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My Big Fat Greek Debt

Sherri Moshman Paganos looks at the way in which negative language has been the prevailing dialect of international media coverage of the Greek Debt Crisis – and how even our own native tongue has been used against us.

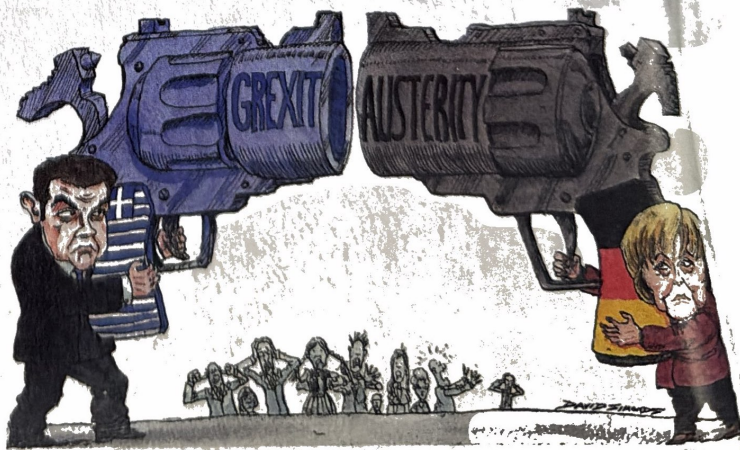
Last year in the summer of 2015, while the financial crisis hit its peak, and an air of misery hung over Greece, media all over the world found their issue of the summer. Foreign newspapers ran photos of citizens waiting in huge lines to get their daily 60 euros allowed by the banks, and ran article after article about impending bankruptcy. As many of these articles played up negative pictures of the country and people, I found myself as an American expatriate, not only explaining over and over to family and friends abroad what was happening, but also defending people's conduct. Not everyone was living beyond their means, I insisted, and the people I knew actually did pay their taxes. But the fact remains that if today you google "Greek debt crisis negative articles", you'll get over one million hits.

This slant toward negative reporting has been noted in many articles and reports. Adding her comments last month to the topic was Greek-Canadian journalist and writer Justine Frangouli-Argritis. In a talk in Athens entitled "International Press Coverage of the Greek Debt Crisis" Ms. Frangouli-Argritis, a weekly blogger for the Huffington Post and columnist for various Greek-Canadian newspapers and websites, referred to the pervasive "media ridicule" of Greece found in debt crisis articles.

According to the speaker, coverage of the crisis can be divided into several stages, the first going back to 2010 with its initial appearance and the first bailout agreement. At this time, the media emphasized the ineptness and powerlessness of the government to fight against tax evaders and corruption that had brought the country to this position, and stressed how the government "cooked the books" and lied about statistics in order for the country to join the euro. [Later it was

revealed that other countries in the EU had done the same, but the criticism was reserved for Greece]. This was the time of the offensive for many—cover of the German Focus magazine with the statue of Aphrodite of Milos draped in the Greek flag making an objectionable gesture with the headline: "Fraudsters in the European Family."

Not only were the government and leaders criticized during this period (with good reason) but the problem concerned, as the speaker stressed, criticism of ordinary citizens, "even a wave of hatred," she insisted "against everything Greek". And as sure as the sun beats down on a Greek summer day, stereotypes grew and flourished, with the prevailing idea that Greeks were "lazy", "liars" and "not to be trusted".



Negative stereotypes stemmed naturally from the sense of morality that the crisis brought out, and that we often have regarding money issues. Anyone reading newspapers in the early days of the crisis could see this predominant outlook. Northern European countries, such as Germany and Holland, set themselves up as moral and controlled, while Greece especially was considered too "fun loving", "carefree", "irresponsibly" spending "way beyond its means". So, in a sense the country had to be "punished" and so the mnimonio or bailout was "fine" and austerity is what the Greeks "deserved". Greece wasn't considered the only "Euro sinner", of course, by the Northern Europeans. Other southern Europeans were at it too: Portugal, Italy and Spain. As in the famous or rather infamous acronym "PIIGS" attests. And Ireland, although Northern European, for a time was admonished for its wasteful spending as well. A sense of morality about money also led to articles scaring the German public that they were paying with their tax money for the Greeks' profligacy.

In the second period of articles, in the fall of 2011, the government continued to be criticized for having failed to comply with reforms in the tax area and public sector, which led to the second bailout under a new government.

In contrast to the periods before, from 2012 to 2014, more sympathetic articles started to appear, stressing the sacrifices that ordinary Greeks were making: how citizens were suffering; about the increase in the homeless; and in the increasing loss of jobs as companies closed. The Greek media also began featuring articles about how to deal with a Grexit, such as going back to the land and growing your own fruits and vegetables.

With the new government and economic minister in 2015, articles again took a turn for the worse. It seemed a pattern was developing. In periods right before a bailout, negative articles reached their peak, as a way of exerting pressure. Whether positive, negative or neutral, international newspapers and magazines, talk shows on radio and TV stations all discussed the debt crisis. Newspaper editors had a field day with Greek allusions; the debt crisis was called an "odyssey without end", many articles referred to the "hubris" of the Greeks, "a Greek drama that would make Sophocles proud" along with inevitable references to "my big fat Greek debt".

Even The Onion, the American satirical newspaper, offered a list of "suggestions" last summer for battling the crisis, such as: "avoid frivolous spending on things like health care and a national infrastructure, appoint a special finance minister charged with groveling at Angela Merkel's feet, patiently remind creditors that money is just a social construct that holds no intrinsic value". It concluded with one final bit of advice: "10.8 million cups of hemlock." The Greek debt crisis had become a worldwide joke.

One might ask if there is too much sensitivity to this criticism. As Frangouli-Argyris would put it, however, this article and so many others, overstepped some bounds. And not only that, while no one can deny the problem of corruption, tax evasion, or the urgent need to reform the public sector; it's the notion that we tend to have that only we, but not others, can criticize ourselves.

Certainly there have been no lack of home-grown Greek political cartoons finding humor in the handling of the debt crisis. And just as self-criticism is preferable to that of others, many have commented that



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it would have been so much better if the Greek government itself had suggested some of these changes years ago. If these reforms had been carried out, the country would not have to suffer now under the harsh terms of the "troika" or now the "kouarteto", adding the European Parliament to the European Bank, Council and IMF, assiduously totting up whether the numbers of the bailout are being met while ignoring the human factor.

Although the debt crisis is by no means over – unemployment remains the highest in the EU, and more businesses close each week – the media is focusing on another devastating crisis in Greece, that of the refugees. While it might seem convenient to the world's media outlets that "Greek" collocates with "crisis", in both of these cases, the proper expression should be "EU crisis". The issues affect not just Greece, but the whole of the European Union. ❶