supported Greece's membership in the EU, yet harnessed his own metaphor in 2011: "Europe without Greece is like a child without a birth certificate."

Professor Kakavoulia emphasizes competing discourses which are enforced, promoted, and rejected in the media, the job of which is to inform and report on current events while also entertain the public by turning reports into reflections of support for the action of public. Journalists are essential as they craft messages that directly influence politics. Professor Kakavoulia will use examples of print media from three countries to draw comparative relationships in the treatment of the Greek crisis to assess how a variety of media channels promoted or undermined the independence of Greece from Europe. In Germany, she used *FOCUS* magazine, in the UK, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, and in Greece, *Ta Nea*, *H Kathimerini*, and social media.

From the German point of view, Professor Kakavoulia examines an image from the cover of *FOCUS* magazine: the infamous *Aphrodite from Melos* with her raised middle finger. *FOCUS* is the most popular weekly magazine in Germany, first published in 1993, with a 500,000/week circulation. The magazine is known for its social conservatism and economic liberalism, with strong editorial opinions. It is meant for busy readers, the information elites, and its slogan is evidence of this: "facts, facts, facts." It is positioned against *Der Spiegel* and has color images as well as informational graphics. After the *Aphrodite of Melos* image was disseminated on the cover of *FOCUS*, a response in Eleftherios Typos fired back with an image of the victory column in Berlin crowned with a swastika, and unpaid German war reparations were raised in parliament. The German point of view expounded the idea of the Greek decline, pulling Europe down with it. As the jewel of the classical past, *FOCUS* was asking, what happened – 2,000 years of decline? Other Greek media sources responded with articles defending Greece's position in the EU and, with that, in world history. The case of Germany and Greece, Kakavoulia argues, is a crisis of friendship between two countries and two peoples, the polarized representation of cultural and historical values. With this, came the revival of WWII rhetoric in Greek media sources such as *I Avgi*. A new narrative arose with this back and forth between Greek and German news sources after the *FOCUS* magazine cover image: Germany occupied the role of enemy, and Greece as the victimized, empty holder of cultural heritage; the resurrection of old stereotypes.

After examining the German perspective, Professor Kakavoulia moves on to news sources from the UK, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*. Both sources are serious news media outlets meant for educated, professional readers, and the editorial opinions are generally kept at a minimum. In articles, Greek decisions were framed as being relevant to the UK public. Journalists focused on specific events and voices, yet it was usually EU

elites (politicians, members of the CEB or IMF) whose voices are heard in UK publications, only after which are Greek politics and the Greek public heard.

Kakavoulia examines phrasing in *The Guardian* about the Greek elections, which include words such as anger, unpopular parties, and electorate. Anger, as an emotive process, Kakavoulia argues, is transformed into the material process of punishment, with the agent being the electorate, or Greek public. The discourse that emerges tells a story about Greeks who are strong enough to fight and win by punishing elites. Word choice in *The Observer* includes verbs such as “warns, urged, warn, rule out.” Greeks are presented as faced with a decision to leave or remain in the Eurozone, and their elections are represented with the same polarity. The media in the UK, Kakavoulia argues, maintains the dominant discourse over GREXIT.

The crisis vocabulary in Greek media, on the other hand, includes phrases such as “turning crisis into opportunity,” “change of attitude,” and “we need to adapt.” Feature stories are about the everyday person; they focus on the people’s perspectives by including hundreds of reports and analyses of effects of austerity measures. Greek people are presented as victims and the crisis is personified as an illness, an external threat to Greek society instead of part of it. *Ta Nea*, for example, presents event/character-focused reports and voices are given to angry citizens, for example those who lived in tents in Constitution Square during the protests. *H Kathimerini* presents the public as victims, chronicling the 25,000 homeless of Athens through a series of photographs. On TV, Greek outlets presented human-interest stories of how people were surviving. The Greek media, Kakavoulia argues, did not focus on the causes/responsibilities of politicians, but on the human effects of crisis. Metaphors of death, destruction, and war are employed; Greece is represented as “sinking”, “slowly dying”, “has reached bottom”, “dragging around”, “gasping”, and “in war.” The crisis is personified as an illness, as a chronic pain, a cancer, ax, storm, or famine. The rhetoric is that of occupation, and informal language styles emerge such as slang and colloquial expressions when the crisis is the focus of a story, whereas formal language is employed when the focus of a story is on solutions to the crisis.

Kakavoulia delves into a new media landscape: social media, which presents a crisis of representation. Due to YouTube and websites, new videos from 2010 attempted to explain the origins of the crisis; they became a venue through which to perform citizenship in a new frame. The new media landscape is a fragmented one, yet is more personalized than conventional media sources. By avoiding the mainstream representation of the crisis, there is a fundamental shift away from the couch to the streets, ignited by a different commitment – the caring of the people. The new media, Kakavoulia argues, can be understood as an elaboration of and reference to people’s values, a meta narrative through which various stories, events, and statistics could be linked together as symptoms of the crisis.

Kakavoulia ends by mentioning the 2014 edition of *Discourse and Society*, the entire issue of which is devoted to the analysis of the Greek crisis and its discourse from various perspectives. It was the first to start analyzing representations of the crisis.

Question and answer:

Stathis Gourgouris: Whatever is called the crisis is something that is constructed through images and language. Constructed/guided so blurs what the crisis is and what normality is is of great interest. Situations are at first shocking, and then the aim is for people to get used to a new regime – this becomes a daily reality. Many have raised this concern: why have the Syntagma protest movements stopped, why have they become less and less dramatic? New media/social media – is as much activity still on a daily basis? In relation to the Syntagma movement's hey days? Now we see a more normal reality – less homeless, the whole construction of the images is changed, and the media plays up the recovery.

Maria Kakavoulia: This is a slippery research landscape. People are trying now to find out what happened then. It's different to ask now about what's happening now. At least this (social media) has remained, but with many new forms of expression. Young people find new ways to express, and new platforms. New media landscape is a new field of research, its very interesting, and technology is involved. In the end, the TV and laptop and mobile phone will take over. Not many people still get their information from the printed newspaper. This is the new direction.

Stathis Gourgouris: This is a very optimistic line of thought. I'm interested in new media to the extent that it lies outside the mainstream media.

Maria Kakavoulia: We should avoid this optimism. There are many layers of negotiation of identity. Media creates this metaphor of adjusting the first years, which worked for the people. Language can actually do things, it is pragmatic, and it can persuade people to be patient. If news media reproduces this rhetoric, you create.

Neni Panourgia: Maybe we should also keep in mind that there is specificity in the spatial organization of media and its dissemination, and the ways people of various ages relate to different forms of media or lack thereof, according to where they are spatially within a city. In Exarcheia, people have no use for any sort of media, because the way they operate is by word of mouth. We can see concentric circles radiating out towards the rest of the city; the more that these circles radiate out, the more dependence there is on traditional forms of media. Have you seen what the temperament of this change is? What is the temperament of how young people change the way they get their news?

Maria Kakavoulia: I don't know. This is an interesting question; it has to do with population, media practices by ages, social identity, and class identity. All these issues are under research now. The only in depth academic exploration of this issue is in this *Discourse and Society* 2014 issue, "Representations of Crisis." This is the return of a new orality, due to the distrust of the media, even the new media landscape.

Maria Mytelinaki: Exactly.

Maria Kakavoulia: An interesting detail is, as I mentioned, during the hot days of the Syntagma square assemblies, they adopted a practice that discarded any notion of representation. They distrusted interviews, what they actually went for was live streaming their own media and nothing else.

Maria Mytelinaki: I agree. They want to control the dissemination of news, Kostis Kornetis's article, who was writing during the 2008 riots in 2010, wrote about the connection between these riots and those of the past. What I found interesting are mottos on walls written in English and French: this shows a mistrust of the media to such an extent that they resorted to translations; they wanted to address the foreign media directly. Mistrust in translation is interesting to me, by attempting to communicate in English or French is a sign of the subjugation of these languages. The street languages were Greek, Albanian, etc. Also, the recent theorization of events, I think, does exist. The theorization of east/west/the thought of where the Greeks belong does exist. The work of Michael Herzfeld, Stathis Gourgouris, issues that address identity.

Maria Kakavoulia: We need to first research more what exactly is this media landscape. For example, a liberal UK newspaper should go for the Greek people. All of a sudden, it drops the labor party and quotes elite Europeans. Media has many subcategories. Even the Greek media focused on the Greek people, gave them a voice. Still, there was a mistrust of the representation of these people's truths. For me the variety/richness of these mediation practices are very interesting. After researching the ways the crisis was represented, we can make connections. Also, the stories created for the crisis were narrativized, embedded into the story of crisis. That was an interpretation of an event that would be somehow biased. This is very political.

Dimitris Papadopoulos: Do you think there are ways of trying to reconstruct/trace what resists the narrative, this fragmented new media landscape, that resists being consolidated, mediated, that's part of this lack of trust? How are we to trace trajectories of these new media forms? Are there new initiatives/platforms that try to do this? For example, we have the Occupy Wall Street archive online, an initiative to build a narrative based on this event. Is it too soon for the Greek case? Are there possibilities for research, even using indirect way of extracting user-generated data, by bypassing?

Maria Kakavoulia: Yes, we do. Things have started going on, but you cannot predict this. The blogs, personalized information. It's a very slippery landscape. The initiatives produced by communities generally can be trusted. Some of my students are doing research on social media and the political sphere right now. Many Greek politicians have started using social media to address younger people.

Stathis Gourgouris: I don't know if trust is a good mode of discourse around here. As you said, the presumed resistance of the person whether it is performative or oral, against the industry, and has been discredited as propaganda, that critique is just as important. Its not about finding the truth of representation or information; or if it is, this must be part of the home pedagogy of a society, which must be able to assess with its own critique, all the items it encounters. Trust is not a reliable category. All sources are to not be trusted, yet

all sources contain elements of information and truth of the situation. All of them are in play.

Maria Kakavoulia: All have performative value. The news media adopt very frequently schematic representations. We live in this rhetoric of the media. The representations have a value of their own.

Maria Hadjipolykarpou: This idea of the outlet, of social new media, I was thinking that the blogosphere is a place to escape the idea of a collective, which stands behind the writer. It's a way to enter a new world, a new reality that these people are trying to create. Maybe we should look into the elements of this new reality that is meant to be an escape from the old reality. Through blogs, maybe we can analyze the new politics of the individual.

Maria Kakavoulia: The blogosphere is changing now; it's a bit out of date, in terms of practices today. We have the danger of generalizing.

Maria Hadjipolykarpou: I was talking more about the personal blogs, those that do not belong to a collective, as a way of an outlet.

Maria Kakavoulia: Yes, this is a very interesting field of research. Asking things about identity construction, and new categories.

It seems to me it may be helpful to assess the different perspectives coming out of different countries to analyze the true causes of the crisis in relation to the propaganda statements. What are the roles of the possible true causes of the crisis? What is lacking in the discussion is a valuable gauge, a point of comparison, of the causes of the crisis.

Maria Kakavoulia: I would say that the causes were not mentioned by the media. The line that connects the media representations is the renegotiation of values, of Greece's place in Europe, of Greece as its mother. The media usually do not give causes; they do not focus on the causes.

Maria Sereti: It seems like there was a lot of emphasis from the UK, Germany, and Greece. What about the Italians? Portuguese? Are there as many analyses for these economic crises?

Maria Kakavoulia: The Greek crisis was somehow elevated, it was not equally represented. The German media did not have one page for Italian or Spanish crises. The Greek crisis became somehow a guinea pig, an example.

Various attendees: A scapegoat.

Maria Mytelinaki: If you think of the hellenophobia of Greece to the Germans, you can see why.

Maria Kakavoulia: A lot of anti-Greek rhetoric was produced. Suddenly, the friendship has recovered. I didn't focus on the French media, they were more sympathetic to Greece. There is no comparison, however, to the other European crises. This is a media reality.

Neni Panourgia: How about the rest of the PIGS? How did they respond about the Greeks?

Maria Kakavoulia: They were sympathetic to a certain extent, they were not negative.

Anthony Barsamian: How are responses determined to be positive or negative?

Maria Kakavoulia: Certain terms, titles, this depends on the researcher.

Stathis Gourgouris: Many see it as an international issue. *Der Zeit* is interesting because it shows that it is seen as an international issue. It is the result of the fear of the exit from the Eurozone. This is very interesting. You have been very kind with our questions, we thank you for coming.