

## Hierarchies, Civilization, and the Eurozone Crisis: The Greek Financial Crisis

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### INTRODUCTION

It is not controversial to suggest that the Greek Financial Crisis (GRFC) has been one of the most noteworthy challenges faced by the European Union (EU) over the last years. But while much attention has been paid to the economic and political causes of the crisis, less attention has been paid to the ways in which the management of the GRFC was engrained in the construction of Greece as a Eurozone/EU outsider. Building on the concept of the ‘Standard of Civilization’ (SoC) and themes from postcolonial studies, the aim of the chapter is to examine the transformation of Greece into a negative signifier and to illustrate the relevance of civilizational practices and narratives to the GRFC.

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The argument of the chapter is twofold. First, we argue that one of the most important, albeit neglected, features of the management of the GRFC has been the power politics of conditionality, which can be seen as a contemporary SoC. Briefly stated, the eventual reposition of Greece from a Eurozone member to Eurozone's 'Other' points to the enduring influence of civilizational narratives and hierarchical practices on the EU's crisis response, which has been reflected in the blame game and the pressure of Grexit. Second, although certain aspects of the EU's policies toward non-member countries have been usually underpinned by colonial impulses and hierarchical practices, we suggest that the response to the GRFC marks a significant departure from previous EU policies. This is because a member country is presented as a negative signifier. This has important implications not only for the future of Greece and its people, but also for the prospects of the EU project in general.

The chapter is organized in the following way. The first section revisits the SoC as a key characteristic of the expansion of the European international society of states to the non-European world during the nineteenth century. It also provides a brief overview of the literature that deals with the relevance of the SoC to contemporary practices in international society. The second section moves on to consider the ways in which EU practices and discourses have been reflective of the logic of the SoC. Consequently, the third section focuses on the construction of Greece as a negative signifier from the outset of the crisis and provides a discussion of the relevance of the SoC to assess EU's response to the GRFC. A key point that emerges from this discussion is that, in many ways, the EU's management of the GRFC indicates the enduring influence of colonial legacies echoing the importance of civilizational narratives and hierarchical practices. Crucially, however, what is novel and noteworthy is that this process has occurred within the EU. The chapter thus not only provides a reflective critique to exclusionary practices engrained in economic governance, but also offers a new lens through which to understand the complex dynamics of the GRFC in a historical and comparative perspective, highlighting the importance of hierarchy and civilization within the Eurozone. Finally, in doing so, new avenues are opened for an interdisciplinary research agenda on the GRFC, EU Studies, and the politics of the Eurozone.

THE STANDARD OF CIVILIZATION IN INTERNATIONAL  
SOCIETY: A RELIC OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY OR  
A CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE IN GLOBAL POLITICS?

The SoC has been one of the most important features of the expansion of the European international society of states into the non-European world in the nineteenth century (Bull and Watson 1984; Buzan and Little 2014), based largely on colonialism, racism, and coercion. Bull and Watson (1984, p. 1) define international society as ‘a group of states (or more generally, a group of independent political communities) which form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements’. This violent process of the European civilizing mission gradually culminated in the establishment of a universal society of sovereign states in the twentieth century. It was against this historical backdrop that the SoC emerged as a set of administrative, socio-political, and legal practices formulated by the Europeans to assess and differentiate between members and non-members of the expanding international society of states (Gong 1984; Keene 2002; Bowden 2009; Stroikos 2014; Linklater 2016).

A key assumption of the SoC was that there was a society of ‘civilized’ European members that met these criteria and an outer tier of ‘uncivilized’ non-European political entities that did not. Therefore, during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, entering the society of civilized states required the fulfillment of the society’s SoC as a criterion for state recognition. According to Gong (1984, pp. 14–15), these standards included basic rights of life and property, the existence of an organized political bureaucracy, the adherence to international law, the operation of diplomatic interchange and communication, and the abstract notion that a ‘civilized’ state follows the norms and practices the ‘civilized’ international society. Notably, by the end of the nineteenth century, international law was a key part of the SoC, manifested in the unequal treaties and extraterritoriality (Koskeniemi 2001; Simpson 2004; Anghie 2004). In other words, the key issue was conforming to a set of organizing and normative standards of conduct regulating the interaction among states in order to be recognized as a full sovereign member in international society.

In principle, the aftermath of the Second World War and the subsequent process of decolonization marked the end of the operation of the SoC (Bowden 2009, p. 126). Yet, there is a burgeoning literature that examines the extent to which the logic of the SoC remains enmeshed in the normative structure of contemporary international society (Stroikos 2014). Significantly, like the old SoC, the new ‘SoC’ is not value-free, but it is interwoven with liberal values, ideas, and practices that demarcate insiders and outsiders in the liberal international order (Fidler 2001; Bowden 2009). These include: economic and financial standards (Gong 2002, pp. 84–92; Mozaffari 2001, pp. 77–96; Bowden and Seabrooke 2007), human rights (Donnelly 1998), democratic government (Hobson 2008; Clark 2009; Navari 2013), the status of women (Townes 2009), development and environmental stewardship (Gong 2002, p. 84; Buzan 2014, pp. 590–592), peacebuilding and statebuilding (Paris 2002), and trusteeship (Bain 2003). What should be emphasized for the purposes of this discussion is that the logic of the new SoC also underpins the EU’s membership conditionality (Behr 2007; Stivachtis 2008). The next section considers this aspect of EU policies and discourses.

### THE NEW SOC AND THE EU

In the context of discussing the enduring relevance of the logic of the SoC, Behr (2007) argues that the dynamics of EU accession politics, especially the 2004 enlargement, echo the legacies of the nineteenth-century imperial rule and the SoC. Employing a historical comparative perspective, Behr identifies three common features between the nineteenth-century SoC and EU regulations on accession and membership: (a) the existence of regulations designed by European nations that demarcate between themselves as insiders and those who are outside the EU; (b) different modes of recognition and cooperation between those who are brought inside the EU and those perceived as the ‘outside’; (c) the importance of a geopolitical imagination that projects a hierarchical world order, which distinguishes European states at the center from peripheries of perceived less politically developed states (Behr 2007). Likewise, according to Stivachtis (2008), the EU policy of ‘membership conditionality’, including monitoring the fulfillment of the so-called Copenhagen criteria, can be understood as a contemporary SoC.

More recently, in examining a number of EU policies and discourses, Nicolaidis et al. (2014) identify two patterns underpinning the operation

of what they describe as a ‘new standards typology’. The first is ‘agency denial’, given that it is still Europeans that unilaterally set standards and impose them on others. The second is ‘hierarchy’, considering how the standards set by the Europeans promote the institutionalization of conferring unequal status upon others. In this respect, the tendency to project the EU as a model that needs to be replicated by others is part of an influential narrative that echoes assumptions about Europe’s civilizational superiority. Thus, the EU has only been partially successful in shaping its identity as a postcolonial global actor that leaves behind its colonial impulses and Eurocentricism.

Part of this debate is also the question of what kind of international actor is the EU (Stavridis and Sola 2011). In his influential introduction of the concept of ‘Normative Power Europe’ (NPE), Manners (2002, p. 239) suggests that the EU can be seen as a normative power with an ability to shape conceptions of ‘normal’ in international affairs. This involves the pursuit of normative aims, juxtaposed to self-interest material benefits, mainly through normative means, instead of using military and/or economic means (Manners 2002). Since the publication of Manners’ piece, there has been a great deal of debate about the merits and pitfalls of conceptualizing the EU as a normative power (Whitman 2011; Nicolaïdis and Whitman 2013). So, there is no need to rehearse the discussions, but what is noteworthy for the purposes of this chapter is the conceptualization of Europe as an empire, which can be related to the relevance of the logic of the SoC. More specifically, in response to the concept of NPE, it is maintained that, if we want to understand the politics and foreign policy of the EU, it makes more sense to treat it as an empire. In this regard, for example, it has been suggested that the EU bears the characteristics of a ‘neo-medieval empire’, centered on multilevel governance and the interpenetration of multiple political units (Zielonka 2006). In particular, the emerging system lacks a definite power center and it consists of concentric circles, fuzzy borders, soft power projection, and a shared/spread authority. Consequently, this contrasts with the notion of a neo-Westphalian empire, whereby the principal features are centralized governance, power relations of a ‘metropolis/periphery’ hierarchy and control through political and military means.

Conceptualizing Europe as empire is also related to the ways in which the EU expands and consolidates through the construction of the distinction between ‘Civilized’ and ‘Other’, which is reflected on certain EU policies, practices, and geopolitical projections (Foster 2013; Behr and

Stivachtis 2016). Essentially, this process rests upon the construction of third parties as EU's 'Others', including Turkey and Russia (Neumann and Welsh 1991; Zarakol 2011; Neumann 2011). In this vein, in addition to describing the process of European integration as empire in general (Gravier 2015), there is a growing literature that employs the analytical utility of the concept of empire in order to highlight key aspects of EU's external relations that reflect the legacies of Europe's imperial past and civilizational narratives. Examples include the 'eastern enlargement' of the EU, as noted earlier (Böröcz 2001; Behr 2007; Stivachtis 2008), the EU's external relations with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (APC) countries (Sepos 2013), the geopolitical projection of what is known as *Eurafrica* (Hansen and Jonsson 2014), the European Neighborhood Policy (Pänke 2015), and its behavior toward North Africa and the Middle East (Del Sarto 2016). In fact, rather than seeing EU's policies toward African countries as an expression of its normative power, some authors (Schmidt 2012; Langan 2015) have suggested that the EU should be seen as a neo-colonial power. The key question then is whether the EU's response to the GRFC shares commonalities with how the EU deals with its external relations in its periphery on the basis of an 'empire' approach that echoes the logic of the SoC. This is the focus of discussion of the next section.

### THE ENDURING RELEVANCE OF THE SOC AND THE GREEK FINANCIAL CRISIS

The Eurozone crisis has had an important impact on the legitimacy of the process of European integration. This has been manifested in a shift of public opinion away from favoring European integration (Vilpišauskas 2013). While it is too early to say what the long-term implications of the GRFC will be, it is clear that the crisis has revealed the inherent structural problems and limits regarding European fiscal rules, such as the dominance of financialization and impediments to political integration (Della Posta and Talani 2011; Patomäki 2013; Bitzenis et al. 2015; Constantopoulou 2016). However, it remains plausible that the crisis might spearhead the advancement of integration rather than its impediment, at least as far as the integration of the Economic Monetary Union (EMU) is concerned (Tosun et al. 2014; Ioannou et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, the GRFC has triggered an extensive set of explanatory/analytical frameworks and research questions. A multitude of causes contributing to the crisis have been identified, including the country's

dramatic public finance situation, the adamant stance of certain leading states, the consequences of the international financial crisis (mid and late 2000s), the economic imbalances among EMU member states, and structural causes concerning the EMU's economic characteristics (Verde 2011, pp. 144–150). Consequently, there is by now a burgeoning literature that illustrates certain aspects of the GRFC. Our intention here is not to provide a detailed discussion of this literature, but it is necessary to briefly sketch out the complex amalgam of issues raised by the GRFC. These include the interplay of domestic and external/institutional factors and how they have shaped the crisis (Bitzenis et al. 2013; Sklias and Tzifakis 2013), domestic influences, such as weakened domestic institutions and the effects of the shadow economy (Featherstone 2011, pp. 195–200; Mitsopoulos and Pelagidis 2011; Tzogopoulos 2013, Chaps. 1–3; Bitzenis and Vlachos 2015), the intricacies of negotiation strategies and bargaining power (Tsebelis 2016; Zahariadis 2016, 2017), the dynamics and limits of the politics and policies of reforming public administration and the social sector (Kalyvas et al. 2012; Ladi 2012; Featherstone 2015; Petmesidou and Glatzer 2015; Theodoropoulou 2015), and deep structural causes of the crisis, such as falling profitability and the overaccumulation crisis (Mavroudeas 2014). Further, it has been suggested that the GRFC constitutes a noteworthy example of the 'politics of extreme austerity' (Karyotis and Gerodimos 2015) as well as a case of stateness under strain due to financial/economic adjustment and conditionality (Lavdas et al. 2013).

Likewise, attention has been paid to the effect of the GRFC on Greek foreign policy, political institutions, and the civil society (Kovras and Loizides 2014; Pappas 2014; Clarke et al. 2015; Katsanidou and Otjes 2016; Litsas and Tziampiris 2017). Another important focus of analysis has been the crucial role of the media in shaping domestic and external perceptions about the crisis and constructing prevailing discourses (Clements et al. 2014; Karyotis and Gerodimos 2015; Kyriakidis 2016; Takas and Samaras 2016). It should be noted that the discursive representation of the crisis in global media was far from monolithic, but it was clearly underpinned by Greece as a negative signifier and EU/Eurozone's 'Other'. From the outset, there was a tendency to frame Greece in negative terms invoking three major themes: corruption, lack of credibility/reliability, and 'irresponsibility'. This was accompanied by typical stereotypes regarding the Greeks based on excessive generalities or ironic comments, and less interest in domestic debates or alternative views (Antoniades 2013; Tzogopoulos 2013). In this regard, examining Eurozone discourses and narratives helps

to illustrate key moves that shaped the EU response to the GRFC. One of the most important steps was the emergence of the politics of agency denial with regard to Greece, which was later replaced by the mantra of Greece ‘as a special case’. This was followed by the politics of blaming and breaking the ‘Grexit’ taboo (Papadimitriou and Zartaloudis 2015).

The exit of Greece from the Euro was for the time averted thanks to the July 2015 agreement, but the very fact that Greece was portrayed as a possible outsider has had an important impact on how the EU decided to deal with the GRFC. First, as far as analogies with the nineteenth-century imperial rule and the management of the crisis are concerned, it is worth recalling certain policies and practices based on hierarchical and asymmetrical power relations between unequal parties (Eurozone members and Greece), including surrendering fiscal sovereignty in return for the provision of specific loan arrangements, and the central role of the creditors in monitoring the fulfillment of certain reforms and policies that conditions Greece as a member of the Eurozone. Remarkably, in one of his books before assuming office, Greece’s current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Kotzias (2013), described the status of Greece in terms of the concept of ‘debt colony’. In his view, there are certain analogies between the nineteenth-century imperial rule of European powers and the management of the GRFC that point to echoes of imperial rule, such as access to natural assets and resources, the central role of the creditors in monitoring key facets of the Greek economy and advancing/enforcing further privatization. This largely relates to the fact that the standards applied in the crisis management have been largely unfolded upon the myth of ‘neo-liberal structural reforms as panacea’ (Polychroniou 2015, p. 248). Comprehensive reflexivity over the nature and effects of such reforms was rather limited, especially if one considers the persistence of inequality and inefficiency in terms of precarious employment and social instability. In fact, the ‘rescue’ dimension of the respective programs of the European South has been more about protecting the European banking system than solving the actual economic problems of the corresponding nations (Polychroniou 2015, pp. 248–254).

Second, for all debates about EU solidarity, the idea of solidarity was somehow narrowly conceptualized, what is called ‘restricted solidarity’, in the sense that the bailout was influenced by proximity and homogeneity in economic, political, and cultural terms, with the main aim of maintaining macro-economic stability (Verde 2011, pp. 157–161). At the same time, the response to the crisis cannot be easily disentangled from Germany’s



hegemonic, albeit reluctant, position, evident in a burden-sharing and institutional design of asymmetrical interdependence, which provided a framework of asymmetrical bargaining power. Thus, it is not surprising that the elicited response, in many ways, reflected Germany's values related to a culture that emphasizes fiscal stability (Bulmer 2014; Schimmelfennig 2015). Notwithstanding what one thinks about Germany's contribution to the management of the GRFC, its obsession with stability, what is called 'ordoliberalism', led to the transformation of a nation's fiscal problem into a systemic sovereign debt crisis (Matthijs 2016). To be sure, it has been suggested (Ryner 2015) that the persistence of the EMU (despite various contradictions or social costs as well as of a discredited capitalism) can be better understood in terms of an 'ordoliberal iron cage' rather than merely an indication of a specific class or state dominance. Equally, in relation to the negotiations, it was apparent that asymmetrical and hierarchical power relations were also a reflection of Greece as a small country. This meant that there were few resources available in terms of bargaining power that could help the Greek government to formulate a more effective bargaining strategy (Zahariadis 2016, 2017). According to Tsebelis, EU's inflexibility (which was misconceived by the Greek side) and the unanimity rule as a means of turning multiple actors into veto players further complicated the process of managing the crisis (Tsebelis 2016).

Third, as was noted earlier, a crucial dimension of responding to the crisis was the construction of Greece as the EU/Eurozone 'Other', which has been embedded in the stigmatization of the European South. This involves the geopolitical projection of a core/periphery binary in economic and financial terms. But it also involves the reproduction of essentialist ideas about Greek culture premised on subtle racism and stereotypes that usually portray Greeks as 'corrupted', 'lazy', 'irresponsible', 'emotional', and so on, juxtaposed to essentialist qualities of Northern Europeans, such as 'industrious', 'rational', 'hard-working', 'responsible', and 'reliable' (Tekin 2014). Crucially, this has the effect of de-politicizing the crisis rather than focusing on economic differences or asymmetries, the historical evolution of political phenomena, and the salience of power politics (Leontidou 2012, 2014; Markantonatou 2013; Bitzenis et al. 2015; Van Vossle 2016).

Considering the above, framing the EU's response in binary distinctions has largely opened the way for hierarchical practices and policies that echo colonial legacies and the nineteenth-century SoC. This has important implications for at least three reasons. First, the stigmatization

of Greece as the ‘financially uncivilized Other’ that needs to be civilized in economic terms, at least for now, has profoundly shaped the management of the GRFC, not the least because it has precluded other policies available. For instance, it is clear that an emphasis on economic growth, instead of an obsession with austerity measures, could have less detrimental effects to the most vulnerable population groups in Greece. But blaming the Greeks and their cultural qualities, that is, the ‘culturalization’ of what has largely been a systemic crisis, has led to the ‘de-politization’ of finding proper solutions, which, in turn, made easier the imposition of painful austerity measures that simply have not worked so far (Mylonas 2012). Therefore, civilizing narratives have interwoven with domestic and local politics (Constantopoulou 2016, p. 3).

Second, the repositioning of Greece as a semi-sovereign state points to different layers of sovereignty within the EU that has de facto demarcated the country as a second tier or failed state in terms of a standard of economic and financial civilization. But what should be added is that, despite efforts by non-European states to join the European international society, meeting the nineteenth-century SoC remained a moving target for the ‘uncivilized’ states to meet. A key question then that emerges is the extent to which Greece will continue to be suspended somewhere in the outer tier of the EU/Eurozone, regardless of whether it will be successful in restructuring the debt burden by complying with the criteria set by its creditors.

Third, returning to the concept of NPE, the GRFC has highlighted the limits of EU as a distinct cosmopolitan actor with normative power. Indeed, in the aftermath of the management of the GRFC, there is some scope of thinking the EU in terms of what Mikelis calls ‘Neocolonial Power Europe’ (Mikelis 2016). Consequently, is the EU still able to project its normative influence as an international actor by promoting certain values and norms, when one of its members has been constructed as a negative signifier? As Tekin notes, the ascent of power politics, the absence of a true cosmopolitan solidarity, the harsh treatment of Greece, and the EU’s democratic deficit have rendered the EU project less appealing in its neighborhood (Tekin 2014, p. 35). Equally, the stigmatization and ‘orientalization’ that constructed Greece as EU’s Other and solely responsible for the Eurozone crisis means that the EU is far from a cosmopolitan, post-national order (Tekin 2014).

Moreover, in relation to the GRFC, little effort was made to draw lessons from previous efforts of structural adjustment programs (Greer

2013). Equally, rather little attention has been paid to the need of crafting a conditionality strategy that is attentive to bureaucratic interests, administrative traditions, and cultural norms. As a result, a prevailing sense of forced adjustment contributed to the deligitimation of the conditionality strategy (Featherstone 2015). Hence, the EU failure to elicit the necessary substantive reforms has consequences for its ability to coordinate macroeconomic performance across a heterogeneous Eurozone, which marks an ‘implicit challenge—to force adaptation—that has loomed for the EU since it embarked on the single market and the single currency’ (Featherstone 2015, p. 310). As far as the hierarchical and asymmetrical nature of the EU’s management of the GRFC is concerned, although a sort of condition might have been necessary and beneficial for fostering reforms, the lack of clear and full-blown safeguards (checks and balances) for all parties involved has reinforced the asymmetry of power politics and rendered the completion of the restructuring program a more formidable task for the Greek elites.

In this regard, our argument falls within the broader agenda of advancing a critique of the immaturity thesis. This is evident in the discourse of debt negotiations, which primarily attributes failure to specific peripheral actors unable to abide with systemic requirements, while paying less attention to structural deficiencies and the role of the system’s gatekeepers. As a consequence of the immaturity argument, efforts to carve out a European institutional response to the crisis have emphasized the need to bring the immature states of Europe’s periphery to the ‘correct’ path towards progress and economic recovery. But given the obvious limits of such efforts to date, a critique of this argument is necessary by taking into consideration existing asymmetries of power between EU member states and the role of agency and diversity among them (Dooley 2014).

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the fact that the purpose of our analysis has been to elucidate certain aspects of the GRFC that have been downplayed in the relevant literature, our intention has not been to (over)simplify the complex external and internal factors that have shaped the management of the GRFC. Nor do we suggest that the causes of the crisis can be attributed only to how the EU decided to handle the GRFC. It is clear that Greek governments

also bear responsibility in completing effectively the debt restructuring programs and fiscal adjustment. Yet, European and indeed EMU governance, especially regarding the management of the economic/financial and sovereign debt crisis may well be conceptualized as ‘civilizing governance’ in the sense that it is premised on a new civilizing mission or process. The logic of this civilizing governance can be described as ‘comply to certain standards or suffer the consequences’, echoing the legacies of imperial rule. As we have seen, this has been manifested in the demarcation between insiders and outsiders within the Eurozone that repositioned Greece as a negative signifier in the context of civilizational discourses and the collective pressure of a possible Grexit.

To be sure, we do not claim that the governance of the EU can be devoid of some sort of criteria and standards of conduct. Nor do we believe that any response to the EU should entail the unconditional provision of assistance. However, it is one thing to look for ways to improve the governance of the EU and another thing to consider the process of managing the GRFC and its outcomes to date in a constructive and reflexive way. After all, the Greek case helps to highlight certain features of the politics of conditionality that are relevant to other cases. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that financial assistance to African countries with the aim of facilitating poverty eradication has failed to reduce poverty alleviation because of the promotion of policies of regressive liberalization (Langan 2015).

Be that as it may, our main purpose has been to offer an alternative framework that helps to cast a revealing light on the enduring influence of civilizational discourse and hierarchical practices. Building on the concept of the SoC and borrowing ideas from postcolonial studies, we have argued that the construction of Greece as Eurozone’s ‘Other’ through the distinction between Eurozone insiders and outsiders as well as the ways in which the EU responded to the crisis serve to highlight the continuing relevance of the logic of the SoC. Following from this, we also argued that the representation of Greece as a ‘financially uncivilized Other’ facilitated the introduction of ineffective austerity measures that have already caused much suffering among many Greek people. But the stigmatization of Greece as Eurozone’s Other and the management of the GRFC have already challenged fundamental European values and norms, such as democracy and solidarity. Further, the EU’s response to the GRFC raises important questions about whether the EU can still be seen as a distinct international actor with a normative influence in its periphery. Reinventing the EU amid several important challenges, such as the Eurozone crisis,

the migration and refugee crisis, and Brexit, seems a daunting task. It is somehow ironic, therefore, that facing these challenges requires a stronger EU, but one that is genuinely ‘united in diversity’.

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