

Women, Youth and the Economic Crisis in Southern Europe



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Abstract

The paper raises questions about how the economic crisis is being played out 'in place' taking an embodied, generational and gender perspective. We place in a political context – examining how global realities are experienced in place and argue that we need to look at the every day realities of the crisis from a gendered and generational perspective in order to counter grand narratives of gloom and doom where women (whether old, young, migrant, heterosexual or otherwise) are particular victims. We seek to show how by contextualizing the gendered and generational realities of the crisis in southern Europe can we change the narrative of overwhelming paralyzing crisis to one of potential transformation. We focus on the rise of resistance, solidarity economies and new types of communities in the search for alternatives to neoliberal capitalism by women and youth in southern Europe. We look at how people are organizing differently as a result of the crises, creating new forms of political economic and social relations. Dominant narratives tend to exclude the stories of the unprivileged in such reshaping of political, economic and social relations, this paper is the beginnings of bringing the experience and understandings of women and youth in southern Europe to the centre of the analysis of the economic crisis in Europe.

Keywords

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Mainstream narratives on women and the crisis in Europe.

The first studies and reports are coming out about the impact of the crisis on women in Europe. A EU commissioned Report undertaken by economists based in Italy ‘The impact of the economic crisis on the situation of women and men and on gender equality policies’ (Bettio 2012 et al) and the women’s rights network European Women’s Lobby (EWL)’s report on ‘The Price of Austerity’ (2012) set out the gendered nature of the crisis in detailed studies on the economic and social impact on European women.

Bettio et al point to across the board greater unemployment, dampening of wages and an overall increase of poverty and deepening inequalities. The study suggests that due to labour market segregation the early narrowing of the gender gap in employment is now over. Whereas at first more jobs in the male sector were lost and women’s jobs were at first more sheltered from the crisis now with fiscal consolidation there is a significant curtailing of public sector jobs where the majority of women are employed. The EWL report states that women account in average for almost 70% of public sector workers in the EU (EWL 2012, 3), therefore anything that happens to public sector jobs and wages affects women more. For example, In Italy in education alone, 19,700 women’s jobs have been cut since 2009 and 87,000 more are predicted in the immediate future (EWL 2012, 4).

Bettio et al argue that the crisis in Europe has affected women and men differently rather than ‘more’ or ‘less’ (2012, 8). Though differences in gender equality vary considerably among countries they suggest that widening disparities in gender equality within Europe as the austerity measures have impaired the functioning of the gender equality infrastructure in several Member States.

They point to the housing crisis as affecting single mothers and low- income households (among whom women are over-represented). They also show how the cost of healthcare weighs more heavily on women. The rights of pregnant women to maternity leave and benefits have been curtailed and discrimination against pregnant women is being documented. Budget cuts in the health sector also hit women’s jobs as more women are employed in the public health sector.

Fiscal consolidation has cut in many countries long-term care allowances and monetary benefits with disproportionate impact on women. In the field of childcare, public expenditure on monetary allowances has been reduced more consistently than public expenditure on the provision of services.

Reductions in care benefits have reduced the real income of women with care responsibilities, and weakened their economic independence during care periods and increased their burden of care responsibilities to women in households.

The conclusion of both studies is that the overall that the current austerity measures will ultimately reduce welfare provisions, leading to poorer services in health and education and that given the gendered social and economic inequalities women will suffer from greater severe material deprivation in all countries.

While not disputing the findings, or political intent of these studies, nor questioning if they are using a correct gender lens, or that they lack social awareness I would like to argue it is important that we move from this economistic focus on the crisis and its impacts on some universal woman, 'European' or otherwise, who is more at risk than men, more vulnerable, and lost without adequate and specific state support.

Youth without Future

Many European youth have been deeply affected by the economic crisis. Living precariously, unable to get a formal job, earning barely enough to pay the rent and survive. Without jobs, homes and no hope of 'retirement' and pensions they are becoming stereotyped as the 'lost generation'. According to the European Commission 7.5 million young Europeans are neither studying nor employed or in training (NEETS) (2013). According to the statistics of the European Commission more than one in five young people cannot find a job in southern Europe. In Spain and Greece it is even worse with every one in two young people unemployed (European commission 2013). According to another study youth unemployment in Spain almost reached 60% last year (Lantier 2013).

Reading these statistics youth are well aware that they are not expected to enjoy the prosperity or stability of their parents as the resources for the middle class of the future is shrinking. These youth however are starting to refute such classifications of their lives and their future. The every day experience of the crisis as brought with it the search for alternatives to dominant economic and social structures, and their resistance is starting to build a different picture.

On March 2013 *Youth without Future*, a collective from Madrid expressed the need to look at the stories instead of the numbers of the youth affected by the economic crisis. Through their initiative '*We are not leaving they are kicking us out*' they opened the space (virtually) so people could recognize the number of Spanish youth leaving their homes looking for opportunities of decent living conditions. This action led to an international protest in more than 30 countries. More importantly, this initiative made their stories visible and underlined that these young people refused to be read or defined merely through sterile statistics that cannot capture their lived realities.

"We don't owe, we don't pay", "vuestra deuda no la pagamos", "solidarite internationale contre L'Europe du capital" were heard at protests in Frankfurt and Madrid during 2013 (Trejo

2014). These claims reveal a strong collective awareness that the system and institutions are part of the problem. There is a sense that solutions are to be created outside these, by the people who are being affected (Trejo 2014).

Youth Without Future denounce the precarious working conditions, inaccessible housing, temporary contracts, disguised exploitation presented as 'non-paid internship opportunities'. It is important to look more closely at these denouncements, and the resilient strategies of these young people who refuse to see themselves as on the margins in order to mark how young people are responding to the dominant homogenizing discourse that flattens their realities.

Reframing the discussion

Our proposal is that we need to move away from seeing the crisis as necessarily where women and youth are worse off, exposed and vulnerable, to seeing the crisis as part of an on-going set of historical circumstances where gender inequalities are being played out, challenged and lived in neoliberal capitalism. The crisis is not something insurmountable and paralytic but it is something we are living through. We need to see how it is being experienced in ways that invite possibilities for change in our daily lives, not that we can ignore what is hard and difficult, and unjust but we need to observe what is going on, without assuming we know where the crisis will lead us

We need to scrutinize much more the mainstream universalising framing of the impact of women and the youth crisis narrative –away from economic prescriptive givens and learn from insights coming from social justice movements, feminism, youth movements and their understanding of the links among body, generational difference, culture, ecology and economy.

We need to get out of the trap of our pre determined ideas of what measures to take, and look with more openness at the contradictions, the failures, the messiness, which contain within them the hopes for social change.

In this approach we are influenced by the writings of US feminist Nancy Fraser on the crisis. Fraser writes from the New School in New York and frequently contributes to the UK based radical intellectual journal *New Left Review*. We are interested in her discussion of the shift new forms of politics in the neoliberal era linked to marketization, social protection and emancipatory projects in her call for a 'triple movement' response to today's economic, financial, ecological and social crisis.

She asks: Why is there no European-wide movement against austerity? Why has the current economic crisis failed to produce as in the early 20th century a strong counter hegemony to capitalism and marketization? Why is there no coalescence around alternatives (Fraser 2013, 127)?

She points to how organized labour with its focus on social protection is no longer providing an alternative as it fails to speak for society in today's new global capitalist formations that bypass

labour organising. The grammar of protest today – the struggles over gender, sexuality, religion, language, age, race/ethnicity and nationality are different from the old class/capital battles. The large number of emancipatory movements (anti-racism, anti-imperialism, anti-war, feminism, LGBT liberation, multiculturalism, youth movement etc.), are strongly critical of the forms of social protection institutionalized in the welfare and developmental states of the postwar era.

She sees the emancipatory movements (including here feminism and youth movements) as repeatedly having to cross the line ‘that separates a valid critique of oppressive protection and legitimate claims for labour-market access, on the one hand, from an uncritical embrace of meritocratic individualism and privatized consumerism, on the other’ (Fraser 2013, 131).

We find this an interesting dilemma to ponder over as we consider women and youth and the European economic crisis.

Women and the politics of place

In order to unpack the dominant framings of women, youth and the economic crisis and to pick up on the dilemma posed by Fraser we propose to frame the discussions in relation to women and the politics of place

We use the concept of place in a political context – examining how global realities are played out in place (Harcourt and Escobar 2005) and argue that we need to look at the every day realities of the crisis from these perspectives in order to counter grand narratives of gloom and doom where women (whether old, young, migrant, heterosexual or otherwise) are particular victims. One place to begin in order to pry out and move with and around and through the crisis is from our ontological knowledge of globalization processes in place. By contextualizing the gendered realities in place we change the narrative of overwhelming paralyzing crisis of capitalism to one of creative potential, understanding and transformation.

We find the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham (the pen name of the late Julie Graham US feminist economist and Kathie Gibson Australian feminist geographer) very helpful in this regard. In their work since 1996 they have pointed out that we need to move beyond capitalism as it represented in dominant narratives as a unified system: bounded, hierarchically ordered, vitalized by a growth imperative, and omnipresent, understood by macroeconomic theory and policy. (Gibson-Graham J.K. 1996; 2006)

Such is the hegemony of dominant capitalist narratives that the very idea of a noncapitalist economy is seen as unlikely or even an impossible to imagine.

Given its omnipresence it becomes difficult to see daily or partial replacements of capitalism by noncapitalist economic practices, or of capitalist retreats and reversals. They and others have

engaged in researching and documenting noncapitalist economic practices in order to allow new forms of anticapitalist politics and imaginaries to flourish.

Some of us working on the politics of place have identified new forms of localized economic politics emerging or what Michal Osterweil calls 'place-based globalism' (2005, 23). Where different community economies are linking through the politics of place to create an ethical and political rather than structural conception of economic dynamics

In this imaginary the economy is seen as a diversified social space. At the centre of these forms of economies are new economic subjects and ethical practices of self-cultivation. Place is a site of becoming and the ground of a global economic politics of local transformations where power is every day negotiated (skirted, marshalled or redirected) through ethical practices of freedom. Place-based globalism is not a potential or actual movement but an alternative logic of politics, one that invests not in what is to be replaced, but in what is to become. To quote J.K. Gibson-Graham:

'Place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* with highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system' (2008, 39).

We argue that place based globalism offers a crucial role for alternative discourses of feminism and youth which allows us to understand the economic crisis in more helpful ways as we connect the private and public, the domestic and national, local and the global, changing the rigid boundaries of established political and economic discourse.

In this imaginary local economic transformation is about ways of cultivating economic subjects with different desires and capacities and greater openness to change and uncertainty. Place becomes the site and possibility of becoming, the opening for politics:

'In the place-based imaginary, every place is to some extent 'outside' the various spaces of control; places change imitatively, partially, multidirectionally, sequentially, and space is transformed via changes in place... Place-based globalism recognizes that there is a continual struggle to transform subjects and places and conditions of life under circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty' (Gibson-Graham J.K. 2008, 34).

We also find the emerging literature on generations as a concept an important analytical frame through which to understand age and youth. According to Edmunds and Turner (2002) an age cohort can be considered a generation when the historical context in which they exist has shaped a shared cultural identity. The concept 'generation as actuality' applies when there is a strong connection forged between those who feel they belong to a generation. Edmunds and Turner mention the impact/ role in social change of a generation can only be clear with time. The youth

without a future now emerging in southern Europe is building a collective awareness of themselves as a generation marked by precariousness, vulnerability and struggles that together is reacting, organizing and creating alternatives.

Women and place based politics in Southern Europe

A recent colloquium on women and the economic crisis held in Gothenburg Sweden illustrated how women are working with and around the crisis searching for survival strategies but also alternatives to unfettered neoliberal capitalism and as a result of the crisis, creating new forms of political economic and social relations. The argument is that new economics demands new politics that can support real change for communities. There is a crisis of democracy as people lose faith in party systems as elected politicians take care of the state apparatus while it is the bankers and business class who make the real decisions (Roos 2013: 9)

Bolsena, Italy

In Italy where Wendy lives, she works with a small community based feminist organization Punti di Vista (PdV) (Points of View) based in a 17th century Franciscan monastery The Convento S. Maria del Giglio on the outskirts of Bolsena, Italy. The members of PdV work voluntarily in the Convento and undertake paid work in academic, government and NGO organisations based in Italy and further afield. There is an uneasy balance between the international knowledge and experience that people from outside bring to PdV and local realities of running the Convento given the politics of the local town particularly as the local economy stagnates and the austerity measures imposed by the State are being felt. There is a struggle over livelihoods as local environmental groups of the slow food movement battle for sustainable agricultural practices, in the face of tourism and history of the town where Church and State and aristocracy have fought for centuries over ownership of the place.

Negotiating around who decides what happens in Bolsena is a continual struggle among the town hall, local committees, the church, local parties and progressive groups. PdV work with local women who have been leading the alternative to mainstream tourism, running the book and coffee shops, 'eco' wine bars, 'bio' cheese farms, holding workshops on local food and Etruscan cultures.

Discussions about viability of local enterprises are shaped also by the everyday politics of taking care of family. Survival is via the 'black economy' which provides the food and care that enables people to overcome the down turn in tourism, the increase in local and national taxes, the closure of vital services and complexity of EU laws on food and safety. The community survives reliant on the goodwill of many who live under the shadow of the uncertainties of the Italian political system as well as the economic uncertainties.

The high levels of precarity and deepening unemployment among young people in Italy are clearly evident in small rural communities like Bolsena. Young people are mostly, along with migrants, employed in the shadow economy, without a contract or access to rights. Particularly in sectors dominated by tourism, as in Bolsena with its seasonal or casual work in restaurants, hotels and wine bars, most are working in the black economy.

Public protests including occupation of schools, marches on the streets, as in other cities in southern Europe happen with a regularity in the big towns, (people from Bolsena go to the nearby capital of the province Viterbo). Along with protest there are also new initiatives happening – from communal gardens, sharing of local produce in cooperatives, time banks, the organizing of pageants celebrating local historical events, fairs at harvest time etc. There is a re-embracing of histories of different sorts – forming a sense of the culture of the Tuscia area with its Etruscan history, as well as more conservative histories based on the Catholic Church, fishing and hunting communities. Attempts are being made to build communities around youth wings of local parties, new forms of fair trade shops, local restaurants promoting locally grown food and wine

Talking to young people there is a sense of looking for new forms of cultural identity and politics, with a strong distrust of the national politics and of the possibilities of making it in today's global market. Labour rights and social protection is not even seen as something to be fought for, such is the distrust of state politics, including 'Europe'. Many speak of moving to Germany, England, Holland where they see chances are better. As we write young people are occupying Porta Pia in Rome outside government buildings, asking people to stop and talk to them and consider together what economic crisis means for young people who face precariousness in a situation where ISTAT 2014 reports that 80% of young people under 30 live at home.

But though attention is on youth, the majority of the people in Bolsena are people over 60 – staying in the medieval borgo as younger people move to find work in other places. With the austerity measures the increase in medical costs have changed their lives, medicine is less affordable, there is one less doctor, the local hospital has closed so they have to go 20 km away. There is a concern about security and being an economic burden to their children. It raises the question of what living longer lives means when people see old people as problems rather than as contributors to our social and economic well-being.

These generational tensions alongside new livelihoods activities in Bolsena are a sign that things are shifting. It is important to understand the impact of the crisis on the different generations and their role in the community. Bolsena's survival depends on shifts in the economic imaginary in order to re value ways of living in our times.

Madrid, Spain

Lina Galvez Munoz and Nieves Salobral Martin from Spain spoke at a recent meeting (footnote) about the 100s of new civic movements emerging in Spain in the wake of the crisis as millions of people take to the streets to demand a radical change in Spanish politics. Feminist groups have been active in the 15-M movement that began in May 2011 in 57 Spanish cities, as well as other popular movements such as 'Take the Squares', the 'Indignados' movements and 'Youth Without a Future'.

The protests are about unemployment, welfare cuts, political corruption and economic injustice with a demand for systemic change. One of the 15-M mottos is that 'We are not against the system, the system is against us'. The resistance is also about creating new possibilities in place. There is a sense of hope in building alternatives alongside and outside the system that is failing to provide jobs, education, housing and well-being. The focus is on creating the reality they want today – not waiting for tomorrow either for utopia or for further economic and political failure.

Precarity is becoming a way of life as young people taking temporary jobs to make ends meet, with no security let alone pensions. Many young people in Southern Europe leave to look for jobs – in Spain there is a campaign 'We are not leaving they are kicking us out' which connects young people on the move for jobs. They have set out an interactive map where they ask young people to write themselves into the map, with stories about their experience – the statement is that precariousness and nomadic lives are now the way of life for young people (Trejo Mendez 2013, 16).

In big cities like Madrid neighborhood assemblies are forming all over the cities. Initiatives by people from 15M and other activists provide food for people who cannot afford it through self-managed foodbanks and popular free meals in the squares. (Trejo Mendez 2013, 21).

"Unjust laws are not to be followed" "rights are taken not implored" (Lavapies, 2014). The 'Asamblea de vivienda centro' describe themselves as "a community of neighbours who abandoned by the social injustice experienced in Madrid and in the rest of the Spanish State, have decided 'to take that which is ours' (Lavapies, 2014). They have taken under the PAH¹ campaign a building in the barrio of Toledo to give housing to 10 families who were in need. This is the third building they opened. The other two are located in the barrio of Malasana giving shelter to 30 families facing precarious conditions (Lavapies, 2014). This collective recognizes the system privileges a minority while denouncing the precariousness they are forced to experience. These people are women of all ages, students, precarious youth who are organizing for their right to decent housing (Lavapies, 2014).

On May 17-18 2014 more than 50 collectives, groups, assemblies gathered at Campo de Cebada in Madrid. Celebrating the anniversary of 15M by coming together, sharing workshops,

¹ Movement of mortgage victims.

squares about history of the crisis and the need for alternative economic models to overcome what she called 'austercide'.

The resistance to this 'austercide' is evident in the youth actions around southern Europe. The youth collective in Crete produces organic olive oil, part of the money is used to support political prisoners in Greece. This olive oil can be bought at Café Cralle in Berlin, a space for Queer politics, cultural and social activities. Popular kitchen evenings in Amsterdam in places like Kraakschool Antartica or Joe's garage where many young people gather to share food that would be thrown otherwise. These are the same spaces used to organize, do fundraising for political prisoners in other countries such as those facing trial linked to La Ciutadella protest in Barcelona (Joe's Garage, 2014). The economic crisis has linked youth from different parts of Europe who act in solidarity to others experiencing the hardships of the times. Sharing the discontent towards the institutions considered responsible for the current economic climate, but also looking for alternatives to dominant models.

Thessalonica, Greece

At the seminar in Sweden, the managing director of the Ergani Centre in Thessalonica Popi Sourmaido, described the increasing levels of gender inequality, deepening poverty and unemployment in Greece. The Ergani Centre was set up in 1991 with EU money to support women's cooperatives and the entry of women into the mainstream workforce, building a network among Greek universities, vocational training centres and entrepreneur groups and providing for women who came to the centre retraining, computer and language skills. Since the 2009 crisis the Centre has shifted focus with the increase in unemployment and wide spread insecurity. There has been a huge increase in women coming to the centre for counseling and basic survival needs. As in Spain, local assemblies are emerging in Athens and other large centres as well as rural areas. The Centre has become part of a network that helps connect women and provide support for survival. Whereas pre crisis the focus was on vocational training there is now a need to confront deepening poverty through social networking on best ways to distribute food, build community gardens, along with experimental seminars on how to create community support economic experiments particularly for young people, who, like in Italy and Greece are facing unemployment and precariousness. The mark of the crisis is that Centre from having worked mostly with women entrepreneurs now works with women from rural areas, immigrants, Roma people unemployed people over the age of 45, families with more than three children or with low income or without homes (Ergani 2014)

As Sourmaidou stated at the seminar, the name "ERGANI", - diligence and creative ability - refers to the attributes of Goddess Athena by the Ancient Greeks. Both qualities that she sees as

features of Greek women's responses to the crisis – coming from long histories of survival that confront challenges with creative imagination.

Conclusion

We see the role of feminist researchers committed to social change is to provide new imaginaries coming from trenchant critiques of dominant thinking and ways of life including strong critiques of economic that have framed the crisis. We need to think how our research and actions are creating the grounds for social and economic innovation. What are the socially creative thinking practices that can allow our feminist analysis to release the positive affect of hope and possibility and generate alternative discourses?

Thinking about the economy cannot be separated from our emotions and bodily sensation. We cannot afford to be taken down by the fear generated by crisis narratives, we need to remain hopeful toward connections and openings how we represent something like an economy influences how we think about what is possible. If we see the economy as naturally and rightfully 'capitalist' then any economic activity that is positioned as different (e.g., involves non-market transactions, or non-waged labour) cannot be viewed as legitimate, dynamic or long-lasting. The 'capitalocentrism' of economic discourse subsumes all economically diverse activities as ultimately the same as, the opposite of, a complement to or contained within capitalism (Gibson-Graham J.K. 2008, 37).

Dominant narratives tend to exclude the stories of the unprivileged in such reshapings of political, economic and social relations. We need to pose questions that open up rather than close down the possibility of becoming economically innovative in our ways of living that move us beyond the deep inequalities of capitalism and move towards social change. Out of the crisis there is resistance that is pushing for new economies that fit the emerging realities.

We need to be able to look at the existing examples that challenge dominant models and discourses and to look at everyday practices that reveal the experiences of economic crisis that go beyond the numbers. Youth without Future first came together in 2011 to make their plight visible as youth "without a home, without a job" but mostly importantly they wanted to be seen as "without fear". We cannot afford to not listen to what those claims mean. We need to analyze what is happening for women and youth not through the eyes of mainstream analysis but use these experiences to rethink mainstream narratives themselves. Instead of telling the crisis through the eyes of the privileged we need to bring in the realities that contest/ oppose that privilege.

We see this paper as contributing to bringing the experience and understandings of women and youth in southern Europe to the centre of the analysis of the economic crisis in Europe.

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