Humor & Politics in Europe
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Contradictions: Envisioning European Futures

In many historical moments Europe's futures have seemed not simply open and uncertain, but also replete with contradiction. In the contemporary juncture, the responses both of ordinary Europeans and of the continent's collective actors and institutions to the challenges posed by crisis again constitute a series of contradictions—some of which reiterate large questions from Europe's past, while also impinging upon the ability of social forces to imagine possible futures. Europe is today a space within which the principle of social solidarity appears firmly rooted, yet also one in which the politics of austerity threaten to erode welfare state commitments. It is a context in which supra-national institutions and transnational social connections have progressed far, but also the scene of substantial efforts to reassert nationalism. It is a setting in which many are disenchanted with mainstream politics, yet also challenged by the possible growth of new movements. These— and other— tensions and contradictions manifest themselves in individual lives, social relations, institutions and collective projects. And we would like the 22nd International Conference of Europeanists to examine such opposing tendencies and, facing forward, consider the many potential futures emerging from the European crisis.

Thus, for its 2015 conference, the Council for European Studies (CES) invites proposals for panels, roundtables, book discussions and individual papers on the study of Europe, broadly defined. We encourage proposals in the widest range of disciplines, and, in particular, proposals that combine disciplines, nationalities, and generations. Although it is not mandatory that papers be related to the conference theme, papers that do so are especially welcome.

We strongly encourage participants to submit their proposals as part of an organized panel. Full panel proposals will be given top priority in the selection process. Participants may find it useful to connect with like-minded scholars through the growing number of CES research networks, links to which can be found here: http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/research/research-networks

Proposals may be submitted from August 18 to October 10, 2014. Participants will be notified of the Committee's decision by December 18, 2014. Information on how to submit proposals will be posted on the CES website and disseminated through its newsletter. To subscribe to the CES newsletter visit: http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/

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 Editor’s Note

Since 1989 we have observed expanding forms of political participation as well as opposition in Europe. From Portugal to Sweden, Bulgaria to Iceland, citizens have reacted to economic and political crises, social marginalization, and exclusion with mass protests and self-immolations. They have also laughed, expressing their worlds of despair and hopes for a different future.

This issue of Perspectives on Europe focuses on humor, an innovative form of political participation in twenty-first century Europe. Some of the recent years’ highlights include the parliamentary elections of 2008 in Lithuania, when the newly founded National Resurrection Party (NRP), popularly called a ‘showmen party’, gained 15 percent of the total vote and finished second. Citizens were amused by images of vampires, the insane, prostitutes, and criminals in the NRP campaign. They laughed at subversive messages, such as “Let us in the Ship of Fools!”, that is, the Parliament. In Iceland, Jón Gnarr, one of Iceland’s top comedians, became Reykjavik’s mayor after his new party won council elections in 2010. Among his promises: “Free towels in all the swimming pools! A polar bear for the Reykjav’ik zoo!”

Beppe Grillo, an Italian comedian, gained victory in the elections to the Italian Parliament in 2012. His Five Star Movement fielded a group of political novices and took 8.7 million votes, more than any other party. In all these cases humor mediated serious efforts to constitute a different politics.

Humorous campaigns reach outside Europe. In 2010 Brazilians elected Francisco Everardo Oliveira Silva, a real clown, to the Congress. The candidate received 1.3 million votes from the state of Sao Paulo, nearly twice as many as the next-highest vote-getter. Francisco Silva told voters: “If elected, I promise I will help all Brazilian families ... especially mine.”

In a ethnographic study of satirical political activism in the United States, Angelique Haugerud recently discussed how ‘Billionaires’, a satirical political group dressed up in tuxedos, top hats, evening gowns, and tiaras, have used satirical street theater to speak about serious issues of democracy.

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At different elections they campaigned for “Four More Wars!”, “Leave No Corporation Behind!”, “Widen the Income Gap!”, and “Taxes Are Not for Everyone.”

Is humor, like in Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, a weapon of the weak? Although humor is often seen as a light genre, as trivial and inconsequential politically, it can be very powerful. Lenny Bruce’s (1925–1966) performances liberated American nightclubs by turning them into “America’s freest free-speech zones.” Twelve cartoons on the prophet Mohammed, published by Jyllands-Posten, Copenhagen’s leading paper, in 2005 provoked harsh response from the governments of Muslim countries, a boycott of Danish goods, and death threats against the cartoonists. In early Soviet Russia, laughter was “a weapon of class struggle, a mechanism of social control, an instrument of social cohesion.” Lenin and Stalin like Mao and Hitler allowed no laughter at the expense of themselves or their regime.

What is the place of humor in recent European politics? Anna Sheftel, in this Perspectives on Europe issue, focuses on dark humor in post-war Bosnia as an alternative form of remembering the war, which challenges official discourses and creates solidarities. Noelle Mólé interrogates Beppe Grillo’s satirical activism in Italy and his use of ‘supernatural humor’, populated with images of zombies or other enchanted beings, to critique political life in Berlusconi’s Italy. Dominic Boyer analyzes Jón Gnarr’s and the Best Party’s subversive comic engagements in Iceland and the reinvention of politics itself. Shawn Clybor considers absurdities and ironies in the 2013 Czech presidential elections and strategic use of humor during the electoral campaign. Eduardo Romanos explores ‘15 May’ protests or the Indignados movement in Spain, where humor was used to convey dissent as well as to create self-critical and creative community.

As the contributors to this issue show, humorous engagements give rise to new forms of political agency and shape alternative forms of political participation. Citizens resist economic and political reforms, state ideologies, and socio-economic marginalization and reclaim dignity and respect. Humor, like other forms of political opposition, reifies the power it subverts. But unlike more conventional forms of political opposition, it exposes the mechanism according to which political spectacles are constructed, reveals its fixed

5 Ibid.
9 Leonard Freedman, “Wit as a Political Weapon.”
form and imaginary nature, and makes it nonsensical. Humor engages a new affective and moral ideology of discontent and hope by exposing gaps between promises and lack of solutions, between policy and its arbitrariness, between asserted national solidarity and increasing fragmentation of national community, between democratic ideals of equality, representation, transparency, and accountability and rising stratification and poverty, harsh realities of corruption, impudence, and disengagement. Humor expresses desires for change and projects a new ontology of European politics, one with a human face.

With a great excitement I join the Perspectives on Europe editorial board as a new editor. I would like to thank Peter Scholten for his inspiring editorship of Perspectives on Europe during the past two years. And, my gratitude goes to Siovahn Walker and Corey Fabian Borenstein for their devoted work on the journal!

Neringa Klumbytē
Editor

10 See Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak on late socialism in the USSR, in “American Stiob: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West,” Cultural Anthropology 25, no. 2 (2010), 179–221.

Enchanting the Disenchanted: Grillo's Supernatural Humor as Populist Politics

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“Reality has surpassed every fantasy.” – Beppe Grillo

“Monsters involve all kinds of doubling.” – Elizabeth Grosz

In November of 2011, Beppe Grillo – a social critic and Italy’s comedian-cum-politician who leads the populist Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle) – cracked a Berlusconi joke: “Berlusconi is an old zombie. He was already politically dead in 2008” (Grillo Blog, November 9, 2011). It gets a laugh because, despite Berlusconi’s numerous legal indictments, corruption and prostitution scandals, and political gaffes, he’s outlived several political deaths since his election to prime minister in 1994. Grillo also teased Berlusconi for his infamous cronyism, remarking, “We always see solidarity between zombies” (Grillo Blog, December 26, 2011). He regularly refers to former Prime Minister Mario Monti as

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‘Rigor Montis’, the political parties of Italy’s Second Republic as ‘zombies’, and Democratic candidate Walter Bersani as ‘the dead man who speaks’ (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 10, 20; Grillo Blog, February 27, 2013). Grillo refers to Prime Minister Letta’s government as the ‘Monster Club’ (Il Club dei mostri) and called it “mythological, a fantastic animal, with many heads but only one brain with two separated hemispheres: the right one is Berlusconi which is already predetermined, and the left one is international finance ready to squeeze Italy” (Grillo Blog, April 28, 2013). To his mind, Italy’s political system is like a delusional ghost: “Our weed-ridden politics are like the spirit of a dead person that doesn’t know he’s dead” (Grillo Blog, May 6, 2010). One of his 2013 political posters features a fat zombie with a mohawk, whose protruding belly shows a last meal of various opposing politicians, and which has the tagline: “Politicians are scared of us, you know why? Because we eat them!” Grillo’s message to the Italian electorate is clear: It’s a zombie-eat-zombie world.

Beppe Grillo stunned Italy when his party, the Five Star Movement (Movimento Cinque Stelle), garnered nearly a third of the national vote in the February 2013 national elections. The Five Star Movement has been called a protest movement, populist, anti-political, and even anarchist (Rizzini 2013; Biorcio and Natale 2013; Galeazzi 2013); certainly, Grillo’s flair for humor and satire challenges the Berlusconian status quo. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that Grillo has great jokes on government corruption: his quip exposing former Prime Minister Benito Craxi’s corruption is legendary in Italy; his biting one-liners, popular since the 1980s, on exploitative governmental and corporate power have made him trustable and likable among many Italians, and his humor is surely a critical feature of his party’s appeal. Along such lines, Roberto Biorcio and Paolo Natale (2013) suggest Grillo has cleverly marshaled “his original vocation of satirist and radical critic of political parties” (16). Fabio Bordignon and Luigi Ceccarini (2013), describing Grillo as part ‘anti-political sentiment’ and part ‘political entrepreneur’, attribute his popularity to Italians’ “uncertainty about the future and demand for protection clash[ing] with the anti-crisis measures, stoking the anti-party sentiment” (2). So, at first glance, we have a familiar story: Grillo, like other funny politicians around the globe (Klumbytė 2014; Baym and Jones 2012), deploys humor to bolster his anti-establishment authenticity in times of Italy’s social and economic crisis. The crisis, I believe, is significant not only for stoking public anxiety, but also for rendering the population more cynical about government corruption, cronism, and overall inefficiency. As of October 2013, Silvio Berlusconi, media tycoon and four-time prime minister, awaits sentencing on criminal charges for underage prostitution and has been banned from serving in political office. Prime Minister Enrico Letta was appointed in April 2013 after a political deadlock between Grillo’s Five Star Movement and right- and left-wing parties; Mario Monti, an economist and technocrat who served from 2011 to 2013, tried unsuccessfully to resolve Italy’s debt crisis.

Though Grillo’s appeal may be due his being a political outsider when standard politics looks dismal, this explanation needs to account for a salient social fact: Grillo’s regular use of zombie and ghosts. Grillo’s supernatural humor deserves more credit in propelling his movement than has otherwise been recognized. His otherworldly humor speaks not just to brewing cultural and economic anxieties, but rather represents a kind of wink to citizens: he, too, recognizes the profound and ghastly irrationality of contemporary Italian political life. This wink communicates what many Italians secretly long to hear: You are not insane.

The rise of a political outsider

Over the course of three decades, Grillo has earned his political chops in unconventional ways. Artistic director and television host Pippo Baudo helped Grillo get his first television show, Videobox, in 1977 (Galeazzi 2013). Starring in several variety shows such as I’ll Give You America, Grillo joined forced with famous producer and infamous satirist Antonio Ricci, who is known for bringing the first news parody show to Italian television in 1988,
In September 2007, Grillo organized ‘V Day’ or ‘F--- Off Day’ (Vaffa Day), a public rally against journalists and politicians, the latter he called “the real unlawful people.”
between private and public channels, with even more flagrant political ownership of and control of the media (Briziarelli 2011, 13). During the 1990s and 2000s, Berlusconi represented the era of ‘mediatization of politics’, wherein theatrical and media-ready politics became the norm across many Western democracies (Campus 2010, 227; Boyer and Yurchak 2010). Moreover, Berlusconi also used a method of overt censorship to silence political satirists off the air, and shows that criticized him or his party struggled to get airtime (Edwards 2005).

Examined broadly, the Five Star Movement has been steadily gaining political ground and attracting citizens based on a shared disenchantment with ‘mediatized’ politics, labor, and government corruption. By 2012, it garnered more than 10 percent of the vote in local elections, largely centered in the Center-North of Italy, and 5 mayors and 150 members were voted to local councils (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2013, 5). In the general elections of February 2013, Grillo’s Five Star Movement received an astonishing one third of national votes. Afterwards and through the fall of 2013, when new elections were still imminent, Grillo refused to align his party with Italy’s leftist party (Partito Democratico) or Berlusconi’s right-wing party, PDL (Partito Democratico della Liberta). Currently, however, the Five Star Movement still has a strong national representation, with 109 deputies and 54 senators in the Italian Parliament, and Grillo himself remains highly visible in the national media. Grillo has a secured his image as a political outsider and purposeful humorist whose anti-establishment practice make him the antithesis of media guru, corporate player, and accidental comedian, Silvio Berlusconi.

Italozombies: In reverence and revelry
Grillo as Italy’s anti-Berlusconi is a useful shortcut to begin thinking about his flair for supernatural humor. Grillo’s blog makes room for politically satirical ghost stories; in 2010, he imagined the ‘Italozombie’:

“Italians...are second generation zombies. [...] Italozombies are united with
the traditional zombie in its apparent incapacity to plan or to desire anything. In reality it is a victim of idiotic transitional laws that have been propagated via news and television. When it makes a wrong decision it keeps going at the cost of appearing like an imbecile, until it actually becomes one. A consistent feature of stupid-ified italozombies is the envy of the person who wants to emulate them. [...] The italozombie gets aggressive with anyone who tries to explain that it is acting like an italozombie. [...] It doesn’t want to be contradicted nor does it want to discover its true nature. Its daily behavior is media-directed, it doesn’t have ideas or opinions [...] Moreover, it has a temporary memory lasting only a few days and it cannot make any connections between events. The italozombie is a social predator [...] wherever he passes solidarity cannot grow, consciousness cannot be raised, grass grows no more. The italozombie is a chameleon, it mimics yet-to-be-infected Italians” (Grillo Blog, January 17, 2010).

Consistent with his views on media, Grillo’s scary satire imagines a grotesque consumer society gone awry: consumers become mind-numbed cannibals. The zombie becomes a caricature of selfish, apathetic, and vapid citizens made dead by their media consumption and their lack of awareness and compassion. But the narrative also implies hope for Italians in that an infection, an external source, is the cause, suggesting unintentional victimization of the populace, and, therefore, a political possibility that it might be cured. The passage also implies a critique of Italy’s most famous media tycoon, Berlusconi, who was at the forefront of secularizing and commodifying privatized knowledge in Italy. Berlusconi is information society’s zombie master to Grillo’s zombie hunter. In fact, the post ends by mobilizing political action: “The Italozombie is the Country’s metastasis and freedom of information is the cure” (Grillo Blog, January 17, 2010). The cancerous media, then, is what erases and decapitates the population: consuming toxic knowledge poisons Italian souls. Still, Grillo also warns citizens that Italozombies ‘mimic’ regular Italians, meaning that there are two groups: visible zombies and invisible zombies who appear human on the surface. Grillo thus hints at a manipulation of consciousness so profound that one might not even know of one’s own zombiehood. Citizens, he implies, must scrutinize their own naïve trust in information society in order to root out toxic self-awareness.

Scholars have found that stories of zombies and monsters often emerge in socio-political contexts rife with socio-economic change and widespread uncertainty (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Dendle 2007; McNally 2011). Annalee Newitz (2006) examines how nineteenth-century American narratives featuring monsters “embody the contradictions of a culture where making a living often feels like dying” (2). Avery Gordon (2008) suggests that hauntings represent “one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life” (xvi). In War, Politics, and Superheroes, Marc Di Paolo examines how American superheroes and villains reflect contemporary political ideology in the United States. Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, he suggests, emerged out of a social context of “racism, class warfare, and American imperial policies” (DiPaolo 2011, 250). He examines how Barack Obama’s presidential term has led to proliferating narratives of zombie apocalypse. DiPaolo argues that zombie narratives give Americans a catharsis as “the physical manifestation of cultural anxieties about a number of abstract issues.” In short, “they give angry Americans something to shoot at” (DiPaolo, 252). Surely, a political outsider like Grillo, one accused of being an anarchist and a demagogue, might employ some savvy strategies by directing citizens toward some anxiety-releasing ghost stories.

Though Grillo’s trope of zombies might indeed offer citizens a scapegoat for socio-economic crises, the labor of zombie stories, I think, is actually epistemological, about how knowledge is made, processed, and obstructed. Grillo’s zombie figure reaffirms a vision of a split reality within Italy,
the danger of something horrible and monstrous appearing authentically alive and human. The zombie’s savvy ‘mimicry’ of the uninfected warns Italians that they must discern between the two competing realities: the message arouses vigilance among citizens and makes their already existing anxieties warranted and safe. Whether it was Berlusconi’s sex parties or his prosecution for hiring underage prostitutes or his privately owned media conglomeration that he mobilized to get him elected, the age of Berlusconi was riddled with seemingly impossible truths. Moreover, Italy’s increasingly outlandish and spectacular public and political culture unfolds almost entirely through media consumption (Molé 2013). The zombification of the population, in Grillo’s vision, results from citizens’ mutated knowledge processing and seemingly mutant true information. In a blogpost called “The New Monsters” he writes, “Italian information is decomposing. It’s like a journalism of new monsters that are eating our brains. [...] News is the triumph of unburied” (Grillo Blog, April 9, 2007). For Grillo, Italy is haunted by mass-produced false reality propagated through zombified news media, perhaps better conceived as ‘para’-news. Correcting how Italians process information is, at least for Grillo, a high-stakes political objective: people’s souls are at stake. The zombie figure, whether it is a person or a set of media institutions, becomes shorthand for a warning to citizens that reality is indeed stranger than fiction...
a smart politician cleverly proposing himself as a corrective to the status quo, the anti-Berlusconi; it is a masterful rhetorical move that redirects the cynical energy of a population for whom magical thinking, at least within Berlusconian Italy, has become standard political rationale.

**Conclusion: Enchanting the disenchanted**

Across Europe and the United States, we have seen politicians and political activists intertwine humor and satire as successful strategies (Klumbytė 2014; Haugerud 2012; Molé 2013). In an age of increasingly orchestrated and consolidated social and political messages, political satire has increasingly become the necessary weapons of political dissent (Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Baym and Jones 2012). Grillo’s satirical savvy means he plays both sides: he’ll scare up Italian zombies stories and then turn around and have a fat zombie with a Mohawk represent his political movement. Though Beppe Grillo may be critically recognized as a “louidspeaker and amplifier of public protest,” his humor and playful narratives are actually about confirming a collective hunch that the normal seems to have become the para-normal – the next to, near, but certainly not the entirely normal (Biorcio and Natale 2013, 16). Grillo’s specters make visible Italy’s spectaculars: the corruption and corrosion of mediatized politics, and especially, the deceptive deformities of information society.

**References**


On May 15, 2011, protest marches called by the Democracia Real Ya [Real Democracy Now] digital platform with the slogan “We are not products in the hands of politicians and bankers” managed to draw tens of thousands of people all over Spain. In Madrid some of the protesters decided to continue the march with a ‘reclaim the streets’ type activity, blocking traffic in the center of the city with a sit-down protest. After confrontations with police, which led to some arrests, a group of about 40 people remained at the Puerta del Sol in order to, among other reasons, “support the detainees and continue with the demonstrations”. From this meeting there arose an assembly “with the main idea of creating and maintaining a permanent camp” (Romanos 2013a).

The media have stressed the element of indignation and this is how the movement that emerged from the camps in Madrid and other Spanish cities has become known internationally, the indignados. The label makes reference to the book Indignez-vous! (Time for Outrage!) by Stéphane Hessel, a writer, diplomat, and concentration camp survivor, who in his book invites readers to recapture the wartime spirit of resistance to the Nazis by rejecting the power of money and markets and by defending values of modern democracy. The media identified
the book as a main source of inspiration for the Spanish protests. The activists, however, prefer to call themselves the 15M movement in honor of the date that was the starting gun for the movement. Indignation is, without a doubt, a central emotion in the Spanish movement. But anyone who visited the Puerta del Sol in Madrid or any of the other public spaces occupied by the Spanish indignados movement since May 2011 might have asked the same question: If the indignados are so angry, why are they laughing so much? They even laughed at themselves. Indeed, this seems to be one of the movement’s paradoxes, the combination of indignation directed at the ‘politicians and bankers’ combined with amusing actions and protests.

Humor and indignation

Numerous participants in the protests organized by the 15M movement in the months following May 2011 brought humorous placards they had written at home, while others designed them during the course of the demonstrations. During some protests, there were spaces arranged for creating humorous placards. Some activists organized workshops specifically for the development of collective creativity in the producing of individual or collective banners, in particular for large demonstrations. These workshops were held in public squares or the social centers that have served as meeting places and provided various resources for the indignados movement (see Romanos 2013a). Many placards and banners contained humorous messages, which subverted already familiar texts including poems, advertising slogans, film and song titles, public statements, and the language of signs in public spaces (see Minchinela 2011). For example, “Tu banco, y cada día el de más gente” [Your bank and the bank of more people every day] presents a play on words based on the fact that ‘bank’ and ‘park bench’ are represented by the same word in Spanish. The slogan belongs to an advertisement for a business in the financial sector. The activists altered the advertisement – in this case without having to change its wording, just its location, by placing it on a park bench – to condemn the high cost of housing and the growing number of evictions of people unable to pay their mortgages.

In a humorous form, the placard “Tu banco, y cada día el de más gente” spoke about very serious issues. Every 15 minutes, a family is evicted from their home in Spain because they are unable to meet their mortgage payments; there were 30,034 family home evictions in 2012. The source for this data is the latest Land Registry report, the most reliable source of information given the absence of official statistics that specifically deal with evictions. Similar figures are expected for 2013. This is occurring in a context in which there are 3.4 million homes vacant in Spain (Romanos 2013b). Throughout the past decade, the equivalent of a new home for every newborn person in the country has been constructed. The so-called property bubble and the economic model based on it have aggravated the global economic crisis in Spain, producing an unemployment rate of 27 percent (57 percent among the young) and a poverty rate of 21 percent. This is the context in which a new social movement has managed to mobilize a lot of people against the evictions, attract broad social support, and constitute a continuing challenge to the state (Romanos 2013b).

Creative humorous engagements extended to ironic performances, organized by specific groups. In Madrid, perhaps the most important among these groups was the Grupo de Teatro 15 de Mayo [Theater Group May 15], which organized two particularly noteworthy performances in late May and June 2011: the ‘funeral of democracy’ and the ‘aerobics assembly’. The ‘funeral of democracy’ – a standard performance among social movements – consisted of a funeral procession led by activists dressed up as priests and, behind them, a coffin containing democracy and a group that mourned its death. In Madrid, the procession had several stops where ironic prayers were said in the name of the rights and freedoms lost. The false priests tried to continue to look serious, while those in the procession worked themselves into paroxysms of exaggerated grief. The group performed the ‘funeral’ in Madrid on May 27, 2011, the day of heavy police repression of the indignados in Barcelona –
an event which triggered the immediate solidarity of those participating in other occupied squares throughout Spain – and on June 11, 2011, the day of the swearing in of the newly elected right-wing Mayor of Madrid – an event which caused fierce clashes between activists and the police.

The ‘aerobics assembly’ took place before the 15M general assembly at Puerta del Sol, when the camp was still present (it broke up on June 12, 2011) and the assemblies were massive. A group of activists dressed up in tacky gym clothes took over the assembly and, after performing a series of exercises to practice the various gestures used in the assembly, developed a ridiculous argument about, for example, how to reform one of their kitchens. The ‘aerobics’ arose from the internal conflicts generated in the camp about the decision to abandon or maintain it. The performance mocked the problems associated with the assembly, e.g., the continual blockages in decision-making, and the endless debates about the internal structure of the movement and the taking of decisions at its heart. It also had a didactic function: the performance showed how a consensus could be arrived at that would include elements of all the proposals made by participants.

Humorous performances served to cool tempers during moments of great stress caused by the intervention of the police, as in the ‘funeral of democracy’, or it mediated internal disagreements, as in ‘aerobics assembly’. Both performances also served to facilitate emotional union within the 15M group, return the movement its lost creativity, and attract media attention, as the activists themselves recognize in their documents (Romanos 2013a). According to Meyer (2000), one of the most important functions of humor in communication is the identification between the communicator and the audience, enhancing speaker credibility and building group cohesiveness. In the 15M movement the identification function was consciously tackled and strengthened in performances in which the members of the group laughed at themselves through the exaggeration of a situation or a behavior to the point of ridiculousness (e.g., the continual blockages in the taking of decisions and the endless discussions). Spectators recognized themselves in the situation or behavior portrayed, which strengthened their capacity for self-criticism.

Humorous activism

Humor is present in 15M internal documents. One of the most notable cases comes from the documents produced by the World Extension Team (WET) of Acampadasol [the camp in Puerta del Sol, Madrid]. This commission was set up during the first days of the camp with the objective of disseminating and coordinating the indignados movement at the international level. On August 17, 2011, the commission launched the Proyecto Acta [Minutes Project], an initiative to draw up the minutes of the commission’s meetings.
in a fun way, as if they were a tale incorporating elements of what was going on around them. In general, the names of the participants in the assemblies were substituted for pseudonyms that, in addition to preserving their identity, served to create ‘characters’ in the story.

With Proyecto Acta, the members of the group consciously sought to use another ‘language’ that would in some way contribute to lowering the costs of activism related to fatigue. For four months the initiative allowed other members of the group and other participants in the movement to read the minutes with greater interest. The use of humor in the writing of the minutes helped members of the group get involved in one of the most boring tasks connected to the minutes, that is, writing them. The use of this ‘language’ contributed to making a game of what at the start would have been seen as a form of work. Thus, the entertainment associated with the game proved useful for group development and the maintaining of organized efforts (see Shepard 2011).

Proyecto Acta also helped to lower tensions in the WET commission by providing an opportunity to communicate possible critiques and dissatisfaction in a less conflicting way. Humor is a form of communication that is particularly useful in situations “in which a more serious and direct mode runs the risk of being too confrontational, potentially embarrassing, or otherwise risky” (Martin 2007, 17). It is not only about lowering tensions, such as in the case of ironic performances mentioned above, but also about communicating a criticism without the level of tension rising as a result. In the WET commission one of the sources of tension was, for example, a lack of punctuality.

Finally, Proyecto Acta served to reinforce the internal cohesion of the commission through jokes that made use of codes shared among its members. These codes were sometimes used to ridicule the actions or position of rival external actors (e.g., the police) and, surely more importantly, of groups within the movement with which members of WET had disagreements. According to Meyer, “people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them” (Meyer 2000, 314). By clarifying the identity of those who are different and hostile, and clarifying what makes them different and hostile (often the subject of mockery), group members in turn strengthen their collective identity and promote internal cohesion. Obviously, the cost of this form of humor is the distancing of those not related to the group. This is one of the most visible contradictory interpersonal functions of humor: it improves social cohesion but excludes individuals from outside the group.

**Culture jammers**

‘Culture jamming’ refers to a symbolic strategy by way of which anti-corporate activists make use of diverse artistic techniques (e.g., appropriation, collage, ironic inversion, juxtaposition) to change the original discourse of corporate advertising by altering corporate symbols (logos, slogans, etc.) visually and thus giving them a new meaning. Among the most common of these tactics are billboard pirating, physical and virtual graffiti, and website alteration (Juris 2008). The Spanish indignados relied on the so-called ‘creatives’ and ‘radical community managers’ – professionals who do not situate themselves outside of the movement but rather form part of it, in some cases playing a central and active role. The term ‘creative’ refers to all those designers, illustrators, and other professionals or experts in advertising and the visual arts, who have put their expertise at the service of the movement. For their part, the radical community managers have applied their skills in promoting online content to disseminate the messages and images of the creatives while contributing other techniques brought in from culture jamming. For example, they created false Twitter accounts that supplanted the identities of certain people and ridiculed the behavior of the police and the authorities.

The Twitter account @acampadapolicia [@policecamp] was created on August 2, 2011, after the police cleared the Puerta del Sol of demonstrators, closed off access to the square, and used violence against those trying to get in. Some activists started to tweet “as if the police
were encamped in the center of the square, with their problems, their celebrations, their demands and necessities.” This account received a rapid and positive response. Among the objectives of the account recognized by one of its creators was to counteract the rigidity suffered by the movement. The conscious search for greater resonance was another of the motivations that led this ‘radical community manager’ to participate in the account’s creation (Grueso 2011). The fake Twitter account can be seen as a form of the ‘identity correction’ technique and as a form of parody, used by other culture jammers, such as the Yes Men, who “impersonate corporate and government spokespeople so as to expose their ‘true’ character and thereby spread anti-capitalist messages” (Firat and Kuryel 2010, 10).

Conclusions

The use of humor helped the Spanish indignados to achieve a series of objectives, namely: i) to identify problems within and outside the movement and draw the attention of its participants – actual and potential – to them; ii) to cool tempers during moments of great stress; iii) to cause onlookers to identify with the demands of the movement; iv) to lower the costs of activism related to fatigue; v) to communicate possible internal anger and criticism in a less dramatic and conflictual way; vi) to reinforce internal cohesion; and vii) to ridicule opponents. The Spanish indignados used humor in organizing workshops to promote imaginative and ironic messages on placards; organizing performances to explicitly seek an emotional connection to the public; developing specific humor-driven initiatives within the committees; and advertising and distributing their messages on Internet.

Humor has remained present in the actions of the Spanish indignados in spite of the relative decline suffered by the movement in terms of participation and social support since May 2011. Many Spanish indignados have no problem in acknowledging that they are participating in a
movement that is provisional and in a permanent state of construction. The recognition of shared insecurities and ambivalences through humor may be yet another element that differentiates the current movement from previous, more ‘serious’ ones. If, as claimed by Flesher Fominaya (2007), the recognition of humor’s potential for subversion in political activism was a relatively new concept in Spanish movement circles in the early 2000s, what we have learned from our study of the 15M movement leads us to think that this is no longer the case. There is no doubt that the activists’ ability to use humor in organizing and coordinating protests with a high level of media impact contributed decisively to the success of the demonstrations on May 15, 2011, and that of the social movement that grew out of it (Romanos 2013a). Although consideration of this point falls beyond the scope of this article, it may not be excessive to think that perception of a supposed rupture with ‘typical’ protests of the past may have facilitated the participation of people with no history or no recent history of activism in the new movement.

References


For a country of 320,000 people, Iceland has been a surprisingly routine presence in international news cycles over the past five years. First, in the early weeks of the global financial crisis of 2008, Iceland suffered, relative to the size of its economy, the largest banking collapse in world history. Deregulation of the Icelandic banking industry in the early 2000s had created enormous incentives, as elsewhere in the world, for banks to reinvent themselves as speculative, entrepreneurial enterprises. Overheated international investment followed, inflating the banking sector and domestic lending, fueling in turn a consumer revolution that, for a few years, made Iceland one of the wealthiest countries per capita in the world. But Iceland’s three major private banks also ended up accumulating


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more than $85 billion of international debt by 2008, several times more than Iceland’s gross domestic product. When international credit markets dried up after the collapse of Lehman Brothers that September, the banks’ debt could no longer be serviced and all three failed and were nationalized, bringing Iceland’s Central Bank very nearly to the brink of bankruptcy. Foreign bank account holders, particularly in the United Kingdom, pressured their governments to force the return of their deposits. In less than two weeks, Icelandic sovereign debt was downgraded to junk status and the Icelandic kröna lost two thirds of its value; meanwhile, inflation and unemployment soared. With the Icelandic economy in collapse, in November the International Monetary Fund stepped in with a $4 billion stabilization package, ending the most intense phase of the crisis.

But the aftermath spilled over into 2009 as popular protests against those who had presided over the collapse increased. As anthropologist Hulda Proppé recalls, “In January 2009, the demonstrations reached a level of intense seriousness and a violent undertone could be felt. On January 21, [they] took a new twist. On that night the drumming of the pots, pans and drums could be heard loudly to my home, a 10 minute walk from the city center, and the light from the fire that had been made by setting the Christmas tree in the city center on fire, lit the sky blood red. For the first time in 60 years the Reykjavík police used tear gas to move demonstrators from the parliament building in order to try to gain control of the situation that had emerged” (Proppé n.d.). Prime Minister Geir Haarde, who had presided over the run-up to the financial crash, was driven from office less than a week later by what amounted to a popular revolution that anticipated and inspired both the Arab Spring and the global Occupy movement. Yet, protests in Reykjavík continued throughout the year as the succeeding government also sought to hold Icelandic citizens liable for part of the debt amassed by the failed banks. In the end, foreign creditors were forced to accept losses on the great majority of the banking debt, a most unusual solution for coping with the aftermath of 2008 (as we continue to see in today’s Eurozone crisis).

But this extraordinary commitment to prioritizing citizen interests over financiers’ interests is precisely what pushed Iceland into the international news again. Not only was Haarde arrested, tried, and convicted for his role in allowing the crisis conditions to build, but Iceland’s economic turnaround in 2011 and 2012 has convinced a number of economic policy analysts that the decision to allow its overinflated banking sector to collapse (as opposed, for example, to the ‘too big to fail’ policies of the United States and United Kingdom) and to protect citizens from the odious debt generated by its banking sector were among the key decisions that allowed Iceland to minimize the long-term negative impact of the crash. Indeed, economic pundits like Paul Krugman have routinely cited Iceland in debates over what to do with other failing European countries like Greece and Spain where creditor-friendly austerity policies are driving economies into recessionary ruin. Once an internationally recognized exemplar of the dangers of deregulated banking and excessive borrowing, just a few years later Iceland became an international symbol of resistance to the dominant wisdom of neo-liberal necessity. As I toured the occupation of Barcelona’s Plaça de Catalunya with a Brazilian journalist in May 2011, he pointed out to me that the camp had three sections named for its inspirations: Tunis, Tahrir, and Iceland.

But, the part of this story that is most closely related to the theme of this issue began to unfold

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1 January 21, 2009, is now known in Iceland as the culminating event of the ‘Pot and Pan Revolution’, so known because of the use of kitchenware to make noise during the protests of 2008–2009.

2 In all, more than 200 warrants were issued for banking and political leaders, including for the CEOs of the three failed banks. Many of these figures have fled Iceland.

3 Others included capital controls to stabilize the kröna and forcing banks to write down mortgage debt over 110 percent of a home’s value.

4 See, for example, Darvas, Zsolt. 2011. “A Tale of Three Countries: Recovery after Banking Crises.” Bruegel Policy Contribution 2011/19 (December).

a few years earlier in 2009. In the heart of the political unrest concerning public debt liability, an unexpected group of actors entered the Icelandic political sphere and found a public resonance for a particular mode of political performance that was, once again, unparalleled at that moment anywhere else in the world.

**Jón Gnarr and Besti flokkurinn**

In the fall of 2009, Iceland had four major political parties, the Social-Democratic Alliance, the Left-Green Party, the Independence Party, and the Progressive Party. What made the political discontent so severe was that the latter two parties represented the government that had deregulated the banking industry and allowed it to generate the massive debts in the first place, while the first two parties composed a new government trying to convince the public to accept debt liability in order to avoid international sanctions. There was a distinct feeling of betrayal among many citizens that the new government was slipping into the habits of its predecessor and a sense of the absence of meaningful political choice, at least when it came to the debt issue.

Things changed when a new party appeared in November 2009, Besti flokkurinn (‘Best Party’), that was immediately and widely derided as an amusing but otherwise inconsequential ‘joke party’ by the Icelandic political elite. After all, critics smirked, the party’s supposed 10-point platform was composed of 13 points and included statements like “3. Stop corruption: We promise to stop corruption. We’ll accomplish this by participating in it openly.” and “10. Free access to swimming pools for everyone and free towels: This is something that everyone should fall for, and it’s the election promise we’re most proud of.” But the platform also notably included, “6. Cancel all debts: We listen to the nation and do as it wishes because the nation knows what's best for itself.” None of the Best Party candidates had any previous political experience, although some were familiar figures in the Icelandic music and arts scene, including the party’s founder and chief agent provocateur, Jón Gnarr, a well-known actor, writer, and stand-up comedian, Ottarr Proppé, a founding member of the influential rock band, HAM, and Einar Örn from the Sugarcubes. Proppé confirmed to me in an interview in Reykjavik in December 2011 that the original impetus to form the Best Party had come from Gnarr, who was calling old friends and associates to express his dismay with the state of politics in the country. “I had absolutely no interest in politics myself,” Proppé told me, “but I knew Jón and I knew that he was the kind of guy who would see this through.”

Soon Gnarr was running for mayor of Reykjavik, with elections scheduled for May 2010. The Best Party’s platform proved to be remarkably resonant despite, or perhaps because of, the Icelandic political and media establishments’ refusal to take it seriously. It did not hurt that Gnarr also proved to be a magnetic and often hilarious public speaker. In campaign debates, one could see opponents spontaneously laughing along with him as he oscillated between the absurdist talking points of the Best Party platform and reassurance that he was absolutely sincere and serious in his efforts to change Iceland for the better. Heida Helgasdottir, Gnarr’s campaign manager and the Best Party’s only salaried employee, told me that she thought Gnarr’s background had been essential to his campaign success: “Jón has a terrific sense of timing that he developed from his work in comedy. And politics, you know, is also about timing.”

As the Best Party rose in the polls in the early months of 2010, Gnarr attracted more and more news media attention. The fact that the Best Party promised to refuse to coalition with any party that had not watched all five seasons of HBO’s *The Wire* drew significant commentary.7 News reports also pored over the details of Gnarr’s life: He had never completed secondary school, he was a juvenile delinquent, punker, anarchist, and the son of a communist policeman; his wife was pop singer Björk’s best friend. These nuggets were not often the result of investigative journalism, however, as

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6 <http://bestiflokkurinn.is/um-flokkinn/stefnumal>.

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Gnarr himself was usually the one feeding the news media, seemingly delegitimating information about himself. In one interview he said, “I have always been a rather shocking character, ever since I was a kid. It has always been part of my personality, to shock. As a four-year-old, I used to go up to people on the bus and ask if they had been fucking. ‘Are you always fucking?’ I’d ask, and my mother would have to rush me out.” It’s clear that pundits were not quite sure what to make of Gnarr’s political campaign. Was it just another shocking prank? If he was sincere, why did he seem unable to remain serious? Most of the news reporting both inside and outside Iceland concluded that the Best Party and its popular support was little more than a protest action against a political system that had failed its population in a spectacular fashion. In other words, there was no positive content to the Best Party; it was simply a caricature of a political system that had already made itself a laughing stock. Gnarr certainly did not deny his frustration with mainstream Icelandic politics. In an interview he gave to an English-language Icelandic news service in May 2010, he described the Best Party as an effort to provoke a ‘cultural revolution’ in Iceland. Gnarr explained, “Political discourse is all dead and vapid. I’ve never been interested in governance or politics … I’ve listened to all the empty political discourse, but it’s never touched me at all or moved me, until the economic collapse. Then I just felt I’d had enough of those people. ... I started reading the local news websites and watching the news and political talk shows – and it filled me with so much frustration. ... So I wanted to do something, to fuck the system.”

To change it around and impact it in some way.”

But the argument that support for the Best Party was simply a prank or even protest voting misses the fact that what characterized the Best Party’s political performativity was a principled refusal to choose between being either parodic or sincere. In the party’s view, it was always both. Gnarr never modified the position that he was not joking, that his political positions, however absurd, were utterly genuine. He explained that his political convictions always moved between anarchism and surrealism, trying to combine “the best bits” of both. He saw himself on the Left, except that he could not tolerate left-wing moralization and hegemony: “What’s it to me if someone wants to spend their time in strip clubs or smoking crack or surfing the web for pornography?” In the same interview quoted above, he said that what he disliked most was the effort to categorize the Best Party in one way or another: “Yes, categorization. I am against that. We are such a clever species of animal, we love defining everything. I like depriving people of that sense of wellbeing they derive from that – any sense of wellbeing really – and make them feel uncomfortable. Not that I want to hurt anyone. I just hate being categorized, placed in a shelf. That’s one of the things I am enjoying about Besti flokkurinn.”

The constitutive ambiguity between parody and sincerity is exemplified by what was perhaps the most effective tactic of the Best Party campaign, the production of a campaign video that appeared to both imitate and satirize the traditional aesthetics and tropes of political campaign videos. Set to the tune of Tina Turner’s “Simply the Best,” the video cuts alternate between candidate Gnarr touring the city and making campaign stops, listening earnestly to concerned citizens, even kissing a baby, and studio shots of members of the Best Party putting their philosophy to song (e.g., “We are the Best, the Bestest of Parties” and “Tell
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the squatters in charge that it’s time to leave, the blathering loons should be given a home in the city zoo.”). The video culminates in a campaign speech by Gnarr, standing alone on the top of a building that overlooks Reykjavík, gesturing wildly, and speaking apparently to no one and to everyone below him:

“Fellow citizens, the time has come for everyone in Reykjavík to look inside their hearts, to discuss with their family and friends: Do I want a bright future with the Best Party? Or do I want Reykjavík destroyed? Free towels in all the swimming pools! A polar bear for the Reykjavík zoo! ... Disneyland in the Vatnsmyri area! A drug-free parliament by 2020! ... Do away with all debt! Economize, we only need one Santa! And, and, we will not accept the mediocre! We want the Best!”

The video, released on YouTube, was instantly impactful, and eventually received hundreds of thousands of views in Iceland and beyond.9 On the face of it, it is a fun, smart satire. But, over time, in a variety of other speaking engagements, it became evident that some of the more curious elements of the Best Party’s platform sought to address (or at least to reference) significant social, political, and environmental issues facing Iceland and the world. The polar bear for the zoo addressed, for example, climate change and the current Icelandic policy to shoot polar bears that swam to shore to avoid melting ice farther north. The free towels at swimming pools aimed at attracting greater European tourism, obliquely invoking an obscure European Union regulation that, for a pool to be classified as a ‘spa’, free towels had to be provided. The drug-free parliament referenced an extended rhetorical analogy Gnarr filled out later that the relationship of Icelandic political culture to the nation was one of a substance-abusing father to his injured yet enabling family.10 But these evidently sincere political messages were cloaked, almost unrecognizably, in the parodic displacements of the video and campaign platform. Once again, it

9 I highly recommend watching the video yourself: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxBW4mpPzw6E>.
10 <http://grapevine.is/Author/ReadArticle/Mayor-Compares-Nation-to-Alcoholic-Family>.
was not quite the case that sincere politics was hidden inside a satirical shell. The mode of political performance simply denied a categorical distinction between satire and sincerity.

Besti flokkurinn won the municipal elections in Reykjavík on May 30, 2010, with 34.7 percent of the popular vote, gaining 6 of 15 seats on the city council, only 2 short of an absolute majority in Iceland’s capital. With 83 percent of Reykjavík’s registered voters (nearly a third of Iceland’s total voting population) going to the polls, this was an event of national political significance in Iceland. Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir described the Best Party’s victory as a shock and perhaps the “beginning of the end” of Iceland’s four-party system. Gnarr’s first several months as mayor then offered more shocks, further confounding observers at home and abroad as to his political sincerity. His frequent invocation of the wisdom of a classic Finnish comic book series, the Moomin elves, caused opposition politicians to roll their eyes or to stare at him uncomprehendingly. His mayoral welcome address to the Iceland Airwaves music festival in August 2010 was a brilliantly surreal piece of governmental discourse, beginning with the scientific improbability of anyone being in Reykjavík, followed by a discussion of Schrödinger’s cat and the reality of existence, a report on his ongoing conversations with elves and trolls and their advice that Iceland would do well to join the European Union. Also in August 2010, Gnarr led Reykjavík’s gay pride parade in full drag, complaining that the real Jón Gnarr hadn’t shown up as promised, accusing him of probably talking to elves and concluding, “This is what we get for voting for a clown in elections.”

Gnarr avows that there is a method, of sorts, to all this. He says he frequently plays upon his apparent unsuitability for political office in serious times as a method of attracting media attention to the party and its positive work: “I like appearing as a simpleton, like when I gave a speech at the University of Reykjavík and shouted that I had risen from the ashes like the bird Felix. I was just waiting for some blogger type to correct me on that. That gets the party press and exposure, and as soon as they do, I can stand aside, laugh and let the facts or essence of what I was saying do the talking.” And he has shown time and again that it remains possible, even as mayor, to infuse political performance with effects other than earnestness. Indeed, if what has come to be known in Iceland as ‘Gnarrism’ contains an ideology, it is not a set of policies or positions but rather a kind of affective disposition, one that distinguishes itself in its humility and playfulness from the self-satisfied professional austerity of normal politics. Proppé, then a city councilor, told me that the hardest thing about the transition from campaign to government was how to maintain a “sense of naïveté”: “Before meetings, we give each other hugs and kisses. That’s something we do to maintain our spirit. … I think it’s very important that we maintain our humility, that we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Because that is opposed to how politics is normally practiced.”

Gnarr confirmed this in his first presentation of a city budget in December 2010. Faced with the very earnest situation of having to cut municipal services, he took a humble, apologetic, strangely honest position:

“What kind of party is the Best Party? I don’t really know. We are not a proper political party. We are maybe more of a self-help organization, like Alcoholics Anonymous. We try to take one day at a time, to not overreach our boundaries and to maintain joy, humility and positive thinking. ... Our motto is: humanity, culture and peace. We do not foster any other ideals or political visions. We do not share a predetermined, mutual ideology. We are neither left nor right. We are both. We don’t even think it matters. ... We often say that we aren’t doing what we want to do, but what needs to be done.


12 <www.grapevine.is/Features/ReadArticle/Feature-What-Are-You-Voting-For-Reykjavik>.
“We simply try to work as well as our conscience permits. And it is work, often very hard work. These are troubled times. Our society collapsed, and we are still dealing with the consequences. We need to make cutbacks for the third [successive] year … We are forced to reduce services, and increase the burdens of some. This is not a fun position to be in. Sometimes we have to choose the lesser of two evils. Is it better to deprive children than the elderly?

“This budget contains many propositions that I would be happy to be rid of. But this is our situation. My hope is that we can achieve solidarity about these propositions, not just us elected officials but also all of us that inhabit this city – its employees and inhabitants. We can do this if we do this together.

“We have so much. We have this wonderful country and all the opportunity it offers. And we have one another, to rejoice with and to comfort. We need not be sad. We can laugh, have fun and tell jokes. We can dress up and stage events to pass the time. Smiling is free. We are still OK. Christmas is on the horizon, and then the sun will return. The future is bright and filled with possibility.”

Rather than playing to affects of anger or fear, the affective ideology of Gnarrism emphasizes hope, laughter, and play. At the more obviously earnest pole of Besti flokkurinn politics have been some very interesting experiments in direct participatory democracy, including an official partnership with a non-profit organization, the Citizens Foundation, which has a website, Better Reykjavik (<http://betrireykjavik.is/>) that allows citizens to recommend and vote on municipal budget priorities. Following the model of Porto Alegre in Brazil, the Best Party set aside funds for participatory budgeting on neighborhood priorities. At the other pole, as Gnarr says, “We are the only species that laughs, so why should our politics not reflect this?”

Gnarr and Besti flokkurinn extensively utilize the social networking medium Facebook as a method of remaining in contact with citizens concerning political issues. Gnarr often also posts links he finds interesting and also home videos, including a Christmas address in which he appears in a Darth Vader helmet topped by a red Santa hat. Another repost suggests an ideological kinship for Besti flokkurinn in Gnarr’s link to <http://thefuntheory.com>, a website dedicated “to the thought that something as simple as fun is the easiest way to change people’s behaviour for the better.” And, yet, Helgasdottir told me that being mayor was less than fun for Gnarr himself.

**Bright future**

When I met Gnarr for the first time in Chicago in July 2013 (accompanying his wife and Björk on tour) he struck me as both utterly modest about his accomplishments and thoroughly exhausted with political life. What he liked most about being mayor, he said, was being able to meet so many interesting people from around the world. But he had never become used to the viciousness of politics, “where one moment you are having a normal conversation with someone and the next they are saying such terrible things about you.” Showing me the tattoo of Reykjavík’s flag now inked on his forearm, he hinted strongly that he would not run for a second term.

In anticipation of the Icelandic parliamentary elections of 2013, in early 2012 the Best Party contributed significantly in terms of ideas, persons, and initials to the formation of a new national party,
Björt Framtíð (Bright Future), which aimed to move experimental political interventions to a national stage. Unfortunately, Bright Future did not fare as well as the Best Party, perhaps in part because it campaigned in a more traditional way with a more literal political message and in part because the 2013 election became a referendum on whether or not Iceland should seek to join the Eurozone. Bright Future took a pro-Euro stance and won only 8.25 percent of the national vote. Meanwhile, the Euroskeptical Progressive and Independence parties (the very coalition that governed over the run-up to the banking collapse) won just more than 50 percent of the vote in a major victory for the Icelandic political establishment. Gnarr was clearly upset. “Shit! Democracy? No, anarchy!” he instant-messaged me the morning after the elections. It was not that he was without ambivalence about Bright Future (“My support for it is mostly moral as many of my friends are involved … Bright Future is totally different from the Best party. It is a political party but the Best is more of a state of mind. [Bright Future] is more of a typical liberal democratic party.”), but he saw the center-right coalition as deeply dangerous to Iceland with its nationalism, media manipulation, and interest in attracting more aluminum smelters to capitalize upon Iceland’s wealth of geothermal energy.

Gnarr and the rest of the Best Party were a little coy throughout the Fall of 2013 as to whether they would seek re-election in 2014. Their popularity remained high in Reykjavík. Polls taken in October suggested that Besti flokkurinn would receive 37 percent of the vote, a few points better than they had done in 2010. Then on October 31st, on a radio program to raise money for breast cancer research, Gnarr announced that the Best Party was disbanding and would not take part in the upcoming election. “If I were to do it again, I would have to become a politician and I’m not one. … My whole life I’ve been a comedian, an artist, and I get a lot out of making people happy.” Politics, meanwhile, he likened to being “in a reading group where people only discuss sentences and never the story.” Like many others who had found themselves inspired by the Best Party, I marveled at when, in the history of western liberal democracy, a party in power and leading in the polls has simply opted to cease to exist. On the other hand, I thought to myself, how else could this have ended but with some surreal twist?

When Gnarr posted the news about his resignation on his English-language Facebook page, the international outpouring of warmth and thanks was truly touching. Within a few minutes hundreds of replies were posted, most expressing sadness and thanks for having made politics something other than the business of “solemn men and women in suits.” There were a few invitations to bring the Best Party to Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Mexico, the Philippines, Romania, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The most important thing about the Best Party, Gnarr told me in Chicago, “was to show that regular citizens could take over politics and that nothing bad would happen.” Perhaps that idea, even more so than its fusion of political parody and sincerity, will become the greatest legacy of the Best Party. Whatever comes next, it is clear that the work of Gnarr and his colleagues has been no ‘joke’, but instead a serious and seriously playful effort to constitute a different politics.
Joking about the Violent Past: Humor, Memory, and Narrative in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina

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The Balkans is a region notorious for being populated by people with a dark, biting, and witty sense of humor; this was one of the reasons I fell in love with it when I first visited as a tourist in 2001. It therefore did not surprise me to laugh so often during the oral history interviews that I conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2005 and 2006, even amidst discussions of some of the most painful moments of my interviewees’ lives. We talked about World War II, the Croatian and Bosnian Wars, and many other difficult memories, and yet many interviews were peppered with jokes, many of them deeply ironic or sarcastic. Nevertheless, it took me several years of listening and writing about these interviews to realize that humor meant something beyond the fact that I was lucky to know some exceptionally funny people. It was a way of speaking about the Bosnian past and present, and as a narrative form, one that could communicate subversively about a difficult past sometimes better than a literal recounting of experience would. And so I began to listen to the jokes I had heard a thousand times already with a new sense of purpose.¹

¹ I published a piece on humor in Bosnian War narratives and art in Memory Studies in 2013. This essay draws largely on the research conducted for that article.

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One of the most often-cited explanations of what oral history aims to accomplish as a methodology comes from the essay “What Makes Oral History Different?”, which initially appeared in Alessandro Portelli’s seminal book, The Death of Luigi Trastulli: Form and Meaning in Oral History (1991). Taking on concerns that it is difficult to evaluate the veracity of events described in an interview, Portelli points out that the subjective and sometimes unreliable nature of memory is precisely what is so interesting to study. He says, “The first thing that makes oral history different, therefore, is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning…. Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (1998, 67).

Indeed, an inquiry into subjective experiences of political turmoil and atrocity was precisely what drew me to conduct oral histories in northwest Bosnia-Herzegovina. If remembering the past does not consist of a straightforward retelling of events, then what does that mean for how societies, governments and organizations instrumentalize – that is, make use of, usually for political purposes – that memory? This question is important not only for initiatives to make peace with a troubled past, such as tribunals, truth commissions, and commemorative projects, but also for governments and national groups that have used memories of violence as a way of promoting divisive nationalist narratives and identities. Both tendencies have been influential in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past few decades. During the Yugoslav period, the memory of World War II was sanitized to promote an account of the war in which all Yugoslavs banned together and resisted the evils of fascism together. This was an integral part of the Titoist mythology that prioritized the creation of a coherent Yugoslav identity as a means of unifying the country’s constituent regions and peoples. Following Tito’s death in 1980, historical memory of violence, particularly that of World War II, was revived as a major tool for constructing nationalist identities and making a case for war in the 1980s and 1990s (Banac 1995; Djordjevich 2003; Ramet 2005), and these narratives have persisted since the wars that dissolved the Yugoslav state. The models that have existed for talking about the violent past during the past century in Yugoslavia therefore waver between the extremes of a sanitized, but harmonious national narrative that explicitly unifies all the constituent Yugoslav ethnicities, and several conflicting, ethnic nationalist narratives that create friction and promote division.

In the post-war context, memory of ‘what happened’ remains divided among ethnic lines; Serbian, Bosniak and Croat politicians, interest groups, and other public organizations all promote narratives of their own histories that serve to construct the legitimacy of their ethnic identities and national claims. At the same time, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), beyond its judicial mandate, has been seen as the international arbiter of what happened in the wars of the 1990s, its process creating an official memory of the violence. Considering the use and abuse of memory in recent Yugoslav history, scholars of transitional justice have argued that Bosnia-Herzegovina and other ex-Yugoslav states necessitate a body such as a truth commission, to find productive ways of speaking about the violent past that do not feed nefarious ambitions (Gisvold 1998; Minow 1999). The question is how, when memory has previously been used to stoke ethnic difference and to promote violence, it could then be transformed into a tool for peace. It is important to note that scholars such as Robert Hayden (2007) have been very critical of the tendency to impose a prescriptive Western understanding of what it means for a place like Bosnia-Herzegovina to reconstruct and reconcile, and have called on us to try to understand, more closely, how reconstruction and moving forward are understood by communities on the ground. Are truth commissions, necessitating an open discussion about the violent past, the only way to right historical wrongs?

Where does humor fit into this weighty context of the uses and abuses of memory? Portelli has devoted much of his writing on oral history to convince us not only that we should be studying meaning rather than fact, but also that the way to
do so must involve studying form as much as content. If remembering is complex and does not relate directly back to the event in question, then our ways of expressing it will be too. They may involve omissions, repetitions, myths, nostalgia, and song, among other ways of speaking about the past. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, it involved many such narrative strategies, as well as a way of speaking that has been largely neglected in discussions of oral history and post-conflict memory: humor. That humor took various forms: dark jokes about wartime experiences; recollections of ‘funny’ moments from the war; sarcastic and ironic comments about both past and present politics; and absurdism that highlighted the ridiculous nature of what had happened, and the difficulty of gleaning meaning from it.

While humor has been subject to much philosophical inquiry for hundreds of years, intriguing such notable thinkers as Descartes (Farb 1981) and Kant (1951), Freud was among the first to take humor seriously as a mode of expression worthy of profound study. In “Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious” (1938), he spends nearly 200 pages laying out every type of wit possible, and how each affects both the speaker and the listener. He connects wit to dreams, seeing it as another way of interpreting and parsing reality. Like dreams, wit is subversively structured and allows for expressions of the taboo, making it another means of exploring the subconscious. More recent scholars have recognized the subversive and expressive potential of humor and looked at how it relates to times of political instability and violent conflict (Payne 2005; Scott 1990). Where Freud was interested in how wit could express taboo emotions and ideas within an individual, contemporary researchers are keen to see how it facilitates expression about what is, or was previously, taboo within a society. In writing about memory in post-authoritarian societies, Leigh Payne has argued that humor allows for bottom-up expression in places where there had been very little space for individual voices to express themselves politically. She refers to humor as “a way of making trouble, doing politics, by other means: an alternative form of truth-telling” (72). Similarly, James Scott has argued that humor is one of many means used to communicate and organize hidden resistance among oppressed peoples (1990). Holocaust scholars have also begun to explore humor as a means for survivor and community expression of seemingly incommunicable experiences (Lipman 1993; Rosen 2004; Gilman 2003). What is clear from theoretical, sociological, and historical studies of humor, particularly within difficult political contexts, is that it offers a way of speaking about troubled or taboo events and experiences, opening up new spaces for discourse. What is not clear, however, is what this means politically. While the premise that humor says something real and incisive about a community’s experience is unlikely to be controversial, what one then does with this non-literal way of speaking about a troubled past remains to be seen. How seriously do we take humor? Do we start telling jokes at commemoration events or within international criminal tribunals?

My own research in Bosnia-Herzegovina sought to understand how individuals reconciled their own memories of war in twentieth-century Bosnia with the larger mnemonic forces at play, as described briefly above. The frequent presence of humor in my interviews was therefore significant. While humor is able to do a great many things, in this paper I would like to focus on three ways it was used in my interviews in Bosnia, in particular: First, it allowed people to express counter-narratives of the recent past that resisted manipulation by nationalists and politicians, and thus felt less dangerous to express. Second, it highlighted topics like community and cooperation that challenged international perceptions of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a backwards and violent place, as presented in widespread understandings of the war. Third, it critiqued dominant narratives and highlighted the absurdity of the war and of contemporary politics. Below, I will use interview excerpts to briefly demonstrate and discuss each of these three tendencies. Regarding the former, in a region where

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2 It is important to note that theorists of humour are very particular about their choice of vocabulary, making distinctions between wit, jokes, comedy, etc. It is not within the scope of this piece to explore such definitions, and so I generally use ‘humor’ as a catch-all term here.
memory of violence has been so instrumentalized by nationalist politicians, and where, previously, a Titoist national mythology of Yugoslav cooperation made for relatively smooth day-to-day living, my interviewees were skeptical of the project of speaking openly about the past. Remembering the war earnestly could never be politically neutral; my interviewees saw open discussion of their experiences of inter-ethnic violence as something that could only lead to further division. Making jokes about what had happened was less dangerous. Alen,\(^3\) for example, told me:

> We have these sayings that we say about each other, what all of our weaknesses are, I guess. So we will say things like that Montenegrins are lazy, and there is a joke: How do you hide something from a Montenegrin? Put it under a shovel. In the same way, Bosnians are stupid. How do you hide something from a Bosnian? Put it in a book. These are old jokes that we all make about each other, we are just joking, but you know, when I look at how this happened to us, we were so naive, we allowed ourselves to be slaughtered like this because we did not believe it could happen, I wonder ... I think maybe these jokes are really a little bit true. I think maybe we are a little bit stupid, that’s how all of this happened (Alen, 2006).

Much has been written about Bosniak victimhood and complicity within the war, but I found many of my Bosniak interviewees reluctant to either declare themselves as victims or as proud soldiers. They were wary of allegiances to identities that implied a particular political narrative. Instead, I heard jokes like the one above, in which victimhood turned into stupidity, which evades political categorization. Alen did not paint himself as the long-suffering noble victim, but rather as one unworthy of pity or admiration. This discussion of ethnic belonging and difference spoke to a deep sense of mourning and shame about how this could have happened, but it resisted instrumentalization; you could not easily transform this way of seeing Bosniak suffering into political propaganda.

On a similar note of resisting dominant ways of categorizing people’s roles in the war and what it was about, interviewees also suggested that humor was not only a way of communicating their experiences to me, but also, with one another. Alma told me:

> I guess there were some really bad things like the shelling and being in constant fear, not sleeping in the night ... but also there were some good things and some feelings, some sense of security when you are with other people in the same position, when people help each other, and stuff like that. Like funny things that happened, because we did not have electricity, so we had to do all sorts of stuff to watch television, like ... take out the accumulator [battery] from the car to plug it in to our own television ... A lot of very funny situations, but also horrible things that happened (Alma 2006).

The majority of my interviewees had spent much of the war under siege in Bihać, and they often explained that what they discussed the most, when recounting the war with one another, were these funny stories of ingenuity and clumsiness in the pursuit of day-to-day survival. These stories were told alongside, as Alma put it, a recollection of life under siege as something that involved a whole community being in the same lot together, and therefore helping each other out due to necessity. I was told stories of ridiculous exploits, songs, and jokes. Why focus on the positives of life under siege? This served not only to paint a more human picture of those years, but also to focus on community and cooperation, which most interviewees explained they felt had been lost after the war. The majority of my interviewees still openly identified as Titoists, and thus invoked Titoist values in their narratives, which included a strong sense of community cohesion and common struggle. Recounting the cooperative side of the war allowed them to express their values, as well as how they had

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\(^3\) All interviewee names are pseudonyms.
been lost in the post-war period. It shifted the conversation; humor demonstrated a psychological kind of resistance, rather than a physical one.

And finally, when attempting to discuss what the conflicts of the 1990s meant, interviewees turned to absurdist humor seemingly to communicate how pointless the violence had been, and how pointless the present post-war landscape had become. For example, Vanja told me:

“What was the war about? … You know the Eurovision song contest? In Yugoslavia we took the song contest very seriously. We love music here, we love Eurovision, but it is very, very difficult to win, especially when countries are making alliances with each other, voting is not fair. I think that Milošević and Karadžić and all these men … really they are great lovers of music, and they wanted to give Yugoslavia more chances to win the contest [as each country gets its own song entry]. Now we have so many entries in the contest … Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, soon even Montenegro, it is really a service that Milošević provided us, to be able to display our musical talents in so many different ways … This is a joke, a joke … but it is a better answer than the real answer, it is possible. It makes more sense (Vanja, 2006).

I heard many comments like Vanja’s that played on the absurdity of making sense of senseless violence: comments about how wonderfully they were able to lose weight thanks to the deprivation of the war; about how the most effective thing about the presence of peacekeepers was being able to improve one’s English; and about being jealous of the cushy residences of those indicted and transferred to the ICTY for trial, in which people reflected that committing war crimes allowed you a heated cell with three meals a day, counter to civilians who were now living in half-built unheated homes, struggling to feed entire families often on less than one income. In his work, Freud refers to a category of wit that he dubs ‘nonsense humor’, consisting of “advancing something apparently absurd or nonsensical which, however, discloses sense that serves to illustrate and represent some other actual absurdity and nonsense” (1938, 665). The playwright Luigi Pirandello says that humor shows that “the pretense of logic is much greater in us than real logical coherence” (1966, 50). In his review of the Sarajevo Survival Guide (1993), the satirical guidebook to Sarajevo under siege published by a collective of journalists during the war, Stephenson (1994) argues that “the guide does not rely so much on its gallows humor to score points, but on the cumulative effect of the whole absurd gesture. Sometimes, just the sheer honesty of a statement cuts through the gimmick with a force that leaves one with seemingly no conceivable response” (96).

That the most prevalent kind of humor I heard during my research in Bosnia-Herzegovina was absurd, or ‘nonsense’ can partly be attributed to the aesthetic tendencies of the region, but it was also incredibly effective in explaining the myriad ways in which post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, despite a transition to a market economy and democracy, has left the majority of its citizens worse off and disempowered. While scholars have argued for two decades now about exactly why Yugoslavia fell, my interviewees wanted to tell another story; it fell for no reason at all. Returning to Portelli’s invocation about the purpose of oral history, then, what is important here is not to determine the actual reason for the violence; rather, it is to understand why so many people interpret its meaning as a total lack of any meaning at all.

The use of humor, irony, and joking about
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war, violence, and its aftermath in Bosnia-Herzegovina complicates the pictures painted by nationalist politicians and those focused on purely ethnic accounts of the war. It allows people to talk about the war without aligning themselves directly with a particular political or ethnic group. In a region where memory has been so used for political ends, the ingenuity of using humor to resist the co-opting of one’s narrative to promote dominant discourses cannot be underemphasized. However, as I suggest above, the real challenge is asking what we can do with all of this. How do we understand non-literal ways of communicating about a troubled past as legitimate and real ways of engaging with the political system, particularly in post-conflict and transitional states? Can humor be a true contribution to post-war political discourse? Increasingly, discussions of post-conflict memory turn toward official mechanisms for addressing divisive pasts, such as truth commissions, tribunals, national history projects, and commemorative events. What is the place of non-literal truth-telling within them? If there are things that cannot be said through open speech, but which are better expressed through humor, then it is the job of scholars to understand how such necessarily informal and subversive modes of expression can interact with the formal processes that now accompany any post-conflict process. While truth is tricky to define when historicizing such a contested past, the jokes that I heard about the war in Bosnia avoided literalism in favor of figurative truths. Humor also asserts the agency and cosmopolitanism of a group of people who have been through hell; it counters popular imagery of the Bosnian War, which gives the impression of a country that is backwards, violent, and uncivilized. Humor takes wit, sophistication, and a capacity for critical reflection to truly succeed. As such, those who invoke it remind the world that they are human. That, in itself, is a deeply political and necessary act.

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Postcard from Absurdistan: Miloš Zeman, Karel Schwarzenberg, and the 2013 Czech Presidential Elections

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During his first speech before parliament in May 2013, the newly elected president of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, seized the opportunity to criticize his chief electoral rival – the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karel Schwarzenberg.1 Zeman’s campaign had mounted a deeply personal campaign against Schwarzenberg, an aristocrat whose family fled to Austria after the communist seizure of power in 1948, by labeling him a ‘German’ and mocking his foreign accent. It thus surprised no one when Schwarzenberg, who was seated behind Zeman during the speech, found a way to exact revenge against his rival. When Zeman turned around to criticize Schwarzenberg’s foreign policies, he found Schwarzenberg with his face down on the podium. “It is nonsense…” Zeman began, trailing off in mid-sentence as parliament exploded in laughter. Schwarzenberg, roused by the ruckus, glared at his opponent as the audience

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burst into applause. Schwarzenberg later noted, with dryness typical of Czech humor, that he always falls asleep when he is bored.

What compounds the humor of Schwarzenberg’s ‘protest nap’ is the serendipity of Zeman’s utterance, “It is nonsense” (to je nesmysl) at the precise moment that he saw his rival sleeping. As a result, the statement functioned less as a critique of Schwarzenberg’s policies than an ironic affirmation of the scene unfolding around him – utter political nonsense. The political ‘nonsense’ of this scene was not an isolated occurrence. Absurdities and ironic humor have framed political protests in the Czech lands since the early twentieth century – from the picaresque misadventures of Jaroslav Hašek’s ‘Good Soldier Švejk’ to the hapless lítost (sorrow) of Kundera’s semi-autobiographical antiheroes. Drawing upon this legacy of nonsense in Czech politics, the absurdist playwright Václav Havel first popularized the term ‘Absurdistan’ to criticize the communist regime in Czechoslovakia – that Havel would become the first post-Soviet president of ‘Absurdistan’ in 1989 is yet another link in the ongoing chain.

This article will explore how ironies and absurdities shaped the 2013 Czech presidential election, pitting the chain-smoking ex-communist Miloš Zeman and his leftist political party, SPOZ (Party of Civic Rights – Zeman’s People) against Karel Schwarzenberg and his center-right party TOP 09 (Party of Traditional Accountability and Prosperity). The narrative will focus in particular on how Zeman has used humor and left-wing populist rhetoric as a political weapon against his political rivals. Beyond the election, it will offer a brief description of how Zeman capitalized upon the collapse of the parliamentary government under Petr Nečas and the snap election in October, which significantly strengthened his leftist allies in the ČSSD (Czech Party of Social Democrats) and the KSČM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia).

Politics is the focus of this analysis, but only to the extent that such an exploration reveals how irony and absurdity (both intentional and unintentional) remain a fundamental component of Czech political discourse. To this end, I build upon studies of late socialist and post-socialist European states that emphasize the de-stabilizing potential of humor as an expressed desire for change. My goal is to consider the potential of humor from a slightly different angle, emphasizing how it can also legitimate, not merely subvert, the contradictions of the Czech political system. I contend that ironic, absurdist humor buttressed attempts by Zeman and Schwarzenberg to portray themselves as political outsiders, and (especially in the case of Zeman) to excuse political shortcomings.

According to Neringa Klumbytė, humor constitutes a form of political participation in post-socialist states that allows citizens to articulate discontent. I would argue, from another perspective, that humor also reifies or reinforces existing political structures by defusing the tensions or contradictions of political discourse. Indeed, both Zeman and Schwarzenberg used absurdity as a means of reinforcing their competing political messages. What made Zeman more successful to this end was how the absurdities of his campaign, both intentional and unintentional, legitimated and excused his ethically questionable statements and opinions. Nevertheless, and despite his success during the presidential election, the parliamentary election the following October has demonstrated that the subversive/stabilizing potential of humor is difficult to predict. Pundits and press outlets widely expected Zeman’s SPOZ party to double its electoral support, when instead voters have fled to larger establishment parties.

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2 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwe0kLWtDkk>.


New type of candidate

The 2013 presidential election in the Czech Republic was the unprecedented result of an amendment to the country’s constitution establishing a two-stage direct election – an open primary followed by a run-off between the two leading candidates (in the event that no single candidate received a plurality of the vote during the primary round). This resulted in a fundamentally new type of presidential candidate. Heretofore, presidents were appointed indirectly by a closed-door session of parliament, but this system gradually fell into disrepute amid a string of corruption cases, almost too numerous to count, against high-ranking government officials.\(^5\) In 2010, Prime Minister Petr Nečas agreed to submit the issue to a parliamentary vote – an act meant to appease the demands of his governing coalition partners, including Schwarzenberg’s TOP 09. Ultimately, and despite the opposition of Nečas’s own Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, or ODS), the amendment passed in late 2012, with the first election scheduled for the following January.

The radically new structure of the election process destabilized Czech politics in ways that few pundits could have predicted in the months leading up to the constitutional amendment. Neither Zeman nor Schwarzenberg were predicted to win the election until shortly before the January primary, and even then Schwarzenberg’s total share of the vote was estimated at 7 to 11 percent (he received 23.4 percent). Zeman, who won the primary with 24.2 percent of vote, polled second or even third until November. Conversely, the political candidates considered frontrunners under the old system, such as former Prime Minister Jan Fischer and Prague councilman Jiří Dienstbier Jr., polled a meager 16.35 percent and 16.12 percent, respectively, of the total vote. The comedic ‘anti-candidate’ Vladimír Franz, who is covered in tattoos and campaigned in his rented limousine, ‘Air Franz One’, received nearly 7 percent of the vote – double his predicted showing, according to public opinion polls taken in December 2012.

What accounts for the meteoric rise of Schwarzenberg and Zeman in the polls? As candidates, they are polar opposites in almost every possible respect – whereas the former is a German-speaking aristocrat and a former anti-communist political exile, the latter is a lifelong Czech nationalist who came from a working class background and spent the majority of his career as a low-ranking political outcast. Indeed, it is their differences as candidates that accounts for their respectively popularity in the election. Ultimately, they appealed to two very different types of voters: Zeman appealed primarily to poorer voters from rural areas, whereas Schwarzenberg did best in urban areas, benefiting from a savvy online presence and the backing of prominent intellectuals. This divergence is best explained by a brief examination of their social and political backgrounds.

Prince Karel von Schwarzenberg was born into one of the most powerful noble families in the former Austrian Empire.\(^6\) His family supported the anti-Nazi resistance during World War II (after flirting with fascist political organizations), but fled to Austria shortly after the communist seizure of power in 1948. After the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he became a prominent anti-communist human rights advocate and close ally to Václav Havel, who appointed him chancellor of Czechoslovakia’s first post-communist government in 1990. Since 2007, he has served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in two consecutive parliamentary coalitions, and in 2009 established his own center-right party TOP 09.

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5 The corruption scandals are almost too numerous to count. Among those implicated in the past two years are the former Prague mayor, Pavel Bem, two former defense ministers, a labor minister, a former adviser to then-Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, and Social Democratic Deputy David Rath, who was arrested for taking bribes, and who had CZK 5 million (approximately US $260,000) in cash hidden under his bed and in a suitcase.

6 The family’s feudal titles were technically abolished with the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918. Karel’s official title would have been ‘His Serene Highness The Prince of Schwarzenberg, Count of Sulz, Princely Landgrave in Klettgau, and Duke of Krumlov, Karl Johannes Nepomuk Josef Norbert Friedrich Antonius Wratislaw Mena von Schwarzenberg’.
Schwarzenberg became such a strong contender in the 2013 presidential race thanks to the support of younger voters. Aware of their candidate’s somewhat peculiar youth appeal (given that he is nearly 80 years old), his campaign managers hired the artist David Černý, known for his rebellious art pranks, to soften his image and bolster his ‘street cred’. Never one to disappoint, Černý produced an ironic campaign poster modeled on a Sex Pistols album cover that features Schwarzenberg with his trademark bowtie and a bright red mohawk [figure 1].

Miloš Zeman was born in 1944 in the industrial city of Kolín, whose predominantly German-speaking population was expelled from the country after 1945. Raised by his Czech-speaking mother, Zeman’s proletarian roots in communist Czechoslovakia served to his advantage, allowing him to graduate from the University of Economics in Prague. He joined the Communist Party in 1968, but was expelled shortly thereafter for condemning the Warsaw Pact invasion. After spending the next two decades of his career as a low-level bureaucrat, he became a leading member of the anti-communist Civic Forum during the Velvet Revolution, standing alongside his presidential predecessors, Václav Havel and Václav Klaus. In 1993, Zeman became chairman of the Social Democrats, and after leading his party through a series of electoral victories became prime minister in 1998. During his four-year tenure as prime minister, Zeman gained international notoriety for his xenophobic gaffes, especially against Czech-German expellees, whom he labeled ‘Hitler’s fifth column’. Zeman resigned from parliament in 2002 to launch a failed presidential bid against his ODS rival, Klaus, and ‘retired’ to the countryside shortly after he lost. He launched a political comeback in the late 2000s, and immediately made clear his intentions of running for president.

‘Foreign influence’

Competing claims of ‘foreign influence’ defined the second round of the Czech presidential campaign, often with tragic-comic effect. The Zeman campaign was especially toxic – accusing Schwarzenberg of being a German traitor with ties to the Nazi Party. The week before the election, an ‘anonymous’ poster was published in the newspaper Blesk that accused Schwarzenberg of taking orders from Sudeten exiles in Germany, which it labeled ‘Nazi collaborators’ (although many, in fact, were not) [figure 2]. The poster backfired, however, when a popular newspaper revealed that its propagator was a former StB agent (Statní bezpečnost, the communist-era secret police) with links to Zeman. Such accusations were not necessarily anonymous: Zdeněk Štengl, the leader of Zeman’s SPOZ party, accused Schwarzenberg of wanting to re-establish the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Nor was such xenophobia limited to the Zeman campaign – Livia Klausová, First Lady to President Klaus and no ally to SPOZ, noted that it was difficult to support a candidate

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(i.e., Schwarzenberg) whose wife could not speak Czech.10

The jingoism of Zeman’s campaign devolved into ironic self-parody when it published a fake response to the popular actor Zdeněk Sverák, who publicly supported Schwarzenberg. Sverák is best known for his portrayal of Jára Cimrman, a fictional world traveler and Renaissance man whom Czechs facetiously revere. According to legend, Cimrman’s many accomplishments include inventing dynamite, planning the Panama Canal, and creating the world’s first yogurt – the joke is that wily foreigners always manage to patent these ideas first. In other words, Cimrman is a Czech ‘everyman’ whose brilliance goes unnoticed by the international community. The Cimrman ruse is a nationwide inside joke – the Bohemian countryside is dotted with plaques and monuments dedicated to his local achievements. When the BBC sponsored a ‘Greatest Czech’ contest in 2005, Cimrman almost won until he was disqualified for “not actually existing.”11

Shortly after Sverák’s endorsement, the Zeman campaign posted a letter on its Facebook page by the Cimrmanologist ‘Jan Novák’, a generic name in Czech and an obvious pseudonym. According to Novák, the “real” Cimrman would “turn over in his grave” to see a “Habsburg feudal” elected president of an independent Czech state. Zeman’s campaign, in other words, condemned a real endorsement with a fake response on behalf of a fictional character that most Czechs pretend is a real person. That said, the Cimrman character certainly did despise the Austrian monarchy – his most infamous adventures pitted him against the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, whose children he taught to sing Czech nationalist hymns. However, and this is key, Cimrman’s nationalism is part of the larger joke: His mother was Austrian and his name is a Czechification of the German ‘Zimmerman’. The underlying humor of the Cimrman myth is thus that Cimrman does not exist, nor is he purely ‘Czech’.

By positing the ‘realness’ of Sverák’s character against the ‘fakeness’ of Sverák the actor (and by proxy Schwarzenberg), the Zeman campaign served only to reveal the constructedness of nationalism as an imagined community based on ‘invented traditions’. A further irony is that the Cimrman character emerged during the early 1960s, when Czech memories of the Austrian Empire and German Protectorate were overshadowed by Soviet domination in the East bloc. In other words, Cimrman’s popularity required a certain amount of emotional distance, which allowed viewers to

Figure 2: Anonymous, Blesk, “Don’t Vote for Karel Schwarzenberg” (January 25, 2013)

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laugh about the blurred divisions between Czech and German national identity. However, under the shadow of the German-dominated European Union (EU) and the ongoing financial crisis, Zeman was able forge a link between his struggles as a leftwing nationalist against the ‘German’ conservative Schwarzenberg and Cimrman’s struggles against the Austrian monarchy.

Whatever the case, Schwarzenberg has long championed an accord with Sudeten exiles, including limited property restitution, which made him especially susceptible to charges of ‘anti-Czech’ sympathies. However, this is not strictly a ‘Czechs vs. Germans’ issue. President Havel, in whose government Schwarzenberg served in the 1990s, backed several unpopular property restitution campaigns. Schwarzenberg’s inability to competently discuss the matter has only solidified the impression among many Czechs that he is a Sudeten sympathizer. In a televised presidential debate against Zeman, Schwarzenberg proclaimed that if the expulsions were committed today, those responsible for it “would have found themselves in the Hague” facing a war crimes tribunal. Zeman responded by accusing his rival of “speaking like a Sudeten German, not like a President.” Zeman’s statement was double-edged – suggesting that not only did Schwarzenberg say things reminiscent of a Sudeten German, but his thick accent also made him sound like one.

Yet another irony, as Schwarzenberg’s supporters have repeatedly pointed out, is that the only candidate with actual connections to foreigners is Zeman himself, whose election campaign is linked to LUKoil, Russia’s second-largest oil conglomerate. For example, Martin Nejedlý, the vice president of Zeman’s SPOZ and the head of LUKoil’s Czech subsidiary, donated 400,000 Czech crowns to Zeman’s campaign (approximately US $21,000, or 15,000 Euros). Because this is a ‘personal donation’, it is not subject to Czech campaign finance laws that ban corporate contributions. Another controversial ally is Zeman’s campaign chief and right-hand man Miroslav Šlouf, a corporate lobbyist who brokered the recent deal between the Czech government and LUKoil for the exclusive right to supply Prague’s Havel Airport with fuel. Although these links do not prove that Zeman is a Russian-backed patsy, as Schwarzenberg’s allies have contended, it is difficult to deny Russia’s expanding political and economic influence in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, amid the global financial crisis and the ongoing financial instabilities of the EU, the German ‘threat’ now appears to be a more potent threat. Despite his questionable business connections, Zeman has thus managed to articulate a clear, if highly negative message: Schwarzenberg is a German who does not belong to the Czech nation and will not protect its interests.

Populist vendettas

The second-round elections began ominously for Schwarzenberg, who invalidated his own ballot by submitting it without the required envelope. His error proved prophetic – Zeman won 54.8 percent of the vote, with a solid majority in every electoral district aside from Prague, compared with 45.2 percent of the vote for Schwarzenberg. Exit polls suggest that most voters chose Zeman because he is a true ‘Czech’ who stands up to the ‘Germans’ – a clear sign that his campaign message resonated with constituents. When Zeman assumed power in March, he presented himself as a left-wing Czech-national populist with a mandate to govern for the bottom “10 million.” In his official presidential portrait, population.

14 Classified documents published by Wikileaks reveal that as early as 2008, leading members of the Czech government had alerted the United States government to the growing role of Russian interests in its energy supplies, especially LUKoil. See: <www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07PRAGUE33_a.html>.
15 <www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/01/czech-election>
instead of using the standard pose, he clasped his hands below his chin as if in prayer – an attempt to demonstrate his authenticity, but a somewhat ironic post for the president of one of the most secular countries in the world.\(^*\)

Despite the brash nationalism that contributed to his electoral success, Zeman immediately cultivated his image abroad as a self-proclaimed ‘pro-European federalist’. In his first official act as president, he met with EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso to survey his presidential guard as it hoisted the EU flag over the Prague Castle. The act was lauded in the international press – Zeman’s predecessor Klaus was a notorious Euro-skeptic who refused any symbolic demonstration of European solidarity. Over the following weeks the new president called upon EU member states to forge a more united approach to foreign policy and defense. Notably absent from the EU flag ceremony, however, was Zeman’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg.

Outside his symbolic role as the Czech Republic’s ambassador to the EU, Zeman has very few real political powers. First and foremost he is responsible for approving ambassadorial appointments, which were submitted to his office by Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg. To be sure, Zeman used this power to settle scores with his political rival: Within weeks of his inauguration, he broke a longstanding tradition of presidential non-interference in the nomination process by demanding that Schwarzenberg nominate Livia Klausová as ambassador to Slovakia – the former First Lady, who insulted Schwarzenberg’s wife during the campaign for not speaking Czech.\(^{18}\) Shortly thereafter, Zeman took his first official trip abroad to Slovakia, a customary gesture of Czech-Slovak friendship that emerged after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. Slightly breaking with this tradition, he traveled without his foreign minister.

The partisan bickering intensified in June, 17 <www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/czech-president-elect-zeman-reveals-his-official-portrait/900114>.\(^{19}\) 18 <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/domaci/politika/clanek.phtml?id=775380>. when the conservative Prime Minister Petr Nečas, once known as ‘Mr. Clean Hands’ for his promise to end political corruption, resigned after his lover and chief of staff, Jana Nagyová, was arrested on criminal charges. According to prosecutors, Nagyová bribed three members of Parliament for opposing Nečas’s austerity plan and illegally paid military intelligence officers to tail Nečas’s wife, Radka Nečasová. Although Nagyová denies the bribery allegations, she has admitted to using the secret service to tail Nečasová, whom she believed was having an affair. Allegedly, her goal was to expose the affair and convince Nečas to divorce his wife. More recently, Nagyová’s lawyers have argued that their client was trying to protect Nečas and his children from a woman under the influence of the “cult organization” of Jehovah’s Witnesses.\(^{19}\) Whatever the case, ‘Mr. Clean Hands’ divorced his wife in August, and under a cloud of scandal married Nagyová in a secret ceremony. The timing was not fortuitous – according to Czech law, spouses cannot be compelled to testify against each another.

Although these antics were by no means intentionally absurd, they reveal how deeply political absurdity has been engrained in Czech political culture. Whatever the case, Nečas’s resignation did not occur in a neutral political environment. His cabinet has grown deeply unpopular – the dual result of ongoing political corruption scandals and the economic recession that has slowed growth in the Czech Republic for the past 18 months. Shortly after Nečas’s resignation, Zeman promised to meet with the leaders of the coalition parties, including Schwarzenberg’s TOP 09, to select a new prime minister. Negotiations broke down, however, when Zeman demanded that leading leftist parties, including SPOZ, be included in the new coalition. When Zeman tried to circumvent his opponents by appointing his own cabinet, parliament voted to dissolve itself and called for new elections.\(^{20}\) Once

again positioning himself as a man of the people, Zeman took credit for the crisis – arguing that the governmental collapse would allow his “three million voters” an opportunity for their voices to be heard.

The parliamentary vote in October 2013 was a political disaster for SPOZ, which captured 1.5 percent of the vote (approximately 75,000 voters) – not quite Zeman’s predicted 3 million, and well below the 5 percent threshold required for entry into parliament. The outgoing coalition parties also fared poorly: Schwarzenberg’s TOP 09 declined from 17 percent to 12 percent of the total vote, and Nečas’s ODS declined from 20 percent to 8 percent. Aside from SPOZ, the left-wing parties polled strongly: the Social Democrats received 20.5 percent of the vote and the Communists received 15 percent. Two newly formed conservative parties also fared well: ANO, led by a Slovak multimillionaire, received 19 percent; Úsvit, which is committed to ‘direct democracy’, received 7 percent. The Social Democrats thus face a dilemma: They must either form a parliamentary coalition with conservative parties or join with the Communists in a minority government. Once again, politics have culminated with absurdity.

Conclusion
The rise of Miloš Zeman reveals the ongoing power of absurdity in contemporary Czech politics – whether an intentional strategy or unintended result of scandals and corruption. During the 2013 presidential election, these absurdities helped to mask the incongruity between political realities and the fantasies created by Zeman’s nationalist political pandering. As he blasted his opponent for foreign sympathies, he himself relied upon money and influence provided by shadowy players with links to foreign business interests. Thanks to widespread political discontent with the status quo, however, the ironies of his campaign worked to his advantage. It helped that, in many respects, many voters viewed his opponent as an establishment candidate linked to the deeply unpopular governing coalition of Petr Nečas, which supported German calls for financial austerity. To this end, I have argued that Zeman’s jingoistic humor helped forge a conceptual link between Schwarzenberg’s ‘German identity’, unpopular conservative policies, and the German-dominated EU.

Ultimately, however, many of the tactics Zeman used during his presidential campaign to great success may have undermined his legitimacy as president. Take, for instance, his pledge to remain ‘non-partisan’ (nadstranický) during the 2013 parliamentary elections (and this despite the fact that his party is known as the ‘Zemanites’). Shortly before the election, SPOZ began to openly violate this pledge by purchasing highway billboards emblazoned with Zeman’s face that read: “I’m voting for the Zemanites.” According to SPOZ and the President’s Office this was not a presidential endorsement. One of Zeman’s press secretaries, tongue firmly in check, stated that the billboard “was supposed to be formatted like a postcard, and thus it seems logical to use a postage stamp,” which, of course, just so happens to bear the president’s portrait. 21 Perhaps this postcard from Absurdistan would have been funnier had it been marked “Return to Sender.”

Speaking of the Future in Financial Crisis

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A recent survey found that more than a third of Greeks have borrowed money in order to bridge a deficit in their household budget,1 as unemployment has neared 25 percent (60 percent for youth) and household income has dropped by 23 percent.2 The collapse of earnings and increased reliance on borrowing has helped to paralyze the legal framework for transacting capital between households, firms, and governments. As income has fallen, real estate sales have stalled and construction has stopped; utility companies have found it difficult to purchase fuel from international suppliers so they ratchet their clients with bill collectors; the government has failed to pay pharmacists when they fill prescriptions so they close their shops in protest, and so on. In 2010, the Greek parliament passed the first consumer bankruptcy law (referred to as the Katseli Law after the minister who proposed it) designed to create a legal framework through which individuals with mortgages and credit cards can resolve their debts. Perhaps more importantly, bankruptcy procedures would help reduce current and expected deficits in household budgeting, restoring confidence and promoting investment. This is particularly due to protections for primary homes valued under 200,000 Euros, though many banks have asked to remove this protection to allow for foreclosures. In the first six months of 2013,
more than 80,000 applications were filed under the law, making a backlog of cases that has pushed court dates for resolution as far as 10 years into the future.\(^3\)

Recent anthropological theorizing on debt has given scholars a useful interdisciplinary vantage point from which to consider the configuration of capital markets as economies of debt by observing the articulation of local capitalism into global markets (Roitman 2004; Graeber 2012; Riles 2011). The growth of this field might reflect uneasiness with the appearance that debt is no longer a mere ethical vehicle for capital, transacted through situated cultural practices that give the terms of mutual responsibility. Indeed it appears that the importance of debt instruments has surpassed capital transactions in organizing the economic activity of households, firms, and governments. My research builds on such projects while pivoting in a slightly different conceptual direction, considering how deficits emerge as an economic problem that requires legal and political regulation. The deficit may be the ultimate moment of ‘crisis’ – judgment, in its Greek sense – that takes shape in the decoupling between earnings and obligations. It is an immediate condition of ‘lack’, a struggle for the money and resources needed to ensure survival while making good on liabilities. Deficits have been figured as a threat to fiscal regulation, pushing economic activity outside of the scope of legible and licit flows of revenue, destabilizing state currencies, and prompting attempts to bring them under control. Today in Greece, deficits are generating profound conditions of precarious insecurity across the social landscape as deficits become both more common and difficult to resolve. As such, I imagine deficits as a site of activity, while experiences with and fear of such ‘lack’ has become an important domain of political discourse about the economy.

The recent story of Greek government deficits is by now well known. In February 2010, the Greek government announced that the current deficit and long-term debt owed to international creditors was substantially larger than previously acknowledged. Interest rates on government bonds began to rise, increasing the price paid by the government to finance its regular operations through borrowing. Investors and banks that were once aggressive buyers of sovereign debt began to panic. By April, government bonds were downgraded to junk status by credit rating agencies and could no longer be used as bank collateral. The flow of money used to finance both current government expenses and debt payments was shut off, threatening a default on money already borrowed. Three international bodies collectively known as the ‘Troika’ – the European Central Bank, European Commission, and International Monetary Fund – stepped in to finance debt payments in exchange for structural adjustment and austerity measures intended to eliminate deficit spending, produce a surplus of tax revenue, and pay down the debt. The first loan agreement was met by massive protests and mass confusion in financial markets. Despite having been ‘bailed out’, total government debt appeared to increase while the effects of deepening recession were taking their toll – increasing unemployment, poverty, and social inequality.

In February 2012, the Greek parliament was called to vote on its second loan agreement with the Troika, negotiated under the leadership of Prime Minister Lucas Papademos. The new prime minister was appointed head of a ‘unity’ government in November 2011 after George Papandreou lost international support for his leadership amid his call for a referendum on Greece’s Euro membership. As a former European Central Bank Vice President, and previously Governor of the Bank of Greece, Papademos was perceived as a technically skilled and non-partisan leader who could earn the respect of both the major political parties and Greece’s creditors. As the anthropologist Doug Holmes (2009) has illustrated, the capacity of a central banker to execute monetary policy is dependent on the ‘economy of words’, the skillful uses of rhetoric to sustain trust in markets, restrain collective expectations, and
define the future with the aim of intervening as it unfolds. Papademos seemed to make use of these resources throughout his time as prime minister, and especially in his effort to steer perceptions of the economy. In particular, he attempted to frame the vote on the Second Memorandum as an impending catastrophe that could be successfully managed through the technical and financial assistance of the Troika. Papademos leaned heavily on a prognosis that ‘catastrophe’ would ensue should the Memorandum not be enacted, using the word four times in short remarks before his cabinet about the future of the Greek economy. For instance:

“Some say, instead of an economic program that includes painful measures it would be preferable to be bankrupt. People who say this are grievously mistaken or dangerous demagogues. A disorderly bankruptcy would throw our country into a catastrophic adventure. Those circumstances would create uncontrollable economic chaos and social explosion. The adverse consequences of a disorderly bankruptcy would be multiple and extremely painful…”

These serious and severe remarks were covered widely in the domestic and international press as analysts, policymakers, and the public debated what was at stake in parliament’s vote on the Memorandum. Though it might be impossible for an ethnographer to evaluate claims such as these, perhaps even beyond the reach of most economists, it would be fruitful to depart from here in search of ground for comparison with other prognoses.

What would happen if the austerity package lost by a single vote? No one really knew. Papademos suggested that the payments system would take a direct hit if cash ceased to flow, putting an already tenuous social contract at risk. Drawing closer to the present, he says that public-sector pay would be frozen in the case of a bankruptcy – not merely for a week, and perhaps indefinitely. Should the Memorandum be passed, life was not predicted to be easy – there would still be unemployment and wage cuts, yet perhaps less total sacrifice than in the imagined catastrophe. It’s evocative but vague. The challenge of speaking about the ‘financial crisis’ seems a case of what Jane Guyer identifies as the “burden of a theoretical position that embraces fluctuation as a necessary condition of the market system, but that is bereft of concepts to convey this in positive terms at the time that fluctuation happens” (Guyer 2009, 99). The success of such an argument depends on convergence between rhetoric regarding the future of the national economy, and the possible futures that people interpret from evidence at closer proximity – that which is witnessed in a family, with friends, and on the streets, and from which strategies are devised and suspicions tested in everyday life. We might push the research question into the subtext of the Papademos message: the possibility of a catastrophe indicates that the Euro and the nation could not be considered indestructible, but without the complete disappearance of things that are familiar and durable.

During the vote, tens of thousands of people went into Syntagma Square in front of the parliament building in central Athens to protest the new cuts in spending across the government, as well as the reductions in pensions, the minimum wage, aggressive tax policies, and displaced dignity. There are too many different voices to talk about ‘Greek’ sentiment in the crisis, as there is little agreement about the nature of the problems that are making ‘this crisis’. Yet most of the people who stand in front of parliament shouting about traitors seem to agree that though there are no politicians who can resist temptation to skim off the top of government accounts, there are no alternatives, and no new heroes. In conversations that reached deep into the night discussing the despicable game of politics, I encouraged some astute friends to give up talk and campaign for parliament, only to be told that politics is something reasonable people stay far from.

During a protest, Syntagma Square may be pulsing with life, but many regard these events from a distance as the sign conspiratorial mechanisms at work. As people began to enter
the square and stand in sedate, loose groups, I watched as a group of young men yelled a football chant and then walk in a tight squad up the hill toward the police who were lines in front of the parliament building and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The young men dressed in mostly black sweatpants and T-shirts and carried heavy gas masks, fire extinguishers, and other paraphernalia, ready to riot. Sensing what this meant, I made my exit just as small explosions began and tear gas wafted through the square. The rest of the crowd moved outward. As we walked out, the mood was tired and anxious, faces red, spirit waning; the most important days of protest are always taken over by these extremists. This makes things more boring as much as it terrifies. The surreal quality of this intentional confrontation underlined the often repeated notion that the violent drama in the demonstrations is well rehearsed. A link between police and the hooded youths (ostensibly anarchists) who throw fire bombs has been documented in photographs and widely accepted, while the long-suspected connection between police and the far-right Golden Dawn political party is likely to be attested in court soon. Taking such perceptions into account, the nation increasingly appears tenuous and indeed destructible.

On the day after these protests, the news coverage focused on images of violence – police batons, fire bombs, and burned buildings. From night into the morning, the streets around the square were strewn with marble chunks torn from the sides of several luxury hotels as well as the Ministry of Finance, which sits directly on the square. By afternoon the streets had been swept and washed, while Athenians stopped to take pictures of a famous theater that had been firebombed. I found it hard to distinguish between what had been burned the night before and all the others that give Athens its deteriorated aesthetic. Nearly everyone I encountered on the streets of Athens that afternoon carried a shopping bag, surely not the same people who stayed in Syntagma Square until 1a.m. braving the air made toxic by constant volleys of tear gas.

The second loan agreement calls for increasing the international competitiveness of Greek products by lowering wages in order to reduce export prices – a strategy often called ‘internal devaluation’. This approach is prescribed in the conditions attached to the government’s agreements in the Memorandum, but in fact precedes the present situation. Currency area theory regarded wage flexibility as necessary for the success of the Euro, and it was written into the treaties of the European Union as a condition of creating competition within Europe in order to be more competitive in markets outside Europe (Peebles 1997). People not only had to be able to move freely from one European country to another, they needed wage incentives in order to want to move into the most advantageous geographic positions for their field. In this respect, the Greek government is perceived to have done a poor job at realizing the economic aims of the common market, and the “internal devaluation” may appear to be finally forcing Greek regulators to achieve the outcomes expected of other Euro members. Parliament lowers the minimum wage, eliminates jobs in the public sector while reducing wages and benefits, ‘liberalizes’ professions by transforming certifications and licensing procedures, and eliminates or defers pension and welfare payments. The effect reaches like scattered shot into industries even where there is no direct government control over wage setting by increasing competition for scarce capital and employment and eliminating the advantages of collective bargaining, causing wage deflation in the private sector (relative to the cost of living, which has remained stable or deflated more slowly than income). In other words, there is a decoupling between wages and obligations that creates the likelihood of deficits in household budgets. Resources, energy, and attention are increasingly diverted to managing these emerging deficits – children are financed by parents for longer periods of time, many consider emigration, work is done without payment in order to maintain a position, and people accept contracts that are short-term in an economy increasingly reliant on flexible staffing. By considering such strategies and conditions as effects of deficits rather than ‘crisis’,
it may be possible to build on this often anecdotal types of evidence to describe how a specific problem provoked by a deficit might expand in space and time – from government, through firms and households – and to describe with perspicuity any political settlement such as the Memorandum that aims to solve such a problem.

References


The making of peripheries was not inevitable. World-systems theorists and imperial historians alike tell us that the eighteenth century was the era of mercantilism, that imperial states subordinated the interests of their colonies to those of the metropole, and that the politicians, administrators, and theorists of early modern empires adhered to a ‘maxim’ of manufacture at home and raw material production in the colonies. For most of these theorists and historians, Britain is the prime example of a mercantilist empire. But my project contends that throughout
the period of British imperial control in America, there was no real agreement on how colonial production ought to be treated or, indeed, on how an empire ought to be run. Merchants, politicians, pamphleteers, and producers disagreed over whether colonies should be allowed to manufacture finished products. Debates raged on whether manufacturing was important to economic development and national prosperity, whether it was important to keep manufacture at home and out of foreign hands, and whether colonies counted as foreign, domestic, or something else entirely.

Amid the debate, producers, officials, and schemers put forth proposals to promote colonial manufacturing industries: iron in the Chesapeake; sugar refining in the Caribbean; cordage, pitch, tar, and sailcloth in New York; and textiles in New England, Pennsylvania, and Jamaica. Even though many of these schemes failed, the very fact that they existed forces us to revise the notion that colonial dependence on the metropole was a given. The conception in the historical literature of the British American colonies as underdeveloped sites for the land-intensive, low-technology production of raw materials like sugar cane, tobacco, and cotton is so pervasive that it almost keeps us from asking about these colonial manufacturing schemes. This project takes the proposed colonial manufacturing industries seriously as alternative possibilities for Britain’s imperial economy. Enquiring why most of these schemes failed enables us to understand why Britain’s colonies remained dependent on England for manufactured goods, Britain’s industrialization in the context of its empire, and, indeed, the eventual division of the world into zones of raw material production using un-free labor and zones of industrial manufacturing by free wage labor.

The arguments against colonial manufacturing were hardly ever limited to a single region or commodity – sugar refining, cloth-making, Jamaica, Ireland, and New England were spoken in the same breath. Hence, to understand why these colonial manufacturing projects failed, we have to look at the whole arena on which the debates played out: Britain’s whole empire and the full range of commodities that its subjects dealt in. This was not a debate about a commodity or a colony, but a debate about what sort of work should happen where and who ought to control finished goods.

This tendency for arguments about one region or commodity to expand outward to encompass all the rest is evident in the rhetoric of commissioners, politicians, and writers. For example: the Commissioners of the Customs met in the early decades of the eighteenth century to give their opinions on sugar duties for sugars coming from British colonies in the Caribbean. Their concern was that sugars that were refined or, in their words, ‘manufactured’ on the sugar islands themselves were entering the country as brown sugars, thereby evading the higher duty on white sugar—a duty that had been created for the purpose of discouraging that very practice of refining in the colonies. The commissioners decided to make a new category for these ‘clayed’ sugars (so called because the refining process used clay to separate the grains of sugar from the syrup) so that they could tax it accordingly. But the commissioners’ reasoning for laying the duty on clayed sugar is what matters for us. First of all, they state the familiar maxim, “All commodities of the Growth of the Plantations should be imported in their 1st product.” That is, raw material should be sent from the colonies to the metropole to be manufactured there—no ‘improving’ beyond what is absolutely necessary should be done in the colonies. The commissioners provide one very telling justification for adhering to that rule: “Manufacturing in the Plantations,” they say, “draws more People thither than is necessary for product.” In other words, the commissioners are committed to an empire where as few people as possible settle in the colonies—only what is absolutely necessary to extract resources or cultivate raw materials. And finally, most tellingly of all, the commissioners worry that if planters are allowed to manufacture their sugar, “This may encourage other manufacturers in the Plantations as of Cotton wool, Dying, &c.” Here, the

1 Drafts and copies of minutes, reports, and letters of the Commissioners of the Customs; with memorials, accounts, and other papers relating to trade, 1692–1721, BL Add MSS 18,902, ff. 13–24.
commissioners express their concern that colonial sugar refining will not only spread to other colonies, but that the manufacture of sugar will spread to other industries — igniting the uncontrollable spread of manufacturing in the colonies. Here is another example: in 1699, parliament passed, at the urging of the Board of Trade, an act to prohibit the manufacture of woolen cloth in Ireland and the North American colonies. Although the effort began as a limited attempt to control Irish manufactures, the Board of Trade insisted that colonial North American woolen manufactures were every bit as dangerous to the domestic industry as were Irish woolens, and recommended their prohibition “by the most coercive and proper means.” And so administrators and members of parliament, as well as some pamphleteers and petitioners, drew together disparate corners of the empire and dissimilar industries to espouse a ‘maxim’ of raw material production abroad and manufacture at home.

But there were others who did not see colonial manufacturing as a potential disaster. Many people in early modern Britain could envision an empire where manufacturing took place in all corners, and where production and trade created wealth everywhere. The merchant and writer Thomas Tryon, who was resident in Barbados for a few years in the 1660s, wrote a tract in 1701 in which he proposed that sugar colonies in the West Indies begin a cotton manufacturing industry to “stem the Current of Groans, Sighs, Melancholly Lamentations, and Turmoil of your Servants, into a pleasant, calm, serene Life, of happy Employments.” It should be noted that Tryon was also in favor of allowing Ireland to continue its woolen manufacturing industry, as was Lord Chancellor of Ireland Sir Richard Cox. They argued that Ireland’s wealth would enrich England; that high wages in Ireland would provide a good market for other English manufactures; and that prohibiting woolen manufacturing would weaken the Protestant interest there.

In a certain sense, opinions about colonial manufacturing came down to people’s conceptions of colonial space. Some thought about colonies as foreign space, others as domestic space. Sometimes policymakers or pamphleteers treated colonies as subordinate space – subservient to the needs of the metropole – other times they treated them as distinct but autonomous, and still others argued that colonies should be treated as the same space – another province of Britain. Parliamentary debates over customs duties, for instance, reveal these different conceptions: the debates were often over whether to treat colonial products as foreign commodities or domestic commodities. These perspectives are also apparent in assertions about who was entitled to the rights and privileges of freeborn Englishmen, like Barbados planter Edward Littleton’s complaint that Caribbean planters were made foreigners and aliens because their sugars were being treated as foreign commodities, writing “that there is a distance and space between England and the Plantations. So that we must lose our Countrey upon the account of Space, a thing little more then imaginary; a thing next neighbor to nothing.”

2 “Act to prevent the Exportation of Wooll out of the Kingdoms of Ireland and England into foreign Parts; and for the Encouragement of the Woollen Manufactures in the Kingdome of England” (1699), The Statutes at Large: from Magna Charta, to the end of the last Parliament, 1761, vol. 4, ed. Owen Ruffhead (London: Mark Basket, 1763), 9–12.
4 Thomas Tryon, The merchant, citizen and country-man’s instructor: or, a necessary companion for all people (London, 1701), 183.
5 Thomas Tryon, Some general considerations offered, relating to our present trade. And intended for its help and improvement (London, 1698), 5.
6 Sir Richard Cox, Some thoughts on the Bill Depending before the Right Honourable House of Lords, for prohibiting the exportation of the woollen manufactures of Ireland to Foreign parts. Humbly offered to their Lordships (Dublin: Joseph Bay, 1698).
7 Edward Littleton, the groans of the plantations: or, a true account of their grievous and extreme sufferings by the heavy impositions upon sugar, and other hardships: relating
the Governor of New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, informed the Board of Trade in November 1700 that some of the New York council members “express’d great discontent at the Acts of Trade and Navigation, that restrained ’em from an open free trade to all parts of the world; they alleg’d they were as much English as those in England, and thought they had a right to all the privileges that the people of England had.” But whatever one’s view, and whether one measured the status of colonies by that of their commodities or of their inhabitants, it made little sense to argue for the prohibition of colonial manufacturing if one thought of the colonies as part of Britain. Anyone who argued that colonial manufacturing should be discouraged had to define the colonies as separate, different, and, usually, subordinate space.

Examples of colonial manufacturing industries gathered during my research time in the United Kingdom and Ireland – among them the production of pitch, tar, sailcloth, and other naval stores in New York; schemes to promote migration to Jamaica and diversify the sugar monoculture there; and the successful efforts to replace Irish woollen manufacturing with a new linen industry – provide a glimpse of how people thought about economic behavior, about what it took to get people to work, and about how one would go about setting up an industry where it did not already exist. These cases also reveal something new about colonial manufacturing: in the minds of its proponents, these industries in the colonies need not involve free wage labor.

For many historians, it is not even worth asking why colonial manufacturing did not develop because the colonies lacked the basic conditions that many consider necessary to develop manufacturing: a dense population, enough people with little or no access to land or self-sufficiency, less than full employment – in short, the makings of lots of free wages laborers working for relatively low wages. Needless to say, this picture does not describe the American colonies – especially not in North America. But what comes through in these examples is that un-free labor was a standard part of the proposals for colonial manufacturing industries. Eighteenth-century administrators, merchants, and manufacturers understood that wages were too high and labor too scarce in most parts of the colonies to run industries on a wage-labor system. Instead, they devised a variety of ways to get people to work and to get workers where they wanted them. The intricacies of these schemes force us to uncouple manufacturing and free wage labor, and put us in a better position to begin to answer the question of why these colonies did not become manufacturing centers.

The politics of colonial manufacturing in the early eighteenth century sheds light on two key historical turning points: the American Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. First, Colonial American historians have long explained the American Revolution as an outcome of the sudden reversal of colonial autonomy and sudden onset of authoritarian imperialism in the 1760s. The politics of colonial economic development earlier in the century make it difficult to cast that earlier period as an era of metropolitan neglect of the colonies, and instead forces historians to grapple with the politically driven shifts in imperial governance throughout the century. Secondly, scholars from a variety of perspectives have long debated the importance of colonial goods and markets to English economic growth and industrialization in the eighteenth century. Adam Smith thought that unrestricted trade and development would benefit all, but we should confront the possibility that England’s astronomical economic and technological growth later in the century depended on using colonies as protected markets and sources of

more particularly to the island of Barbados (London, 1689), 1, 14, 19, 21, 26.


9 In her study of European empires between 1400 and 1900, Lauren Benton argues that the geography of empire is uneven and “legally differentiated.” Her characterization of the irregularity of imperial space helps us imagine the range of contemporaries’ conceptions of colonies. Lauren Benton, A Search for Sovereignty: Law and geography in European empires, 1400–1900 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
raw materials, and prohibiting manufacturing there.

Ultimately, the debate over colonial manufacturing was a debate about the way to national, imperial, or local prosperity. Manufacturing was not everyone’s priority, to be sure, but for many in colonial North America, the Caribbean, England, and Ireland, growing and retaining manufacturing within one’s borders was of enormous importance: making finished goods, it was argued, employed the poor, created wealth, and granted political power, virtue, and even independence. If we can accept that all modern economies have depended on a set of political and administrative decisions, as well as institutions, that have cultivated some sectors of the economy (and some ways of thinking about the economy) and sought to weaken others, this foray into the politics of colonial manufacturing can, I hope, help to illuminate a set of decisions that led eventually to the division of the world into uneven spheres of production as Britain’s empire was taking shape.
The South African (or Anglo-Boer) War (1899–1902) had one foot in the nineteenth century and another in the twentieth. It resembled the Victorian ‘small wars’ that conquered the African continent, yet foreshadowed the total wars of the twentieth century. Britons greeted the conflict with enthusiasm; a martial campaign in Africa promised adventure, imperial romance and masculine prowess amid fin-de-siècle angst. Landmark victories at Mafeking and Ladysmith provoked spontaneous street celebrations, and after a string of victorious set-pieces, revelers unveiled a ‘mission accomplished’ banner in London. Yet the war defied expectations. After British forces captured capital cities and other strategic points, enemy commandoes filtered into the countryside, where they conducted a prolonged guerrilla insurgency.

In the end, the war proved costly and controversial. For the first time, European soldiers faced a colonial army equipped with modern technology: smokeless gunpowder and automatic Mauser rifles. Long-range ammunition made the enemy invisible, and British soldiers quickly realized the futility of offensive strikes – a lesson painfully relearned in the trenches of World War I. The blurred lines between soldiers and civilians, another characteristic of modern partisan war, further hampered British tactics and resulted in mass
reprisals against non-combatants.

Above all, the conflict endowed the world with an exemplary institution of modern warfare: the ‘concentration camp’. In order to ‘trap’ an elusive and dehumanized foe, General Horatio Kitchener concentrated some quarter-million African and Afrikaner civilians in purpose-built camps. Enclosed by barbed wire and guarded by sentries, these camps marked an ominous chapter in the history of British imperialism, and in the transnational development of modern detention. By demoralizing an enemy people and physically severing guerrillas from their civilian sources of supply, the camps likely won Britain the war. But the cost was a black mark on Britain’s reputation, and the deaths of some 50,000 inmates who perished from disease and malnutrition.

My research, funded in part by a Council for European Studies Pre-dissertation fellowship, took me to archives in Great Britain, South Africa, and eventually to India. My goal was to examine the form and function of the camps as they developed over the course of the war. This is a project left surprisingly unfulfilled in existing literature, which either exaggerates the horrors of camp life for political purposes, or else simply highlights the policies that first generated the camps without following their subsequent development. I wished also to place the South African camps into a larger transnational context. How should the concentration camps of a ‘liberal’ power in the nineteenth century be incorporated within the more familiar framework of twentieth-century violence? As a means to manage dangerous or suspect populations, are camps an inherent feature of the modern state?

Serious scholarship on British concentration camps is a rare commodity. In South Africa, the camps feature prominently in a national mythology that enshrines these ‘altars of suffering’ at the center of Afrikaner national consciousness. While heartfelt, such narratives substitute sober scholarship with a racially tainted mythology that whitewashes the experience of black Africans, who were also concentrated in camps.

In British academe, meanwhile, concentration camps appear as the objects of an instrumental military rationality. They detained political ‘undesirables’, ‘protected’ refugees, and, above all, prevented civilians from providing roving commandoes with shelter and supplies. Such narratives offer a clear-sighted analysis of tactics, but they neglect the cultural representations and social mindsets that fostered the development and administration of the camps over the course of three years. Popular stereotypes of Afrikaners as semi-savage nomads – a European race that had degenerated in the wilds of Africa – proved foundational to forced encampment, and such mentalities framed camp management long after the camps’ initial formation by the army.

The richness of the historical record became clear when I traveled to the South African cities of Pretoria and Bloemfontein. Here, in grim but orderly reading rooms, I found a wealth of administrative documents, medical reports, and personal testimonies from British camp officials. Such sources rarely feature in existing accounts. But when read alongside the letters and diaries of camp inmates (the staple of Afrikaans scholarship), these records make possible a balanced and nuanced analysis of camp administration as it developed first under military control and then under civilian oversight. Such documents shed light onto the contested motives of officials: their racial prejudices and humanitarian concerns, their efforts to save lives and their at-times callous inattention to the hardships that inmates suffered. The archives highlight the coercion and discipline inherent to the camps alongside the relief and medical care officials tried but often failed to distribute. In short, these documents reveal the priorities and constraints of British imperialism at the precipice of a colonial disaster.

Fundamentally, the camps provided British officials with a means to classify and regulate the population of a newly annexed colony: to make its denizens ‘legible’, as described by the political theorist James Scott, and to render them governable subjects. Camp superintendents classified their charges as ‘bona fide refugees’ or ‘political undesirables’. The partially redacted letter
of ‘Liz’, an intelligence officer at Bethulie camp, offers insight into the latter: ‘undesirables’ were political suspects who did not “behave themselves in camps,” could not “hold their tongues from speaking politics,” and who insisted on wearing the forbidden colors (orange, blue, and white) of the former Boer republics. Such inmates ended up in punitive “wired-in enclosures” like the ‘Bird Cage’ at Bloemfontein, where the superintendent enforced “8 hours [of work] a day with pick and shovel” for “all singing birds.” A similar undesirable ward at Winburg known as the ‘showyard’ segregated those who “foster[ed] resistance to rules and regulations.” It thereby prevented seditious elements from “infecting” those “who only require[ed] a little tactful handling to make them reasonably contented and useful.” (Medical metaphors were common in the writing of camp officials.)

Apart from political surveillance, British records also reveal the condescending social and cultural mindsets that informed camp management. Traveling inspectors spoke of the “primitive,” “ignorant” and “frequently revolting methods” of the Boers, while medical operatives like Dr. Kendal Franks, who represented the new cultural authority of professional science, condemned the superstitious home remedies of camp inmates. Cow-dung baths and the consumption of roasted cat hair were frequent targets of ridicule. Disparaging representations of Afrikaners as a “dirty, careless, lazy lot” who had lost the “instincts of their European forefathers” facilitated coercive measures against them, and placed the blame for mounting death rates on camp residents themselves. At a historical moment when cleanliness was next to Godliness, inmates seemed to justify their own detention with unsanitary behavior (the lack of soap, running water, and hygienic facilities in the camps notwithstanding). At times, a Victorian sanitary craze even mapped onto fears of political subversion; an undesirable ward at Norval’s Pont known as ‘Hog’s Paradise’, for instance, conflated political undesirables with the “extremely dirty” and “verminous.” An undercurrent of hygienic imagery flowed beneath the surface of official military rationales.

All in all, the archival record paints the picture of a colonial administration overwhelmed. A public image of cleanliness and orderly geometry
justified the camps. But the reality was one of dirt, disorder, and disease. At a camp in Aliwal North, “soldiers, police, hawkers, refugees, coolies, and niggers seemed to come and go as they pleased;” latrines and cesspools were “scattered around” in an unhygienic manner, one observer complained, and the whole place looked like “a low down Chinese Slum.” “We have created out here 33 London slums of the worst description,” another inspector lamented. These candid observations highlight the unsanitary conditions that resulted in outbreaks of epidemic disease: measles, typhoid, and dysentery ravaged the camps. This was a state of affairs for which British officials accepted private responsibility. By “herding” populations together “in strange conditions where they all died like rats in a hole,” the health inspector Lucy Deane confessed, the camps offered “a huge object-lesson ... in what not to do.”

Mortality peaked in November 1901. At Bethulie camp, the Afrikaner chaplain J. D. Luckoff revealed the desperation of the moment in eloquent staccato prose. “One grows so weary of scenes of suffering and sorrow,” he wrote, “always red and tear-stained eyes; always Love; helpless, hopeless, impotent, despairing; always face to face with Decay, Change, Death.” Amid mounting public criticism from ‘pro-Boer’ humanitarian factions, meanwhile, the War and Colonial Offices in London found themselves under siege.

In the heat of public pressure, the High Commissioner Alfred Milner and Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain looked desperately for a way to reorganize the camps and bring the death rate under control. Conceiving camp inmates as a social analogue to Britain’s slum-dwelling ‘dangerous classes’ – who themselves endured the unsanitary conditions of Britain’s new urban industrial centers, not to mention the coercive indignities of the workhouse – Milner enlisted the advice of factory inspectors, health visitors, and former poor law guardians. Meanwhile, Chamberlain turned to the resources of the empire by consulting an existing British imperial tradition of confining civilian populations in concentrated camps.

Starting in the 1870s, Britain had presided over an empire of work camps and relief camps erected during famine, plague, and other moments of emergency. India, in particular, offered a fount of experience. In Bombay, officials “herded” hundreds of thousands of famine refugees into “large enclosures” where they worked “like a colony of ants.” And during plague operations in the 1890s, barbed-wire enclosures served to control and classify the unwashed colonial poor. Ostensibly humane interventions that provided work for the starving or served the putatively objective injunctions of epidemiology, these camps depended, much like the concentration camps of South Africa, on a discourse of ‘dangerous persons’, ‘suspects’, and ‘fugitives’. Moreover, they offered an archive of experience in maintaining the discipline and health of concentrated colonials.

Realizing the “very analogous experience” on offer at “numerous plague and famine camps,” Chamberlain recruited a group of “camp experts” from India to administer the concentration camps of South Africa. Drawn from the Indian Army and Indian Medical Services, these officials connected Britain’s nineteenth-century tradition of Indian plague and famine camps with its new twentieth-century network of wartime concentration camps.

Putting into practice the lessons of sanitary surveillance and colonial discipline accumulated over decades of camp management, these “big guns from India” presided over a rapidly falling mortality rate. Ultimately, they helped render the camp – in their minds at least – a safe and legitimate instrument of imperial rule, and one that might be justifiably employed in the future.

In their reformed iteration, British camps saved lives instead of exterminating them. Monthly mortality rates dropped from a high of 30 percent in November 1901 to a mere 2 percent the following year. These camps should therefore be distinguished from the concentration camps of totalitarian Europe, where morality stemmed from willful genocide rather than tragic neglect. But the inmates of South African camps found themselves in an unenviable position nonetheless. Detained in a microcosm of colonial domination, inmates resembled the “bare life” described by the political
philosopher Giorgio Agamben: stripped of rights and reduced to an abject state of meager biological existence, their survival depended entirely on the mercy of a hostile sovereign power. Common discourses of hygiene and labor, along with a shared framework of bureaucratic rationality and the “aspirations for order” exhibited by the modern “gardening state” also point to hidden solidarities between British concentration camps and their totalitarian cousins.

The most compelling association between British camps in South Africa and the violence of a dawning twentieth century, however, is not in hidden structural continuities but in conscious, concrete connections. Ironically, by reforming its camps and reducing mortality rates, Britain set a legitimizing precedent. Future camps for refugees, displaced persons, and wartime internees would all draw from the British example. Tragically, however, so too would more ominous camp regimes. Joseph Goebbels’s most lucrative film of 1941, Ohm Kruger, justified Nazi concentration camps by equating them with British camps in South Africa. With an equal degree of cynicism, Herman Goering also harkened back to Britain for a justifying precedent. In 1939, for example, he reprimanded Nevile Henderson, Britain’s ambassador to Berlin, for complaining about Germany’s burgeoning network of camps. Walking to his bookshelf, the Nazi leader pulled out the ‘K’ volume of a German encyclopaedia and read “Konzentrationslager: first used by Britain in the South African War.”
My research is about the future in contemporary Greece. But rather than asking what the future will turn out to be, my research asks what the future already is, does, and means in the present. In 2010, during the first summer of what has come to be called simply *krisi* (‘the crisis’) – after the initial austerity measures were announced, but before lost income and benefits became material realities for most – the future presented itself as an open question, imbuing daily experience with deep uncertainty. “It’s just hard to know what it’s all going to mean,” a resident told me. Twelve months later, the same person remarked, “The real problem is not knowing what we’ll pass on to our kids.” The next time we spoke, in 2012, she was in the middle of trying to secure a loan as well as sell off some property, anything she could do to get some immediate cash. The horizon of the future had crept much closer – instead of appearing in the form of a problem about inheritance, it appeared in the form of an electricity bill.

The ethnographic study that I am currently conducting focuses on the future that emerges through economic forecasting. Greece’s embroilment in financial agreements and political debates has created a situation marked on the one hand by unprecedented uncertainty about the future and on the other hand by unprecedented attention to the status and movements of the national...
Consequently, the flipside of uncertainty is the prominence of economic forecasting as a particular mode of articulating a future.

Three research objectives guide my work: The first is to understand what is involved in rendering future states of a national economy. How do specific technologies, techniques, and epistemologies operate and interact to produce an object called an economic future? The second is to describe how work with the future acts as a crucial way in which economics gets established as a form of expertise. How do an economic future and the practices that produce it circulate beyond economists and gain authority in political and social contexts? The third objective is to address the role of the economic future in constructing the contemporary nation. How does economic expertise contribute to establishing the legitimacy (and enabling the contestation) of state forms and national imaginaries? Starting from the observation that in Greece today the making of the future constitutes a key site of social contention, this project is rooted in a concern with how to attend to a particular future as something made, intervened in, and circulated in distinctive ways, and moreover, how this object gets embraced, contested, and refused.

Anthropologists have recently urged greater engagement with the future as an object of study, arguing that the future lies at the center of a number of key contemporary domains of activity (including finance, science, and security) and that it brings anthropological inquiry up against the limits of core disciplinary concepts built around an orientation toward the past. The most prominent framework through which the future has been studied is that of risk. In focusing attention on decision-making under uncertainty, the concept of risk has contributed enormously to understanding how political rationalities and social logics manage the present, especially by deploying visions of the future to authorize particular forms of intervention. In this literature, the future tends to be portrayed as a malleable resource, whose specific content has little bearing on the techniques of management that its deployment makes possible. Moreover, this approach tends not to ask how particular futures are actually constructed and made compelling in the first place.¹

While very much in conversation with existing studies of the future, I depart from the analytic templates they propose, especially in the way that I frame the future as an object of inquiry. In particular, my concern is to draw out the specific attributes of an object that emerges as a distinct kind of future and to offer an account of how this specificity is produced. I propose that a sufficiently shared concern for a particular kind of future can be traced, in terms of both how it comes about and what it goes on to do. I therefore begin by focusing on the relationship between a set of practices and the object around which it coheres – in this case, economic forecasting and the future of the Greek economy.

By asking how a particular future gets constituted, my larger point is to draw attention to the ways in which this constitution becomes a site of contention. A given economic forecast is only one of many possible outcomes depending on variations in data, modeling, or theory (as well as the pre-technical considerations that go into shaping each of these things). Moreover, the future articulated through an economic forecast contends with countless other articulations to capture popular imaginaries of the future. Even then, an economic forecast is not automatically embraced as an expert account; instead, work must be done to establish it as such. Furthermore, discourses and imaginaries of the future are crucial grounds on which technical expertise, political power, social influence, and forms of opposition to each of these things are established as such. Finally, claims on or about the future constitute a crucial way in which reason, truth, and reality are grounded (and contested) in the present.

“People are more and more interested in what we’re doing, especially in the figures – everybody wants to know the future,” a macroeconomic forecaster explained. “But people

¹ Other frameworks through which questions about the future have been posed include studies of the emergent, histories of probability, and theories of virtuality and potentiality.
don’t really understand what we actually do. They don’t realize that it is very difficult to have a prediction of the figures. When I’m running the models, I’m never focusing on the actual figures themselves.” Yet those figures get reported in the news and discussed over coffee, not the models that churn them out or the data fed into the models, and least of all the forecasters’ indifference to the figures themselves. More fundamentally, what is the Greek economy, and how does it organize the world around it, such that the fate of a nation and its people appear to depend so decisively on it? I approach this question by pursuing how the economy emerges as an epistemic object, and furthermore how a kind of expertise is constituted through a particular relationship between this object and the set of practices that address it. I also trace the history of the idea of a national economy as something that can be modeled and forecasted, and of the instruments and theories for doing so.

The relationship between economics as a science and the economy as its object has most productively been theorized in recent years through a performative reading. This approach offers a view of a world populated by effects that come about through constant iteration, shifting emphasis from ideas, intentions, and theories about how the economy should work to tools, techniques, and procedures through which it does work. While drawing on this reading’s analytic insights, I also seek to extend its scope in a couple of ways. First, by focusing on the circulation of economic knowledge beyond economists’ hands, I bring into view a broad range of actors whose interactions with forecasts are crucial to understanding the economy’s formation. Second, departing from the performative understanding of the social as a temporary outcome of a process, I consider how social parameters might in fact contribute to shaping that process itself, taking seriously the role of the social in shaping economic practice as well as the potential social valence of economic knowledge.

While another relevant body of literature, social studies of finance, offers ethnographic insights into how actors deal with questions of uncertainty and temporality as well as methodological examples for how to study the presence of a particular kind of future in the present, I depart from this literature in the way that I aim to study financial and more broadly economic objects socially. To be specific, social studies of finance (especially its anthropological branch) tend to intervene by recognizing the social within finance; that is, by arguing against a view of finance as abstract and rational by offering an account of it as messy and embodied. In starting from a concern with what happens when a form of technical economic knowledge becomes a matter of popular interest, my approach is somewhat the reverse, not to place the social within economics, but to place the economic within society. Rather than maintaining economics as a bounded realm, I ask how this realm spills over – how technical knowledge becomes popular knowledge and how expertise becomes a dominant social and political force.

Asking about the role of the economic future in constructing the contemporary Greek nation also brings me to examine state legitimacy and national imaginary through a specific focus on how the nation emerges as an object through various kinds of work with the future. Understandings of the making of Greece have had much to say about the role of experts in constructing a past. The literature has extensively described how Greece emerges in the nineteenth century as a European philhellenic project, in which state legitimacy and national imaginary are based on constructing continuity between the ancient past and the living present. Such a reading, however, is inadequate for addressing the shift long-underway in a fundamental source of recognition and legitimacy for the nation, from a link with an ancient past to a link with a projected, if contested, European future.

In considering the role of economics in constructing the nation, and particularly in legitimizing the state, I also take up a set of concerns often discussed under the rubric of neoliberalism.

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But I suggest that an analysis of neoliberalism in Greece cannot simply extend existing analyses of the cogency and successes of neoliberal projects, but must ask how neoliberalism can productively be understood in terms of its obstacles and even failures. Wendy Brown has argued that as a result of the neoliberal state’s explicit embrace of market values, “the health and growth of the economy is the basis of state legitimacy” (2005, 42). The question that the Greek situation prompts is, what if there is no ‘health and growth’ to point to? Examining how neoliberalism is experienced and contested by Greek actors themselves is also revealing. Consider the neoliberal logic of austerity, which calls for recovery from an irresponsible past in the form of self-sacrifice in the present to be redeemed in the eventual future. As subjects of austerity in Greece have drawn attention to in numerous ways, this logic can easily stall in the absence of viable or compelling images of a future.

My research examines a range of practices in the present concerned with future states of the Greek economy, documents the objects brought into being by these practices, and considers the consequences of a specific articulation of a future coming to exert such influence on reckonings of the future in Greece and of Greece. It also pursues a central analytic question, namely, what does it entail to take a future as an object of anthropological inquiry? By shifting emphasis from the productivity of a future to how that future itself is produced, I examine the future as a key site of contention for understanding the present. Finally, the research necessarily makes a case for the value of ethnographic study in analyzing the timely, the ongoing, and the incomplete – often considered incidental if not even detrimental to academic and especially ethnographic research. It does this by following the basic ethnographic impulse to attend to the everyday that endures within a seemingly exceptional moment, as well as to place this exceptionality in the context of both its history and its contested futures.

References


Tuberculosis as Disease and Politics in the Two Germanys, 1871-1961

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Political structures, ideology, and scientific knowledge interact to shape public health policy in ways that are complex and still poorly understood. The German experience during the twentieth century provides a unique opportunity to examine this interplay. Using the evolution of tuberculosis treatment and prevention in Germany between 1871 and 1961 as a case study, this project examines the way in which ideology, politics, scientific knowledge, and medical advances interacted to shape public health and medicine. In the late nineteenth century, tuberculosis represented a political and economic threat to the strength of the German nation. Control of tuberculosis therefore became central to public health policy for all governments: successive German regimes approached tuberculosis control according to their own political and ideological proclivities and with divergent attitudes toward science, while also retaining continuities in structure and strategy from predecessor regimes. Continuities existed also in the traditions of scientific thought and method, which, in turn, put limits on the influence of ideology and politics – even during the National Socialist period.

After 1945, there emerged groundbreaking new options for tuberculosis management. One of these was the introduction of streptomycin – the first effective drug therapy – which in the course of several years was followed
by important new drugs such as isoniazid. The second major advancement was the rapidly growing acceptance of the safety and benefits of immunization against tuberculosis using the BCG vaccine. These important medical developments coincided with the creation of the two ideologically distinct German states that were in the process of reshaping their public health systems and their approach to tuberculosis.

Much of my work is focused on developments after May 1945 in the Soviet and United States occupation zones and in East and West Germany. I seek to understand why, despite shared medical and public health traditions, East and West Germany developed such divergent approaches to tuberculosis. My dissertation demonstrated that public health was a major front in the Cold War and that the subjugation of tuberculosis, the ultimate ‘worker’s disease’, was a major objective in which East and West vied for superiority.

Thanks to the generous support of the Council for European Studies Pre-dissertation Fellowship, I began my archival research in Germany during the summer of 2009, completing my dissertation in July 2013. This report outlines the key findings.

**Tuberculosis as a public health and political problem, 1871–1945**

German state institutions came to see tuberculosis (TBC) as a threat to economic and military strength, while the country’s political left saw it as the embodiment of social and political injustice. The state’s self-interest compelled it to take an active role in fighting TBC, and this effort was supported across the political landscape, from conservative physicians to left-leaning insurers, reformers, and patriotic citizens. Because Germany’s federal system made health a responsibility of the individual states, the federal government could not centralize the fight against TBC. The national effort to curb the disease found expression in complex and decentralized activities with a multitude of local, regional, public, and private organizations independently providing a variety of services; this decentralization proved a formidable hurdle to Germany’s TBC control efforts for decades to come.

During the Weimar Republic, practices regarding public health and TBC changed, in part due to the Great War’s demographic changes and the fears they inspired. The rising influence of social hygiene and eugenics movements were particularly sensitive to the social and demographic cost of TBC and developed a wide array of proposals to control the disease, from tying social services to ‘hygienic behavior’ to forced sterilization. These ideas influenced National Socialist approaches to health and TBC management, and remained influential even after World War II.

Upon coming to power in 1933, the National Socialists immediately moved to translate ideology into policy and law. Medicine and public health were central to the vision of a powerful German race, racially and genetically purified. Such ideas were applied to TBC control but constantly struggled with existing medical structures and perspectives, material constraints, and competing priorities within the ruling party.

The collapse of the Nazi regime ushered in an era rife with both public health challenges and opportunities for reorganization. Although the Allies moved quickly to contain and eliminate epidemics, TBC soon appeared as a significant public health threat. Returning prisoners of war, squalid living conditions, and hunger fuelled rising rates of infection. For Germans, the aggressive resurgence of TBC foreshadowed a perilous and uncertain future. TBC control measures were inextricably linked to questions of social order, political legitimacy, and Germany’s postwar identity. As tensions grew between Soviet and American occupiers, TBC became increasingly politicized. Germans argued that it was incumbent upon the occupying powers to improve living conditions, especially nutrition. They pointed to the ominous parallels to the sharp spike in TBC deaths that had occurred after World War I and warned that only a satiated nation, free of TBC, would be a peaceful nation. In this way the fight against TBC became a proxy for the struggle over Germany’s future, its fate tied to geopolitical and ideological rivalries.
between the United States and the Soviet Union. The ability to provide medical care and secure the public health increasingly became an area of intense and sometimes bitter rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.

**Tuberculosis as a public health problem and Cold War front, 1945–1961**

East German communists championed a model of centralized and preventive care, universal access to treatment, along with workplace protections designed to win the support of the working class. The goal of building a peaceful and prosperous future and the emphasis on worker’s health was framed to contrast with the Nazi regimes’ racialized medicine, and also with the commercialized way in which medicine was being practiced in West Germany.

In East Germany, the anti-TBC campaign was built upon the Soviet Military Administration’s Order 297, issued on October 3, 1946. This called for standardized, mandatory reporting of certain forms of TBC, housing patients in suitable facilities, the creation of dispensaries where patients and their families would receive medical and social support, a public health propaganda campaign, and an improvement in living conditions.

By 1949, the East German state systematically sidelined private medical practice in favor of policlinics and hospitals organized at municipal and district (Bezirk) levels. Here strict, uniform reporting practices were followed. Cases were reported at a district level and ultimately aggregated at a national level by the Tuberculosis Research Institute (FLT) in Berlin.

Established in 1952 under the leadership of the widely respected TBC specialist Paul Steinbrück, the FLT served as the key node that brought together public health data, scientific research, medical practice, and government policy. Physically, the FLT was located in the showcase hospital city of Berlin-Buch, within the building of the famed Hufeland Hospital. Organizationally, it reported directly to the Ministry of Health and used medical knowledge to guide public health and social policy with regard to TBC. The FLT thereby brought together centralized data, clinical practice, primary research, and policy. This unique structure allowed the rigorous, standardized, and efficient marshaling of limited East German resources against TBC and did this so effectively that East German success matched – and, arguably, even surpassed – West German success in reducing disease rates.

By contrast, in the Western occupation zones, the Allies’ early attempts at reform were met by resistance from German physicians eager to retain the professional gains that they had consolidated during the Third Reich. This opposition, together with the Allies’ push for a federal state, helped lead to the West German health system in which health was the primary responsibility of private physicians as well as insurers. And, unlike the German Democratic Republic, which had a national ministry of health from the start, in the Federal Republic of Germany health only gained its own federal ministry in 1961.

In West Germany, the federal system precluded a highly centralized organization. Health was the responsibility of the individual Länder and therefore TBC care was organized at various, sometimes at overlapping levels between local, municipal, and Länder providers. The most important organization dealing with TBC was the Deutsches Tuberkulose Zentralkomitee (DZK), a national organization that brought together representatives of the individual states’ governments, the federal government, medical experts, and representatives of insurers. Its focus was on evaluation of scientific and medical progress, issuance of non-binding guidelines for physicians, and for discussion and recommendations for relevant government policy.

These inter-German differences in health organization had substantial implications for the approach to controlling TBC. In the East German fight against TBC, the interests of state and physicians were aligned to shape binding public policy and medical protocols in order to provide the best public health outcomes. By contrast, in the West German case different interest groups negotiated at the state and federal level for a better public health outcome that also served their own
interests. This differences were evident in divergent approaches to vaccination, identifying and tracking new cases, and even in medical practice.

This was especially clear, for example, in the stark differences in how streptomycin, the first effective antibiotic against the disease, was integrated into East and West German TBC treatment. In 1948, American and British researchers published the first long-term study results on streptomycin’s efficacy. Widely publicized in medical literature and the popular media, this resulted in what some described as a ‘streptomycin psychosis’.

However, the drug was scarce and very expensive, and supply could not keep pace with demand. This situation was especially acute in the East because the United States prohibited the export of streptomycin, as well as the technology required to mass produce it, to the Soviet Union or its satellite states. As a result, streptomycin became a powerful American propaganda tool, embodying literally the life-saving possibilities of American scientific and technological know-how – the flip side of the atomic bomb’s embodiment of the destructive power of new technology. It also served as American counter-narrative to the Soviet depiction of United States sciences as anti-humanitarian and militaristic.

To make the most of this scarce and valuable resource, the East German regime harnessed its centralized structure to identify cases likely to have the best response to the drug. By carefully following the most recent available American and British guidelines for streptomycin’s use in TBC – what specific types and stages of the disease were most likely to respond and at what dose – the FLT mandated that all physicians seeking streptomycin send in a doubly confirmed diagnosis to Berlin before being allocated the drug. After treatment, the treating physician would send back a detailed case report. By carefully controlling dispensation and collecting these case reports, the FLT was able to track and further refine its treatment protocols and guidelines.

By contrast, West German physicians by 1949 had easy access to the new drugs, which were generally paid for by insurance and soon produced by West German pharmaceutical companies. Although the DZK issued treatment guidelines, physicians were free to use the drug as they chose. Notably, although there was as much public enthusiasm for the drugs in West Germany as in East Germany, West German physicians were slow to warm to the new drugs since the prospect of effective new drugs shortening in-patient periods and rendering surgical procedures obsolete directly threatened the livelihoods of West German specialists.

**Conclusion**

East Germany’s government, for all its failings elsewhere, did, by most standard measures, manage to improve the health of its population and bolstered the regime’s quest for political legitimacy and popular support. It did so by combining the efficiency of centralized social hygiene with modern medical innovations. East German officials created a centralized health-care system based on the principles of social medicine, emphasizing disease prevention, early detection, and theoretically, a healthy, safe workplace. Yet West Germany’s TBC rates also fell, almost in parallel to those of the German Democratic Republic. This drop was most likely a result of the ‘economic miracle’, which dramatically improved nutrition and living standards, while new drugs lowered morbidity and reduced new infection, and the continued use of the sanatoria sequestered actively infectious and terminally ill patients.

From a long-term public health perspective, neither system prevails exclusively: the best public health strategies require combining both approaches. As antibiotic resistance developed, initial enthusiasm about miracle treatments gave way to more caveats and it became clear that neither system had the upper hand. These lessons of TBC ultimately serve as models for fighting other massive public health challenges, including cancer and AIDS. Experience ultimately teaches that effective public health results from evidence-based therapeutic approaches and preventative, population-based approaches.
From Private Regulation to Public Policy: The Case of Corporate Non-Financial Reporting
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More than 2,500 of Europe’s largest companies now disclose information related to social and environmental performance on a regular basis – up from nearly zero in the early 1990s (European Commission, 2013). Though critics of so-called corporate non-financial reporting often claim that these disclosures amount to little more than public relations ‘greenwash’, others argue that transparency of this kind has improved significantly over the past decade, helping companies to better understand their own impact on society and the environment and improving their long-term financial (as well as non-financial) performance. Whatever the final judgment is, and it is likely far too soon to know, the upward trend in reporting shows no sign of stopping. For while corporate non-financial reporting began largely as a voluntary enterprise – something companies did either on their own or under the guidance of private regulatory organizations like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), and the United Nations Global Compact (GC) – it has now caught the eye of policymakers, most recently in Brussels, who look to extend this practice to more companies through mandatory reporting legislation.

This project uses the case of corporate non-financial reporting to examine the relationship between private business regulation – that is, regulation by non-state actors – and public policy. Recent work in political science has called
attention to the increased role of private actors at various stages of the regulatory process, including agenda-setting, rule-making, and implementation (Büthe and Mattli, 2011; Vogel, 2008). To some, the delegation of regulatory authority by government to the private sector, whether done implicitly or explicitly, is emblematic of the declining power of the state and the further entrenchment of ‘neo-liberal’ ideas. Contrary to these views, the case of corporate non-financial reporting illustrates how private actors can use voluntary standards and frameworks, not to replace government, but to drag it into policy areas that have been neglected or ignored. At the same time, while private regulation has the potential to ‘bring the state back in’, so to speak, it also provides business interests with new opportunities to influence the development of public policy.

Although corporate non-financial reporting is already commonplace among the world’s largest corporations (approximately 80 percent of the world’s largest 250 companies currently report), the vast majority of companies still do not report at all. In Europe, the 2,500 companies that are currently reporting make up only about 6 percent of the approximately 42,000 large companies currently in operation (European Commission, 2013). Thus, while corporate non-financial reporting has come a long way in a relatively short period of time, it still has a long way to go – especially when compared with financial reporting. Preliminary results from my research identify this as a key dynamic linking private regulation to public policy. On the one hand, private regulatory organizations have created powerful incentives for companies to improve their disclosure practices above and beyond existing legal requirements. In the process, they have also established rules and frameworks with widespread legitimacy and influence in the corporate sphere, placing non-financial reporting high on the agenda of many large, high-profile companies. At the same time, they have run up against problems that state regulators are in a unique position to solve, namely problems of implementation (e.g., getting companies to report according to a common standard) and enforcement (e.g., getting more companies to report by penalizing those that do not). Although policymakers today typically refrain from imposing additional regulations on business, it appears that the work done by private regulatory organizations has provided sufficient political cover for them to intervene in this case.

This analysis is based on approximately 40 in-depth interviews with large, mostly multinational companies based in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, as well as several of the most prominent private regulatory organizations operating in the area of corporate non-financial reporting, including the GRI, the CDP, and the GC. In part, these interviews were intended to uncover how companies form their own preferences toward non-financial reporting (i.e., why/how do companies report?), and to determine the extent to which these preferences vary cross-nationally (Martin and Swank, 2012). In addition, these interviews were also designed to reveal the strategies that private regulatory organizations employ to incentivize companies and to standardize and legitimize the practice of corporate non-financial reporting more generally.

Most of the companies interviewed engage in at least some form of non-financial reporting. Indeed, a number of them are now required to report by law. For example, most large companies in France are required to report on a number of specific non-financial indicators as a result of the Grenelle II regulations, passed in 2012. The reporting requirement in Grenelle II greatly expanded upon a previous requirement included in the 2001 New Economic Regulations. A more limited, narrative reporting requirement has been in place for listed companies in the United Kingdom since 2006. Interestingly, a more extensive requirement, called the ‘Operating and Financial Review’, had been set to roll out that same year, only to be scrapped at the last minute by then-Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown (and despite significant support from the business community). In Sweden, no comprehensive reporting requirement exists for large or listed companies, although state-owned companies must now report in accordance with the GRI’s Sustainability Reporting Guidelines
(through legislation passed in 2007). In some ways the timing of the interviews is unfortunate, as private regulations predate almost all of these state regulations, and many of the companies interviewed started reporting before these laws were passed. Still, it remains true that much of the reporting done by the companies interviewed exceeds (often substantially) even these newer, more rigorous legal requirements, leaving open the question of why companies report.

For most companies, the decision to go ‘beyond compliance’ in their non-financial reporting is an explicit part of a larger business strategy. The purpose of this strategy is often to improve financial performance by identifying risks and protecting brand reputation, attracting new investment, recruiting and retaining talented employees, identifying new opportunities for growth, or gaining access to new markets. As a result, many companies target their reporting at investors and ‘non-financial analysts’ (i.e., the gatekeepers of various indices, ratings, and rankings of ‘responsible’ companies), current and prospective employees, and, to a lesser extent, local communities and governments (i.e., reporting as part of the ‘license to operate’). Many companies also see reporting as a way to avoid scandal. For example, many claim that the process of reporting helps to identify and address potential risks (as one put it, “what gets measured gets managed”) and thus adds value regardless of whether anyone actually reads the report. Of course, some companies also say that reporting on non-financial performance is simply the right thing to do. As one can imagine, the particular reasons a company has for reporting vary according to a number of contextual factors, including the company’s leadership, industry, size, ownership, and regulatory environment.

Private regulatory organizations play a key role not only in convincing companies why they should disclose non-financial information but also in helping them to figure out exactly how and what to report. For example, the GC’s ‘Ten Principles’ give companies a rough overview of major non-financial issues, covering human rights, labor, the environment, and anti-corruption – something which may be particularly helpful for companies reporting for the first time. For those that want to produce a more extensive report, the GRI’s Sustainability Reporting Guidelines (currently in its fourth version, ‘G4’) provide detailed discussion of general reporting principles (including materiality, comparability, reliability, etc.) as well as 91 specific indicators of social, environmental, and economic performance that companies can begin to track and report. Many other organizations – such as the Carbon Disclosure Project and the Dow Jones Sustainability Index – solicit non-financial information from companies directly through questionnaires. These questionnaires may contain 100 or more questions and take a month or more to complete; nevertheless, many companies take them seriously (as they are required for many of the most competitive ratings and rankings), and as a result they operate as de facto reporting standards.

The voluntary aspect of reporting presents a challenge for private regulators – they must incentivize companies to commit to self-regulation while also making sure that these regulations have enough bite to actually make a difference. Bob Massie, co-founder of the GRI, describes it as the challenge of being both “bold and visionary” as well as “practical and incrementalist.” Once these organizations succeed in gaining companies’ support – for example, by building their own ‘brand’ and offering exclusive reputational benefits based on the value of that brand – they need to be careful not to move too fast too quickly. Early drafts of ‘G4’, for instance, received a negative reaction at several of the companies interviewed for this project. One manager dismissed it as a “wish list for NGOs,” while another claimed that it “could undermine the existence of the [GRI].” The GRI is certainly not alone in having this kind of problem. In general, while private regulatory organizations have succeeded in getting a relatively large number of companies to report on non-financial performance, they have also run into limitations that are in some sense inherent to voluntary self-regulation.
As noted, only about 6 percent of large companies in Europe currently report on non-financial performance (European Commission, 2013). Although this group includes many of the largest and most recognizable corporations in the region, many observers agree that more companies need to begin reporting. Unfortunately, while more companies continue to report each year, growth in non-financial reporting is slowing (CorporateRegister.com, 2013). In addition, among those companies that do report, there is still a great deal of variance as to the standard(s) used as well as the content and quality of the actual disclosures. All this has raised demand for new mandatory non-financial reporting legislation. In response to this demand, the European Commission hosted a number of multi-stakeholder roundtables in 2009–10, launched a general public consultation in 2010–11, and gathered experts (including those from private regulatory organizations) for an impact assessment in 2012. In April 2013, it released its proposal for a new directive that would require large companies (i.e., those with more than 500 employees, a balance sheet exceeding EUR 20 million, or revenue exceeding EUR 40 million) to include non-financial information in their annual reports. The Commission estimates that this requirement, if accepted, would increase the number of companies reporting from 2,500 to 18,000 – a threshold that private regulatory organizations appear unlikely to reach on their own.

The rise of non-financial reporting, as with ‘corporate social responsibility’ in general, is often associated with the rise of neo-liberalism and the erosion of institutionalized forms of social solidarity in Europe (Kinderman, 2013). Although the absence of effective public policy is key to the rise of private regulation, this research paints a somewhat different picture by illustrating how private actors can use voluntary standards and frameworks to bring government into policy domains that have been left vacant as a result of neo-liberalism. That said, neo-liberal rhetoric can be a powerful tool (Schmidt and Thatcher, 2013), and it is partly through their use of this tool that private regulatory organizations have been able to secure the support not only of business but of government as well. The idea that companies can create ‘shared value’, benefiting both themselves and society at large, has been particularly powerful, for instance (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Still, while private regulation may lay the groundwork for new public policy in some cases, its reliance upon voluntary self-regulation also raises questions about corporate influence in processes and discussions that are largely hidden from public view (Culpepper, 2011).

For many, the most important question about corporate non-financial reporting relates not to how it is regulated but to whether it actually makes any difference. Among individual companies, those that report often refer to it both as a “learning process,” in which they come to understand their own social and environmental impacts, and as a catalyst for positive change within the company (e.g., “to say something, you have to do something”). Of course, others are more skeptical, pointing out that while they agree with the idea of reporting, they find many faults in its implementation (e.g., too many companies with poor performance still managing to do well in rankings, ratings, etc.). At a structural or systemic level, one can look at the development of non-financial reporting over the past two decades as part of a gradual change in expectations about large corporations and their role in society. The transition from private regulation to public policy appears perhaps more natural from this perspective. For, as one manager noted, “what is voluntary becomes expected; what is expected can become mandatory.”
References


Productive Debts: The Financialization of Post-Socialist Cities and the Magic of Debt in Skopje, Macedonia

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The noise of construction workers drilling the ground just a few meters from bamboo-made lounge chairs occupied by young men and women in business clothes is a prominent sign that Skopje is changing. The gray, cement, and open socialist public spaces are being replaced by national monuments, glass-built shopping malls, and luxury office towers. Despite the prophecy broadcast on gigantic LCD screens that soon the center of Macedonia’s capital “will become like Times Square,” the gigantic urban renewal project, Skopje 2014, has run out of money. Yet, local building companies continue to erect new buildings, borrowing materials and delaying payments to workers.

What drives the continuing production of Skopje 2014, now that debt, not capital, is being accumulated? How do building companies transform negative debt relations into productive forms of credit? What keeps the stalled relations of debt among international lenders, building companies, and the Macedonian government from falling apart?

I started exploring these questions in the summer of 2013, when I spent two months conducting preliminary research in Skopje. Originally, I
had approached construction company managers, both active and retired, in order to understand their subjective perspectives on the privatization of urban space. I wanted to know what they thought was the benefit, if any, of building a new, private city – but I soon was told that there were more urgent questions to ask. “This is all very interesting,” commented Ana, one of my interlocutors, when I told her that I was interested in the new aesthetics embedded in private spaces. “But Fabio, here you’re missing the point: Where is the money coming from”? Following the lead of Ana and many other interlocutors, I redirected my inquiry to further explore the social relations through which building companies are able to construct new private spaces despite not having monetary liquidity.

Preliminary data, consisting of five long, semi-structured interviews collected during about two months of participant observation with young architects and company managers, suggest that building companies occupy a strange position: On the one hand, they rely heavily on financial instruments, such as loans or mortgages, both to pay for their own construction activity and to find customers able to buy the spaces they produce. In this respect, many building companies offer their customers preferential treatments at specific bank offices; this includes better loan or mortgage conditions, but also the possibility of using the purchased home (as opposed to a previously owned property) as collateral. Yet on the other hand, building companies are not able to rely on money and finance alone in order to complete their transactions: the Macedonian State, as well as other private local and international investors, does not pay them in time. This pushes companies to find alternative ways to compensate workers, contractors, and furnisher – they have to find ways to make their debt productive. But how do they do so? What kind of non-monetary forms of payment can allow companies to pay for their debt?

While these questions will be the core of my doctoral dissertation, preliminary data show that paying back monetary debt with non-monetary means does not simply settle the score. In certain cases, it might ever turn the previous debt into a new credit. For instance, one way to pay back overdue salaries of construction companies is to provide in-good compensation. Enterprise managers would reward workers with a certain amount of built space – generally apartments – in exchange for a given amount of working time. Yet how the equivalences are calculated is not always a matter of precise science: all sorts of ‘external’ elements shape whose work will be evaluated more, and who on the contrary will see their time concretized in smaller rooms. Often, workers find themselves indebted with their employers: the value of apartments seems to always exceed the long hours they work, so that precisely because they are getting paid, they need to work more for the company. Work, in this case, does not generate freedom, but new bonds of dependence. In other cases, payments might consist of different sorts of favors, such as hiring a workers’ kinsman, or facilitating some transactions with local authorities. Yet, again, such ‘reciprocities’ go well beyond the monetary debt that a company owes a worker or another company. This results in managers of construction companies having additional leverage over the people they are indebted to. Magically, precisely because they don’t have money, building companies seem to be able to turn debt into credit – and credit into different forms of power.

This scenario complicates current discussions of urban financialization. On the one hand, building companies are the harbingers of financial obligations and promote forms of financial debt and credit. They fit neatly into familiar schemes of urban financialization, whereby meaningful spaces of life are linked and shaped by unstable, monetized, and global financial markets (Martin 2002). On the other hand, these financial forms of debt and credit coexist and interact with other kinds of debt and credit relations, reciprocities, and favor, pertaining to different domains of social life. Urban financial regimes cannot thus be simply described as abstract economic tools utilized by the capitalist class for dispossessing citizens (Brash 2011) and for disciplining their subjectivities (Martin 2002; Williams 2004). Specific attention
needs to be paid to the way in which debt and credit are manipulated by building companies, and specifically to the nature of the reversible relation that connects credit to debt: operating conversions between different domains of life might generate alternative forms of power. How do different spheres interact, and what kind of exchanges and conversions are operated between these domains, is the central topic of the research that I will pursue in my doctoral fieldwork throughout 2013 and 2014.

It is perhaps superfluous to stress the centrality and urgency of studying debt and credit relations. The current global financial crisis has unraveled long-standing financial schemes that have driven urban redevelopment for decades, whether feeding off household savings (as in Italy) or consumer indebtedness and wage reduction (as in the United States). In Skopje, urban financialization does not follow the urban real-estate market; instead, it is hugely a consequence of the restructuring and expansion of the Macedonian state. The 300 million Euros loan from the International Monetary Fund was not only used to develop and ‘brand’ the city center as a luxurious private paradise for foreign investors; the government utilized it to build a national past, erecting anew neo-classical buildings and statues of national heroes, and to solve or regulate conflicts over ownership of land and property. Together with drastic reforms of urban land-use regulations that earned Macedonia the World Bank’s praise as the third-best world economic reformer in 2010, the project magnified the volume of financial transactions, dragging companies, investors, and normal citizens into new financial relations with the state and international investors.

In this scenario, debt is the result of multiple practices and of layered scalar relations. Construction companies have come to be interfaces for debt and credit relations that tie in precarious equilibriums the Macedonian state, international lenders, workers, and buyers. This specific entanglement of relations has been downplayed in the rare studies of privatization in post-socialist cities that focused on financial issues.

Stressing the fragmentation of urban spaces, such accounts describe finance and debt as agents of space-time compression that foster flexible accumulation of capital (Harvey 1990; Hirt 2012; Andreusz 2006). While such studies stress the incorporation of cities into global financial flows, they downplay the unique historical position of post-socialist cities, where the volatility of stalled financial relations embedded in projects such as Skopje 2014 interacts with different layers of uncertainty inherited by post-socialist transition: flexibility, uncertainty, and precarity were part of post-socialist everyday well before the inflow of financial schemes. Yet, what new social relations will be generated by the encounter of different forms of flexibility? The vagaries of socialism have given rise to complex, rooted, and porous networks of favors, barter, reciprocity, and corruption that have mitigated some of the uncertainties of post-socialist transition. How do they interact with the financialization of debt and credit relations? What new forms of social hierarchy and reciprocity will be enabled by the financialization of urban life?

Additionally, the kind of debt and credit relations I encountered in Skopje’s building companies do not fit neatly within classical anthropological account of debt and credit. In fact, debt and credit have been at the core of the discussion in Economic Anthropology for decades. Disrupting our common association of debt with negative relations and credit with positive ones, Peebles (2010) has recently stressed the need to think of credit and debt as inseparable concepts and practices. Classic anthropological literature on exchange and value supports Peebles’s argument, focusing on reciprocity – that is, the social relations (Mauss 1967; Malinowski 1922), cultural practices and forms of reasoning (Maurer 2005), and currencies (Bloch and Parry 1989; Bohannan and Bohannan 1968) that make it possible to smoothly transform debt into credit. However, by dealing with reciprocation, this discussion elides the
transformative aspects of the translation of debt into credit. As Coronil (1997) has shown for the Venezuelan state, financial wealth and credit can ‘magically’ turn into indebtedness. In Macedonia, construction companies can employ a similar ‘magic’ to turn their debt into credit: this usually involves transforming monetary debt towards workers (wages) or financial institutions (loans) into payments in kind (housing units) or relational favors/nepotism (hiring kinsmen). Yet, what kinds of social negotiations and stratification hierarchies make these ‘magical’ transformations possible? Using Guyer’s (2004) work as a framework, my project will argue that scales of value and hierarchies of power are crucial to understanding transactions and translations of debts into credit in and across different domains of value: construction companies rely on power hierarchies to unequally convert monetary debt into favors, working hours into built spaces, and personal connections into credit lines. Building on the anthropology of labor (Blim 1994; Petrovici 2011), my study will discuss specifically the hierarchies within the enterprises that allow for the transformation of debt, instead of the cultural aspect of debt management usually put forward in anthropological accounts of high-level employees, traders, and brokers (Ho 2009; Zaloom 2006).

My future project will address these issues by focusing on building companies as mediating entities that generate, articulate, and shape debt, moving it between the different domains of financial and interpersonal relations. Preliminary fieldwork suggests that building companies are crucial mediators of national and transnational debt relations. They design plans for municipalities in a way that will accommodate the political need to increase revenue by expanding taxable space; ensure the loyalty of workers even in the absence of payment from the state; and provide foreign investors with professional expertise, consulting, and connections across political and ethnic divides. At the same time, building companies manipulate debt: they renegotiate credit lines, they stretch debt’s repayment over time, and they even transform monetary credit into relational favors. Spearheading the government’s Skopje 2014 privatization wave, building companies crystallize the new arrangement of social relations brought about by the financialization of urban life. Moreover, they are a site where researchers can study both ‘up’, opening a window into the networks of interests around urban speculation, and ‘down’, onto the new forms of labor control and solidarity. Finally, the networks of exchange in which building companies participate are rooted in both socialist and post-socialist experiences, thus allowing for a genealogical analysis of emerging debt relations.

References


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