

## **Humiliation, Shame and Violence: Honor, Trauma and Political Extremism Before and After the 2009 Crisis in Greece**

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### **Acknowledgments:**

The author would like to thank Prof. Barry Richards, Dr Irene Agapidaki and the two anonymous referees for their valuable feedback and comments, and Jonathan Asser for his input on the Shame/Violence Intervention approach. Part of this research was carried out during a visiting fellowship at the Salzburg Global Seminar in Austria.

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### **Abstract:**

Recent scholarship has mapped the dynamic between humiliation and violence, including the role of trauma and self-esteem. While existing research has mostly focused on individuals, there is a strong case for applying this framework to the macro-social level. Taking an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology and political sociology, this paper carries out a step-by-step application of Gilligan's (2003) shame/violence theory to the case of Greece, focusing on the post-2009 era known as 'the Crisis'.

The paper outlines the root causes of the shame/violence dynamic in Greece, with reference to communitarian moral codes and honor crimes, as well as political divisions, unresolved trauma and shame/violence spirals originating in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It then examines the role of humiliation during the current economic crisis, as well as the surge of political aggression. The application of Gilligan's theory provides us with a compelling interpretation of the civic culture in contemporary Greece, throwing light on patterns of collective self-harming behavior ("suicide by cop") – both, as a possible result of subjective humiliation, and, as a means of seeking pity and attention. The paper also identifies the existence of accumulated shame, which could lead to outbreaks of political extremism.

**Keywords:** *civic culture, honor, humiliation, narcissistic trauma, shame, violence*

**Word count** (incl. references, excl. abstract): 8,354

## Introduction

Shame is increasingly recognized as a key driver of violence. A series of influential accounts over the last three decades (Gilligan 2003, Volkan 2004, Scheff 2011) documented the role of emotions such as humiliation and shame as root causes of aggressive behavior across a wide range of contexts. Gilligan (2017: 175) summarizes the essence of what could be called a 'general theory of violence': "the wish to ward off or eliminate overwhelming intensities of shame and humiliation and replace them with their opposites, feelings of pride and honor, by assaulting and injuring others and thus transferring one's own shame and dishonor onto them".

Over the last decade, researchers have further mapped and empirically tested the dynamics between humiliation, shame and violence (e.g. Hejdenberg and Andrews 2011, Elison, Garofalo and Velotti 2014; Velotti, Elison and Garofalo 2014). These studies have confirmed both the near universal presence of some form of humiliation or shame in cases of aggression *and* Gilligan's caveat that shame is a *necessary* condition, but not a *sufficient* one on its own. Further factors – such as an early narcissistic trauma and the associated lack of self-esteem – play an important role in how subjects experience and act on feelings of shame.

Most studies on shame and violence focus at the micro level of individuals – from familial and educational settings to prisons and psychiatric institutions, and from school shootings to random acts of killing. A handful of scholars (e.g. Volkan 2004, Gilligan 2017, Lacey 2011) have utilized or applied this framework to the mezzo level of social groups or the macro level of countries or collective cultures, i.e. looking at the role of shame in terrorism, political violence, civil and interstate conflict. There is a strong case to be made for the value of adopting an interdisciplinary approach that combines elements from psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology and political sociology in order to apply shame/violence theory to the macro level.

This paper takes such an approach and applies shame/violence theory to the case of contemporary Greece – especially to the post-2009 period known as 'the Crisis'. Over the last nine years, Greece has gone through a political, economic, social and emotional rollercoaster as it has faced the prospects of

defaulting on its debt, being forced to leave the Eurozone and the European Union, and reverting back to a less than a fully functioning and mature liberal democracy. While from 2010 to 2012 extensive riots and acts of aggression recurred in the headlines of global media, political violence in Greece has a much longer and deeper history going back decades (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012, Kiesling 2014, Kassimeris 2013).

For the purposes of this study, I use Gilligan's (2003) framework of shame and violence as the basis of the analysis. The aim of the paper is to examine the extent to which the shame/violence theory is applicable to the case of Greece – i.e. the extent to which the components and steps of the pathway from shame to violence fit the case study. Assuming we accept the presence of certain patterns and phenomena, what can the theory tell us about the root causes, dynamics and consequences of shame and violence during the crisis in Greece?

The next section outlines the relationship between shame and violence as that has been documented in the recent literature, looking on the role of humiliation, trauma and self-esteem. The conceptual boundaries of the analysis vis-à-vis other emotions and concepts, such as guilt, are also drawn. The subsequent section sets out the rationale for, and benefits of, applying this model to the level of the collective culture, as well as the points of interaction between micro and macro, which in fact appear to play an important role in triggering or facilitating aggression. I then introduce and contextualize the choice of Greece as a case study and examine the role of humiliation, shame and trauma in violence.

### **From Shame to Violence (and Back)**

Shame is often used as shorthand for several emotions: embarrassment, shyness, and – crucially – humiliation. The two concepts are intrinsically linked and, in fact, for the purposes of this study shame includes humiliation, not as a synonym, but as part of the same package of emotional root causes. However, the two emotions are distinct, and it is important to unpack them and acknowledge the diverse ways in which different scholars have approached them. For example, humiliation can be

defined either as the original offensive act (i.e. the cause), or as the experienced emotion akin to shame (i.e. the effect).

According to Torres and Bergner (2010: 199),

"an individual suffers humiliation when he makes a bid or claim to a certain social status, has this bid or claim fail publicly, and has it fail at the hands of another person or persons who have the status necessary to reject the claim. Finally, what is denied is not only the status claim itself, but also and more fundamentally the individual's very status to have made such a claim at all".

For Lacey (2011: 78), shame is the result of what you do (i.e. behaving outside social norms), while humiliation is the result of being demeaned because of who you are. However, others note that shame is an internal emotion experienced by the individual alone, whereas humiliation requires the presence of an audience or at least "to imagine yourself in the mind of others" (Richards 2009: 63). Humiliation "entails being regarded by others in a particular way that generates feelings of shame in the one humiliated" (Adshead 2010: 207).

Therefore, humiliation/shame require the existence of a community or group that upholds certain values or norms, as well as an event or critical juncture that disrupts one's narrative identity causing them to lose face in front of that community; it is that disruption – real or imagined – that is the cause of humiliation and shame (Adshead 2010: 207). According to psychoanalytic theory, the narcissistic wound is key to how an individual experiences shame (Kernberg 1975). Overcoming the infantile narcissism – the idea that we are at the centre of the universe – requires the acquisition of a basic humility or humbleness: "For the individual who cannot relinquish narcissism, having to accept reality and be one frail human among others is a humiliation. So, the fundamental task of psychic development, as seen by psychoanalysis, could perhaps be described as the acquisition of humility" (Richards 2009:

61). Kohut's work on narcissism and narcissistic rage (1972) showed that aggression can be a response to narcissistic injury; an attempt to salvage the humiliated sense of self.

Many mental disorders – such as depressive disorders, social phobia, narcissistic personality disorder and, notably, bipolar personality disorder – magnify the effects of humiliation or create the perception of humiliation where there is none. Lack of self-esteem is common to most mental health disorders and plays an important facilitating role in the relationship between shame and violence (Torres and Bergner 2010, Velotti, Elison and Garofalo 2014). Shame-proneness is significantly related to a tendency to become angry in response to criticism, i.e. threats to rank and ego or public exposure of negative aspects of the self (Hejdenberg and Andrews 2011: 1280). Therefore, an early trauma can lead to malignant forms of narcissism, including rejection sensitivity and shame-proneness, that can lead to aggression towards others and/or towards the self.

Elison, Garofalo and Velotti (2014: 448) define shame as "an affect elicited by devaluation of the self, especially when the shamed is aware of having violated a standard held by others [...] From an evolutionary perspective, shame warns of a potential threat to one's life, via impending social exclusion; violence, in turn, is best understood as a defense". While the literature traditionally focused on the role of anger in driving aggression, there is now sufficient evidence to suggest that shame is a primary driver of anger. There is solid empirical evidence showing that humiliation is one of the primary antecedents of violent behavior in diverse contexts (Velotti, Elison and Garofalo 2014), from domestic violence and school shootings, to terrorism, civil wars and interethnic conflict.

Shame and aggression are linked through various paths, including pain (social exclusion elicits physical pain – Elison, Garofalo and Velotti 2014: 450), and blame-shifting, which allows the shamed individual "to gain some sense of control and relief from the self-impairing experience of shame" (Hejdenberg and Andrews 2011: 1278).

From that perspective, shame is not a *moral* emotion (charged with guilt and regret), but a *functional* emotion oriented towards survival and the protection of the self within a hostile context. Thus, Gilligan does not view shame as a “moral impulse” – i.e. as guilt-ridden embarrassment, but as the *opposite* of guilt: as a blame-avoiding strategy of survival that claims innocence. While many scholars often refer to “fear of shame” as a driver of violence, for Gilligan, it is already experienced humiliation, possibly buried deeply into the unconscious as shame, that drives the need to restore pride, ergo violence.

The relationship between shame and guilt is somewhat controversial (Elison, Garofalo and Velotti 2014): some scholars would place guilt in the shame family; others view the two as distinct and possibly antithetical with shame being perceived as maladaptive, and guilt as adaptive. Velotti, Elison and Garofalo (2014: 455) assign shame itself with those moral and socially functional properties: "shame may play an adaptive role in motivating and regulating people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as in driving people to work hard in achievement and task domains, or to behave in moral, socially appropriate ways in their social interactions and intimate relationships".

Therefore, while different scholars choose different (and occasionally contrasting) labels, certain core elements recur throughout the literature and reiterate the pathway to violence: the real or imagined disruption of a humiliating event; shame as threatened status or impending social isolation; a possible narcissistic wound and the lack of self-esteem (and associated mental illnesses or personality disorders) as key intervening variables; blame avoidance as a mechanism of protecting the self; and aggressive behavior as the effect of that dynamic.

A simplified schematic representation of the shame/violence dynamic based on the above is provided in **Figure 1**: violence is an instinctive, subconscious or rational attempt by an individual or group (Actor A) to reclaim one’s pride, dignity or self-esteem that is perceived (by them) as having been lost or hurt because of someone else’s actions (Actor B). Thus, the fundamental prerequisite for shame – ergo

violence – according to this model is humiliation of Actor A due to disrespect (or other motive) on the part of Actor B.

The consequences of violence are equally interesting and important. Actor A's violence may be directed against the self (Actor A), and/or against the perceived perpetrator of the original act of disrespect (Actor B), and/or someone else altogether (Actor C). The violent act may have no consequences; or it could lead to retaliation and/or punishment, which typically aggravates Actor A's sense of humiliation and shame, potentially leading to a vicious cycle of violence. Scheff (2011: 456) notes that unresolved shame can build up to a backlog of hidden shame. Any new incident – beyond its own primary impact – also reactivates the backlog, making the new incident disproportionately painful. This has been described as a "shame-rage spiral", "endlessly recursive shame" and "humiliated fury" (Scheff 2011: 454, Elison, Garofalo and Velotti 2014: 450).

Insofar as the mechanics of shame and violence are concerned, the extent to which Actor A has a legitimate case for feeling ashamed is – at this point – irrelevant. In order to begin unlocking Actor A's feelings, thought patterns and actions – which may include violence – we have to start by focusing on whether *they* feel that they have been disrespected or humiliated, regardless of how reasonable or delusional that belief is. (An evaluation of the basis of their grievance may well be useful in the latter, therapeutic, stages of the analysis).

### **From Micro to Macro (and Back)**

While humiliation, shame and violence theory was originally developed based on clinical research on individual offenders, these dynamics can also be applied to collective behavior (Volkan 2009). Naturally, applying a model that was designed for the individual to a collective political culture – and extrapolating interpretations and interventions at that level – poses at least two important challenges. Firstly, such an

approach requires treating the civic culture – or at least the psychosocial state of a country at any given point in time – as a coherent unit. Prominent cultural anthropologists (e.g. Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict) and sociologists (e.g. Nobeit Elias) studying the “national character” of countries faced such criticism. Yet, while significant variations may exist within groups and societies, the psychosocial analysis of emotions and cultural patterns, and application of theories, at the collective level is legitimate and fruitful, given that structures, institutions, power relations, identities, socialization patterns, cultural rituals, codes and symbols, traumas and emotions exist and are experienced collectively, as well as individually. Therefore, by claiming that a particular trauma or tendency for violence is salient within a society at a particular point in time is not to deny the plethora of complex and contradictory social dynamics, but to highlight phenomena that have agency at the collective level; phenomena that have particular cultural or psychosocial significance – either vis-à-vis other periods of that same culture or across other comparable units of analysis, e.g. societies; and the fact that societies and cultures resemble and differ from each other in recognizable ways.

A separate methodological challenge is the assumption that phenomena and patterns which have been documented to operate at the level of the individual (e.g. that an early infancy trauma may affect one’s tendency to experience shame, or that humiliation may lead to aggression rather than remorse) operate in the same way at the macro-social level; that is to say, that their constituent parts and causal relationships behave in similar ways at that different ecosystem.

There is evidence to suggest that the shame/violence model is applicable to the level of groups, communities and states. Gilligan (2003: 1150) notes that “one can observe this same mutually self-defeating vicious cycle on a national and international scale and throughout history, both in this country and elsewhere...” and cites the examples of Chechnya, Israel-Palestine, Iraq and the two World Wars.

One example that is pertinent to our case study is the difference between liberal cultures, which favour individualism, privacy and looser social ties, and communitarian ones, in which collective moral codes play a dominant role in determining the individual’s status and value. Honor – i.e. the recognition of someone’s value in their own eyes, but more importantly in the eyes of others (Campbell 1964) – is



usually an important driver of emotions and behaviors. In diverse societies individuals are likely to acquire their sense of identity and self-esteem through multiple status groups (i.e. circles of acquaintances). Hence, no single group is so crucial to personal self-esteem, as opposed to honor cultures, which tend to have less diverse civic societies. In these culture, status loss can potentially lead to social isolation (Lacey 2009: 10).

Despite the importance of those emotions and phenomena at the macro-social level, since Ruth Benedict's seminal work on honor and shame cultures, and with the exception of the work of Vamik Volkan (e.g. 2004, 2009), "most of the literature and analysis of humiliation, rage and revenge is at the personal level of analysis, leaving a familiar problem in International Relations – bridging the levels of analysis" (Lacey 2011: 76).

However, the link between micro and macro is not merely a methodological one. The two levels – the individual and the social – are intimately connected and interact constantly, as is the psychoanalytical with the political in both levels of analysis. One obvious way is the impact that social structures, imagined communities and collective narratives have on the individual's psyche and identity. In fact, narratives of victory and defeat, pride and humiliation, are integral to our development and socialization as young members of our community. Past traumas – accounts of events that took place decades or centuries ago – become an integral part of a civic culture and of group identity, which can lead to accumulated shame and chronic mourning. However, the basis of this recurring shame may be "chosen traumas" (Volkan 2004), i.e. fantasies of shared humiliations, since they may have occurred long before contemporary members were even born and/or have no relation to their lives.

While a sense of victimhood may be shared by many in a community, individual trajectories are still crucial. As Richards (2009: 66) notes, "while there are many people who feel themselves to be victims, most do not develop terrorist ambitions. This is where the element of humiliation comes in, as a factor pushing the individual towards revenge. This is a point at which we can see the intrinsic role of psychological factors stemming from the individual's history, not from current circumstances".

Based on this rationale, the next section examines the applicability of shame/violence theory in the case of Greece. I start by examining historical incidents of collective humiliation, shame and trauma before focusing on the post-2009 crisis period.

## **The case of Greece**

### *The roots of the shame/violence dynamic*

Seminal ethnographic studies carried out in the 1950s and 60s (Campbell 1963, Lee 1953, Peristiany 1965, Pollis 1965) document a series of cultural and psychosocial patterns in Greece, such as the intimate connection between honor, shame and violence. Honor is the fundamental social value that binds together the members of a family in a culture based on kin and hostility between familial tribes that are not related by blood or marriage. Honor depends both on the individual's self-esteem as well as the community's recognition of their worth. The perceived value or standing of the individual affects that of their family, and vice versa. Thus, one person's deviance from social norms directly affects every other member of their family; the self is defined in relation to others and one's identity is constructed by the community.

In comparative surveys of civil society, Greece is often classified as an individualistic culture (e.g. Norris 2002) but that characterization is somewhat misleading. Modern Greek culture prioritizes the autonomy or prosperity not of the individual, but of the family (e.g. Lee 1953). The community (whether that is the immediate neighbourhood, the village, or public opinion at large) judges individuals according to their behavior, as well as that of their family. As Avdela's 2006 comprehensive census of honor crimes between the end of the Civil War (1949) and the onset of the 1967 dictatorship shows, these crimes fit within specific cultural and gendered scenarios (often those of unmarried women, and of their lovers, brothers and fathers). Community, family and gender were the three factors most central to honor crimes in Greece.

The culturally important and notoriously untranslatable concept of *filotimo* (literally: 'love of honor' - also 'dignity') remained intact as long as one avoided shame, i.e. being publicly embarrassed, which demanded a response. If someone's honor was questioned or violated, then they were obliged to "rinse it with blood" otherwise both they and their family would lose their social standing. This remained an influential cultural paradigm throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th century, especially in rural and more conservative parts of Greece.

The expression "for reasons of honor" was a kind of shorthand used by defendants, lawyers, prosecutors, newspaper reporters and the community at large. No further context was needed or given. Being able to understand why and how an offense to one's honor could lead to murder, without any further explanation, meant that one was part of the same cultural community, i.e. the widespread acceptance of honor as a cultural code. These values of the collective – obedience, sacrifice, family loyalty and knowing one's place – are dominant within tribal and some Asian, Middle Eastern and African societies, as opposed to modern Western cultures, which emphasize the values of individual achievement and responsibility, human rights, liberty, choice and separation of church and state (Lacey 2009: 8).

The salience of honor, shame and associated violence could be seen partly as a residue of Greece's past within the Ottoman Empire. The country's geographic position at the border of Europe and the Middle East has meant that this cultural cleavage between Enlightenment-driven modern individualism and communitarian and tribal traditions based on kin has retained its importance. Even to this day, that cleavage – which partly overlaps with the urban v. rural cleavage – continues to have fascinating extensions and applications into the political domain as shown below.

Within this context, during the last 100 years Greece has experienced a series of major political rifts starting with the National Schism (1914-17), which brought supporters of Prime Minister Venizelos (who pressed for Greece to enter the World War I in support of the Allies) against those of King Constantine I (who promoted a stance of neutrality that would have favoured the Central Powers). This evolved into a major disagreement over Greece's campaign in Asia Minor during the early 1920s. The Schism's knock-

on effects (which included violent clashes and military coups) carried on until the beginning of World War II. In turn the events of the 1940s – World War II, the Occupation, the Resistance and the ensuing Civil War between the Greek government army and the Communists, which ended in the latter's defeat in 1949 – constitute a critical juncture in Greece's history; a collective trauma of immense proportions which is still partly unresolved and whose ideological and psychological repercussions – in terms of experienced pain, humiliation and accumulated shame – are still felt.

Avdela (2006: 14) argues that these events – taking place within the space of nine years – led to the domestication of violence, as family members turned against each other. Political assassinations and executions became a staple of daily life, particularly in Thessaloniki (Anastasiadis 2010). The familial, the provincial and the political as drivers of the honor / shame / violence dynamic became highly entangled. While honor crimes declined in the 1960s, aggression as social and political currency never disappeared. It was replaced by newer forms of violence – urban and ideological ones. The pre- and post-war humiliation and marginalization of the Communist Left (including detention, exile and police brutality and torture) further scarred the national psyche and bestowed the Greek Left with a sense of moral superiority that in turn legitimized far left political violence (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012).

To this canvas of strife and shame/violence spirals we should add widespread suspicion of Western powers, including Germany (due to its role in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War), Britain (which was resented by the Left for having intervened in support of the right-wing Greek government during the Civil War) and the United States (which has been accused of systematically intervening in the country's domestic affairs, including during the 1967-74 military junta). That hostility ran across the political spectrum, despite the fact that Greece benefitted significantly both from the Marshall Plan, and from its accession into the political, economic and defence postwar infrastructure of Western Europe (such as the European Economic Community and NATO).

In conclusion, over the last century Greek society has experienced a series of – mostly internal (self-inflicted even) – traumas that created shame/violence spirals whose reverberations are still felt to this day. The Greek culture's communitarian moral codes promoted a relationship with the self – and a

perception of self-esteem – that is still mediated through the perceptions of others. In this psychosocially charged context, aggression or the *threat* of aggression has often been seen as a legitimate means of acquiring justice or reclaiming honor and pride. Two important caveats are that (a) after the disastrous 1920-22 campaign in Asia Minor, and with the exception of the 1974 coup in Cyprus (backed by Greece's military junta), the country has not engaged in acts of aggression or territorial claims against other states; and that (b) the collapse of the junta in 1974 marks the transition to a stable liberal democracy.

However, the “clean break” of 1974, which was followed by the dominance of the Right fuelled the Left's antagonistic mentality. As Andronikidou and Kovras point out, “historical legacies and political cultures matter. In the Greek case, the transition to democracy shaped a political ‘culture of sympathy’ towards acts of resistance to the state, a culture that has been institutionalized since the mid-1970s” (2012: 707). Highly visible and extremist phenomena of political violence – terrorism, street riots, vandalism, uricide by anarchist groups – became tolerated by mainstream parts of society.

From 1975 to 2002, a number of terrorist groups – notably Revolutionary Organization 17 November (17N) and Revolutionary Popular Struggle (ELA) – carried out tens of attacks against domestic and foreign targets, including politicians, diplomats, industrialists and journalists. 17N in particular achieved mythic status with part of the Greek public, while the state persistently failed to tackle the phenomenon (Kiesling 2014). The arrest, prosecution and conviction of fifteen 17N leaders and members in 2002-03 put a temporary pause to the phenomenon. Yet, a new generation of terrorist groups and urban guerrillas emerged almost immediately. While still subscribing to far-left grievances, that newer generation has intensified its attacks against the police, has promoted a nihilistic discourse of chaos (as opposed to the more tangible Marxist demands of the pre-2002 groups) and is intimately linked to both organized crime and urban anarchist groups.

Therefore, while the onset of the Greek debt crisis in 2009 constitutes a critical juncture in the country's contemporary political history, it is important to acknowledge the pre-existing psychosocial and cultural fabric upon which the crisis and its shame/violence dynamic unfolded, as well as the striking continuities

of those phenomena before and after that juncture. In fact, the worst instance of generalized political violence in Greece's post-Civil War history took place in the December 2008 following the shooting by a police guard of a 15-year-old student. The 2008 riots are an important reminder that political grievances, a widespread sense of victimhood, and emotions of rage and shame were widespread across Greek society well before the breakout of the crisis (Gerodimos 2015).

### *The shame/violence dynamic during the current crisis*

In this section I apply Gilligan's (2003) shame/violence theory to the case of Greece since 2009 – a period that has come to be known as “the Crisis”. I pose in turn three questions that are central to this model: (a) does a significant proportion of Greeks feel disrespected or humiliated, and, if so, by whom? (b) is there evidence of political violence during that time? (c) to what extent can that violence be considered as self-inflicted and contributing to a spiral of shame? The aim of this exercise is to explore whether this theoretical framework can help us understand the root causes and patterns of violence and threats to Greece's civic culture.

In late 2009, after years of extensive borrowing and mismanagement, the true extent of Greece's budget and trade deficit was revealed, along with evidence of manipulation of the official statistics. With market confidence collapsing, the newly elected Greek government was unable to borrow money to finance its deficit and serve its soaring debt. In May 2010 it finally entered into an unprecedented bailout loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission and the European Central Bank (ECB) – the so-called Troika of lenders. This Economic Adjustment Programme (known as “the Memorandum” – which gave its name to the crisis era as a whole) was followed by subsequent agreements, including the February 2012 bailout, which included the biggest debt restructuring (“haircut”) in history, and a third bailout loan in 2015.

Over the course of this period, Greece received more than €310 billion in loans and assistance packages that were tied to a radical program of austerity and public sector reforms monitored closely by the

Troika. The country managed to avoid a disorderly Grexit, while the crisis was an opportunity to enact and implement long overdue reforms. However, the social cost of the crisis has been immense: high unemployment, soaring taxation, significant cuts to salaries and pensions, a healthcare system stretched beyond its limits, a “brain drain” with hundreds of thousands of highly qualified young people leaving the country, and widespread feelings of fear, despair and anger amongst those who stay behind (Karyotis and Gerodimos 2015).

Each of the three bailout agreements, as well as each of all the interim evaluations and conditional releases of funds, was the culmination of prolonged negotiations, controversial political decisions, brinkmanship and rolling news coverage. Day after day, for weeks or months on end, Greeks watched with bated breath as the government negotiated with lenders as each bond matured (which meant immediate repayment or a disorderly default) and each tranche of the bailout package was reluctantly handed out by the Troika. For more than eight years – and especially from late 2009 to late 2012 and throughout 2015 – Greek society, the economy and the political system have operated in a state of crisis governance and psychological shock. The big majority of Greeks have seen their daily reality and quality of life change dramatically and without a sense of an emerging recovery. Political polarization threatened to rupture the civic fabric, with the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn becoming the third largest party in January 2015 and the anti-Semitic and xenophobic Independent Greeks (ANEL) joining the Tsipras government (Tsatsanis and Teperoglou 2016, Rori 2016).

The sense of humiliation and shame in Greece has been palpable. In a December 2017 opinion poll (Ravanos 2017), “shame” (49.7%) is the second most popular “word that expresses Greeks regarding the country’s present and future”. The first one is “rage” (59.4%) and the third one is “fear” (38.6%). I posit that there are at least three distinct sources of shame related to the crisis:

- (i) Systemic problems that caused the crisis – such as widespread tax evasion, clientelism and an unresponsive state bureaucracy. Many citizens associate these phenomena with the political elite of the post-1974 Third Republic, potentially considering that those politicians involved in scandals and bad practices cheated, i.e. humiliated, citizens personally. Others

attribute blame either to society as a whole, believing that there is something fundamentally and irreparably wrong with Greek political culture, or to particular interest groups or trade sectors – whether that is public sector workers, tax-evading freelancers or privileged pensioners that are seen as having benefitted the most from the structural biases of the economy (Karyotis and Rüdig 2015).

- (ii) A second source of shame was the global media and the foreign publics as Greece was framed as “the sick man of Europe” and “lazy” or “cheating” Greeks became the object of sweeping generalizations, stereotyping and parody across the world. Heated op-ed pieces and graphic cartoons satirized Greek society and its way of life (Exadaktylos and Capelos 2015). Greek media engaged with equal fervour in this symbolic warfare, fully participating in a vicious circle of revenge and escalation, as was the case with the front covers of top magazines in Germany and Greece featuring graphic versions of the other country’s statues.
- (iii) The third and possibly most potent source of perceived humiliation has been the Troika of lenders and EU leaders. The bailout measures are widely seen to have been *forced upon* the political system by the creditors with little or no resistance by the Greek government. In contrast to other countries that underwent similar bailout programmes, the government of the day rarely “owned” or made a positive case for those or other, alternative, measures. The austerity packages were presented as a TINA (There Is No Alternative) scenario even when the creditors themselves were open to alternatives (Gerodimos and Karyotis 2015).

A common frame used by populist politicians and the Greek media has been that these three steps – the crisis itself, its framing and its handling – constitute deliberate acts of humiliation, as opposed to ineffective mechanisms of social and political organization. Coercion is a major catalyst for shame; Gilligan (2003: 1164) argues that punishment is the “most powerful stimulant or cause of violence that we have yet discovered”. As coercion or punishment fuels a defensive stance, the likelihood of the subject experiencing remorse or reflecting on practical ways of improving declines even further. This was emphatically the case with Greece as the bailout packages and associated austerity measures were framed in a punitive manner. The Greek crisis was systematically framed as *moral failure* (e.g.



overborrowing, overconsuming and underperforming), not least by key EU figures as this suited their need to contain the crisis by framing it as a Greek problem and, therefore, not allow it to spill over to a generalized Eurozone crisis (Papadimitriou and Zartaloudis 2015). While the merit of these positions and the relevance of a moral dimension to this crisis can be debated, the ultimate effect may have been one of causing the more belligerent social groups to further retreat into their trenches of shame.

It is important to remember that the post-2009 crisis in the Eurozone was not limited to Greece; it affected several countries of the EU's periphery (such as Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain). These countries were collectively branded as 'PIIGS' by parts of the European media and opinion-makers; they faced similar challenges of stereotyping and humiliation. While these cases present interesting similarities and differences (e.g. the political system in Ireland and in Portugal proved more resilient and effective in handling the crisis, while in Italy there has been a surge of radical populism), Greece experienced a level of strife, shame and extremism that is qualitatively and quantitatively different (Gerodimos and Karyotis 2015, Gerodimos 2013).

Over the last eight years, the country has witnessed: violent demonstrations and repeated riots, including arson (in one instance leading to the death of three bank workers in central Athens) and repeated vandalism of sidewalks, public amenities, state buildings and private property, all of which peaked in February 2012 as the second bailout agreement and associated debt 'haircut' was voted into law by parliament; the *Aganaktismenoi (Indignados)* movement in the summer of 2011 included the occupation of public space, physical assaults against MPs, scuffles with police, setting up fake gallows and burning effigies of democratically elected politicians outside the Greek parliament; acts of political violence by neo-Nazi groups, such as the Golden Dawn; systematic and purposeful degradation of the urban landscape (defacing or breaking statues and public works of art – including cemeteries and Holocaust memorials) by far left and far right groups, which continues unabated to this day; anarchist collectives effectively taking over control of an entire neighbourhood in central Athens (Exarcheia) with regular attacks against public intellectuals and journalists in bookshops and at university campuses; an intensification of terrorism, which – especially after the December 2008 riots – has developed extensive

links to organized crime and anarchist groups; online bullying and verbal abuse in social media; and a deeply engrained sense of anomie as the police has been unable – and in some cases unwilling – to enforce the law and protect citizens, public order and private property. One indicative example is that within the space of two months in early 2017 there were 250 attacks by anarchists and neo-Nazis, 200 of which took place in Exarcheia and downtown Athens (Lambropoulos 2017).

Political violence during the Greek crisis has been neither constant, nor universal. The country has also experienced periods of calm, especially after the electoral win of radical-left Syriza in January 2015. Large parts of Greek society – a “silent majority” – have not actively engaged in politically violent behavior. Despite the austerity, the toxic populist rhetoric, and the profound changes to its way of life, Greek society has continued to function; the social fabric and democracy – which at times appeared to be under threat – have survived, albeit bruised.

However, the existence and impact of different forms of violent behavior – on the civic culture, on the political discourse, on the urban landscape, on the public mood, on human rights and civil liberties, on the trajectory of Greece’s economy and stability – is undeniable. While it is hard to quantify the legitimization of aggression and the poisoning of the public dialogue, the social resonance of violence is often much greater than its physical manifestations. Polling data and ethnographic studies have charted the radicalization of Greek youth with the 18-25 age group being key to the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn’s success (e.g. Koronaïou et al. 2015). Given Greece’s political history and the salience of psychosocial patterns, it is important to identify triggers and traumas that can reactivate spirals of shame and violence.

Crucially, self-harm appears to play a key role in the shame/violence dynamic in Greece. Gilligan 2003 found that carriers of shame are often prepared to harm themselves in the process of exacting revenge. Occasionally they provoke their own deaths at the hands of the police (a phenomenon known as “suicide by cop”):

“[S]uch behavior appears to be committed by people who are so tormented by feelings of being shamed and disrespected by their enemies that they are willing to sacrifice their bodies

and their physical existence to replace those intolerable feelings with the opposite feelings of pride and self-respect, and of being honored and admired by their allies and at least respected by their enemies." (2003: 1151).

There is evidence that large segments of Greek society have systematically tolerated or actively endorsed what might be conceptualized as collectively self-harming behavior. Examples include the normalization of extensive vandalism against public property (such as the recent destruction of brand-new ticket barriers across Athens' metro system) and widespread tax evasion and refusal to pay road tolls and other public fees (as in the case of the "I'm not paying" movement). Such tactics are directed against perceived corrupt elites but end up directly harming citizens' own welfare as the state struggles to cope with a lack of resources. A similar argument could be made for phenomena of conventional political violence, such as terrorism and violent riots, which damage not only the country's domestic civic culture, but also its brand abroad, thus adversely affecting investment, tourism etc. These phenomena are, to an extent, still socially legitimized and rarely, if ever, provoke social reaction or pressure in favour of law enforcement (Andronikidou and Kovras 2012).

For self-harming individuals, violence is a consequence of feeling numb or "dead inside": an attempt to test whether they can experience something (anything, even if that is pain) or to seek attention (esp. children and disenfranchised communities, Gilligan 2003). This is a key feature of mental illnesses, notably that of borderline personality disorder as shown by Kernberg (1975). Interestingly, both elements – apathy and attention-seeking – appear to be true in the case of younger perpetrators of political violence in Greece over the last decade – such as the anarchist groups leading the December 2008 riots and the "new generation" of terrorist groups that have been active since 2004. In contrast to the conventionally ideological, Marxist, petit-bourgeois, anti-imperialist resentment of the first generations of terrorist organizations (such as 17N), new terrorism is marked by an ideologically vacuous post-modern nihilism; violent destruction is not the means to an end.

A further application of self-harm concerns the electoral behavior of Greek voters in 2015:(a) the two electoral victories of Syriza, (b) the support for the Tsipras government's (and especially then Finance

Minister's Varoufakis') Russian-roulette-meets-game-of-chicken style negotiations with creditors and European partners, and (c) the rejection (with a significant margin of 61%/39%), in a constitutionally problematic referendum, of a draft bailout agreement proposed by creditors (see Tsatsanis and Teperoglou 2016, Rori 2016). The electorate ignored repeated warnings by almost the entire political, academic and economic establishment of Greece (apart from the government and the far right) that a 'No' vote, i.e. a rejection of the proposed agreement, could have led to a disorderly default, the collapse of the economy, the country's exit from the European Union, and the destabilization of the parliamentary system. This potentially serves as an indication of the extent of pain and humiliation experienced by a large part of Greek society.

Assuming that violence includes self-harming collective behavior, then every single element noted by Gilligan is present here: the vicious cycle of self-defeating tactics; using self-harm in a desperate attempt to seek the attention and pity of others (i.e. creditors, partners and foreign audiences); and the almost welcome prospect of sacrificing oneself (i.e. through Grexit, default and ensuing chaos) in the pursuit of seeking revenge and destroying the perceived perpetrator of the humiliation (i.e. the Eurozone and especially Germany) – something which was repeatedly articulated in public and media discourses, not least by the defence minister and leader of Independent Greeks (Syriza's coalition partner) who in February 2015 threatened European partners by comparing the government's stance to a legendary act of self-sacrifice in the face of certain death during the Greek War of Independence. "Violent people know that violence is an effective means of getting other people's attention: you have to pay attention to someone who is coming to kill you" (Gilligan 2003: 1158).

While the motives of 'No' supporters may have been complex, the intended recipient of the referendum's outcome was not the Greek government, but the Troika of lenders and the international community. This brings us to the issue of self-esteem and the possible presence of a narcissistic trauma that metabolizes shame into the capacity for violence (including self-harm).

Greek media and public opinion have historically bestowed striking emphasis on headlines and representations in foreign news media. References to Greece, Greek politics, athletes, artists and

current affairs in international news media routinely lead the main bulletins of TV networks. Foreign leaders' statements about Greece are played in a loop and carefully dissected on TV, radio, online and in press throughout the 24-hour news cycle. In other words, Greek society is very sensitive to how it is represented outside Greece. Its self-esteem is mediated through other communities' representations and perceptions in the same way that the individual in traditional Greek culture would acquire, maintain or lose their status through the community's response.

There are several possible explanations for this pattern including, but not limited to, the "infantile" trauma of the Greek War of Independence – and the way the Great Powers of the day reacted to it, as well as a sense that Greece is "alone" in the world (the expression "nation without siblings" is part of the country's folklore) and, as such, historically the victim of potential aggression by foreign powers. This residual inferiority complex – which is aggravated by widespread emphasis on the country's chronic ills– is complicated by a residual superiority complex regarding Greece's perceived role as the source of democracy, philosophy and European culture, which only serves to maintain narcissistic feelings of aloneness and persecution. Feelings of inferiority and victimhood are often followed by a shift towards macho culture, nationalism and a return to the holding environment of the family, the flag and the Church.

### **Concluding reflections**

There is ample evidence to suggest that Gilligan's 2003 model of shame/violence theory is applicable to the Greek case study. The country's communitarian moral codes have historically promoted a relationship with the self – a self-esteem – that is heavily affected by the perceptions of others. Violence was historically a legitimate means of restoring pride and honor in familial contexts, while political violence has been part of the country's history, especially during the 1940s, but also before, during and after the 1967-74 dictatorship. The restoration of democracy in 1974 provided the Greek political system with a "clean break", consolidated liberal democracy domestically, and led to the country's

integration into the western European infrastructure. However, an undercurrent of shame, blame and violence continued to exist.

The ongoing trauma of the economic crisis has reactivated a shame/rage spiral leading to a range of violent actions and a normalization of aggressive rhetoric towards the state, democratic institutions and elected representatives. Some of these acts of violence or lawlessness could be considered as self-harming – either as a defence mechanism or as a means of attracting pity or attention. Adshead (2010: 206) notes that when an insecure group is overwhelmed by anxiety, complex thinking stops: “bullying and humiliation are part of the repertoire of behaviors that an anxious hierarchy may use to restore psychological comfort for the group”. Volkan (e.g. 2004) describes how when a group is under stress – or its identity is under threat – it can revert back to simplistic notions of good and evil and an emotional investment in cultural symbols. “An historical trauma can become more salient, and old resentments and humiliations are relived and must be avenged. In such a state, violence is easily aroused” (Lacey 2009: 7). The recent mass demonstrations in Athens and Thessaloniki regarding the use of the term ‘Macedonia’ by the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – an issue that has profound cultural value for many Greeks – demonstrate the need of Greek society for outlets of restoring its lost pride, and the dangers of hidden and accumulated shame.

Over the last eight years, Greece has been operating in crisis mode. A majority of the population feel angry, humiliated and scared, and are nurturing negative emotions towards the political system as well as Greece’s European partners. The value of psychoanalysis, and especially shame/violence theory, is that can help us understand what is happening and why. Were we to accept the applicability of this framework in this case, the next logical step would be to adopt a therapeutic approach, examine different types of interventions that have been developed in clinical practice and consider if and how these might be applied to the macro-social level, for example in education, political discourse, journalism and media practice so as to facilitate healing.

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Figure 1 – Humiliation, Shame and the Cycle of Violence

