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# **Policing the crisis in Greece: The others' side of the story**

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# Policing the crisis in Greece: The others' side of the story

Rosa Vasilaki<sup>#</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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This article looks at the experience of policing protests in Greece during the period of the crisis from the point of view of police officers. Policing in Greece – and especially the subjective experience of police officers themselves – is a non-subject of sociological research for historical and political reasons peculiar to Greece and exceeding usual opposition to police as a repressive state apparatus in Western states. The article relies on extensive qualitative work – based on semi-structured and unstructured interviews as well as observation – over a period of seventeen months. It stems from an ongoing project investigating the everyday experience of police officers and sheds light on topics such as the experience of policing protests, the use of the police by the state, the impact of the hierarchical structure of the institution on the subjectivity of police officers, their relative social isolation, their understandings of the use of violence and their political views.

Keywords: police, crisis, protests, public order, civil unrest

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# **Policing the crisis in Greece: The others' side of the story**

## **1. Introduction: Police as a taboo subject of research**

Since 2010 Greece has undergone a period of intense and rapid economic and political transformation that has come to be known as 'the crisis' – the outcome of austerity politics, the dismantling of the Welfare State and widespread pauperisation of the middle and lower classes. Public manifestations of such crisis include the burgeoning of protests and riots, especially during 2010-2014, with the 2011 summer of discontent as the most iconic moment of civil unrest. They also include the virtual disappearance of those parties that dominated the political scene since the restoration of democratic rule in Greece (1974), such as the once omnipotent PASOK (Socialist Party), and the emergence of political parties and formations lacking clear political identity, at least along the dividing lines of Left and Right as we have known them throughout the twentieth century. Examples include To Potami, or the River, which supports a reformist agenda that is nonetheless hard to politically profile. Other public manifestations of the crisis may be seen in the rise of political extremism, most notably of the far right and the infamous Golden Dawn, but also the ascent of a far Left party, SYRIZA, into State power and its ensuing fast transformation and loss of political identity. As such, the very nature of the political system – parliamentary democracy – has been challenged and the State's legitimacy has been

under constant scrutiny and subject to a general depreciation in the eyes of the public.

The police as an institution is no exception to this crisis, but what is particularly interesting is the role that the police as a State apparatus is required and expected to play in situations of generalised discontent, which often result in open dissent or even clashes between citizens and the State/government. It is commonplace that law enforcement institutions are often targeted by protesting groups across the modern world: this is because by the very structure of the Western state the police upholds the role of suppressing dissent when deemed necessary and guarantees - via direct repression among other tactics (Althusser 1970) - the continuity of the political system along with the protection of democratic institutions and the protection of the majority's vote.

For a variety of historical and political reasons detailed below, the Greek police as an institution with its own culture, values and worldviews have not yet been the object of sociological analysis. Historical research on the police as an institution is similarly almost non-existent (partially due to the fact that the opening of police archives only occurred in June 2015), whilst social and political interest has been focusing on police misconduct, violence or transgression (Amnesty International 2012). A walk in the centre of Athens is instructive of the widespread rejection – even hate – against the police in Greece. Greek citizens are accustomed to expressions of such rejection expressed via graffiti and written slogans on the walls of urban centres. For years I have been accustomed to seeing these slogans, as well. It was only when I started doing this research that I asked myself what the reasons for such normalisation of

hate against the police may mean for the conscience collective – to use a Durkheimian term – of Greek society. What is the sociological and political function of such ideological identification, and what kind of function does this stigmatisation may perform? And why is that people may choose this profession given the ideological – and I would dare to say, even moral – stigma that is attached to it?

This public rejection of the police has not only left a considerable gap in sociological knowledge but has made the police as a subject of research an *a priori* controversial one. Even more, if one aims to turn the gaze from police misconduct, or police violence, to the experience of ordinary policemen, to their experiences and views during the turmoil of the crisis, one enters the realm of taboo. There have been no previous attempts to study ordinary policemen not only as the ones who perform violence in the name of the State, and certainly not as one-dimensional and thoughtless instruments of power, but as persons who also experience the violence of the state.

As with every story, the story of the crisis, as well as the story of repression of resistance and dissent, has more than one side. The side of the protesters, the side of the people on the streets, of those who have been resisting to austerity policies of the past five years is well known (e.g. Dalakoglou 2012; Douzinas 2013; Gourgouris 2011; Theodossopoulos 2014). Greece has made the headlines often enough in the past five years for the European and global public to be familiar with pictures of riots and violent clashes with the police. However, little is known about the story of those who have been called upon to deal on a daily basis with the public manifestations of widespread social

discontent.<sup>1</sup> A common explanation for viewing the police in a stereotypical and largely monolithic perspective has been their recourse to the use of violence: the police is represented as an institution where violence is endemic, and indeed structural violence is part and parcel of the way policemen perform their duties. However, structural violence is also the way the police hierarchy – with its often authoritarian structures – works on police themselves. I would like to argue, then, that while police oppression is one commonsensical part of the story, it does not provide us with a sociological explanation that would allow us to discern the larger political stakes at play or to assess and question the use of the police from the State, especially during times of crisis of the political system. But I am running ahead of my argument, and before this story is told, I need to reflect on those methodological and ethical considerations that are raised during engagement with controversial subjects

## **2. Controversial topics, controversial subjects: methodological and ethical considerations**

Because the topic of the research focuses on experience, I found it necessary to use an inductive approach that allows the data – that is the voice and the experience of the participants – to guide the emergence of explanations. As my aim was to see and account for subjects rather than objects of research, my theoretical framework was informed by the questions and concerns of interpretive sociology and the Weberian tradition that gives precedence to the production of social meanings and

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception perhaps of a focus on the new subject of transnational protesting emerging with the alter-globalisation movement, and its relationship with the police, see Della Porta et al. (2006).

the ways reality is constructed, lived and narrated by the social subjects, along with a phenomenological interest in experience. As such, the project aimed to shed light on the ways that police officers and those who interact with them construct the meaning of their special role, particularly as they are called upon to mediate – albeit in a repressive manner – between the State and its alienated and discontent citizens during the most important crisis of the political system in contemporary Greece.

As explained above, police experience is a controversial topic in sociological research on Greece. How does one go about researching and writing on a taboo subject? Before I address these ethical concerns in relation to the engagement with controversial subjects, let me discuss briefly the methodological and technical aspects of my fieldwork.

Data so far has been collected mainly via thirty semi-structured interviews. Along with semi-structured interviews, I conducted sixty unrecorded unstructured interviews and (so far) seventeen months of ethnographical observation. An ethnographic approach is the most appropriate in order to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a specified group of individuals, for example an occupational group. In this case, it gave me access to a firmly defined and relatively isolated social group—the Greek police—and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment (Atkinson 1990; Hobbs 1998; Wacquant 1995). Additionally, four focus groups of three to seven participants were conducted in the exploratory stages of the project in order to test the main themes of discussion for the interviews but also to elicit a multiplicity of responses and break through issues that

are hard to raise in interviews, such as the case of the relationship between the far-right and the police (Farnsworth and Boon 2010; Smithson 2000). I have also had some experience of riot police operations, as I followed a squad during the commemoration of the 17<sup>th</sup> of November (in 2014), a date that symbolises the end of the dictatorship and the restoration of democratic rule. It is perhaps the most potent symbolic expression of anti-authoritarian rule, and given the role that the police played in implementing aspects of the repression during the Colonels' dictatorship, the police is the target of such yearly demonstrations. I also followed riot police squad operations in April 2015, a few months after SYRIZA's ascent to power, when a wave of occupations of public buildings, universities and SYRIZA's headquarters organised by anarchist groups resulted in numerous skirmishes with the police.

Ethnographic methods are ideal to gain a bottom-up view, to achieve what anthropologists call a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) that gives insight into practices, the construction of meanings, relationships within groups, strategies of inclusion and exclusion, and a general understanding of a culture in a holistic perspective. However, ethnography also requires a great deal of time, commitment, and in this case, the willingness to accept the inability to plan in advance. As police officers only find out about their shifts the night before, participating in their routines requires the flexibility and commitment to follow this exhausting schedule. That of course gives further insight into the way the insecurity and instability of the quotidian lives of this particular social group. The other well-known issue in ethnographical work is the risk, through a period of immersion in a particular way of life and

experience, of beginning to see the world through their eyes. I see this to a certain extent as unavoidable while the data collection phase is ongoing. Empathy is a necessary aspect of any anthropological or sociological work, allowing the researcher to narrate the others' side of the story. However, the necessary analytical distance is restored once the process of data analysis and writing resumes.

Access, of course, was another complicated issue from the start: given the general mistrust of the public towards the police, but also the cultural and professional mistrust of the police towards outsiders, access to the field has been a main concern from the start. My first point of contact was the officers I had met at a workshop on riots in Athens 2014 that was the initial trigger for this research project. However, the breakthrough was achieved through a contact with a journalist who runs a very popular police internet site, with the ambiguous name 'bloko' which means barricade – a word used during clashes by both police and protesters. This meeting was crucial in enabling me to build the basis of my own network, which as time passed grew in numbers and diversity of participants. Recommendation and trust are paramount when one works with close-knit groups, even more so when there are questions of security and confidentiality. So far, I have had extremely few cases of refusal of participation. There were methodological concerns at the beginning, due to the nature of snowball sampling, which was chosen because of the difficulty of accessing the group under study but which risks having homogeneity of responses. However, these concerns were surpassed with the development of the network of participants, which gave access to different services and ranks of the hierarchy.

Let me now move on to ethical considerations and address questions of reflexivity. These concern the position of the researcher when he or she engages with topics and subjects whose ethical legitimacy is questionable and whose relation to power is an innate source of controversy. Law enforcement officers are a group whose peculiar place between enforcing order and being powerless in relation to the orders of hierarchical power produces a constant tension not only within the subjects themselves but also to the researcher, who constantly feels she has to navigate on 'shaky ground' whilst empathising with those people who share their stories and everyday concerns with her. As will be explained below, at the heart of such considerations lies the problem of violence and the peculiar role of police officers as agents cum instruments of State repression, as representatives of lawfulness and in charge of policing social boundaries. The challenges and perils associated with researching controversial subjects such as the police have been long discussed in anthropological literature. Jeffrey Sluka (1999), for instance, has written about 'humanizing the inhumane', while Antonius Robben (1996) has reflected on the 'ethnographic seduction' of establishing good rapport and its effect on the researcher's critical detachment. However, as Jauregui (2013) persuasively argues, such a position entails the problematical assumptions that clear lines between perpetrators and victims of violence can always be drawn (Mamdani 2002; Das 2007) or that the distinction between the researcher and the participants can guarantee objectivity.

This space of ethical indeterminacy raises numerous questions, such as: How do we conduct research with participants who perform violence on a daily basis? How do we react when our own political views are

challenged and ethical certainties become less solid? How do we account for the sensibilities, moral impasses, vulnerabilities and responsibilities of those social agents for whom violence – often against people and groups with whom we sympathise – is routinized whilst trying to construe and analyse their practices? These questions are constantly present when one does fieldwork with controversial subjects: they are present not only in encounters with police officers, but they are also present each time the researcher presents her work to academic or lay publics. In the past seventeen months since I started my research project, I was called to respond almost daily to criticism for my engagement with the police ('how is it even possible that you even talk to them?', or 'why do you legitimise them by making them your interlocutors?') and to hard-core stereotyping, such as 'do they even have a brain?'

Such views also force the researcher to face a long-standing ethical and political question, pertinently posed by Becker's classic essay 'Whose Side Are We On?' (Becker 1967). Or to put it differently, as Fassin framed it in his own ethnography of the French anticrime squad, 'for whom do we write?' (Fassin 2013). Where does the researcher's loyalty lie when engaging with controversial subjects? As practitioners of qualitative research know all too well, there is no such a thing as 'pure' or 'innocent' science, especially when dealing with the messiness of human existence; even engagement with 'clean' causes and insider research is bound to entangle the researcher in the expectations and micro-politics of any given community or group, however marginalised or powerful it may be, and regardless of the rightfulness of their cause (Islam 1999). This, naturally, does not mean that ethical engagement is neutralised, but it

does entail navigating through often conflicting moral logics. Ethical engagement also means willingness to question one's moral high ground to allow those 'Others' to be heard in their own terms and to contribute to the knowledge produced by the researcher.

### **3. «Μπάτσοι, γουρούνια, δολοφόνου»: the historical and political context of police hate in Greece**

Construing the symbolic role of the police in the Greek political universe and its lack of legitimacy by large parts of the public requires a contextualization of the issue within the *longue durée* of policing politics in Greece in the twentieth century (Mazower 1997; Mouzelis 1979; Samatas 1986; Veremis 1997). The collective trauma of the Civil War (1946-1949), which followed the end of the Second World War, has rigidly defined the political identities and symbolic universes of the Left and Right in Greece. The political persecution of the Left in the years that followed the end of the Civil War has been associated in the collective memory of the Left with the police, as the instrument of the State implementing aspects of such persecution. Equally, the police has been used for the execution of practices of political repression in the interwar years, initially by the implementation of the law of *Idionymo* in 1929, which penalised the support and dissemination of subversive – i.e., communist and anarchist – ideas; and subsequently by the 1936-1941 Metaxas dictatorship, which imposed the infamous 'statements of repentance' and the institution of exile camps on isolated islands with the purpose of morally reforming dissenters. The latter practice was also

used by the post-Civil War regime. Later on, the colonels' dictatorship (1967-1974), which ruthlessly suppressed democratic political dissent in Greece, further consolidated the popular perception of the police as a repressive State apparatus. These particular historical experiences, as well as the swinging of the pendulum since the restoration of democracy in Greece towards an ideological hegemony of the Left<sup>2</sup>, have contributed toward not only mistrust, but often open hostility between the police and the progressive side of the political spectrum. The police has occupied a structural role in the symbolic universe of Left political dissent, be it parliamentary, communist, extra-parliamentary, or with anarchist leanings. There is practically no example of public demonstration in Greece that does not take a turn against the police: the slogan 'και τώρα ένα σύνθημα που όλους μας ενώνει, μπάτσοι, γουρούνια, δολοφόνοι', translating 'and now a slogan which unite us all, cops, pigs, murderers' in its countless variations, is evoked almost in a ritualistic manner, and is perhaps the most instructive instance of the symbolic role the police holds in the universe of political dissent in Greece. Additionally, the persistence of political terrorism in Greece (Kassimeris 2001, 2013), which often takes the police as its primary target, along with the special place of the anarchist subculture in Greece that had enjoyed – at least up to the Marfin events in 2012 - a peculiar and ethical legitimacy (Boukalas 2011; Trocchi 2011; Vasilaki forthcoming), have further contributed to consolidating popular representations of 'the police versus the people' cliché. Last, but not least, one should not leave outside the picture the particular cultural understandings of lawfulness in Greece, where the law is not seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Albeit not in terms of political power *per se*, at least not until January 2015 and Syriza's ascent into power.

absolutely prohibiting or set in stone but as negotiable and malleable, while its institutional representatives are a priori mistrusted.

Even though the process of recruitment of police officers was radically revised in the 1980s, allowing for the transformation of the body along with structural reforms that diminished the autonomy of the police (Zianikas 1995; Stergioulis 2001), the public's suspicion towards the police has remained largely unchanged. Since the restoration of democratic rule, 'hate against the police' often functions as a kind of ideological glue for political formations and movements that situate themselves on the left of the political spectrum. As a result, incidents of police violence are viewed a priori as systemic, with little examination of those cases or of the police culture itself, which is automatically considered authoritarian and anti-democratic. A paradox of such assumptions is, for instance, that although the army was the main instigator of coup d'états that resulted in dictatorships in Greece, public perceptions shared by the Left and the Right regard the army as bearer of a democratic political ethic in contrast to the police. This has given the police a role that is not only stereotypical but essentially structural in the articulation of the political landscape in Greece: every mention of the police is almost always negative, while challenging the stereotype of 'fascist cop' is an extremely sensitive endeavor.

This established problematical relationship between the police and the public deteriorated further in recent years. The 2008 Athens riots, which followed the shooting of a teenager by a police officer in central Athens, spread across the country for almost a month. At the same time, they acquired international resonance and immense symbolic value in the

universe of dissent to State violence and police brutality and as a result heavily affected the already strained relationship between the police and the public. The 2008 riots marked a shift in a number of ways: first, in legitimising both violent expressions of discontent and repressive responses from the state; second, in normalising the over-policing of demonstrations and the regular use of specialised riot police forces as well as the specialised motorcycle police forces, the DELTA teams (abolished in October 2015); and third, in causing a break – yet unrepaired – in the relationship between the public and the police. This event has also consolidated the idea of the police as an obscure, parastate institution rather than an essential pillar in the functioning of a democratic state, an institution serving and guaranteeing the rule of law (Vasilaki forthcoming).

The economic crisis and the social turmoil it generated have been translated into a proliferation of protests that often have taken the police as their target. The retreat of the Welfare State and the determination of Greece's governments to push the austerity agenda, along with a 35% drop of the GDP that touched an unprecedented variety of social groups and strata, have left the police as the only visible representative of the State and made them the unwilling protagonist of the crisis as well as the unwilling enemy of the people. The turn of a part of the police force to the far right– which has been highly mediatised to the point of resembling a moral panic, as it will be analysed further below – along with the belated reaction of the government to the criminal activities of the Golden Dawn, has further exacerbated the stereotyping of police as harbouring sympathy for undemocratic, authoritarian political formations.

Along with such developments, the dogma of 'astynomokratia' ('police omnipresence') has not only substantially increased the numbers of the riot squad but also turned ordinary police officers into agents of repression, thus further contributing to the conflation between police as a service and police as a repressive state apparatus. The policing of protests reflects to a certain extent the relationship between the state and society. The social contract between the sovereign and the people constitutes the bedrock of modern states and as such, if the sovereign power violates this contract, its legitimacy to govern can be challenged. It is well established in the relevant literature that heavy-handed and confrontational approaches affect negatively the legitimacy of the government/State (Reiner 1998). The rise of civil rights movements along with the professionalization of the police are considered major factors in the shift of policing practices from a confrontational to a non-confrontational model of policing (Sombatpoonsiri 2015). Even though the modern state's legitimacy partially arises from its ability to sustain public order through rigid policing, rather than from its facilitation of public manifestation of grievances, research on state repression invariably points out that authoritarian responses following the 'law and order' viewpoint, result in authorizing excessive use of force against protesters and dissidents (Churchill and Vander 1990; Davenport 2005; Earl 2003; Kowalewski 2003; Sluka 1999). Previous experiences of policing, the nature of social conflict as well as technological changes in crowd control contribute into forming the balance between what is known as the escalated force or confrontational approach, and the negotiated management or non-confrontational approach

(Sombatpoonsiri 2015; for a problematization of such dichotomizing see Vitale 2005).

When protests are seen as legitimate – as they are seen by the vast majority in Greece – forceful, repressive responses from the State via the use of the police undermine the legitimacy of both the State/government and the police. The appeal of the grammar and language of public order and disorder, of lawfulness and anomie, of crisis and normality that may be convincing – paradoxically – in times of stability, can be seriously challenged and have the opposite result in times of turmoil, precariousness and generalised insecurity. The use of police by the State during the 2010-2014 period reflects precisely the choices of a political system in crisis of legitimation.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. 'We are disposables': the views and experiences of police officers**

The most important aspect of this research was the impact of the crisis within the police. As such, one of the key topics of conversation were the police officers' view of the protesters: the unanimous response in both recorded interviews and unrecorded conversations were the expression of sympathy, identification and solidarity with the protesters, especially with those who have been reacting to austerity measures. In most conversations, policemen told me that they disagreed with the fact

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<sup>3</sup> When a new government from the Left came to power in Greece in January 2015, it originally adopted a non-confrontational approach. That approach, however, has been put to the test, initially by the wave of anarchist occupations of public buildings, especially universities, as well as the governing party's headquarters. The recent turn of the governing party to austerity politics has already turned the mood of the public: activists took to the streets again, and further protests are very likely to occur as the austerity agenda is crystallised to specific policies.

the protests had to be suppressed and they expressed their disappointment that they are less populous and less dynamic since 2012.

*“How is it possible to disagree with the protesters? They represent all of us; my mother whose pension has been cut; my brother in law who was made redundant; and ourselves, we have suffered a lot since the beginning of the crisis” [S.G., Riot Police]*

The ‘αγανακτησμένοι’ - the Greek indignados - were a frequent topic of discussion and the suppression of their movement was unanimously considered by police officers to be the work of what has come to be known as the ‘παρακράτος’ (para-State).

*“The ‘αγανακτησμένοι’ were our hope; every one stood up together; but this hope died as soon as the ‘επεισόδια’ (violent incidents) started. Who have started these incidents? The usual suspects, the ‘parakratos” [G.B., OPKE-Violent Crime and Rapid Response Unit].*

Such views are supported by the fact, as police officers say, that they often have clear orders not to proceed to arrests during violent incidents, while this is entirely possible. Despite the fact that they recognise their role as protectors of the State, they see the State, the government, as largely unfair and as holding a suspicious political agenda. They often refer to the ‘επεισόδια’ (violent incidents) as a ‘παράσταση’, as a show where everybody plays their role and the media, especially the news shows, typically airing between 7-9pm in Greece, capitalise on that.

*“It is a ‘show’ and we play our role; every one play their role; the anarchists, the media, the political parties. Everything on time for 8pm” [M.I., Riot Police]*

Surprisingly their view on violent incidents and riots is similar to the typical Left argument: that these happen in order to disorient the public view and draw attention away from the political issue at stake, for instance, the anti-popular austerity measures.

*“Violent incidents occur in order to manipulate the public; so that the government can pass the memorandum bills at the parliament” [G.T., Riot Police]*

Despite the openly expressed sympathy for the protesters, police officers tend to divide them into two categories: those who protest for their rights and those who clash with the police. Indeed, as anyone who has participated in or observed demonstrations in Greece would have observed, the escalation of tension leads invariably to clashes with the police. That escalation is routinely associated with a distinctive group mainly composed of anarchists and ‘αντι-εξουσιαστικός χώρος’, the extra-parliamentary far left. The latter's presence is constant in all demonstrations in Greece, and the group is known to often initiate violent incidents that turn into clashes. I witnessed this myself when I followed the 17<sup>th</sup> November commemoration in 2014. The tension and then clash is fabricated, as the so-called tension is not an individual or spontaneous expression. Rather, there is preparation, including sartorial preparation that copies police riot gear, as well as organisation on the level of the attack and its aftermath. The long-lasting vendetta between the anarchist movement and the police, as part of the peculiar

subculture in Greece and the historical cum political causes of this antagonism, is often commented upon by police officers who feel that this legacy haunts them today. They point out how unfair they find their association with the role played by the institution in the past, long before they joined the force and became officers.

*“Why am I even held accountable for the wrong doings of the police half a century ago? I was not even born then. How is this fair? It is not, but who cares? It is convenient to see us this way”*

[D.K., DIAS-Motorcycle Police]

They firmly believe that such association not only feeds on deep-rooted stereotypes, but also that such stereotypes are used by political parties and the media to fabricate easy targets. Police violence sells, they say, and it also disorients from pressing political issues.

Naturally, dealing with the paradox of having to repress a demonstration or protest with which one agrees and may identify, at least to the extent that the crisis has hit everyone in the lower and middle classes in Greece, is not an easy thing to do. How do police officers deal with these contradictions? The standard response is that they follow orders. Indeed, the strictly hierarchical nature of the institution does not allow for negotiation or criticism. However, the arbitrariness of orders, and especially the overuse of riot police for any kind of protesting and without discriminating amongst types of demonstrators, was something that was widely commented upon and criticised. In the case, for instance, of those groups that have become symbols of resistance to austerity politics in Greece such as the retired, or those civil employees

such as cleaners who have been made redundant, the omnipresence of the police was largely criticised as both inefficient and unethical.

*“What is the business of the riot police in policing cleaners or the elderly? We are a repressive force, we are designed, trained for clashes, for hard-core situations. Once you get the riot police on the streets, there is no turning back. Why do they use us against peaceful or weak people?” [V.M. Riot Police]*

At the same time, many of the police I interviewed viewed repression of demonstrations as a strategy of the State or the government to use the police as a scapegoat. The police become the hard face of the State, at the same time systematically disorienting public opinion and directing anger away from those responsible for the economic crisis.

*“When the Welfare State withdraws, the police is on the streets. We are the most visible facet of the State. We are there to be hated” [T.D. Greek MI5 in charge of dealing with public disturbance]*

In that sense, what I gathered from the interviews is the frustration, even anger amongst police at the way they have been used in the past four or five years. I found, as well, a disillusionment with politics – a disillusionment that is also associated with the rise of anti-systemic political parties, within the police but also in a broader manner within Greek society, as explained in the following section. For many of the police officers, violence is seen as a tool that needs to be used with caution, and they put the blame for their over-reaction on the political leaders as well as their superiors who organise the operations in a

manner that produces violence. For instance, they often mention how long they have to wait before intervening, as they are ordered to stand eight or twelve or even fourteen hours without a break, all the time absorbing the symbolic, psychological and physical violence directed at them by the protestors. Intervention after such exhaustion, they say, is bound to produce violence.

*“Have you ever had to stand there for hours, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen hours, under the rain of stones thrown at you? No water, no toilet, just standing there, rain or shine? Then, once we are released from the chain, we become wild dogs” [Y.I. former Riot Police]*

*“Operations are designed in a way that makes us violent. We are few against many. We are not allowed to intervene on time. And then, when things escalate beyond control, violence is unavoidable” [Y.S. Riot Police]*

Another reason for the frustration expressed is the hierarchical nature of the institution, with an important divide between high and low rank officers. In all my interviews and discussions this topic came up as of first importance: on the one hand, the discontent and frustration, even anger, of those at the base of the pyramid who lift the weight of not always rational or appropriate orders; on the other hand, the contempt of those at the top of the hierarchy towards those at the bottom. It is interesting that these feelings are widely shared by the participants and they are expressed with similar vocabulary: lower rank unanimously express disappointment and the conviction that their own work conditions and even lives are disposable for the sake of the careers of

those at the top who never dare to counter the interventions and decisions of political authorities.

*“What do these people know from the comfort of their offices? They do not give a damn about us. They are only interested in their careers” [P.P. Riot Police]*

Those at the top tend to say that lower rank officers lack the ability to access situations in a holistic manner; as they contend, low rank officers lack perspective.

*“Do you see this view? [interview on the top floor of the Police Headquarters in Athens] I have this view because I am on the top floor; those on the pavement cannot see what I am able to see, I am standing at the top. This is why I am giving orders and they are following them” [P.S. Head of service, Police Headquarters]*

Indeed, the structure of the education system within the police reinforces such ideas. The idea of hierarchy is not only embedded through education but reflected in the way the structure of the police works, in possibilities of progression, salaries, benefits, and above all behaviour: who has the right to speak, to express an opinion, to disagree. This becomes a point of friction, as high rank police officers rarely have the experience of the streets – as they say in the professional slang – and they have little interest or consideration to hear the objections, advice or ideas of those who experience the difficulties of everyday policing.

The arbitrariness of orders and the nature of the relationship between low and high rank police officers is also an effect of the clientelist state,

which is endemic in the very way Greek public administration has functioned since its inception. Because of the relative isolation of the police as an institution, the workings of the clientelist state of the past forty years are particularly prominent. Promotions but especially placement within specific services is always an effect of networking and client-patron relationships. The nepotistic way in which placement occurs in turn creates tensions between those who work in coveted positions such in the secret service or anti-terrorist units, both services which are considered to be less dangerous and onerous than serving on the streets. For that matter, MAT, the riot police is considered as the service where those with no connections go, whereas it is equally difficult to leave that service without connections. For this reason, the riot police unit is also one that is despised by policemen from other branches. In that sense, the riot police experience a double marginalisation, becoming the scapegoat *par excellence*. Recurrent expressions such as ‘we are disposables’, ‘punching bags’, ‘scapegoats’, ‘we exist so as to be hated’ demonstrate the level of deep disappointment within the police forces.

In modern social theory, violence – as far as police is concerned – is viewed in a rather monolithic manner, often with limited reflection of what makes violence possible, within the institution but also within the broader political context. Foucauldian (2008) approaches revolve around the concept of governmentality and see police violence as the effect of the emergence of disciplining institutions of the modern State, and its technologies of surveillance and control. For critical theorists such as Benjamin (1978), the police is seen as intrinsically ‘ignoble’ because of its authority to ‘make law’ rather than merely enforce law. Derrida (2002)

also concurs with this view by observing that even if the police does not make the law, it acts like the lawmaker of modern times, since each time the law is indeterminate enough to open a possibility for the police to make the law.

These perspectives, however, offer little room to examine the police officers' experience expressed via tropes such as 'it is my duty' or that 'violence is part of the job', or that 'violence is a tool'. What comes out of the narratives of police officers in relation to clashes and violent incidents is that overlapping rationalities are at play in addition to professional duty—necessity, morality, a sense of camaraderie, survival instincts in moments of clash—as well as strong emotional states such as fear, anger, anxiety, insecurity and even loss of control. Violence exercised and inflicted and its effects are constitutive of the police officers' subjectivity and sense of professional self. It is not simply the case of 'using bad means to achieve good ends'—protecting the majority's vote, the polity, public property and so on—a reasoning framework that allows police officers to make sense of their own use of violence and come to terms with what they perceive as their own moral failure when they consider their violence excessive. Police officers have to navigate between limited resources, contradictory orders, the arbitrariness of superiors, and the blame from politicians and the media. It is a constant negotiation between power and powerlessness, partial knowledge (often they do not know what is going on), conflicting moral codes, and contradictory orders, all of which are defensively covered by an expressed sense of 'doing one's duty'. As far as the police are concerned—and especially the riot police who have to take instant decisions with a high risk of misjudgement—boundaries between

perpetrator and victim are often unclear, while decisions depend always on the situation. When is violence an 'excess', when is it justifiable, who decides, at what price and who pays the price of excess? And is it even possible to entirely control violence when social agents such as police officers are authorised to use it in the name of rights, democracy, justice, order and so on? For police, who are sanctioned to use violence in the name of collective values and principles within the historical context of the nation-State, the legitimacy of violence is always a slippery ground, indeterminate, and morally conflicting for the ones who exercise it. Understanding violence as productive in the formation of subjectivities such as those of police officers does not constitute an excuse for violence. Neither does it relativise it. It does, however, complicate the picture and call into question the absolute binaries of 'good' and 'evil', or 'right' and 'wrong'.

## **5. The spectre of far Right within the police in Greece: the Golden Dawn Crisis**

In parallel with the lived experience of dealing with the crisis, the issue of the relationship between the Greek police and the Golden Dawn was naturally prominent in the interviews and discussions with police officers, given the political gravity of the issue, but also the intense attention given to the topic by the media. Golden Dawn is a political party that enjoyed high popularity in the past years in Greece, and indeed police officers, especially those of the riot police, have voted for them in considerable numbers. Estimations vary, and they are based on the results of two polling stations (Ampelokipoi and Kaisariani) where

the riot police officers vote in Athens (though not exclusively). Percentages fluctuate between 15.4% and 23.7%, and according to certain – considerably popular - calculations the ‘pure police vote’ may be up to 50%. This is, however, an extrapolation; these percentages cannot be certified whilst they cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon. What is more interesting—and politically necessary—is to ask why these ideas are popular, what is the context that makes them appealing, and why the police are both more vulnerable and more targeted in relation to the far Right. For this, however, it is crucial to refrain from the moral panic disseminated by the media and echoed in parts of progressive political spectrum. For while it may be politically expedient to denounce this problematic relationship, a certain analytical distance is necessary on the level of interpretative sociological inquiry, since understanding takes more than moral indignation. A distinction between voters and ideologues is also necessary before one rushes to label the police as fascist in a totalising manner: voting takes conviction but it is very different from fully embracing the ideas and intentionally taking part in far Right violent actions.

Certainly, my fieldwork suggests that many of the Golden Dawn ideas are popular within the police. The reasons explaining why police officers may feel sympathetic towards the Golden Dawn were discussed at considerable length during interviews and informal discussions. The most frequently recurring responses focused around four aspects. First, interviewees clearly responded to the anti-systemic attitude of the Golden Dawn.

*“They fight the system. The political system of the country is corrupt. These politicians are traitors. And the Golden Dawn has said that clearly and without fear”* P.D.2, DELTA-Rapid Response Motorcycle Unit]

Anger, as well as frustration towards at what is perceived as the political use of the police, as explained above, were mentioned as probably the most potent factors inducing sympathy towards the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn discourse focuses attention on the collapse of legitimacy of the political system during the years of the crisis; the depreciation of what is perceived as a cohort of corrupted politicians; and the rejection of the ‘educated elites’ who have ‘sold out the country’. Moreover, Golden Dawn expressions of admiration for acts that ‘shamed’ the ‘traitors’ of the country was the most significant motive for ‘giving a chance’ to a party that seemed to gain the status of ‘punishers’.

Second, the use of patriotic discourse and symbols was mentioned as a key element in developing sympathy towards the Golden Dawn.

*“They are patriots. No one can question that. They may have other problems but they love the country. And so we do. They have respect for the traditions, for our flag, for our history. This is why we feel close to them. Although, one could also say that they just use patriotism for their own purposes”* [C.D., DIAS, Motorcycle Police]

Patriotism as well as nationalism are particularly popular ideologies within the security forces for obvious reasons related with the particular mission of such institutions in the functioning of the modern State. The

systematic use of symbols such as the flag or the national anthem; the strategic invocation of heroic or tragic moments of Greek history; and perceptions of increasing multiculturalism and the ideological hegemony of political correctness as a threat have established the Golden Dawn as the bearer of patriotic pride par excellence.

Third, the Golden Dawn's anti-immigration stance was also discussed as a significant feature in assessing the popularity of the far Right within the police. The anti-immigration feeling was mainly expressed as fear of losing national cum cultural identity rather than being associated with the economic crisis and its consequences, such as unemployment. Anti-immigration was also distinguished from racism in all exchanges, and this could be attributed to an unclear understanding of what kind of function racism performs in societies in crisis and what racism entails, but also to the concern to distance themselves from the political stigmatisation of racism.

*“Immigration is an issue because the numbers are large. Soon we will not recognise our own country. There are no jobs, what are we going to do? What are they (the immigrants) going to do here? The so-called progressive do not want to raise this issue. And the Golden Dawn – yes, it is not right that they have attacked those people (the immigrants), I do not like that, I do not agree with that – but they are targeted because they raise the issue” [P.D.2 DELTA-Rapid Response Motorcycle Unit]*

Fourth, the police officers I interviewed admit that the Golden Dawn has been putting forward a profile appreciative of the police - and broadly of the security forces. Given the generalised social isolation police officers

experience, analysed above, this is an additional reason explaining their emotional identification.

*“They are friendly. They like us. What do you expect when everyone else is targeting us? When the Left are calling us pigs and murderers, is it strange that we turn to them (the Golden Dawn)?”*

[M.L., DIAS-Motorcycle Police]

Nazism as an ideology, or fascism for that matter, was never mentioned as an acknowledged or conscious ideological affiliation. What emerged from the interviews was a very limited understanding of how these elements, considered the key factors of the Golden Dawn’s appeal, along with the popularisation of hate speech, have been or can be combined to create an ideological climate of that excludes otherness and encourages aggressiveness and violent responses to those perceived as enemies. As far as the representation of the police as a *de facto* far right institution and a Golden Dawn supporter, officers again attributed this to media and political party use of the police as scapegoats. As explained above, police officers feel that they are easily demonised for their repressive role with little public interest to discern between their professional role and their own beliefs, contradictions and often impasses. Paradoxically, sympathy for the Golden Dawn is considered by the police officers as a punishment against those who identify the police as far right supporters in the first place.

However, if we leave aside the Golden Dawn’s use of patriotic symbols and their efforts to approach the police, we may ask if the ideas of the wholesale rejection of the political system, the anger against pauperisation, and the easy scapegoating of immigrants are ones that

concern the police only. I submit that the socio-economic and cultural conditions are such in Greece that the Golden Dawn has become the proxy for those of all social strata who identify on an emotional level with the Golden Dawn ideas but do not want to get their hands dirty. The Golden Dawn does the dirty work, becoming the proxy of a highly xenophobic society that cannot, however, come to terms ideologically with its own xenophobia and cannot address it openly. Pointing the finger at the police only, an easy target, functions on the level of social psychology as a scapegoat: the police become the culprits in question, the fascists, and responsibilities -ethical, ideological, political- are not sought on a different, deeper and higher level. The media representation of the Pavlos Fyssas murder, where the government practically accused the police for failures that are primarily political, the unexamined cases of the relationship between members of the then government and the Golden Dawn indicate that this particular story has a much darker and uglier side than what we have been able to see so far.

The most systematic attempt to address the link between the police and the Golden Dawn in Greece (Christopoulos 2014; for a similar argument see also Psarras 2012) establishes a continuity in the relationship between the two, which goes as far back as the post-Civil War State and regards the recent developments as a case of total fascisation of security forces in Greece. There is no doubt that the link exists and that ideological sympathies with far Right ideas and values are popular within the police. There is also evidence that the police has reacted to the Golden Dawn actions with lenience; they have also been accused of collaboration with the Golden Dawn members and MPs. However, in the numerous interviews I have had, although there is acknowledgment of

the sympathy with Golden Dawn ideas, the accusation of collaboration was forcefully rejected and leniency was attributed to political commands (let us not forget that the police is not an independent institution).

I do not wish to underplay the importance of such evidence or accusations of collaboration, or the pressing need for democratisation of the security forces in Greece. But what I would like to contest here is the argument that there is an organic relationship between the far Right and the police in Greece. Rather, I would submit that the recent developments point towards a circumstantial rather than systemic link. Certainly ideologies of exclusion—such as nationalism, xenophobia, racism and homophobia—are popular in the culture of the institution. However, it is, first, important to distinguish between those ideologies of exclusion and the ideologies of fascism or Nazism, albeit their elective affinities. Moreover, second, the fact that the police use nationalist symbols—e.g., the omnipresent Greek flag, to be found on everything from the riot police buses to mobile phone screen savers—should not be automatically read as evidence of fascism and may be better understood as a form of banal nationalism (Billig 1995). Contrary to the reading that sees a systemic relationship and regards the crisis as simply a manifestation of such relationship, I would like to argue that the particular popularity of the Golden Dawn within the police is precisely a manifestation of the crisis. The crisis has become a moment when the existing pathogeny of nationalism and other ideologies of exclusion, the social isolation experienced of police officers and the wholesale rejection and stigmatisation of the police as ‘fascists pigs’, led to a situation where

substantial identification with the Golden Dawn became possible within Greek society in general and within the security forces in particular.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article is part of an ongoing research project on policing protests in Greece and on the formation of the subjectivity of police officers through the exercise of their daily duties. In lieu of provisional conclusions of an ongoing project, I would like to conclude with the following two observations, stemming from the analysis so far. The first observation concerns the extremely low morale and feeling of social isolation within the police. Police officers, especially those in front line services and most prominently those who work in repressive services, such as the riot police, feel discouraged, disappointed, underappreciated and used. These feelings have been further exacerbated during the crisis, when police have been left as the only visible representative of the State and its withering welfare element. In the conditions of the crisis, police officers experience with particular intensity their paradoxical status: that of powerless instruments of power. In the background of such circumstantial experience lies an older and deeper sense of social depreciation that leads to feelings of social isolation, a peculiar scapegoating, due to the rejection of the institution for the historical and political reasons presented in the paper. In this perspective, the need to conceive and popularise a new public narrative of the police is particularly acute in Greece.

The second observation concerns the issue of democratisation: this is an extremely sensitive issue, given the sympathy of part of the police for far right political formations. However, I contend that democratization, should start from the institution itself, from the healthy functioning of the institution, from combatting the structural violence embedded in the relationships within the police. From what I have come to understand via my fieldwork, the arbitrariness of commands within the police force, the social exclusion of police officers, the use of the police as a political scapegoat, the working conditions, the education that so far has been modelled on the army (providing a clear portrayal of the enemy as an outsider) need to be immediately reconsidered. The dismantling of the clientelist State and the introduction of transparent process of promotion, career progression and integration into specific services is of paramount importance if we wish to talk seriously of democratisation. Putting the emphasis of democratization on policemen individually isolates them further, by taking it for granted that they are indeed fascists whom an external moral authority has a de facto moral superiority and duty to democratise. This naturally raises the issue of control of consciousness: in democratic societies we are judged and convicted on the basis of acts, and not on the basis of thinking, or convictions. Hence, effective democratisation should focus on the democratisation of the institution itself and not on reforming the consciousness of individual officers.

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