

# VOICES from the **EDGE**

As the economic problems of Greece dominated headlines, **Paul Strong** and his translator, Dimitra Gkerdouki, conducted a series of interviews over the summer in two contrasting Greek regions, trying to put contemporary events into historical context, thinking about real people, the real economy and its implications for personal histories. Here he reports on his initial findings.



“In the past, in 1974, in 1967, in the dictatorship we didn’t have anything. It was not life”

TASOS, FARMER, AGED 48

A qualitative study of people’s perceptions of the good and bad times in Greece’s recent past was an enticing project. We just had time and resources to do a simple snapshot in two regions of Greece – the highest and the lowest unemployment regions, starting in the villages in the south-western tip and finishing in the north-eastern corner (the border

with Turkey and Bulgaria). These two areas, Messinia and Evros, also took in modern Greece’s oldest and its second newest parts, its historically most ethnically and least ethnically diverse regions.

We approached people in public places and asked them the same series of questions: about personal, family, cultural and economic location and development

going back three generations. This naturally led to questions on when were the good and the bad times for them and their family in Greece. We found that this elicited a hugely diverse response, which was in no way predicted or predictable given the contemporary context. Diverse it may be, but a distinct pattern has seemed to emerge, which is consistent across these two very different regions but which is relatively neatly separated much more by age and socio-economic background than by political affiliation.

What we detected more than any great fear and frustration bubbling up through the current economic austerity was an anger and despair, a dissatisfaction with rule from the centre (whether Athens, Brussels, Berlin, ►

“Now is the best period, because in the past we didn’t have anything, no roads, electricity or running water”

ILIAS, PENSIONER AND FORMER FARMER

London or Washington). We also detected a resigned depression at the slow and solid sidelining of the rural economy, the drip, drip decline of regional diversity and relative economic autonomy. The rural economy in Greece has always sat uneasily in its relationship with the wider global economy and with the urban elite, but this uneasy relationship now seems to be exacerbated.

The methodology was a little unconventional, partly because the subject matter is not easy. Greeks in the villages don’t want to talk about the current crisis and they particularly don’t want to talk about it to *xeni* (strangers). There is certainly blame for corruption – the corruption of politicians in general and a kind of “other lot” in the Greek civil service. However, there is also hostility to foreigners – because of a history of foreign intervention (and areas of influence) that is perceived to have persisted into the age of the EU. This recent crisis is seen as a largely foreigner-derived crisis, admittedly made worse locally.

But underneath the costs of foreign intervention (which are seen as significant) lies an embarrassing awareness that Greece has suffered because of Greeks, more than at the hands of foreigners – and that this has been the case at significant points in Greek history. It is important to remember that as many Greeks died during the civil war in the mid to late 1940s as under German occupation. The Greek on Greek violence that persisted until the 1970s is painful and not to be discussed.

There is also the language. Despite generations of measures to encourage ethnic consolidation, diversity undermines the myth of homogeneity at the periphery. Although Greek is the majority language and the *lingua franca*, not everyone on the periphery speaks it or speaks it well. This is a little embarrassing and not to be brought up with foreigners, but more than this it has serious strategic significance: family, language and ethnicity all matter.

“If we compare my father’s era with my era, it’s like day and night. Logically it’s better now, but we’ve started to have difficulties with the financial crisis. We have everything we need in the village, but development has brought with it many costs”

DIMITRIS, AGED 28

So, methodologically and speedily, how did we conduct a qualitative survey that no-one wanted to participate in? We used a “papaki” (a small motorcycle), or more accurately a “michanaki” (a slightly bigger small motorcycle). Greece has the highest per capita motorcycle usage of any European country; everyone has one or has had one. In many ways motorcycle ownership is another manifestation of that deep, recent, lingering poverty (or the only very recent wealth that has been far from pervasive). Turn up in a village on a michanaki (literally, a “small engine”), and no-one really notices, or if they do they look at you with sympathetic curiosity. “Curious way for a stranger to arrive” – and then villagers seem to want to ask you as many questions as you want to ask them. Riding a michanaki you have the appearance of being grounded. Once conversation started we were completely upfront, spelling out who we were and what we were doing. Then a few people refused to talk to us. We even had peanuts thrown at us. Mostly people did talk though and even the people who threw peanuts ended up buying us our coffees.

I speak enough Greek to have coped with it at this level, but it is foreigners’ Greek, which does not help with access. Then there are the other languages of the periphery: Bulgarian, Albanian, Turkish and dialects that seem to pick and mix. I needed a skilled translator and found one locally. It helped that she was a woman, with the women as much as with the men. Again it added to the village gossip vitality, which meant we both had to answer questions before we’d even had a chance to ask them. This made our survey more natural, more of a dialogue and less of an artificial random series of alien-sounding questions. The resulting methodology was transparent and scientific; it was just its delivery system that seemed a little unconventional, even as it proved effective. People talked, and talked openly

about things that many may have initially felt were best left unsaid.

This was meant to be reconnaissance, to see whether it was practicable to extend the work across Greece. Previously the macro numbers seemed doubtful. In terms of making sense of Greece’s past crisis, many of the archives seem highly politicised. The civil war lives on in where they are stored and what has been recorded and saved. So, if both the quantitative data are misleading and the qualitative data are selective, what is left?

There is the generation who grew up during German occupation and during the civil war, when

“My best years were in dictatorship. Then I had a lot of money, because raisins and olive oil had a market price of 2.5 to 5 drachmas and suddenly the prices rose to 500 drachmas in 1966”

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almost Soviet proportions died of starvation (as many of those interviewed reminded us). Civil war followed German occupation, which followed the 1930s, and they followed the Asia Minor disaster (when 30 per cent of the Greek population were suddenly penniless refugees), which followed the First World War, which followed various Balkan wars .... Greece has had its own Hundred Years War and it is not ancient history. It didn’t really recover until the 1980s.

So to reflect and work out just how bad things are, or are likely to get, and what the popular response might be, dogged by dodgy data, there is now this opportunity to interview the rapidly diminishing living archive of old people. Again this would be a sample survey, just bigger. It would allow us to explore beyond these two peripheries of Greece, and enable a dwindling generation to offer their observations on this, the latest trauma to hit the country. ■



**Paul Strong** is a teaching fellow in the Department of Economic History. “Still lives”, a short video about his interviews in Greece, is available at: [youtube.com/watch?v=qPDB10o\\_YcA](https://youtube.com/watch?v=qPDB10o_YcA).