

*The Greek Crisis in the Media:  
Stereotyping in the International Press*

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Media representations of the crisis in the Eurozone, as well as elite and neoliberal discourses, have often promoted national stereotypes and the idea that the crisis is largely due to the problematic national, cultural characteristics of certain countries, such as Greece and the other so-called PIIGS – Portugal, Italy, Ireland and Spain. Greeks in particular have been represented as essentially lazy, corrupt, irrational and excessively greedy or consumerist, destructive and dangerous not just to themselves but to the rest of Europe as well.

A critical, scholarly approach to exploring the issue of stereotypes such as these would be expected to draw from the rich literature in the fields of media or cultural studies and to explore them as ideological constructs which work to justify unequal power relations.

Research on stereotypes usually involves analysis of their discursive construction and essentialising, reductionist and naturalising operations. It includes investigating their embeddedness in historical, economic and political narratives, popular culture, and common sense. Stereotypes are also explored in terms of how they support racism, sexism and other ideological projects such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, ethno-nationalism, militarism, and neoliberalism.

Rather surprisingly, despite the title, *The Greek Crisis in the Media: Stereotyping in the International Press* is not contextualised within this body of work and in fact does not actually focus on media stereotypes.

Instead, it implicitly reiterates certain elite, neoliberal and mainstream media discourses which claim that the particular crisis in Greece is largely the result of the national cultural characteristics and shortcomings of Greeks, rather than deeply systemic, ideological, political and transnational in nature. Although the author claims that overgeneralisations are inaccurate, and that all Greeks should not be blamed for the actions of their politicians, the book implicitly offers support to an understanding of the crisis and Greece in terms of stereotypes. Ultimately, the understandings presented throughout the book seem to be mobilised in order to promote the highly contested IMF/ECB/EU programme and the neoliberal project it involves for Greece.

The main argument of the book, as the author states in the Preface, is that the crisis is 'principally a domestic problem' (p. xiv) due to a great number of 'pathogenies' in governance, politics and society. In keeping with this main argument, the author claims that negative media representations of Greece in the international press are also the fault of the country itself. Journalists simply exposed pathogenies or developed their reports with information from pathogenic sources. The book also includes normative proposals for the resolution of the crisis, as well as for its media coverage, to be adopted by Greek politicians, the EU, journalists, and Greek youth.

An overview of the roots of the crisis is presented and discussed in terms of pathogenies. The concept of pathogeny is never quite defined; however, it refers to a very wide range of problems in governance, politics and society; more generally. Domestic pathogenies in governance involve maladministration and incompetence, government overspending, clientelism, bureaucracy, and support for oligarchies. They also include what the author has called an 'impunity culture' (p. 141), or the failure of weak governments to apply laws and bring perpetrators of illegal actions to justice. The perpetrators of such actions include oil smugglers, corrupt civil servants, media owners, demonstrators and protestors who block roads and occupy public buildings. The political sphere is also seen as exceptionally pathogenic and as completely lacking in 'virtue' (p. 141). Greek politicians are characterised as self-delusional (p. 144) and are discussed in terms of hypocrisy, (p. 137) and immorality (p. 141).

Other more widespread pathogenies discussed are corruption in the form of *fakelaki* (bribes) and *rousfeti* (political favours) as well as resistance to reform and change. The author also seems to imply that certain aspects of political action and protest, such as occupations, are unique to Greece – 'bizarre' and 'original' (p. 141).

These pathogenies are also to blame, according to the author, for the occasional, extremely negative coverage of the crisis in Greece by the press in Europe and the USA. From a sample of 15 leading newspapers in Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the USA, including conservative and liberal broadsheets and tabloids, the author identified four main themes covered during 2009–2012: the status of the Greek problem and its potential impact on the Eurozone and EU, its roots, potential remedies, and social dimensions of the crisis. He found that, although occasional overgeneralisations, inaccuracies and stereotypes did appear, the often very negative reports on Greece in the international press were not the result of bad journalism or due to particular motivations of journalists. Instead, they simply reflected the extreme pathogenies which were being covered. They were also shaped by information fed to them by the Greek government and politicians. The book concludes that 'foreign journalists have, as a whole, reported developments in the Hellenic Republic in a clear, comprehensive, and fair way' (p. 155), and thus, claims made by certain Greek government authorities and politicians as to the unfairness of international media reports are unfounded.

The normative proposals presented for a resolution of the crisis mainly focus on an improved manner of dealing with Greek pathogenies. For example, journalists should be 'careful and accurate' (p. 162) in reports on the possibility of a Greek default or exit from the Eurozone, and improve reports using their recently acquired knowledge of Greece and of the painful situation that Greek citizens are experiencing. Greek politicians should 'stop blaming others,' (p. xiv) 'work hard' (*ibid.*) and modernise the economy, or implement reforms such as privatisations. The EU should push more actively for such institutional changes, rather than promote austerity as an alternative to the reforms which Greek politicians are unable to implement. Finally, Greek youth must postpone emigration in order to fight a democratic battle by becoming politically active as pro-European leaders through 'conferences, debates with ordinary citizens, media exposure and increased participation in civil society' (p. 166). This is necessary, in order to 'oust the status quo of old-guard politicians' (*ibid.*), protect the country's European orientation and bring about a democratic revolution.

Multiple sources are drawn from throughout the book – such as government and EU documents, materials from other international organisations, news articles, interviews conducted with journalists, policymakers and bankers as well as the author's own insights as a journalist and media commentator on behalf of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). However, discussion of both the Greek context and how it has been represented is largely contextualised within elite political, institutional and hegemonic media narratives, rather than academic and scholarly work on the issues. The book seems to promote the viewpoints these narratives express in a taken for granted way, and often reaches conclusions based on speculation.

One of the most important problems in the media research presented is that the terms used to assess the international media are never defined. Thus, it is unclear what unfair or fair reporting means in this context, as well as the meaning of concepts such as quality, clarity, comprehensiveness, stereotype and distortion which are used throughout the book. It is also unclear how the selected media texts were analysed according to these terms. Although the author states that the qualitative analysis was based on the logic of framing, which provided insights into the themes journalists focused on in their coverage of Greece, it is unclear how exactly this method shaped analysis or assessment of the news reports. Framing as a method involves more than simply identifying broad themes in news coverage of the crisis. It includes textual analysis of elements such as language, narratives, images and context and provides insight not just on which themes are covered by the media, but also on how they are represented as well. Although an overview of themes in the international press may be a useful starting point for work on representations of the crisis, in and of itself, without further textual analysis it is quite limited. Overall, the discussion of the international press coverage is more descriptive than analytical, somewhat simplistic and overgeneralised.

The concept of domestic pathogenies is part of elite and neoliberal discourses which have a long history in the Greek public sphere and echo colonial stereotypes. A pathogeny is anything which does not promote or embody the order and predictability assumed to characterise an idealised, homogenised Europe or West, as well as civilisation itself. These discourses depoliticise and culturalise understandings of Greek society and the crisis.

For example, most of the pathogenies referred to in governance and politics are deeply political and systemic in nature. They directly or indirectly serve the interests and dominance of political and economic elites and their cronies. Yet here they seem to be largely discussed in terms of a cultural deficit of rationality, morality and virtue. Protest and occupation, as well as resistance to neoliberal reforms are also implied to be irrational, incomprehensible and illegitimate Greek pathogenies, even though during 2009–2012, these so called bizarre and original elements, actually swept across Europe as well as other places in the world.

It is also rather striking that the author implies the government should have intervened even more intensely against such forms of political action. During the period in question, the frequency and magnitude of the well-documented police violence against peaceful protestors was in fact intense.

The solutions to the problems in Greece are also discussed in depoliticised and cultural terms. The IMF/ECB/EU programme and supervision of Greece is uncritically presented as a taken for granted solution to the crisis, rather than a deeply political and ideological project which is highly contested both in Greece and internationally, even by mainstream economists and other experts. In fact the author states, rather than argues, that it is the incomplete or unsuccessful application of this programme, due to the domestic pathogenies – not its targets, measures and ultimate objectives – which have resulted in the harsh austerity measures and suffering of Greek citizens. The implication is that pathogenies, or cultural shortcomings, must be addressed in order for the crisis to be successfully resolved.

On the one hand, this must involve a moral, rational and virtuous approach to work and governance, on the part of Greek government and politicians. On the other hand, the author seems to be saying that other cultural changes must also take place so that neoliberal reform and change will be embraced rather than resisted by the Greek people.

The author also claims that positive change in Greece will only take place through the work of a younger and pro-EU generation which must take the place of the old guard politicians in order to protect the European orientation of the country and create a democratic revolution.

However, by mentioning that the battle for change will be fought through ‘conferences, debates, the media and participation in civil society’ (p. 166) the author implies that it will not involve political or ideological contestation, but instead,

professional and volunteer-based activities. In other words, it will involve activities defined by elites which it seems will fight against the pathogenies which currently work as obstacles to the neoliberal project and the IMF/ECB/EU programme. Neither are discussed in political terms. Instead, the impression given is that they are taken for granted as the only solution.

Overall, the impression given by the book to this reader is that its goal was to promote elite, neoliberal understandings of the crisis and its resolution, rather than to make a case for them, or to engage in critical scholarly work on the crisis in Greece and its representations in the media. In doing so, media stereotypes have implicitly been reinforced, rather than explored or challenged.

Having said that, this is still an interesting and useful book for anyone interested in how the crisis and its resolution have been constructed through elite and neoliberal discourses. It is also a useful resource for tracing the developments between the Greek government and the IMF/ECB/EU during 2009–2012. The great number of news articles compiled and referred to are also valuable as a basis for further exploration of how the crisis has been represented in the European and US press.

A critical reading of this book should also be of interest to those engaged in scholarship on Cypriot media and public spheres. It will provide food for thought on how national stereotypes with roots in colonial discourses are implicitly used to promote neoliberal understandings of the crisis and its resolution. It may also be useful as a reference point for thinking about how the Eurozone crisis in Cyprus has been discussed in Cypriot mediaspheres, as well as in mediaspheres across Europe and the region.

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