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Venus de Focus (... a couple of years later)

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‘And Venus was her name...’

Aphrodite of Milos, better known as the *Venus de Milo*,<sup>1</sup> was discovered in 1820 and today she is found at the Louvre in Paris. Initially she was considered to be a work of classical antiquity, but later she was dated between 130 and 100 BC. The *Venus de Milo* is widely renowned for the mystery of her missing arms. When the statue was found, both her arms - that are missing today - were in place. There are two theories

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\*\* This text is a reworked version of an older paper published in *The Social Sciences Collection* (<http://iji.cgpublisher.com/product/pub.88/prod.1201>).

<sup>1</sup> Aphrodite of Milos (Greek: Αφροδίτη της Μήλου, Aphroditē tēs Mēlou) is one of the most famous works of ancient Greek sculpture.

about how they were severed; according to the first, they became detached during the transportation to the Louvre; according to the second, they broke off in an argument over the statue between French archaeologists and the local people of Milos, when somebody accidentally knocked her over. Almost two hundred years later one of the two arms has been restored, at least virtually.

On the cover of the German magazine *Focus* in February 2010 (*Focus*, 2001) the *Venus de Milo* appears ‘sound at limb’ at least regarding her right arm that is in place again, sticking out the middle finger. The statue’s nudity is covered by a ragged and dirty Greek flag. The picture has the caption ‘Cheaters in the European Family’ [Betrüger in der europäischen Familie]. The specific cover provoked massive reactions, not only in allegedly nationalist circles, but also in numerous articles, blogs, facebook groups, and television broadcasts. There was even an official response by the Greek government as the image was considered insulting for Greece and Greek citizens,<sup>2</sup> and the magazine went to trial over the cover in November 2011. The *Focus* weekly's publisher and twelve journalists have been charged with defamation and insulting a national symbol (TVXS, 2011). Eventually the Greek court cleared the German *Focus* magazine publisher of libel charges but, in any case, the cover and the controversy over it, lays bare some of the internal contradictions faced by the EU in developing a common European identity among constituent members, states as well as citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Unworthy to remark on’ as ‘it is insulting to Greece and Greek citizens’, commented former government spokesman Giorgos Petalotis (TVXS, 2010). Much harsher positions were expressed, amongst others, by the Speaker of the Greek Parliament, Filippos Petsalnikos, and the spokesperson for the parliamentary group of PASOK, Petros Efthimiou (Kathimerini, 2010; YouTube, 2010). About the reaction of the German and international press see: Spiegel Online (2011), Time (2010), and The Guardian (2011).

The specific cover appeared soon after the eruption of the Greek debt crisis.<sup>3</sup> At the time people did not foresee the social consequences that the 2010 EU/IMF ‘bailout’ and subsequent austerity measures would bring about. The massive challenges provoked by the violence of neoliberal ‘adjustment’ were still yet to come. From this perspective the timing of the cover’s publication and the reaction it provoked is extremely interesting as it fueled a discussion about the premises and the limits of European identity, long before hard economic facts came to challenge not only European unity but also the international monetary system. This complies with Laclau and Mouffe’s position that all objects are constituted as objects of discourse, and thus there is no ontological difference between ‘the linguistic and behavioral aspects of a social practice’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 107). They thus blur, Howarth states, ‘the sharp separation between an objective world, on the one hand, and language or thought on the other, in which the latter is simply a representation or expression of the former’ (Howarth, 2000: 104). Along these lines, I will explore how efforts to construct European identity are influenced by the aforementioned cover and the various discourses that were articulated around it. In particular, I will examine the relationship between the dominant claim to the construction of a *comprehensive European identity* and the attempt to master the crisis in terms of *national identity*, drawing mostly from Michel Foucault and Discourse Theory.

### **European identity and the three modes of objectification**

How complex it is to resolve this inherent tension in the idea of a compressive European identity becomes evident once we realize ‘Europe’ is a very vague notion. Even to situate Europe geographically is problematic. On what grounds is it termed a

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<sup>3</sup> On 8 December 2009 Greece’s credit rating is downgraded to the lowest level in the eurozone as fears mount over its deteriorating public finances (*The Financial Times*, 2011).

continent? Is Russia also Europe? Given that it is, why not the rest of the former Soviet Union on the East? Some even question whether the Mediterranean space should be considered European, not only because Greek and Roman origins are situated in the periphery but, what is more important, because they precede what is now called Europe (Morin, 1987). Even Christianity, that is often called upon as a unifying principle, originated in Asia (Jacobs and Maier, 1988: 13), and, at any rate, is not confined to the European area. In other words, as no original founding principle can be identified, the attempt to define Europe historically and culturally becomes a tricky endeavor. More specifically, 'Europe' can be described as an 'undecidable' structure, not only because it articulates different and competing logics, but also because its identity depends on a series of 'constitutive outsides' (Delanty, 1995). This means that Europe's external frontiers have to be constantly imagined as a projection of an internal collective identity (Neumann, 1999). This sense of identity always involves both sameness and difference, which are the product of a constant negotiation. This means 'European identity' is constructed by various, often contradictory, discourses. To cover over the dislocations that emerge from its inconsistencies, myth needs to be introduced. Myth provides the absent unity which dislocation disrupts, and serves to transform it into an imaginary totality (Laclau, 1990: 60-4). Therefore it is a necessary metaphor for an always absent social fullness: 'myth is constitutive of any possible society' (Laclau, 1990: 67), and is thus a core feature in the formation of subjectivity and identity.

In my opinion, if we tried to isolate just one basic idea that runs through the entire work of Michel Foucault, this would be the process of subjectivation. Subjectivity is a concept that has a paradoxical and contradictory significance, since it suggests both agency and subjection. While subjects are discursively constructed

through ideological practices, they are simultaneously compelled to act because of the ‘failure’ of the structure to confer on them a fixed identity (Howarth, 2000: 109). Therefore, when Foucault describes the ‘three modes of objectification’ he refers to the process through which individuals are turned into subjects-objects of knowledge and power (Howarth, 2000: 79). These three modes also grossly describe the chronological development of his thought (McLaren, 2002: 64), referring to three fundamental aspects of modernity in western societies.

The first mode of objectification describes how regimes of power-knowledge are produced through and within discourse. These ‘regimes of truth’ construct a complex web that divides and excludes, thus producing specific subject positions. ‘Europeaness’, for example, is created and formed through the hegemonic discourse about the European Union according to which a European identity is considered necessary in order to avoid ‘fragmentation, chaos and conflict’,<sup>4</sup> but the contingency of this discourse is thinly veiled: soon it becomes evident that this involves the linking of different identities and political forces, and presumably a conflict of interest. This transpires clearly from the Article F of the Maastricht Treaty, which reads: ‘Union shall respect the national identities of its Member States’; taken together, these two aspects (European identity and respect for national identities) show how this ‘decentring’ of the structure literally introduces an identity crisis for its members, who simultaneously occupy different and often opposing subject positions. According to theorists adopting a ‘multiple identity’ framework (Malmberg and Strath, 2002), ‘European’ and ‘national’ identities are not incommensurable; their position is ‘predicated upon a model of peaceful co-existence between different but equally valid subject positions’ (Stavrakakis, 2007: 219). However, this does not seem to be the

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<sup>4</sup> Citation from keynote address by Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission to the World Telecommunications Forum 1995 Opening Ceremony (Geneva, 10/3/95) (Delgado-Moreira, 1997).

case. As in this particular instance under examination, ‘when a conflict of loyalties arises, certain components or levels [of identity] are always assigned higher priority than others, which is precisely the process that has sustained most national identifications so far’ (Stavrakakis, 2007: 220). The picture on the magazine cover makes evident the existence of such contesting positions. It constructs a discourse around the concept of ‘greekness’ as an empty signifier (Laclau, 1994), which is defined as opposed to ‘europeaness’. From the magazine’s point of view, which purports to express German society and the position of the European Union in general (with the rhetoric of the picture, in fact, identifying ‘europeaness’ with Germany), the empty signifier ‘greekness’ is constructed as the ‘constitutive other’ of Europe / Germany, the ‘constitutive other’ of what is given as organized, rational, honest, and developed. Looking at the photographic sign, the right arm and the flag clearly intervene at the level of denotation. Although the trick is obvious with the intention to satirize, the connotation of the two objects (arm, flag) takes on the ‘objective’ mask of denotation (Barthes, 2001: 31). This symbolically reinforces the trustworthiness of the facts presented by the ‘textual’ narrative, and thereupon the ‘truth’ expressed by the particular magazine. By hiding the ‘naked truth’ about the country’s economic data for years (the Greek flag covers / hides Aphrodite’s genitals), Greece has defrauded the other members of the Union; Greece has deducted large sums at the expense of fellow economies that have supported the country; and it has damaged the reliability of the common European currency and the idea of a united Europe (Greece derided the European Union / the Venus is flipping off the EU).

From the standpoint of Greek society (I am referring to the considerable part that felt offended by the cover) an utterly different political frontier is constructed around the same empty signifier ‘greekness’. This frontier is built around *nationalist*

(Greece as the cradle of civilization / the superiority of the Greek race), *historical* (Germany's World War II debt to Greece), *economic* (Greece as victim of international financial speculation), *religious* (the worship of ancient gods), and other discourses. In this framework, at the level of connotation the statue of Aphrodite expresses a hypostatized perception of Hellenism. This hypostatization is established upon the idea of an uninterrupted historical continuity with classical antiquity. As there is no historical evidence to this continuity (at least not in the sense in which nationalists maintain they descend from a 'pure', uninterrupted, 'Greek' bloodline), this is claimed in the name of a transcendental essence of 'greekness'. The virtually added arm and the misuse of the symbol of the flag function as metaphors for the continuous foreign interference in Greek internal affairs (intervention on the image of Venus / intervention in the political scene of the country ever since the foundation of the Modern Greek State)<sup>5</sup> and the exploitation of Greek civilization (vulgar distortion of a typical specimen of Greek civilization / appropriation of antiquities by foreign museums – here the accidental damaging of the marbles of the Parthenon by the British Museum is also implied).

The second mode of objectification according to Foucault (1972) centers on what he calls the operation of 'dividing practices'. At the most basic level this means that we recognize our own identity in marking out our difference from the 'others'. This duality is 'one of the crucial ways in which we establish and define our own identity, because we are constantly dividing the world into groups and entities, which makes us aware that we belong to one side rather than the other' (Booker, 2004: 568). In fact, there seems to be nothing that is more elementary to the process of human thinking than this tendency to divide everything into opposites between one thing and

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<sup>5</sup> The sovereignty of Greece was confirmed in the London Protocol of 1930.



another. These binary oppositions impose a hegemonic order and hierarchy on those who live within a given society. In this framework, the important role that oppositional narratives play in constructing and cementing national identities is self-evident. The discursive construction of external threats does a wonderful job when it comes to cementing in-group solidarity. One only needs to take a closer look at the verses of most national anthems. Consider, for example, the words of the Marseillaise: ‘Do you hear in the countryside / the roar of these ferocious soldiers? / They’re coming right into your arms / to cut the throats of your sons and women!’ (Eckel and Koogler, 2012).

Foucault (1972) further moves on to suggest that the subject is either divided from others, or divided within herself. Seen again at the level of national identity, one may notice that internal conflicts work even better in solidifying collective identifications (Huguenots in France, Catholics in Britain, Jews pretty much everywhere in Europe) (Eckel and Koogler, 2012). The most notable example today is the notion of a European identity. Obviously, one could object that being European is not a national identity; it involves, nevertheless, a process of collective identification that operates on a similar, even if competing, level. Foucault’s genealogy explores how these dividing practices objectify subjects (McLaren, 2002: 64). To return to our example, at the outset, the rhetoric of the photographic ‘text’ transpires specific central concepts: ‘greekness’ (as signifier of the statue and the flag), and ‘europeaness’ (as signifier of the phrase ‘European family’ on the caption of the picture). Nevertheless, these concepts are juxtaposed, as in the context of the picture described above; identification with one identity simultaneously implies the exclusion of the other, which is constructed as its ‘constitutive other’. Therefore, the foundational problem is taxonomy per se. Nationalist discourses on both sides are

merely the consequence of the ‘dividing myth’ that is reproduced and reconfirmed every time through practices of inclusion or exclusion in the various expressions of the European edifice (Europe, EU, Economic and Monetary Union, lending conditions, levels of representation in collective bodies, Europe’s superpowers, formal languages, etc.). In other words, the attempt to construct a coherent and seamless European identity is condemned from the start, because the construction of a totality presupposes the construction of a constitutive other. Especially when this other is located in another member-state of the in-group things become rather tricky...

At any rate, as previously noted, the subjects included in the total category ‘European identity’ always simultaneously belong *and* don’t belong to this category, as they also participate in a plurality of differentiating discourses such as national identity, social class, sex, gender, language, religious belief, etc. Hence, the total category ‘European identity’ is performed only through these particularities; at the same time, however, these particularities undermine this total identity in fundamentally embodying difference. This way the two faces of the construction of European identity emerge: ‘*they* are completely different from *us*’ (in the case of Greece implying: ‘when *we* were building the Parthenon, *they* were still living in trees’) or ‘*they* are exactly like *us*’ (in the case of Greece implying: ‘*we* are European, *unlike* the populace in the Middle East’). Hence, in order to define difference or similarity accordingly, a certain socially and culturally determined identity is imposed as a universal standard. Difference can be determined only in relation to a totality that is complete and fixed. The two modes of objectification described so far are so closely intertwined (the ‘regimes of truth’ simultaneously construct and reaffirm the ‘dividing practices’), that it is often difficult to tell one from the other. Their

interdependence further strengthens the hypostatization of categories such as the 'nation'.

This illusion of fullness takes us to the third form of objectification where Foucault (1979) especially focuses on the way individuals 'turn themselves into subjects through processes of recognition, self-mastery, and transgression' (Howarth, 2000: 80). I will explore this idea in relation to Lacan's 'mirror stage', where the child literally recognizes itself in its reflection, thus establishing the ego as fundamentally dependent upon external objects, on another. Before the 'mirror stage' the child has no perception of the distinction between the self and the external word of others. This natural condition (the 'Real') is a time of fullness that is irreparably lost with the entrance into the realm of language. In other words, fullness is lost through the construction of identity that presupposes an act of division and exclusion (if I am 'A', I am not 'not-A'). As a result, the whole process of the construction of the subject is founded on the level of the Imaginary as the child identifies itself with something virtual – an image (its reflection in the mirror), which *isn't* itself; it is something *through* which the child recognizes itself. The 'mirror stage' corresponds to the child's demand to make the other a part of itself, because it mistakes its image in the mirror as a stable, coherent, and unified self. This is an imaginary object, which the child constructs in order to replace its sense of lack and loss, division and exclusion. Within this framework, one could claim that the nation as an imaginary community - especially at a time of crisis when the European edifice is shaken - is no more than an expression of the fantasy of lost fullness. Through the hypostatization of the nation, the subject seeks an answer to its fundamental lack. Within this fantasy, Greece sees itself in a likable, idealized form; as the place where democracy and civilization were born; a place the entire modern world owes and looks up to; even more, it becomes

Europe's ideal ego! Hence, the true object of European attraction for Greece is the gaze; the supposedly naïve gaze in which Europe looks at Greece, enchanted by its democracy and civilization (Žižek, 2001: 345). The revelation of the dark side of the procedures that take place in Greece, the soaring debt, the social and political crisis and the reactions they produce, mostly represent the negation of this fantasy. The reality that emerges is nothing but an annoying distortion of this image. That which eventually comes into view is the semantic void on which nationalist ideology is founded.

The element, then, that holds together a given community is not simply located at the level of symbolic identification, but in this surplus 'essence' that is built through fantasies. The only way to define the 'essence' of the nation is by taking recourse to various forms of an empty tautology. This is the ominous existence of an entity that 'exists' only to the extent that subjects believe (in the faith of the other) in its existence (Žižek, 2001: 349). Every nationality has built its own mythology by narrating how the other nations deprive it from this vital part of enjoyment, which would allow it to live fully (Žižek, 2001: 353-4). Thus, from their point of view, Germans are deprived of their own pleasure by the 'Southerners' (the subtitle of the Focus caption also refers to the Spanish, the Italian, and the Portuguese) due to their proverbial Mediterranean lack of organization, their corruption, their boisterous pleasure; and because they lean for financial support on the developed 'North', 'stealing' the Germans' accumulated wealth who are therefore plagued by unemployment and other social issues, and need to cut down on welfare benefits. Thus neo-liberal logics and forms of power, as well as the global crisis of capitalism and the international monetary system, are interpreted as a conflict between 'us' and 'them'. Hence, on both sides, the axis of the argument is that 'we only want what we

righteously deserve' (the World War II reimbursement / the refund for the financial aid that has been squandered).

## **Conclusions**

In my essay I have claimed that the construction of a seamless European identity is inherently bound to fail, because every identity is always threatened by something external to it; a discursive threat shared negatively by those interpellated by the given discourse (Howarth, 2000: 106). Drawing on the example of the recent German *Focus* cover and the reactions it has provoked both in Greece and in Germany, I have tried to highlight the process of identity formation, and to show how antagonisms reveal the boundaries of political frontiers in a social formation such as the EU. This means that Greek or German identity, that is interpellated by the respective nationalist discourses, is always split between a set of particular differences conferred by an existing discursive system (Howarth, 2000: 107). This split intrinsically undermines the possibility of a coherent European identity. It is always this shared negation (*us* versus the 'others') that enables the construction of a discursive unity amongst different ethnic, racial and social groups, leading at the same time to the division of social space by condensing meanings around two antagonistic poles. The simultaneous process of national and European identification is thus revealed as a very touchy dialectic.

So what does this mean for the European edifice? Does it entirely condemn the prospects of the EU? In attempting to impose a *seamless* European identity, the European Union has aimed to create a super-state that will cater for the needs of neoliberal hegemony. This hegemonic force involves a constellation of neo-liberal practices that establish a new way of thinking about the relationship between

economic and social structures, and produce new forms of subjectivity and ethics. Hence, it tries to impose a rigid European identity that is meant to respond to the threats of national populism, and intends to overcome the social pressure Europe faces from the disaffected people both inside (unemployed, minorities, etc.) and outside (growing immigration). But such practices will probably lead to an escalation of nationalism, the reconstruction of tradition by violent means (Giddens, 1994), and even the grounding of economic and social inequities in cultural and even biological differences (Ferrarotti, 1993). This is precisely what the *Focus* incident illustrates, what ‘Venus de Focus’ reveals to us. To contain such a possibility, I believe that we need to avoid theoretical pitfalls such as the belief that it is possible to achieve a fixed, authentic, real, objective, and transparent European identity. What we could become stands as the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of today (Foucault, 1984). Following this line of thought, it is better to address identity as fluid, embracing both difference and change; this attitude alone promotes new possibilities of subjectivity through the rejection of a particular form of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982).

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## Ελληνική Εταιρεία Πολιτικής Επιστήμης Δίκτυο Ανάλυσης Πολιτικού Λόγου

Στόχος του ερευνητικού δικτύου για την «Ανάλυση του Πολιτικού Λόγου» είναι: (α) η προαγωγή του επιστημονικού προβληματισμού γύρω από την έννοια και τις θεωρίες του λόγου (discourse – discours - diskurs) και (β) η συστηματική εξέταση του πολιτικού λόγου και των επιχειρημάτων που αρθρώνουν οι πολιτικοί δρώντες (κόμματα, κινήματα, ΜΜΕ, κ.λπ.) καθώς εμπλέκονται σε σχέσεις αντιπαράθεσης ή συναίνεσης.

Η δημοσίευση σειράς «Κειμένων Εργασίας» (Working Papers), τα οποία αναρτώνται στον ιστότοπο του δικτύου και της Ελληνικής Εταιρείας Πολιτικής Επιστήμης (ΕΕΠΕ), αποτελεί αξονική προτεραιότητα του δικτύου για την «Ανάλυση του Πολιτικού Λόγου». Τα κείμενα εργασίας λειτουργούν ως παρεμβάσεις στο δημόσιο διάλογο είτε και ως ερεθίσματα για περαιτέρω επιστημονικό προβληματισμό. Βοηθούν δε τους συγγραφείς τους να ελέγξουν «υπό κατασκευή» επιχειρήματα και υποθέσεις εργασίας πριν λάβουν την τυπική μορφή επιστημονικών δημοσιεύσεων. Εξέχουσα θέση στο πλαίσιο του πρώτου κύκλου «Κειμένων Εργασίας» κατέχει η θεματική που αφορά σε «Λόγους της Κρίσης», σε πολιτικούς λόγους δηλαδή οι οποίοι αρθρώνονται με αναφορά στην τρέχουσα οικονομική -αν και όχι μόνο- κρίση στην Ελλάδα και την ΕΕ.

Τα κείμενα εργασίας που κατατίθενται προς δημοσίευση αξιολογούνται από τουλάχιστον δύο μέλη του δικτύου. Σε κάθε περίπτωση, τα κείμενα εργασίας εκφράζουν τις απόψεις των συγγραφέων τους και δεν απηχούν θέσεις του δικτύου ή της ΕΕΠΕ.