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# Iphigenia's sacrifice: generational historicity as a structure of feeling in times of austerity

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Iphi, an unemployed actor in austerity-ridden Greece, imagines a theatre adaptation of a classic tragedy, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in which the heroine is sacrificed on the altar of austerity by politicians. While writing her playscript, Iphi has a dream: she is taken to the sacrificial altar, not by politicians, but by her own parents, the generation who lived through the affluent years before austerity. Iphi's generational-analogical thinking introduces a politically inspiring historicity, which offers insights into the accountability of austerity. It also allows us to reassess the notion of generations as a local category and an anthropological analytical construct. The article indicates the emergence of an as yet not fully articulated generational awareness – a new structure of feeling – about austerity, which is outlined here as it develops in an incipient form. I argue that the emerging generational historicity communicates a critical message, but also hides from view less visible inequalities.

Imagine a stage with a sacrificial altar, like those of ancient Greece. Imagine a chorus impersonating impoverished people, the victims of austerity ... Imagine the heroine, 'Iphigenia of austerity', pale, tainted, waiting for her sacrificers, Merkel, Lagarde, and Schäuble, to strike her with knives as they enter the stage. How do you feel at this thought? The audience, people who have suffered from austerity, will reach a state of catharsis from the very first scene!

Iphigenia, who shared these thoughts with me, is a 33-year-old unemployed actor and playwright in austerity-ridden Greece. She bears another classical Greek name, but she has adopted 'Iphigenia' (shortened to Iphi) as her pseudonym for this article. 'I don't want to hide my identity', she said, well aware of academic writing practices; 'rather I want to give a name to my generation ... I am Iphigenia, standing for all Iphigenias, a generation sacrificed at the altar of austerity. I want to speak for the people of my generation'.

Iphi's provocative ideas invite us to examine an emerging 'generational' historicity which addresses accountability – regarding austerity – in terms of consequences felt by particular age groups. To aid the analysis that follows, I rely on Raymond Williams's notion of 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977; 1979; Williams & Orrom

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1954). This was introduced to account for not fully developed understandings of generational awareness, which may not be clearly articulated and formalized, very much like Iphi's. I combine Williams's approach with recent anthropological insights that focus on historicity – a dynamic concept that captures vernacular readings of the past that often challenge formal historicism (Hirsch & Stewart 2005; Stewart 2016). Both concepts – structures of feeling and historicity – direct analytical attention to local, non-homogeneous historicizing narratives – 'forms of human awareness of being and becoming in time' (Palmié & Stewart 2019) – that often coexist with static, linear, dominant narratives or explanations.

My synthesis of such conceptual analytical tools is made available here as an example of ethnographic innovation that captures the creativity, analogic irony, and temporalized ambivalence of unfinished, generation-specific views that are critically predisposed towards power. The concept of structures of feeling, as introduced by Williams, allows us to appreciate that an awareness of change usually develops through a slow process of cultural creation – which is not fully separated from dominant conventions – giving new meaning to excluded elements of the past and present (Roseberry 1991: 26, 76). The concept encourages fertile analytical synergies with anthropological interpretations that are not, strictly speaking, Marxist; a syncretic approach that I will adopt in this article.

In the ethnography that follows, I explore creative but incomplete narratives inspired by the consequences of the austerity crisis in Greece. These include ideas about a theatre play that incorporates a dream and graphic interventions that generate analogical connections with previous eras. They indeterminately outline a new structure of feeling or awareness of generational historicity which Iphi calls the generation of austerity. This structure of feeling is still taking shape and becomes gradually apparent as people – like Iphi and her family – talk about austerity in terms of its felt consequences, although not always in terms of finalized, closed experiences (Williams 1977: 132) or formalized historicist narratives.

It is at this critical moment – ten years after the beginning of austerity – that anthropology can approach the complexity of such issues with more clarity. The austerity crisis has stimulated new narratives about the historicity of the current economic predicament (Knight & Stewart 2016; see also Knight 2013) and its broader consequences (Dalakoglou & Angelopoulos 2018; Papataxiarchis 2018; Rakopoulos 2018; Raudon & Shore 2018; Theodossopoulos 2014a; 2014b). In this article, I take inspiration from – and contribute to – this new literature, but also rely on analytical models produced before the crisis. Iphi's generational critique follows a well-documented Greek practice of thinking analogically (Knight 2015; Stewart 2012; Sutton 1998) to support arguments inspired by the present – such as Iphi's claim that young Greek adults in their late twenties and early thirties have suffered more heavily from economic austerity than older generations.

Iphi sees the predicament of her generation as a sacrifice. She argues that she has been sacrificed – as the heroine of Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis* – by her parents' generation and the economic choices they have made as early as the time of her birth. This recognition manifests itself existentially in a dream, in which Iphi's family put her on the sacrificial altar. Iphi underlines the sense-making value of her dream as a call to apprehend particular consequences (Kirtsoglou 2010; Stewart 1997; 2004; 2012), an opportunity to disseminate a message about austerity, which she incorporates into a theatre play that she is slowly writing: an adaptation of Euripides' tragedy, suited

to address the predicaments of the present. In what follows, I will investigate the generational historicity engendered by Iphi's unrealized idea.

### **Analogical historicities (of austerity) in context**

Iphi's dream and unfinished playscript – and the graphic art I will shortly introduce – are riddled with analogies, which draw from more than one Greek past to think allegorically about an uncomfortable present. Analogical thinking has been recognized as a widespread interpretative practice (or political critique) in informal Greek contexts. It resonates with the pervasiveness of an antiquarian historical formalism in the construction of modern Greek identities and the continuous repudiation of this formalism in everyday life, an analytical view that, through the influential work of Michael Herzfeld (1986; 1987; 1992; 1997), has shaped anthropological understandings of political accountability in Greece.

Contemporary political events, as David Sutton (1998) has shown in his classic analysis of analogical thinking, are explained through appeals to the past or recurring patterns of history (see also Herzfeld 1992). In local-level narratives, particular pasts resurface to explain particular presents – generating a sense of simultaneity – which Daniel Knight (2012; 2015) labels cultural proximity: instances when distant periods of time are often perceived as being closer to the present. Analogical thinking here encourages the merging of the synchronic and diachronic, generating indissoluble connections with the present (and future) (Stewart 2012). The concept of 'generation', as used by Iphi and her peers (to elicit a commentary about austerity), reveals a fluid awareness of temporal interconnectedness, a sense of historicity set 'in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional disposition' (Hirsch & Stewart 2005: 262). Iphi's narrative indicates that her age group has its own distinctive sense of generational historicity, which Iphi employs to turn culturally intimate experiences into a critical weapon against austerity. The austerity crisis, here, is 'stimulating temporal thought' (Knight & Stewart 2016: 1).

Ten years have passed since the implementation of austerity measures, or simply what many in Greece call 'the crisis': they refer to an unsocial regime of salary, pension, and social benefit cuts – and the resulting rates of unemployment – introduced as a remedy for the Greek national debt. Iphi and most of her friends believe that the current crisis was implemented deliberately to weaken the Greek middle class and make people work more for less. In this culturally specific sense, 'crisis' has become a politically charged term, a trope for negotiating accountability (Knight 2013), but also, as I will show in this article, a term that captures a generational experience of impoverishment – the view that a certain portion of the middle class has been transformed into the 'new poor' (*neóftohoi*) (Panourgíá 2018: 132). We now have a clearer ethnographic view of how local social actors, like Iphi, are affected by this gradual process of impoverishment, yet the complexity of the transformation in question necessitates that we proceed with analytical caution – looking carefully at specific fragments of the local experience, aware of complexity, and cautious of generalizations.

### **Conceptual tools: generation and structures of feeling**

Iphi's self-ascribed category – 'I am[: belong to] the generation of austerity' – echoes the views of a social theorist, Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), who correlated the development of strong generational awareness with periods of accelerated change or traumatic historical events (see also Bristow 2016; Edmunds & Turner 2005). Mannheim

located generations temporally in particular historical events, transformations, or circumstances: for example, the people who came of age during the Napoleonic wars or the First World War (Mannheim 1952 [1923]).

Such a socio-historical view of generation is anchored not in biological determinations but in life experiences, and contrasts with the 'genealogical' use of age groups as a regular, cyclical succession of social roles (see Lamb 2015; Pina-Cabral 2018). We see examples of the second mode of understanding generations in structural functional accounts, for example those of African societies, where biological cohorts structure responsibilities and social roles (Fortes 1984; Goody 1971). We can distinguish 'genealogical generations' of this sort in all societies – even in Europe (see Lisón-Tolosana 1966)<sup>1</sup> – for example, retired individuals, or unemployed youth, such as Iphi and her friends. As we shall see, Iphi prefers to set the latter age-categories apart in an attempt to politicize her generational position. Her overall conception of generations challenges the static expectations of naturalized social roles – which she sees as confining – anchoring instead her own generational experiences in a particular transformative period: for example, coming of age at the onset of austerity. Drawing inspiration from Stewart Hall (Hall 2017; Hall & Massey 2010), I am inclined to approach such periods of accelerated transformation as generational conjunctures.

The Gramscian, conjunctural perspective invites us to consider another analytical concept intimately connected with generational experiences and artistic performance. This is Raymond Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling', coined originally to encapsulate a specific generational view and recognition of cultural practice (or style or language of artistic expression) (Williams 1977; 1979; Williams & Orrom 1954): for example, a theatre play, like the one Iphi is organizing. For Williams, structures of feeling can engender partially unconventional understandings that may have not been registered by dominant ideology,<sup>2</sup> as for example, the creative work of a young generation in a given period (Williams 1979). Such novel or progressive understandings do not always presuppose a complete rift with previous norms and conventions.

The elusiveness but also the usefulness of 'structure of feeling' as an analytical concept is rooted in the fluid interrelationship between different generational experiences. As with Mannheim, Williams is aware of the simultaneous coevalness and lack of coevalness that separates and unites overlapping generations (or parts of the same generation that occupy different positions in the constellation of power). This is why Williams refuses to narrowly pinpoint his use of structures of feeling in a closed definition; by the time a structure of feeling becomes clearly articulated, he explains, it may be about to be replaced by another (1977: 128–33). In fact, Williams invites us to consider alternative cultural creations – emergent, artistic, unanticipated forms – beyond the sterile base-superstructure dichotomy that constrained conventional Marxist scholarship (Roseberry 1991).

These insights encourage us to reassess generational thinking. Its local use – independent of its success in defying static formalism and conventions – adds a sense of temporal meaningfulness to local explanations of social change. In the ethnographic case I explore in this article, a particular conception of generation anchored in austerity allows us to see the emergence of a new variant of crisis-related historical constructivism (cf. Faubion 1993), which is based on generational analogical thinking and used by everyday social actors to reason about well-being, its attainment (Narotzky & Besnier 2014), and the consequences of the crisis on their lives. It is time to explore these themes ethnographically.

### The protagonists

Iphi is not a composite character. She and I have considered generating a composite character bearing this ancient Greek name in the near future, each for our own purposes. Iphi intends to develop a contemporary reincarnation of Euripides' Iphigenia, explicitly adapted to the Greek austerity crisis, and renamed *Iphigenia of Austerity* (*Ifigénia tis litótitas*). Her main character, she imagines, will represent her generation's predicament and cancelled dreams. I intend to develop my own version of 'Iphigenia of Austerity' in graphic ethnography form, hoping that in this way I will reach out to the local community, sharing research findings. Iphi and I have collaborated in sketching our main protagonists – and I have drawn them on paper. We have tried to generate 'intelligible typifications' of her generation; defined by age, family status, higher education, subsequent unemployment, but also 'style' (Faubion 1993: 167).

For this article, Iphi is, to all intents and purposes, her real self: an unemployed actor in austerity-ridden Greece; and the same applies for all people who appear in the ethnography that follows. One of them – Iphi's father, Mr Agis – has been my research interlocutor since 1998, while others, such as Iphi's brother (Oréstis) and friends (Níkos, Maria, and Pópi), have shared their views with me since the beginning of the Greek financial crisis, in 2009. They live in Patras, an urban centre in southern Greece, which has been my fieldwork site for at least two decades. Although this article focuses on the views of Iphi and her immediate circle, my analysis is informed by longitudinal anthropological engagement, which culminated in 2014–18, when I worked for an Economic and Social Research Council project that investigated the consequences of austerity in Greece and Portugal.

My fieldwork for this project involved in-depth discussions with a great number of citizens in Patras affected by austerity, most of whom I met through participating in humanitarian solidarity initiatives (see Theodossopoulos 2016; 2020). The majority of my respondents – beneficiaries of aid and volunteers – were people who see themselves as middle class, albeit an impoverished middle class. Neni Panourgíá (2018) refers to this austerity-afflicted category of people as the 'new poor' (*neóftohoi*). My respondents in Patras prefer another term – an adjective turned to a noun – '*oi ftohopiiménoi*' (the impoverished). It addresses the experience of having to live with earning and spending less than before. In Patras, this turn of circumstances is recognized as a lived consequence (Williams 1977) of the prolonged period of austerity.

The pain and apprehension of impoverished citizens, I was told by several social workers and aid volunteers in Patras, far outweigh those of regular victims of poverty, owing to the loss of status, shame, and a reluctance to seek aid. Some middle-class citizens experienced major dispossession – loss of property and income – while others have suffered in less dramatic ways: they have made serious cuts in their spending, and struggle to pay the increased taxation introduced by austerity. Those in permanent employment support at least one unemployed (or partially employed) family member. In this particular context, living with one's parents – while complaining of the arrangement – is a common adaptation strategy for young adults (see also Kyriazidou 2020).

In the respects outlined above, Iphi and her friends are representative of a significant category of citizens in Patras: well-educated but unemployed young adults. Their experiences remain largely invisible in the media and academic accounts – a realization that prompted Iphi to invite me to use the narrative of her dream as an inspiration to represent the views of people like her: not the traditional poor (*tous paradosiakouís*

*ftohoús*), but people who are nevertheless affected by austerity. 'I want you to promise', she said forthrightly,

that you will write something about the victims of austerity who are not stereotypes of poverty. They are young and unemployed and live with their parents, suffocating (*kai pniǵonte*) from their parents' expectations. These are the invisible victims of austerity in Greece, who remain unnoticed (*pou pernán aparatíritoi*) by foreign commentators and Greek politicians. These are the people I want to put on stage in my play.

### **Representational strategies: graphic ethnography and subversive irony**

It is necessary at this point to explain the representational strategies that Iphi and I use to convey our arguments. As mentioned above, I have experimented with graphic ethnography to capture some of the creativity and spontaneity of our anthropological-cum-artistic collaboration. Graphic ethnography captures and amplifies the irony and ambivalence communicated by Iphi's message, but also permits me to differentiate my analysis from hers, without unsettling future co-operation. For irony embraces the possibility of agreement and disagreement in productive cohabitation (see Carrithers 2012; Rapport & Stade 2014).

Graphic ethnography has recently emerged as an ethnographic approach that combines text and image in unique combinations and formats. These range from full-length graphic monographs (e.g. Hamdy & Nye 2017) to sequential graphic strips and reviews (e.g. Theodossopoulos 2017; 2019) and textual articles, such as this one, supported by graphic strips or panels (see also Newman 1998; Schwanhäuser 2016; Theodossopoulos 2016). This explosion of creativity – which represents a graphic 'turn' in its incipient stages – has elevated the medium to an analytic tool, an approach that sharply contrasts with the merely 'illustrative' uses of drawing in older ethnographies (Ingold 2011). Escaping from the realism of photographic replication, ethnographic sketching destabilizes static representation by introducing doubt (Taussig 2011). It also captures ethnographic details that would otherwise escape attention (Causey 2017), including an engagement with the subtle corporeality of everyday life (Elliot 2017; Theodossopoulos 2020). By introducing drawing to ethnography, we open the possibility for a productive process that involves creative improvisation and the realigning of observation with action (Ingold & Hallam 2007: 2-5; see also Bruner 1993).

Pushing experimentation with graphic ethnography one step further, I emulate in this article the style of a well-known Greek political cartoonist, Mentis Mpostantzoglou (1918-95), more widely known as Bost. Instead of using or analysing his work, I sketched original graphic panels that explicitly draw from his artistic style. His critical cartooning, familiar to my respondents in Patras, provides an additional opportunity to reflect about the historicity of their views about austerity, making allegorical connections with previous periods of poverty (cf. Knight 2015). Iphi, who immediately recognized the subversive and allegorical potential of the particular analogies, encouraged me to draw additional Bostian depictions of her dream and theatre play (Figs 1 and 2). The third Bostian graphic (Fig. 3) was used to communicate my analytical views with Iphi (and other respondents in the field), albeit in a less abstract or authority-inducing manner.

Bost's political cartoons, published in major Greek newspapers and magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s, were mostly presented as single frames, with a title and dense dialogues. They delivered a sharp left-orientated critique of contemporary events, political leaders, and celebrities: Karamanlis, Onassis, Kalas, among others

(cf. Demetriou 2004). In time, Bost developed three favourite characters who reappeared in his cartoons: a ragged and toothless classical figure of Mother Greece and her destitute children, Pinaleon (a starving son) and Anergitsa (an unemployed daughter). They stand as ragtag and self-critical representations of culturally intimate embarrassments and pride (Herzfeld 1997), here depicting poverty and unemployment in post-war Greece through a refracting lens that exposes inequality through irony.<sup>3</sup>

Subversive irony is an indispensable ingredient of the Bostian style, and political cartooning more generally (see Moritz Schwarcz 2013). Most of those who can fully appreciate the culturally intimate contextuality of such humour are usually ‘already’ insiders (Herzfeld 2001: 68). As political humour often relies on the interplay of irony and temporality,<sup>4</sup> its relational qualities are anchored on unique understandings – or ‘structures of feeling’ – that emerge from particular periods (Moritz Schwarcz 2013). Seen in these terms, the three graphic panels in this article do not merely provide ethnographic elaboration – attracting attention to what words cannot see (Causey 2017) – but also unravel a dialectic of sub-certainties about truth (see Carrithers 2012; Pipyrou 2014): for example, where the perspectives of the anthropologist and the playwright coexist in creative co-operation and partial disagreement. The resulting ambivalence – an ambiguity between parody and sincerity (Boyer 2013) – can shed light on the ironic contradictions and complexity of social life (Fernandez & Huber 2001).

### Scene no. 1: Sketching a theatre play

Mr Agis’s flat is emblematic of the time it was built: the early 1990s. It occupies the sixth floor of a modern apartment building. I remember the flat new, when it was state of the art, when Mr Agis was a high-ranking civil servant and a citizen actively involved in politics – a member of PASOK.<sup>5</sup> His own political and employment trajectory paralleled the destiny of his party: it started with radical leftish ambitions in the 1970s before gradually converting to mainstream social democracy with neoliberal undertones.

The patina of Mr Agis and his flat is more visible now, in the times of austerity. His previous belief in modernization, very much like the plumbing of his apartment, is in noticeable disrepair. Most middle-class families in Patras have indefinitely postponed the renovation of their flats; austerity dictates more definite priorities. There are now new and increased taxes – ‘for everything’, says Mr Agis: ‘even for things we couldn’t previously imagine! There is no money for expensive clothes or holidays’. Mr Agis’s clothes are tired too, like his flat, and convey, as Iphigenia remarks, a 90s feeling.

In 2017, Mr Agis’s daughter, Iphi, lived in this flat. It was not unusual for unemployed young adults to temporarily reside with their parents (see Kyriazidou 2020), but ‘temporariness’, Iphi reflected, had been extended far too long. Father and daughter, tired of what they both saw as a rather ‘unnatural’ cohabitation – a consequence of the austerity crisis – engaged, at the time, in frequent disagreements about politics and art. It was in Mr Agis’s flat that Iphi described to me in full detail her plan to write a theatre play drawing from a Greek tragedy, *Iphigenia at Aulis*. It was not the first time that she shared ideas of this sort with me. I had been, in a sense, Iphigenia’s academic-cum-art interlocutor in the last ten years, following her father’s request that I help her find a university degree in the United Kingdom. When Iphi finished her studies in 2010, she returned to Greece at the very beginning of the austerity crisis: another overqualified unemployed youth of the austerity generation. Entrenched in the relative



safety and comfort of her father's apartment – a set-up of which she herself is explicitly critical – Iphigenia survived the first austerity years with only occasional part-time jobs in art-related projects.

On this particular afternoon in May 2017, Iphi explained the allegorical elements and subversive expedience of her envisaged 'interactive theatrical performance (*diadrastiki theatrikí parástasi*),<sup>6</sup> intended, she argued, to turn dramaturgical conventions upside-down. It was Iphi's critique of established conventions that encouraged me to see the possibility that her critical narrative outlined an embryonic, not fully articulated 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977). From that moment on, I followed the development of her ideas with dedicated attention.

As in Euripides' play, Iphi related, the plot of her play would revolve around the notion of sacrifice: that of a young Greek woman, whose career and future plans are forfeited to job scarcity. We identified additional allegorical analogies, 'more or less obvious', said Iphi: 'those that anyone can read, and those that require subtler irony'. Whereas Euripides' *Iphigenia* was sacrificed by a middle-aged generation of military-minded Greeks,<sup>7</sup> the new Iphigenia would yield at the sacrificial altar of austerity, betrayed by an older generation of Greek and foreign politicians. Angela Merkel, Christine Lagarde, and Wolfgang Schäuble would parade on stage – performed by actors wearing modern masks, but according to the ancient mask-wearing tradition (see Fig. 1). There would be also a chorus, a line of impoverished Greeks holding pots and food containers and waiting for 'the soup kitchen' (*to sisítio*).

The plot was at a sketchy stage and Iphi asked for my advice. I shared my enthusiasm about the overall idea and started drawing cartoon representations of the potential characters on a piece of tissue paper that I found on the coffee table. I drew the spectres of three Greek prime ministers associated with austerity and argued that the villains should not be merely foreign politicians. 'The Greek audience should accept responsibility for voting for such dubious characters', I said, and proposed that the chorus could be also impersonated by a line of Greek citizens waiting in front of a cash machine with their credit cards – a metaphor for the anxiety over capital controls in summer 2015, and the country's reliance on the capitalist economy more generally.

Iphi welcomed my suggestions, but also clarified that the people queuing for the cash machine do not represent her generation. '*Iphigenia of Austerity* is a play about young people deprived of opportunities', she added, those who had no time to amass property or save money in a bank account. *Iphigenia of Austerity*, she elaborated, should stand for all those younger Greeks who are sacrificed, without their consent, on the altar of a previous neoliberal vision and an obsessive identification with Western capitalism as the unquestionable and only destiny for Greece. This was the essence of Iphi's analysis, which intended, she said, to move the register of her sacrifice – and that of her generation – in a creative, liberating direction.

As Eagleton has argued in a recent work, the notion of sacrifice provides a radical passage 'from victimhood to full humanity' and 'from weakness to power' (2018: 8). Iphi recognized this sense of empowerment, and said: 'This is how I plan to escape (*na apodrásó*) from the misery of austerity that we all feel, to turn the disadvantage to hope'. In my conclusion to this article, I will re-evaluate the optimism and scope of this empowering message, yet when I heard Iphi talking that afternoon, I enthusiastically embraced this message of hope, which she thought would unblock an unrealized potential (Bryant & Knight 2019). Before delivering her punchline, she looked towards her father. The sun had set and he was watching the nine o'clock news in the living

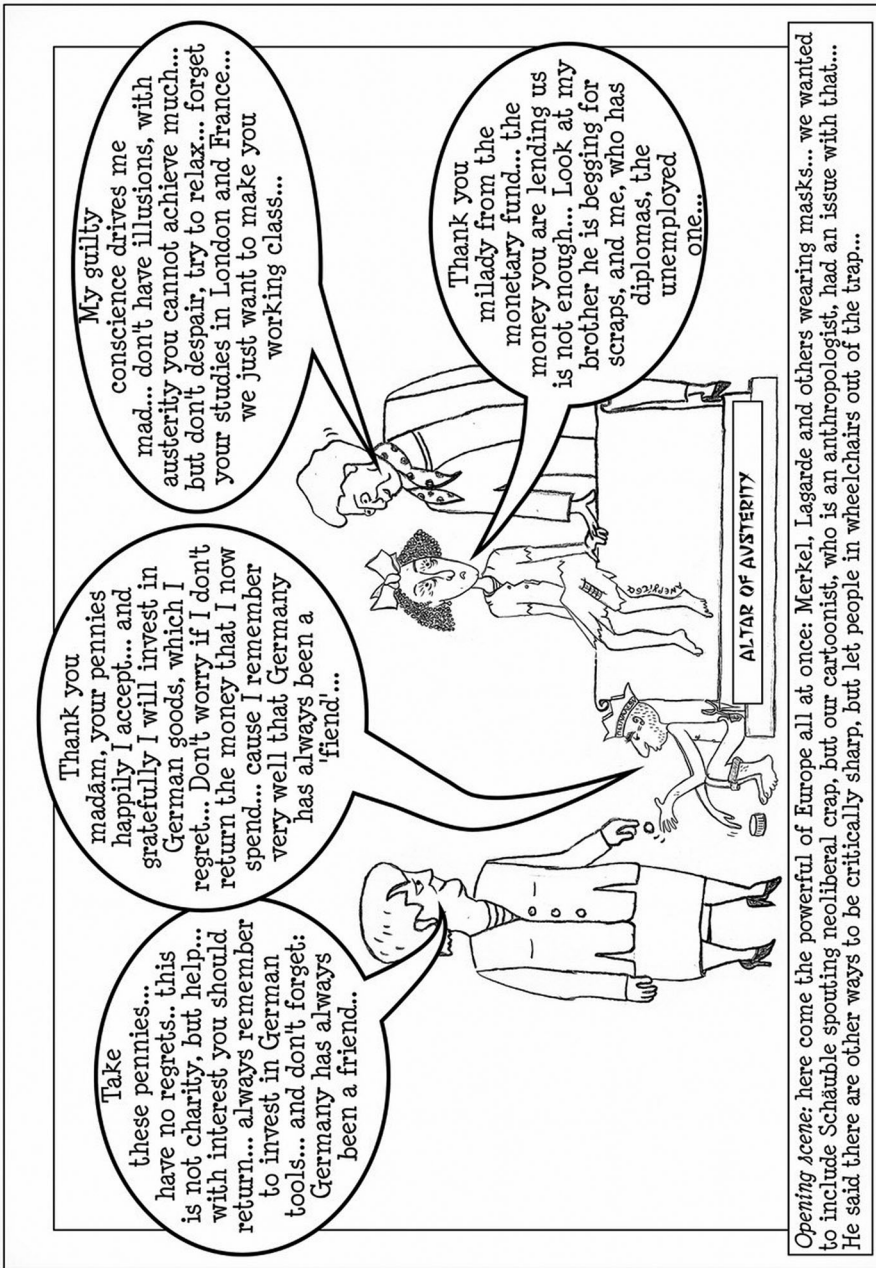


Figure 1. A Bost-inspired sketch of Iphi's first theatre play scene; drawn by the author with input from Iphi.

room. 'As I told you last time,' she whispered and pointed at him, 'the new Iphigenia is paying for the debts of *his* generation.'

### Scene No. 2: Prelude to a dream

Three days after that conversation, Iphi telephoned me. She wanted to share a dream she had had the night before, seeking my interpretation. Well aware of Iphi's analytical spirit, I was convinced that she had already arrived at a satisfactory interpretation of her own. But I was intrigued. We agreed to meet at the cafeteria we had frequented two years earlier, when I conducted a year-long period of fieldwork. The familiar setting reminded Iphi to ask about the progress of my research on the consequences of austerity. We focused on one consequence in particular: the predicament of young adults, like her, who live with their parents. 'Even now during the crisis, people invest in their family,' I said, speaking with the authority of an anthropologist who pondered such things. 'Greek parents invest time, effort, and class aspirations in helping their children,' I added, theorizing in a distanced, generalizing manner, 'everything they do, they purport (*ishirízonte*) to be for the benefit of their children.'

It was as if I had poured petrol on a fire. Iphi changed the intensity of our conversation and raised the emotion in her voice:

This is what they claim (*ishirízonte*)! This is what they want you to believe! Parents pretend to do everything for their kids. It is them, the parents of the old political system, who have destroyed us ... my generation ... The parents of the old political parties. Those who enjoyed the good days. The well-settled 60-year-olds, like my father, a slave of PASOK for thirty years, or my intolerable stepfather, the old-new Democrat.

And added:

We pay the interest for their petty-bourgeois arrogance ... Their flats, their cars, their expensive habits.

### Scene no. 3: The dream

'Last night, I had a dream,' said Iphi, 'a vivid, unusual dream.' She was sitting on the rim of a stone well – the one behind her parents' old holiday house by the sea. But the stone well was really a sacrificial stone, or it somehow became one, as so often happens in dreams. Standing by her were her father and uncle – nagging her about their diminishing pensions. Then suddenly her mother joined in, holding a knife. In a calm and determined voice she announced that *they*, Iphi's own family, had decided to sacrifice her. There was not enough for all, and somebody had to die so that the others could live; they had debated with themselves if it should be her brother or herself. But then her brother argued his way out of it, because her mother believes anything he says (see Fig. 2).

'So the lot fell on me,' said Iphi in a concluding tone, and added:

This was the dream. There is no more. I woke up angry and betrayed. My mother is disappointing overall, but my father and uncle . . . you know, how much they care for me (*mou éhoun adinamia*). They were standing silent (*stékontan amílitoi*) by the stone well, as if they had accepted my sacrifice.

She was evidently emotional about the dream, so I started analysing it to assuage her feelings. I drew attention to the fact that she had been thinking about her theatre play plot, which promoted the idea that her generation was sacrificed. 'Your unconscious is playing tricks on you,' I said. 'You combined elements from the ancient myth and reality.'

Such a psychoanalytical approach was not what Iphi expected. She was given 'plenty of it,' she said, by her friends Maria and Pópi. My responsibility, I was reminded, was

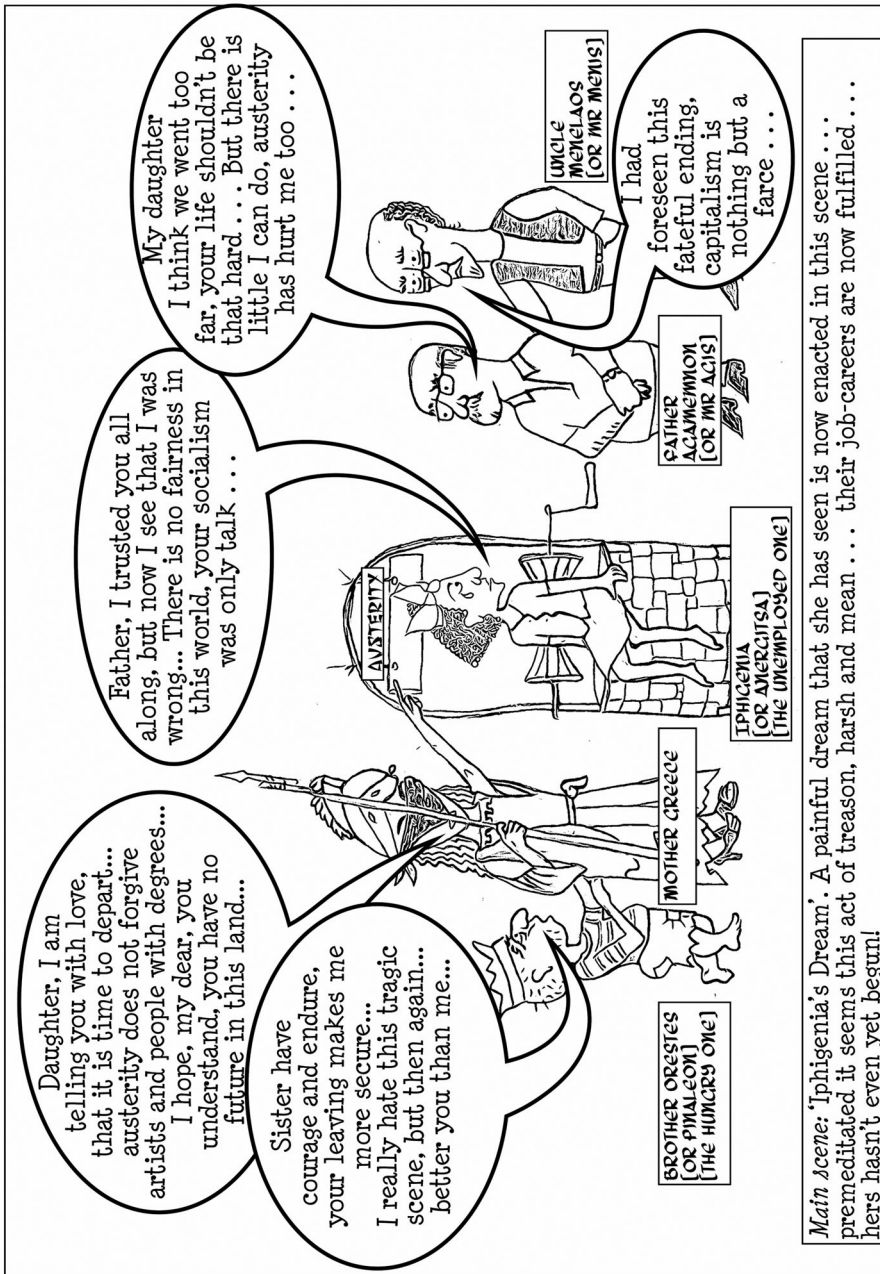


Figure 2. A Bostian sketch of Iphi's dream drawn by the author with input from Iphi.

to provide the anthropological angle: the social matrix of unemployment and austerity that generates a sense of betrayal to a generation of young, unemployed, overqualified Greeks; individuals like Iphi's friends, Maria and Pópi, who have MA degrees from prestigious UK universities in philosophy and classics, subjects difficult to translate into jobs, or numerous other people 'in their thirties' (*triandárides*) who live with their parents, and put off starting a family until they can find reliable employment.

'We are the generation of the shattered dreams (*mateoména óneira*)', added Iphi finally. I could now see more clearly that she was leading me in a particular direction; she had already chosen her interpretative trajectory, as she later admitted. She was convinced that her dream carried a message of a sort – not metaphysical or psychological – but one with strong political resonances. Her dream was a vehicle for telling a story, an excuse and reason to perform, an opportunity to adopt a more critical stance and to make people concerned (*na provlimatísei*).

Iphi's dream arrived at a moment when I felt uninspired with the dry, pessimistic, and descriptive nature of my ethnographic data on the consequences of austerity. Her dream narrative provided me with inspiration to see my previous low-spirited ethnographic observations – the fractured voices of many other citizens in Patras – in a new light; now refocused on an intergenerational angle. Interestingly, dreams, like generational categories, draw from an experienced reality that is anchored in time. This is often 'a moment of anxiety', an existential temporal unconscious response to a threatening unfolding situation (Stewart 1997: 877; 2012: 216) – here, the unsocial outcomes of austerity.

Iphi appears to be in control of the representation of her dream experience, which she plans to expand through further creative engagement. This creative sense of control works as a remedy for what Elisabeth Kirtsoglou (2010) calls the asymmetry between dream-experience and its narrative representation. Iphi's decision to incorporate the narrative of her dream in her draft theatre play has been, as she says, 'therapeutic', 'a creative way out of (*dimiourgikí diéxodos*) the paralysing pessimism of the crisis'. In subsequent conversations, I decided to accept her pragmatic interpretation. Her dream was clearly one that mattered to her (see Mittermaier 2011), in the sense of having significance for her life, as it provided witness to the anxiety and betrayal that she felt. But Iphi categorically refused to consider that the dream came to her from a spiritual force or that it had prophetic qualities – an interpretative commitment which I promised to uphold.

#### **Scene no. 4: Whose generation has suffered most?**

In June 2018, Iphi and I met again at Mr Agis's flat. Orestis, Iphi's brother, was there, chatting with his friend Nikos. Mr Agis was out in town. I showed Iphi the sketches I had drawn of her dream. She browsed my drawings with interest, making suggestions about changes, laughing at the depiction of her dream before commending me for my emulation of the Bostian style. Iphi is a fan of Bost, who, apart from being a cartoonist, was also a playwright.

It was in this creative mood that we reached the point of our interpretative disagreement. While I stressed that the impoverished middle class has the means and social capital to navigate through austerity more efficiently than less-privileged classes, Iphi insisted, as she did a year earlier, that the impoverished middle class has suffered from austerity the most. Hers was, in fact, an argument shared by many other citizens in

Patras, including left-leaning citizens who normally identify with vulnerable subaltern subjectivities.

At this point, Orestis and Nikos joined the conversation in full agreement that parental expectations indeed needed readjustment, and especially so in light of the limitations posed by life under austerity. They also confronted my argument that younger middle-class adults can meet the challenges of austerity more easily than citizens from a less privileged background. ‘Your argument about class is rather old-fashioned’, said Nikos with outright, but polite, confidence: ‘How can you talk about the working class in a town where all major industries are now closed?’ ‘Is it possible to have a working class when there are no workers (*ergátes*)?’ added Orestis with a rhetorically exaggerating tone.<sup>8</sup> Nikos took the lead in the conversation:

I don’t like to think in terms of established categories (*pagioménes kategoríes*): for example, the social classes. I ask myself who are the people whose life has *changed* during the crisis. Those who were poor have remained poor. And those whom you call middle class have now compromised their self-esteem, confidence, and aspirations. This was exactly what Merkel and Schäuble wanted to achieve: to break us, to lower our self-respect, make us work for less.

Iphi couldn’t resist entering this particular argument. ‘The crisis happened for this very end’, she underlined, ‘to impoverish the Greek middle class, to suit the interests of the more powerful nations in Europe’. Orestis interrupted only to accentuate this line of reasoning: ‘The crisis was orchestrated to produce cheaper workers: Greek workers working for less’. At this point, Nikos returned to my previous argument, pulling all the threads together: ‘This is why those you call middle class have suffered the most; the crisis was all about the management of the Greek middle-lower urban class’.

I felt I could detect the influence of Iphi’s ideas on Orestis and Nikos. All three unravelled a familiar thread of accountability about the austerity crisis: one that inspires Iphi’s draft playscript, and, to a certain degree, my own writing. Austerity, according to this perspective, was a trick played by the Troika and the powerful of Europe to break the spirit of the Greeks and subordinate them under their tutelage (Kalantzis 2015). From this point of view, Europe’s financial assistance to Greece – before and after the crisis – can be reinterpreted as a moral gesture (Gkintidis 2016) or gift (Argyrou 2013) intended to subjugate it.

### Scene 5: From the older generation’s point of view

The emerging picture of generational complexity would not be complete without some input from the older generation, here Mr Agis himself. I have promised to give him a voice in this article. In 2018, a few days after the last conversation with his daughter and son, I bumped into him in the centre of Patras and we took a quick coffee break. I described with enthusiasm the *Iphigenia of Austerity* project, offering details on my take of it, to complement the ideas that he had heard from his daughter. Alarmed by a colleague’s remark that Iphi’s critique was too harsh on the older generation, I sought some reaffirmation.

Mr Agis was reassuringly encouraging. Nevertheless, he offered some clarifications, a view of his own generational perspective. He recognized, he said, what Iphi calls the ‘generation of austerity’, in which he includes his daughter and his son, in fact all young people who have not secured reliable employment so far. He remarked:

My daughter and my son have suffered [from austerity] in different ways. But they are not alone. We were unprepared for what happened and it pains me to see the younger having less than the older ...

Such a reversal is unnatural I think. But more so for my generation ... We have childhood memories of what poverty really means, the 1950s and 1960s ... It was worse back then. It was this older poverty, the social divide, that PASOK tried to bridge in the 1980s.

If you ask me, now it is not as bad as in the 1950s. We have achieved certain social benefits (*kinoniká kektiména*). The children did not have to start from scratch, as I did. They have exceptional education, and a better understanding of the world, the media, the internet, and all that ... I am proud of their knowledge and abilities.

Mr Agis also saw some of my Bostian sketches, and described how he followed Bost's work in the magazine *Tahydromos*, how he and his friends used to imitate Bost's style – especially the misspellings.<sup>9</sup> Although the circumstances between now and then are different, he underlined, it is good to make connections with the past, and learn from it. And he pointed at a sketch of him that I had laid out on the coffee table: 'This is a productive process', he said. 'Go ahead, I give you my permission.' Then he looked at me with a serious gaze, and added:

But remember: the older generations suffer too. What can the pensioners say? They worked hard all their lives only to see their pensions reduced. There is nothing they can do now. It is too late to do anything, and no way to escape. We've planned our retirement in a certain way, but we found ourselves in another situation. The young have time ahead of them to change things, to better this miserable situation.

These were the major lines of Agis's generational analysis, which echoed the comments of several other pensioners in Patras. The young may not have jobs, but the old do not have time to change their lives and adapt. They also carry on their shoulders the worries about their children and their future, whom they try to assist with their limited means. It is as if the unemployment of the young burdens the already depleted revenues of the old. And as such, pensioners are doubly afflicted by austerity.

### **First analytical step: Temporalizing ambivalence with analogical irony**

Iphi's ideas about the generational aetiology of austerity invite us to examine the allegorical ambiguity of her narratives. A Herzfeldian analytical framework can help us take the first step that prepares the ground for the conclusion that follows. Herzfeld's long-standing analytical contribution has illuminated the continuous oscillation of contemporary Greek identities between an officially endorsed identification with classical antiquity (which is formalist and Eurocentric) and the self-critical destabilizing of Western European authority in intimate cultural contexts – an ambivalence to which Herzfeld (1987; 1997) refers as *disemia*. Interestingly, the situational identifications highlighted by Herzfeld do not lead us to a structuralist binary – two domains, public and private, clashing with each other in opposition – but make visible the possibility that modern Greeks can be (simultaneously) more or less modern or Western European, shifting from one identification to the other with exceptional flexibility, self-irony, and historical awareness.

Seen in this analytical light, Iphi the actor and playwright can be at once Euripides' tragic heroine (Iphigenia at Aulis) and a modern austerity-afflicted Greek woman crushed by her parents' unfulfilled expectations. She can also embrace the Bostian character of 'Anergitsa' (Ms Unemployment) – a ragged caricature of poverty from the 1950s, the antithesis of Western promises of prosperity (see Figs 1 and 3). Different aspects of the past – ancient glory and/or mid-twentieth-century destitution – provide a self-critical interplay of pride and embarrassment (Herzfeld 1997) which evades the constraints of singular identities: for example, modern/European vs

non-modern/European. Seen through this model of ambivalence, Iphi's Europe-educated identity coexists in a productive but uneasy dialectic with a denial of European power – the Troika and the European leaders imposing austerity and impoverishing Greece, making her generation the 'new poor' (Panourgíá 2018).

The ambivalence and analogical irony of Iphi's intergenerational critique adds temporal depth to the *disemic* oscillation between contrasting identifications: European/formal vs non-European/culturally intimate. The routes of this oscillation have a long history in Greek national consciousness (Herzfeld 1986; 1987). In this respect, we can see ambivalence as a productive process that engenders a synthesis of memories and experiences – for example, of crisis and poverty – that unite more than one Greek generation together (see Knight 2015; Knight & Stewart 2016). Iphi and her father have both experienced crisis and poverty, albeit of different orders – which is, I believe, a reflection that supersedes the question of which (or whose) generation has suffered the most.

Iphi insists that her generation does not have to slip through a cyclical lethargic, inevitable succession into a repetition of her father's generation; a slippage that looks suspiciously like a structuralist-functionalist model of intergenerational succession in which sons and daughters fill the roles of their fathers and mothers. Iphi wishes to defy this fate with analogical irony grounded in a sense of generational awareness. It is this common ground – the felt consequences of austerity – that makes Iphi's artistic ideas meaningful to Orestis, Nikos, Maria, and Pópi. They capture an emerging historicity which is relational, analogical, and sense-making, a new structure of feeling which is not yet fully charted or articulated, but which provides a common ground for understanding.

### **Conclusion: Affordances and limitations of generational historicity**

Thinking in terms of generations – for example, the generation of austerity – has a disarming immediacy. It anchors evaluations of local consequences to the experience of identifiable local persons: for example, 'Here is what happened to my daughter or your father'. This is a particularly effective approach to conceptualizing time (and social change) in locally meaningful and recognizable terms (Hodges 2010). Local, unofficial periodization is sometimes employed to structure nostalgic comparisons of the present within an idealized past of social perfection (Herzfeld 1997), conceived as enduring epochs that contrast with (and critically expose) the unsettling fluidity of the present (see Hodges 2010; Stewart 2012).

Iphi and my other research interlocutors in Patras employ this type of generational thinking to communicate information, evaluations, critical remarks, or generation-specific interpretations of precarity and dispossession (see Butler & Athanasiou 2018). The resulting intergenerational comparisons – for example, between times of crisis or previous traumatic events (see Alexandrakis 2016; Argenti 2010) – shape a variety of temporal trajectories for tracing accountability (Knight 2013; 2015; Knight & Stewart 2016). Anthropologists working in Greece have captured the cultural resonances of this tactic for explaining historical causality (see indicatively Argenti 2018; Brown & Hamilakis 2003; Faubion 1993; Herzfeld 1987; Hirschon 2000; Just 1989; Knight 2015; Papataxiarchis 1993; Stewart 2012; Sutton 1998; 2018; Tsintjilonis 2018). Their work has demonstrated how temporal analogies generate a political awareness in peripheral contexts (cf. Sutton 1998) which partly departs from or partly reproduces official – historicist – narratives or stereotypes, but it is also open to the unexpected.



Iphi's dream and slowly developing theatre play attract attention to a particular set of experiences felt by her generation. Iphi and I, thinking in parallel, appreciate in this refocusing of awareness the probability that generational experiences anchored on transformative historical conjunctures – for example, austerity – can bolster social consciousness of a shared predicament. As we have seen, the artistic articulation of the emerging generational historicity – in graphic or theatrical form – relies on irony to communicate a critical stance towards authority (see Fernandez & Huber 2001; Haugerud 2013) and invites a certain degree of political agency (Knight 2015). What is ironized in this process is 'the historical situatedness' of local actors, and the contradictions and inequalities rooted in it (Pipyrou 2014). In this respect, irony can bring forward a destabilizing effect, generating a sense of local empowerment (cf. Brown & Theodossopoulos 2000; Knight 2015).

Nevertheless, some caution is necessary if we aim not to overstate – or idealize (Theodossopoulos 2015) – subversive empowerment in unofficial everyday-life contexts. Iphi does not entertain the illusion that her dramaturgical adaptations will bring forward an ideologically coherent form of counter-politics. Iphi and I recognize that analogical irony and reflexive self-caricaturing may not always lead to effective resistance (see also Herzfeld 2001), which is a wider liability of indirect resistance (Gledhill 1994; Theodossopoulos 2015). As Karl Mannheim (1952 [1923]) underlined almost a century ago, not all generationally defined social groups succeed in actualizing their potential.

Raymond Williams recognized that such limitations may compromise any emerging form of generational awareness – a recognition that motivated him to introduce the flexible concept of 'structures of feeling'. Williams is using this notion to relate to felt 'experiences', but without the finality and sense of completion (or realization) communicated by the term 'experience' (1977: 132). Sometimes, he clarifies, a new structure of feeling encapsulates contradiction: for example, 'when a formation appears to break away from its class norms, though it retains its substantial affiliation' (1977: 132). In the case examined in this article, Iphi's generational historicity does not radically depart from either official historicism or unofficial historicity, but reorders previous conventions in an unconventional new combination. Furthermore, her vision obscures class differentiation within her generation, hiding from view the felt experience of those who entered austerity from a more disadvantaged position.

Here, my reflexive collaborative approach permits me to lay a parallel critical observation that complicates Iphi's argument. Those who came of age at the onset of the austerity crisis were indeed profoundly unprepared to face the rift between previous social expectations and the emerging social reality. Yet how can we rank suffering and dispossession across generations when all had something to lose? Austerity has undoubtedly limited the options of all generations: the salaries of those in secure employment, the pensions of the pensioners, the choices of a younger cohort entering higher education or employment after the affluent years. Such lived consequences have not been felt only by Iphi's age or social group, which reminds us that austerity is not merely a predicament of an impoverished middle class (see also Rakopoulos 2018) or the 'new poor' (Panourgia 2018).

Iphi's proposition that her age category has suffered the most should thus be taken only allegorically: as an opportunity to raise awareness, think, and debate the accountability of the 'crisis' and the distribution of its consequences within society. The contradictions and omissions in Iphi's narrative – indicative of an articulation of 'feeling

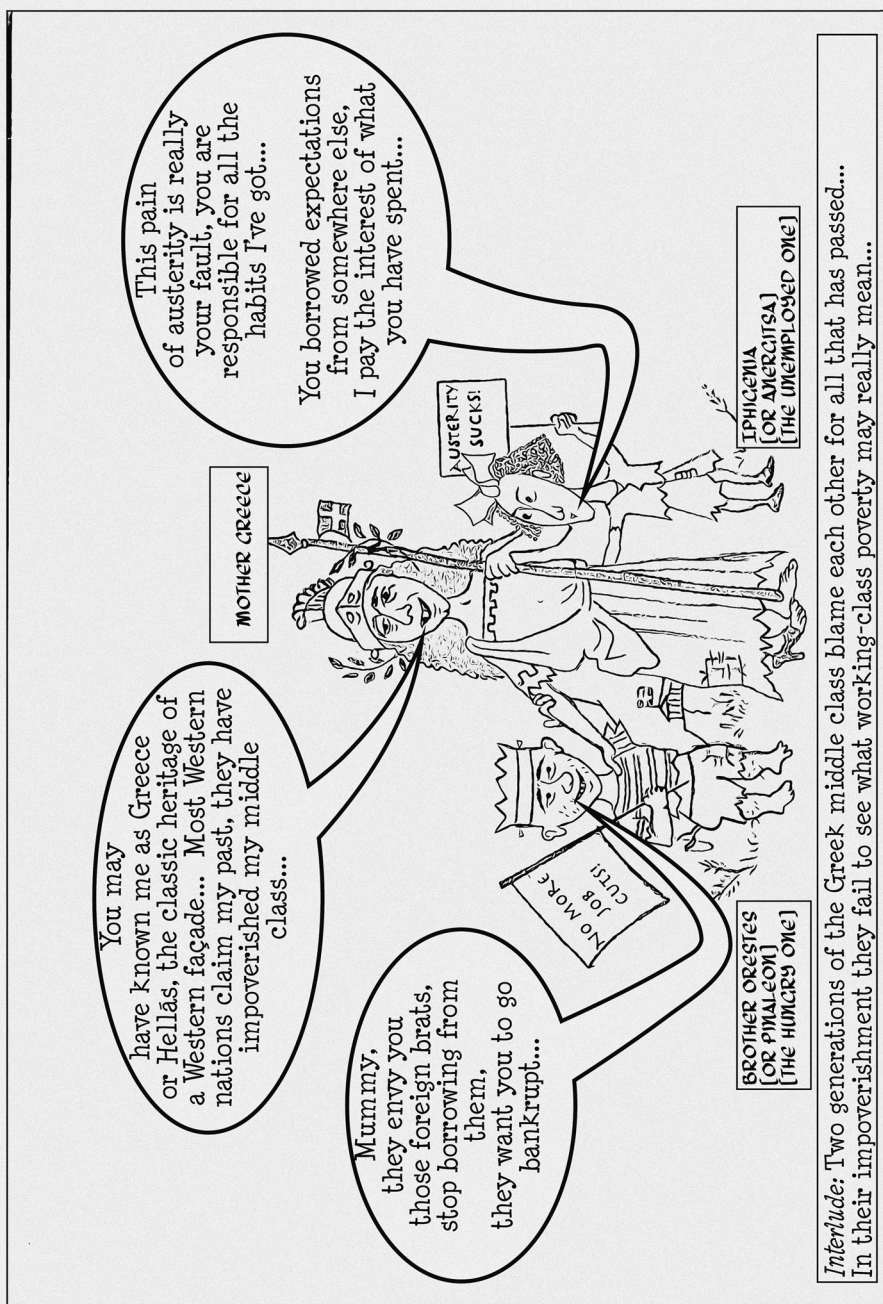


Figure 3. A Bost-inspired sketch of what was left unsaid by Iphi's intergenerational critique; drawn and composed by the author.

and thinking' that is not fully formed – allow us to appreciate that what she and her friends call the 'generation of austerity' is a new structure of feeling in 'an embryonic phase': it has not yet become fully defined; it has not broken completely away from 'fixed forms' (Williams 1977: 130-1); it embraces what Iphi has lived – diminished employment opportunities and shattered expectations – and what she thinks she has lived – the middle-class expectation of her parents' generation, a burden.

Aware of the limitations of our approach, Iphi and I welcome the unrealized, unanticipated possibilities that may emerge from our artistic engagement. We see the incompleteness of our artistic work as a non-authoritarian way to talk about generational experiences of austerity in a manner that has not yet been fully co-opted by convention or static historicism. The confusion between what we feel we have lived and what we aspire to live is in itself productive: 'thought as felt and feeling as thought' (Williams 1977: 132). It engenders a small measure of hope with which we press into the future, pulling emergent potentialities closer to what may become an actuality (Bryant & Knight 2019: 134).

My final graphic panel (Fig. 3) is one I used during fieldwork to communicate my views to Iphi, Orestis, Nikos, and Mr Agis. By emulating, once more, the Bostian artistic style, I framed my view of the present against the background of poverty and destitution in mid-twentieth-century Greece; the familiar, embarrassing, culturally intimate shadows (Herzfeld 1997) of a near, proximate past (see Knight 2015), exemplified here by the raggedy caricatures of post-war hunger (Pinaleon) and unemployment (Anergitsa). They are the 'old poor' to reverse Panourgia's (2018) analytical term – a reminder of what the neoliberal economy can generate and destroy: the naturalized expectation of progressive, cross-generational prosperity; 'a shattered vision', says Iphi, 'not to be taken for granted anymore'.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana's (1966) portrait of generations in an Aragonese town provides us with a classic and thorough view of the cyclical succession of age groups, albeit structurally functionalist in conception. Here we see the naturalizing and homeostatic expectation that each generation is replaced by another to the benefit of the overall social system.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jane Cowan's (1990) application of Williams's concept to describe the emergence of new discursive spaces that contest hegemonic ideas about gender roles in Greek society.

<sup>3</sup> For another inspiring anthropological analysis of Bost's cartoons, focused on the ambivalences of ethnic stereotyping, see Demetriou (2004).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of political slogans and graffiti in austerity-ridden Greece, see Knight (2015). Additional accounts of political humour in Greece include two older articles about the NATO strikes in Yugoslavia (Brown & Theodossopoulos 2000; 2013).

<sup>5</sup> PASOK ruled Greek politics for over three decades. It entered the Greek political scene as a left party, critical of Western hegemony, but after its first electoral success (in 1981), it swiftly transformed into a moderate social democratic party.

<sup>6</sup> Ideally to be performed in an open urban space, with or without permission from the municipal authorities.

<sup>7</sup> This was a generation who, according to the ancient myth, wanted to appease the gods and change the unfavourable winds that hindered their departure for Troy.

<sup>8</sup> What was common knowledge to all participating in the conversation was that Patras maintained a sizeable chain of industries until the 1980s. After this was dissolved most Patrinoi will agree, the working class was not easily discernible.

<sup>9</sup> Bostian cartoon titles and speech balloons were misspelled deliberately to depict class and linguistic tensions, which were visible in Greece until the mid-1970s. Bost's misspellings aimed to critique the imposition of a purist (neo-classical) version of Greek – the *katharevousa* – part of a nationally endorsed project of 'decontaminating' ordinary people's language from Ottoman influences (see Faubion 1993: 75, 151; Herzfeld 1986: 17–21, 34–5).

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## Le sacrifice d'Iphigénie : l'historicité générationnelle comme structure du sentiment à l'heure de l'austérité

### Résumé

Iphi, actrice au chômage dans une Grèce rongée par l'austérité, imagine une adaptation théâtrale d'une tragédie classique, *Iphigénie à Aulis*, dans laquelle l'héroïne est sacrifiée sur l'autel de l'austérité par les politiciens. Alors qu'elle écrit son script, Iphi fait un rêve : c'est elle qui est mise sur l'autel sacrificiel, et pas par les politiciens mais par ses propres parents, la génération qui a connu les années d'abondance avant l'austérité. La pensée analogico-générationnelle d'Iphi présente une historicité politiquement inspirante qui explore la responsabilité de l'austérité. Elle invite également à revoir la notion de générations en tant que catégories locales et constructions analytiques anthropologiques. Cet article évoque l'émergence d'une conscience générationnelle pas encore pleinement exprimée – une nouvelle structure du sentiment – autour de l'austérité, et résumée ici dans ses balbutiements. L'auteur avance que cette historicité générationnelle émergente émet un message critique, mais dissimule également des inégalités moins visibles.

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*Exoticisation undressed* (Manchester University Press, 2016) and *Democracy's paradox* (with B. Kapferer; Berghahn Books, 2019).

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