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On the proletarian public sphere and its contemporaneity: crises, class and the media

This article attempts a critical enquiry into contemporary politics and culture as characterized by a prolonged capitalist crisis and its concomitant economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions. The article highlights the position of the working class today, and its critical potential for a politics of social change, and socialism. Class is understood in intersectional terms, taking into consideration the associations of ethnicity, race and gender in the formation of classed subjects in a globalized world. The experience of the lower classes in structural as well as political terms, is largely negated from publicity, or assimilated and distorted by the media and cultural industries. This has dire consequences for understanding the crisis, its causes, effects, and possible solutions, interpellating the working class and the poor to bourgeois norms and sensibilities. The negation of proletarian voices and the mediation of the proletarian experience by hegemonic bourgeois ideas is theoretically discussed, drawing on the proletarian public sphere notion, and also by looking at empirical contexts of media practices (notably the mainstream news coverage of the Greek/European economic crisis of the 2010's, and the European "refugee crisis" from 2015 onwards). By not addressing the systemic foundations of crises (e.g., economic, humanitarian) in their complexity, the insecurities triggered by neoliberalism are articulated by liberal pundits and

mainstream media through discourses blaming targeted groups (e.g., migrants and workers of the European periphery). Hence, the development of effective antagonistic politics, relies on the creation of both organizational forms and communication structures, to produce shared meanings and identities, as well as political goals and strategies; class perspectives are crucial to overcome the prolonged, current political impasse that capitalist society reproduces, and the possibility to overcome the crises that capitalism produces.

Keywords: publicity, working class experience, social change, politics, Greek economic crisis, capitalist hegemony

Introduction: perpetual crises, politics, and class today

The study attempts a critical enquiry on politics and political culture today, in an era characterised by a prolonged capitalist crisis, along with its economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions, the global hegemony of neoliberalism, and the rise of reactionary phenomena such as nationalism, racism, and fascism. An important issue that this study aims to highlight concerns the position of the working class today, and its critical potential for counter-hegemonic politics of social change, and socialism. Class is understood in intersectional terms, taking into consideration the associations of ethnicity, race and gender in the formation of classed subjects in a globalised world. Moreover, class is also conceptualised in relation to notions such as de-industrialisation, automation, work precarity, as well as in connection to middle-classness, consumerism, individualism, and the reflexive-self notion (Giddens 1991), to contextualise the historico-material and the ideologico-cultural dimensions of class today.

Class is a notion that for some decades has been considered as outdated in politics and in academia, discredited as an essentialist notion of identity that hardly makes sense in the flexible and fast changing late modern societies, and conceived of as an ideological Marxist construction that does not really exist (Wright 2015). Moreover, the lack of class representation in politics and in public life meant the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony and the discrediting of lower-class experiences. Instead, the working class and the poor were generally shamed in mass media as self-responsible for their degrading position and for various socio-political problems (Skeggs 2004). Mass media constantly reproduce middle class norms, idolise successful entrepreneurs and their lavish lifestyles, publicly normalise neoliberal imperatives, and castigate working-class cultures and politics. Middle-class values, associated with neoliberal cultures and lifestyles, such as competition, individualism, mobility, and an overall cynical and anti-political attitude to common affairs, corresponding to bourgeois morals of hard work, property, and entrepreneurialism, reduce poverty into an individual question, deeming collective, and antagonistic class-related demands, as flawed and outdated.

Along with the public cultivation of an entrepreneurial ethos, nationalism and racism also came to substitute class discontent, by channelling insecurities to scapegoated social groups (such as non-Western migrants, the poor, and different gendered, classed and racialised subjects), stigmatised by the media, state politics, and capitalist society. Despite the prolonged global economic crisis starting in 2008, the left worldwide has not been able to appeal to the working class, though class-related demands have risen in leftist politics (e.g., Jeremy Corbyn's "for the many, not the few" 2019 electoral campaign in Britain, or "we are the 99%" from the Occupy movement in 2011, the left-wing appeal to the "people" in Greece or Spain during the 2010s). Regardless of the advance of upper-class interests through neoliberal policies across the world, a working-class identity formation (Wright 2015: 96) is not consolidated. The late-modern identity configuration of the middle class as a majoritarian class emerging in resolute and post-class-conflict societies, remains hegemonic, also emerging as the main subject of appeal in the leftist discourse, as the example of the Greek left-wing party of Syriza [coalition of the radical left] showed, especially during its national election campaigns of 2019 and 2023.

Crisis contexts and meaning regimes

Starting with the announcement of a war against terrorism with worldwide reach by the US's GW Bush administration and its neoconservative leanings in late 2001, following the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in New York on 11/09/2001, the 21st century has so far been a time of different and cumulating crises. Wars, economic crises, pandemics, humanitarian and environmental catastrophes have been developing constantly through the last decades. The 2008 global financial crisis that erupted in the US had severe economic and socio-political implications worldwide. As far as Europe is concerned, the liberal governments of the EU states, along with technocrats, opted for neoliberal austerity regimes to be imposed on the crisis-torn countries of the Eurozone's periphery, primarily aiming at salvaging the financial sectors of core EU states like Germany. Austerity hit particularly hard the middle and lower classes, produced further national indebtment, poverty, uncertainty and social turbulence, providing limited gains with regards to its proclaimed goals for economic recovery, growth and stability (Harvey 2014; Streeck 2016; Dardot & Laval 2014). Indeed, the quest for perpetual economic growth seems like an unattainable goal in a finite planet, bearing grave consequences on societies and ecosystems. In fact, capitalism reinvents itself through crises, which are endemic in the capitalist accumulation process.

During 2015, the so-called refugee crisis emerged in Europe with people fleeing from war-torn countries (such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan), and regions ravaged by injustice, unrest, impoverishment, and climate depletion, seeking

to find refuge in "civilised" and rich Europe. The "refugee crisis" accelerated bigotry and racism among the insecure middle-class Europeans, struggling with neoliberal austerity and recession for more than a decade by now. Along with negative publicity and racist propaganda, the migrants were dealt with by police and military measures through what critics described as "fortress Europe" ideology and policy agenda (Wodak 2015; Fekete 2018; Webber 2017, 2018). The 2020s began with the global Covid-19 pandemic, met with unprecedented biopolitical security measures, which seriously compromised the personal, political and economic rights of citizens, with the lower classes bearing the hardest consequences of prolonged lockdowns and insufficient public health systems. Along with different regional wars, the military conflict being waged between Russia and NATO-backed Ukraine deepened geopolitical divisions and antagonisms, brought forth nationalist and territorial expansionist fantasies, militarisation, and the public reproduction of crude and vicious dichotomies (e.g. between forces of good and evil, as claimed by both sides of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict), triggering fears for a new world war and even a nuclear holocaust. At the same time, climate change and environmental catastrophe are advancing globally at an alarming rate, with deep and irreversible consequences for the planet and all living beings, as capitalist growth within a "free market" framework remains the imperative of all the world's governments (Malm 2018; Huber 2022).

Dardot and Laval (2019: 17) argue that the crisis today, more than a decade after the 2008 global financial crisis, forms a mode of governance. These authors argue that crisis governance marks the latest development of neoliberalism, which emerged as more solidified after 2008. By threatening with the destruction of banks and the economy, mainstream economists, neoliberal pundits and journalists allocated responsibility for the crisis of private finance to the state (Dardot & Laval 2019: 19), demanding the state further strengthen the position of capital by lowering corporate taxes, by deregulating protectionist policies, and by cutting on welfare and rights, which in turn escalated the crisis. In that sense, the crisis signifies a chronic and permanent state of things, accelerating neoliberal policies. These authors note that the term crisis is problematic as it is used to both describe the problem and to justify the (supposed) necessity of neoliberal reforms, reinforcing the system and the social reality perpetuating inequality. In this sense, the use of the crisis notion as a reality that requires a specific and urgent treatment (through neoliberal reforms) hides under an objectivist veil the class politics and class warfare waged by politico-economic oligarchies.

The notion of the crisis deployed here is associated with Dardot's and Laval's assessment, but is also broader and refers to important effects of neoliberal capitalist growth, such as poverty, environmental catastrophe, war, insecurity, racism, and fascism.

Though global and universal in principle, the crisis is mediated by social hierarchies and power relations, affecting different populations disproportionately. Racism, for instance, primarily affects non-white, impoverished, and proletarianised populations of the global South and the peripheries of capitalism, often torn apart by war and imperialist interventions, with their living spaces and resources devastated by climate change. Climate change itself has more dire consequences to the poor of the global South than to the inhabitants of the countries of the North. Likewise, fascism and authoritarianism primarily threaten not the privileged middle and upper classes, but the exploited, impoverished, gendered, and racialised social groups, as well as those politicising social discontent. War also happens in the peripheries of the West and mediates imperial interests and conflicts, disproportionately affecting the poor and the working class of the countries caught into it. Economic and social insecurities caused by neoliberal austerity and its effects (unemployment, labour precarity, competition, loss of welfare, rise in living costs, compromise of public law) primarily effect the working class and the poor, experiencing a lack in prospects for social elevation and living improvement, along with a general sense of disempowerment.

Bourgeois and proletarian public spheres

The public sphere is a much debated theoretical concept that carries a lot of normative assumptions. Nevertheless, the public sphere also reflects acute empirical phenomena and realities, characterising socio-political processes. Understood as a space of experience, communication, reflection, and also debate, the public sphere is crucial for the dissemination and advance of hegemonic social meanings, as well as for their effective contestation by society. The public sphere is thus a space of meaning distribution that mediates social experience, and a site of political antagonism between competing ideas, voices, identities, and interests, reflecting social hierarchies, inequalities, and dichotomies. In his seminal work, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas (1997 [1961]) developed the public sphere idea through a normative stance associated with the defence of modernity's democratic potentials. Habermas saw the historical development of the public sphere in activities such as reading and writing. Those able to engage in such activities were usually society's most affluent members, who could afford education and culture, potentially able to articulate opinions publicly. The rise of the bourgeois class with its vibrant economic, social, and cultural capital was central in such developments. From the appearance-based publicity of feudalism, where nobility with its highly symbolic status (e.g. the king incarnating the country) would make ritualistic and highly symbolic public appearances, the bourgeois public sphere established a political publicity, crucial for the construction of regimes of accountability and legitimacy

of power. The institutions facilitating the public sphere were private realms, such as coffee houses, salons, or book clubs, where matters of common concern (to the bourgeois class) would be discussed. In such contexts, the public sphere developed as a sphere of political publicity, where citizens could deliberate common affairs. Publicity would be formulated through reason, debate, and critique, and would then form public opinion and opinionated publics. The public sphere opened the possibility for the formation of informed publics, able to address questions that could hold political authority accountable, forcing it to seek public consensus and legitimacy of its decisions. Mediated publicity provided the bourgeois class with political power to effectively challenge feudal institutions.

In Habermas's (1997 [1961]: 217) sense, the public sphere can primarily be understood as a sphere of individuals that formulate a public. Hence, the public sphere forms a neutral space that is located between the private realm, and the state, while being a part of the private realm. The bourgeois publicity is based on a strict distinction between the private and the public realm. In the historical configuration of 18th and 19th century Europe, the individual is seen as bourgeois (owner and master) and homme (man among other men). Simultaneously, education and property are viewed as prerequisites of individual autonomy. Property owners were those able to deliberate on political, moral, and universal concerns, as they were free from material constraints and competitive social relations with others (Sandhu 2007: 63). The public sphere becomes an extension of the private realm, and subjectivity is now also connected with publicity. In the public sphere, private individuals join in a common terrain to become informed, communicate, debate and form opinion (a common sense) upon current affairs, based on a common understanding of their class-orientated interests. The public sphere is based on the general access of all autonomous individuals, provided that the socio-economic conditions can allow the universal access to education and property. In the public sphere, private subjects can advance an intersubjective form of communication, which mediates different private realms and subjective contexts.

Habermas presents a republican political proposal, where the public sphere forms the cornerstone of the liberal rule of law. Deliberation forms a public of concerned citizens discussing common affairs. Habermas does not engage with theoretical configurations aspiring to the radical transformation of society and the abolishing of capitalism; "This is due to what he saw as the flawed historical experience of socialist movements in struggles for radical and revolutionary social change. Furthermore, it also concerns the advanced complexity of contemporary (late) modern societies, making their change a highly complicated task" (Stolze 2000: 149). Habermas instead, attempts to salvage

the modernistic and humanist legacies of the Enlightenment, drawing on the philosophy of Kant and the belief in reason as a prerequisite for the advance of truth, democracy, law, and justice (Habermas 1997 [1961]: 115-178). The public sphere can defend the common good by enabling the general will to establish itself (on both lay and formal levels) through reason. This way, he also distances his work from that of his predecessors from the so-called Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer 1989), who became disillusioned with modernity as such in the light of devastating modern trajectories and phenomena such as Auschwitz and the rise of cultural industries. For Habermas, the public sphere and publicity formulate a crucial component in a democratising process. Habermas saw in the public sphere the potential in "the unfinished project of modernity" to advance the universal democratisation of society (Calhoun 1996: 40). Publicity can create transparency, which can turn political power accountable to the public. This way, the public can become informed, train itself in rational dialogue and reflection, traits that can enable itself to exercise control upon the political power. For this to occur though, specific civic qualities, such as toleration, reason, dialogue, along with institutional provisions (the protection of the freedom of speech) are necessary.

Habermas's critics, namely Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (2016), proposed a class-related conceptualisation of the public sphere, bringing forth the problematics of the bourgeois public sphere. Negt and Kluge argued that the problem with the bourgeois public sphere lies, not only in what Habermas described as the refeudalisation of the public sphere, but in the contradictions inherent in the bourgeois public sphere, even in its ideal form. Habermas (1997 [1961]: 221) places the beginning of the decline of the public sphere at the great recession of 1873, when the liberal era presumably reached its end and state interventions distort the free trade principle, opening the possibility for the formation of oligopolies and the privatisation of public law. The most dominant private interests re-feudalised the public realm, substituting state functions under state laws. Forms of disempowerment and dependency emerged, with the decline of individual autonomy and the diminishing of the private sphere into the domestic realm. Moreover, the commercialisation and professionalisation of the media by private oligopolies depoliticised and commoditised public communication, transforming it into mass culture dominated by private interests (Habermas 1997 [1961]: 271). Publicity became instrumental instead of communicative, obtaining the characteristics of advertisement and propaganda.

As a bourgeois institution, the public sphere has been a socially exclusive space to which only the entitled ones, those who hold economic and cultural capital, may have access. The access to information itself – distributed and deliberated in the public sphere – is to a great extent determined by the unequal

material conditions characterising industrial societies (Golding 2017: 4307). Negt and Kluge (2016) bring forth a broader understanding of the public sphere, as a general horizon organising human experience, which is constantly evolving. The prevailing capitalist mode of production and its development, along with the subsequent changes it brings to the people's living conditions, strongly determines the character and the functions of the public sphere: "They [Negt & Kluge] conceive of the public sphere as a historically developing form of the mediation between the cultural organization of human qualities and senses on the one hand and developing capitalist production on the other" (Knödler-Bunte, Lennox & Lennox 1975: 53). In that sense, the public sphere is a broad entity that concerns experiences and interests associated with everyday life, enabling individuals to understand and interpret social reality. Habermas's formulation of the bourgeois public sphere is more formal and normative, dependent upon the potentials laid by the privileges held by the affluent classes, and associated with the viability of specific institutions that may guarantee the deliberative functioning of the public sphere. A dynamic and broad understanding of the public sphere moves beyond the deliberative understanding of the term, and its closure to specific spaces that may foster forms of ideal speech and reasoned argumentation. In Negt's and Kluge's configuration, the public sphere emerges as a broad entity that concerns physical and non-physical spaces, ranging from a variety of locations where people can actually meet performing different immediate communicative practices and contexts, to various uses of different kind of media (analog and digital) and media genres (e.g. news and cinema), as well as architecture, monuments, cultural and educational policies, and potentially any source that carries meaning.

Moreover, Habermas's understanding of the bourgeois public sphere as a legitimate sphere to assess and control state power through the formation of (a bourgeois) public opinion, leaves out that the bourgeois public sphere becomes an important instrument of class supremacy and effective control of the proletariat. The articulation of society's general essence and general will by the bourgeois, and the subsequent foregrounding of the bourgeois public sphere as the one representing all public life, is a forceful political mechanism excluding workers, migrants, women and their realities (Hansen 1991 [2016]: xvii-xviii). Negt and Kluge, among others (Fraser 1990), maintain that a plurality of public spheres exist. Different public spheres correspond to different social contexts and circumstances related to different social groups characterised by economic, social, political, cultural or other criteria. These public spheres may contest each other as they exist in a dynamic relation, despite the hegemony of the bourgeoisie.

Instead of an idealistic and universalist notion, the public sphere emerges as a plural, historically situated, and contested sphere. Different kinds of publicity

exist that reflect the differences in the technical, economic and political forms of organisation (Hansen 2016 [1991]: xxix). Dominant social groups hegemonise the publicity and produce meanings that naturalise and legitimise the privileged positions and the reproduction of the capitalist social relations at national and transnational levels. At the same time, diverse social groups reflecting different ideologies, identities and interests appear publicly and strive for public voice and representation, often competing with the dominant ones. Further, Next and Kluge distinguish between three main types of public sphere: the dominant, liberal-bourgeois model (connected with the liberal bourgeois political institutions like the parliament), the public sphere of production (associated with industrial-commercial forms of publicity, including the corporate media, and is related with the liberal-bourgeois public sphere), and the proletarian public sphere, which concerns alternative and oppositional counterpublics. A proletarian public sphere would provide a symbolic space where the experiences and interests of the proletariat would be articulated and come to public light. This process would enable possibilities of reflection, critique, and imagination on the actual experiences and problems faced by the working class, and the development of politics and struggles, as well as social relations and desires of social change. Such a process would also allow the development of social relations based on the specific realities connected with the proletarian experience, while imagining a different future.

The politics of meaning in the proletarian public sphere are associated with political interventions from organised leftist political groups and parties, as well as from leftist intellectuals, who are meant to work together with the working class other than trying to impose specific meanings to its experience. The proletarian public sphere is concerned with the politics related to a proletarian publicity. This sphere is meant to have an antagonistic position in national and transnational socio-political configurations, striving to hegemonise the cultural space so as to mobilise public support, dominate publicity, construct hegemonic public opinions and identities, and produce radical social change, democratic and socialist. In a historical sense, proletarian public spheres emerged only in specific circumstances, as alternatives to the bourgeois public sphere. Moments of socio-political crisis have been central in the development of proletarian public spheres (Cymbrowski 2017: 4). At the same time, the proletarian public sphere has always been dialectically connected to the bourgeois public sphere, given the centrality of the bourgeois institutions in the capitalist social formation and in the empirical realities and experiences of the working class. In this sense, the risk of appropriation by the bourgeois public sphere is always a possibility.

The destruction of proletarian experience

The experience of the lower classes in structural as well as political terms, is largely negated in publicity, or is assimilated and distorted by the media and cultural industries. Cultural industries include broadcasting, film, music, print publishing, games, and advertising, among other forms of symbolic and creative context, industrially produced (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy 2022: 9). In principle, mass media and cultural production are governed by the capitalist logic of commodity production, dissemination and consumption of symbolic forms in a market framework. This has important consequences on the quality and type of symbolic forms produced, and on the access to produce and to consume media and cultural content (Garnham 2000: 39). Questions of ownership and socio-political power and influence by media and cultural corporations, as well as structural questions related to the broader forms of determination brought by complex abstract systems and processes are important here. In this context, the experience of the working class, largely overdetermined by the reified relations of living reproduced by the naturalised mode of production of capitalism, is mediated by meanings produced by the media and cultural industries, guided by consumerist and market imperatives. Hence, the informational and cultural contents publicised by such industries are not associated with modernist aspirations of emancipation, democratisation, and enlightenment. As Negt and Kluge maintain, the bourgeois public sphere destroys the proletarian experience.

Proletarian experience is undermined and effectively destroyed through three interrelated ways; i) by the alienating mode of capitalist production and the proletarian conditions of living; ii) by the systematic negation of the public expression of the proletariat and its experience through its public exclusion and mediation by hegemonic bourgeois narratives; iii) by the appropriation and simulation of creative efforts and oppositional practices formulated by the proletariat, and their transformation into spectacle by the media and cultural industries (Hansen 2016 [1991]: xxii). At the same time, resistance and discontent is always developing against the constitutive violence of capitalism, marking what Negt and Kluge describe as the limit of real life. According to this conceptualisation, the "reality principle" imposed by capitalist society and the relentless alienation it brings, is resisted (however inconsistently), by the subject's own experiences, understandings, and satisfying of its needs, forging other realities and social imaginaries (Langston 2020: 39).

In what follows, the second dimension described above will be elaborated, notably the negation of proletarian voices and the mediation of the proletarian experience by hegemonic ideas and agents, notably white, middle class, nationalist and machoist ones. Though all dimensions foregrounded by Negt and Kluge are interrelated, the empirical focus in mass media puts attention to questions of working-class voice and representation. Studies (Bennett 2013; Eriksson 2015;

Jacobsson 2018) have shown that in bourgeois societies, the working and lower classes are generally positioned as unable to articulate a meaningful discourse over the problems that they are faced with, lacking respect, according to bourgeois social standards (such as status and wealth) (Skeggs 1997: 75); "attributing negative value to the working class forms a mechanism to attribute positive value to the middle class" (Skeggs 2004: 118). The lower class is interpellated by upper class voices, opposing middle-class identifications with the working class. Additionally, by assuming the authority to represent the identity, problems, and interests of the working class, the middle class uses the working class as a resource for the consolidation of the middle-class self (Skeggs 2004: 129). Hence, the bourgeois have the public legitimacy to define the agenda of publicity in liberal capitalist democracies, reproducing hierarchies of interests, status, and privilege. Acording to this logic then, the bourgeois public sphere articulates the experiences of the proletariat in ways that reproduce the bourgeois values, norms, and interests (Harkis & Lugo-Ocando 2018). In that sense, working-class discontent over work precarity may be articulated in nationalist and racist terms in bourgeois public spheres, with the problem of work precarisation attributed to migration, and not to systemic reasons such as the advance of neoliberal labour reforms. Likewise, the solution to the problem of work precarity may be framed in individualistic terms, with mobility, competition, and entrepreneurialism to be highlighted in bourgeois public spheres, as the ways out of economic insecurity.

Drawing on previously published studies (Mylonas 2019, 2020; Kostopoulos & Mylonas 2022), the publicity about the Greek economic crisis in different European public spheres, as well as the publicity about the so-called migration crisis in Europe, based on an analysis of the Greek press coverage of a specific "migration crisis" incident, will be critically discussed. While neoliberal austerity for the Greek working people was celebrated as a form of revenge for the "hard working European taxpayers" supposedly bailing out "lazy Greeks", a vicious public delegitimation of leftist discourses and politics that emerged in Greece during the crisis also occurred, resulting in the defeat of class-based crisis politics, the establishing of neoliberal austerity, and the resurgence of conservative and right-wing politics in Greece and elsewhere in Europe. With regards to the publicity over the "migration crisis" in Europe, the grave insecurities caused by neoliberalism to the European and Greek middle classes paved the way for the normalisation of racist and nationalist discourses. The representation of migration as a polyvalent and existential threat to the European middle classes, accompanied by anti-migration political agendas, tight border controls and the repression of solidarity practices with migrants, undermined publicity that could have produced class-based and internationalist alliances between workers, refugees and migrants.

The "Greek crisis" reactionary publicity and class struggle

A country on the EU's periphery, Greece was at the epicentre of the Eurozone crisis, following shortly after the US's 2008 credit crunch. A largely negative and intense publicity campaign begun developing shortly after Greece's discrediting by financial rating agencies, devaluing its national bonds in international bond markets to the level of "trash". Liberal politicians and pundits, along with mainstream media in Europe and elsewhere, scorned Greece, its political establishment and the Greek people, attributing the country's near default to their own irresponsible doings (Sobieraj 2022). The capitalist crisis was thus depoliticised, moralised and culturalised publicly (Mylonas 2019). Additionally, the Greek people became the scapegoats for the insecurities triggered by the crisis and neoliberalism in Europe. A false division was created between the hard-working Europeans and the lazy Greeks; Europeans were producing and paying taxes, while Greeks were deceiving and devouring the wealth produced elsewhere. Such racist and bourgeois repertoires diverted the European working people from creating common identities, solidarity politics, resistance against neoliberalism, and progressive visions for a potential post-capitalist trajectory. Instead, reactionary dichotomies were advanced, based on Europe's colonial and bourgeois legacies, between the "good", "responsible", "hard-working", "rich", "rational" Europe, and the quasi, or non-European, poor Other from the South.

Greece is a good example of the rise and fall of a leftist alternative in a neoliberal global context marked by crises, as well as of the resurgence of the neoliberal right in an authoritarian framework with the left's decline (Mylonas 2020). The election of a left-led coalition government in Greece in January 2015, headed by the Syriza (*Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras* [the Coalition of the Radical Left]) party with an anti-neoliberal austerity agenda shocked the liberal establishment of the European Union (EU) and Greece, and raised worldwide hope for a leftist response to neoliberal austerity. The rise of Syriza to power was associated with leftist legacies and struggles in Greece, and the popular resistance to neoliberal austerity and crisis policies. This resistance was able to create counter-hegemonic publicity and politics, challenging the neoliberal commonsense. Syriza tapped into such feelings and gained a conditional electoral victory through participating in the anti-austerity movements and representing the lower classes as well as those affected by austerity. By July 2015, however, the Syriza government succumbed to the pressures exercised by the EU and the so-called Troika (an institutional body formed by the European Commission [EC], the European Central Bank [ECB] and the International Monetary Fund [IMF]) for the continuation of neoliberal austerity, according to Greece's creditors' demands (Roos 2019: 261; Varoufakis 2017). As Dardot and Laval (2019: 99) state, "For six months, supposedly 'apolitical' European institutions, in close connection with Greek

oligarchs, the principal owners of the media, waged a veritable economic and ideological war against the Syriza government." However, even after its 2012 electoral gains, Syriza moved in a more centrist and traditional direction, becoming more centralised at the expense of its internal democratic processes, and targeting a "middle-class", aspirational and Western-oriented electorate while failing to deepen and develop its ties with social movements, labour organisations and the lower classes (Souvlis and Lalakis 2020: 90). Syriza's capitulation to the Troika became the strategic moment for *Nea Dimokratia* (New Democracy [ND]), Greece's major right-wing party, to develop its counter-offensive and regain power. Syriza's ceded administration signified a "passive revolution" moment (Callinicos 2010). Through Syriza's withdrawal from its political programme so as to remain in power, the bourgeois EU establishment imposed its will for neoliberal reforms from above, disregarding the popular mandate.

Syriza's capitulation meant the continuation of austerity, the deepening inequalities in Greece, and the left's shrinking popularity and militancy, under a nominally left-leaning government. ND was able to seize on the public discontent towards Syriza's failure to abolish austerity, through the use of affiliated mass media channels and networks. ND fuelled class frustration (caused by neoliberal reforms) against the left, blaming the left as responsible for the crisis itself, for the austerity reforms' failure (due to the instability caused by protests, and Syriza's "unrealistic" promises to the populace), and for austerity's continuance (because Syriza signed a third memorandum of agreement for neoliberal austerity), while also discrediting the left as failed, ideologically backward, and dangerous. After assuming power in July 2019, ND accelerated the neoliberal reforms framework, dismantling sociopolitical rights, labour rights, welfare and public institutions, and environmental protection laws, to the benefit of Greece's comprador capitalists and transnational oligopolies. The deepening of inequalities and uncertainties triggered by ND's class policies in a highly volatile global setting, were met by repression and propaganda. On the ideological front, ND operationalised various far-right ideas and identities and amalgamated them with neoliberal aspirations. ND produced a hegemonic block between the liberal centre and the far right, assimilating the right-wing reaction to the effects of the neoliberal crisis and austerity (notably, an important chunk of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn [GD] voters), through an anti-leftist discourse related to both nationalist and liberal-Europeanist tropes. Furthermore, popular discontent arising from the grim realities of neoliberal society was diverted by ND, and its effective control of the mass media, towards various scapegoats, such as specific vocational groups (e.g. public servants), and the migrants and refugees attempting to enter Europe through Greece while escaping war and poverty (Koutouza 2019: 230). In effect, a moral panic against migrants and refugees

was publicly produced, while advancing neoliberal reforms. Nationalism, racism, Europeanism and Western-centrism, along with various bourgeois ideas (related to market-related promises) created a sense of social cohesion crucial for the advance of ND's hegemonic political project (Gallas 2016: 31).

The "migration crisis" and the normalisation of racism

The so-called migration (or refugee) crisis proclaimed in Europe from the mid 2010s onwards is connected to the various migration flows directed towards the global North that have been developing on a global scale during the late 20th century context of globalisation. These are also related to the quest for better work and living circumstances by people from the impoverished periphery towards the core states of global capitalism. As well as poverty, war and climate change are further reasons behind the influx of various people towards the global North. Due to the permanent crisis of the economy however, migration has become an increasingly arduous process, as the migrants often become the scapegoats for systemic problems. The labelling of the subjects of migration from non-Western countries is further reflective of the politics developed towards those understood as non-European others (Sajjad 2018: 51). Despite the existence of specific agreements defining the status and the rights of refugees, this remains a highly unstable issue, contingent upon contexts and political decisions. Therefore, the manifested status of a migrant, a refugee, or, an 'illegal' "involves the creation, transformation and manipulation of a specific category of identity" (Sajjad 2018: 46), and defines the power relations that are involved.

Scholars (Koutouza 2019: 230) have argued that popular discontent towards the realities and prospects of neoliberal policies and austerity cuts has been captured and operationalised by the far right throughout Europe, and fuelled against migrants and refugees, as well as against the left. At the same time, the liberal democratic establishment in different European countries has moved further to the right in order to legitimise itself by attending to regressive demands and discourses that do not threaten the social relations of production and accumulation. The migrants thus form a convenient scapegoat for the sustaining of the neoliberal status quo (Mondon and Winter 2020: 122). The insecurities caused by a deep and long economic crisis, and decades of neoliberal deregulation policies following, have, among other things, also meant the rise of the far right across the world, and in Europe especially. Neoliberalism creates a pretext for the advance and normalisation of racism "grounded on a collective socio-economic insecurity that helps facilitate a revival of pre-existing racialized imaginaries of solidarity, as nationalist ideological tropes have been utilized by political parties committed to implementing neoliberal policies as a way of mobilizing a 'democratic' constituency for it" (Davidson and Saull 2017: 716).

The mainstreaming of the far right is largely a top-down process. Scholars (Mondon and Winter 2020: 122) argue that the politico-economic elites affiliate more with regressive socio-political demands instead of progressive ones, so as to not threaten their privileges and interests. In this regard, it is also important to note that illiberal and reactionary tropes are inherent in liberalism (Mondon & Winter 2020: 53). Liberty, meritocracy, and limited government are secondary when established hierarchy and privilege are threatened (Robin 2017: 16). The EU's rejection of the social-democratic politics of Syriza, or the British and the US establishments' reaction against the socialist alternatives that Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders put forth, are all examples. Simultaneously, the EU and US elites proved much more attentive towards the far right, incorporating demands related to anti-migration, and law-and-order policies to the programmes of centrist political parties claiming the governing position in electoral contests.

Along with a tight and severe policing framework in Europe, presumably meant to protect Europe from migrants coming from the world's peripheries, migrants coming from the East and the South were dealt with by a xenophobic and neo-orientalist publicity campaign, normalising racist slurs (Kostopoulos & Mylonas 2022). Publicity about the migration/refugee crisis is articulated through discourses that stress security, health, and cultural threats, while foregrounding essentialist nativist, religious, patriarchal, and middle-class identity constructions (Sajjad 2018: 54). Following ND's approach to migration, the centrist and right-wing press of Greece presented migration in extreme terms, through metaphors of war. The migrants were reduced to mere pawns of Erdogan's nationalist and imperialist plots, instrumentalised by Turkish political agendas to pressure and destabilise Europe. The agency of migrants was limited to crime and exploitation of European institutions and European lifestyles and values, to serve personal greed and a cultural context presumably incompatible to that of Europe. Both centrist and conservative Greek newspapers studied (*Dimokratia, Ta Nea, Kathimerini*) reproduce the discourse of Turkey as an ontological threat to Greece, recontextualised in the refugee "crisis" context. The refugee/migrant efforts to enter Greece are explained as an invasion organised by the Turkish state to serve its geopolitical ambitions in Europe. The projected threatening non-European Other thus combines features of both Turkey and Muslim migrants. War metaphors are deployed, triggering existential anxieties based on nationalist and culturalist-racist fantasies. This type of war is already being waged and has asymmetrical characteristics which call for exceptional emergency and securitisation policies, legitimising the intensification of police and military practices (Boukala 2021: 337). In such narratives, "all Greeks" appear as a reconciled and homogenous whole, to defend a presumably ontological external threat, defined on national, racial and cultural grounds. Class solidarity and internationalism towards fellow

migrant workers are excluded as irrelevant and even dangerous for the nation's survival. Although the progressive mainstream press uses a humanitarian and class-orientated framing of migration, the centrist and conservative press is associated with affluent media conglomerates that have strong ties with the political establishment. This enables them to hegemonise the Greek public sphere.

Concluding remarks

The engagement with the proletarian public sphere concept theoretically and empirically, foregrounds the need for public spaces that enable the working class and the poor to voice and articulate their realities and experiences. This is crucial for the development of antagonistic politics aspiring towards emancipatory social change, social justice, and egalitarian struggles. The lower and subaltern classes cannot produce social change, "conquer power or transform the relations of production, without establishing their own cultural hegemony" (Traverso 2021: 252). The study focuses in particular on what Negt and Kluge describe as the destruction of the proletarian experience, produced by the hegemony of the upper classes, and the diffusion of their meanings and agendas publicly, interpellating the lower classes and defining their living circumstances, values, and challenges. Two examples from socio-political crises related to the European and Greek context from the previous decade (2010-2020) were chosen, to demonstrate how bourgeois politics hegemonise the public agenda, under nationalist and Western-centric tropes, neutralising class struggle and class identities, and imposing their own politics and agendas.

By not addressing the systemic foundations of crises (e.g. economic, humanitarian) in all their complexity, the insecurities triggered by neoliberalism are articulated by liberal pundits and mainstream media through discourses blaming targeted groups (such as Greeks, migrants, or leftists). The loss of social stability and cohesion is substituted with nostalgic fantasies and simplifications related to nationalism, traditional social roles, and bourgeois norms (such as success, hard work, and regimes of entitlement) (McManus 2020: 17). The rise of Donald Trump to power in late 2016, along with similar electoral gains for the far right elsewhere (e.g. in Italy 2022), marked a new development in the history of neoliberalism. Governments with public references to dictatorships (Bolsonaro), and fascism (Meloni) advance policies of law and order, alongside business-friendly legislation that offers low taxation to the rich along with the deregulation of labour and environmental laws, thus benefiting big business's strategies of accumulation. Simultaneously though, the more cosmopolitan and progressive strands of neoliberalism, like that of Macron in France or Biden in the USA, co-exist with the authoritarian neoliberal variants, supposedly working as

the democratic antipodes of the latter. Different neoliberal variants coexist and work supplementary to each other, with free market rationales and objectives remaining unchallenged (Dardot & Laval 2019: xxiv). As a structure and an ideology, neoliberalism is reproduced both through law-making practices nationally and transnationally, and through the public making of relevant subjectivities that share an entrepreneurial view of life, normalising crisis and uncertainty. While laws diminish the prospects of effective oppositional and anti-capitalist politics (Bruff 2014), neoliberal subjectivities organically reproduce neoliberal pursuits, sustaining individualistic and competitive mores, which reflect depoliticised, middle-class aspirations (Gilbert & Williams 2022: 69). In such a grim socio-political reality, the development of effective antagonistic politics relies on the creation of both organisational forms and communication structures, to produce shared meanings and identities, as well as political goals and strategies. Jodi Dean's (2012; 2016; 2019) emphasis on the continuing relevance of communist politics through party-form organisation and relations of comradeship, are relevant to advance this particular discussion, implying the development of antagonistic forms of communication from below.

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