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A BREAK?

ELENA LOIZIDOU

School of Law

Birkbeck, University of London

Malet Street

London WC1E 7HX, UK

Email: e.loizidou@bbk.ac.uk

ABSTRACT. Since the financial crisis of 2008 we have seen a rise in suicides across the world. Greece for example in 2011 saw a sustained increase in suicides of 35.7%. In this article I draw our attention to well-publicized suicides that took place in Greece. I focus on the suicide notes left behind. The suicide notes, I suggest, can be read as offering us a critique of the anxious times in which we find ourselves. They are offering us a critique in two senses: (a) a critique of the way we are being governed (through austerity memorandums and a neoliberal logic); and (b) a critique of the affirmative ways of responding towards the financial crisis (through occupations, demonstrations etc.). Consequently these suicide notes can be read as a demand for having a break from this neoliberal logic and organization of life and asking us to re-imagine our social and political realm. In arguing thus, the article draws on Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Wendy Brown and others.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety, austerity suicides, critique, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Wendy Brown.

When freedom comes into contact with inclosing reserve, it becomes anxious.

(Kierkegaard 1980, p. 124)

Anxiety is the reaction to danger.

(Freud 2001, p. 150)

Although it appears that the new age of anxiety is linked primarily to the danger of terrorist attacks and new illnesses, we should not forget that anxiety arises from the changed perception the subject has of him- or herself as well from changes to their position in society at large.

(Salecl 2004, p.3)

INTRODUCTION

In times of uncertainty we notice a rise in the expression of intense emotions (anger, fear, depression, anxiety) and actions (demonstrations, occupations, wars, suicide, suicide attacks). Indeed, since the financial crisis of 2008 we have witnessed globally an intensification of emotions and actions. *Occupy Wall Street* (17 September 2011) and the *Indignados* movements in Spain (15 May 2011) and Greece (25 May 2011) are examples of this insurrection of feelings and actions. Such responses have not just being interpreted as instances of explosive feelings and actions but have also been described as *political* reactions to the economic crisis (Mason 2012; Taylor and Gessen 2012; Badiou 2012; Douzinas 2013; Caygill 2013). People around the globe, indignant with the devastation

(e.g., homelessness, loss of jobs, reductions in pensions, increase in private debt¹) that the financial sector crisis unleashed, instead of retreating and accepting the effects came together and challenged the political/economic status quo that enabled this financial crisis. The coming together, for example, of people at Zuccotti Park (*Occupy Wall Street*, USA), Puerta de Sol, (*Indignatos*, Spain) and Syntagma Square (*Indignatios*, Greece) to deliberate on common concerns and lines of action as well as make counter-political demands, comes very close to what we know from Arendt to be politics. Recall that Arendt defined politics as the getting together of people, diverse groups and individuals to interact, contest and create a common world (Arendt 1998). One of the reactions to the economic crisis, we can say, was a reaction that galvanized alternative types of politics: politics of resistance, solidarity and of the people.

Another way of understanding these reactions is as a reaction to a time of anxiety. As Salecl (2004) pointed out, financial crises (such as that of the Great Depression in the 1930s) gave rise to such extreme anxiety and stress that it led popular discourse to describe them as times of anxiety (Salecl 2004, pp. 1-15). Taking this perspective as our guide we can retrospectively describe the financial crisis of 2008 as a time of anxiety. Indeed during this period we have witnessed not only the affirmative political actions that I have described above but we have also seen a rise in less affirmative action such as that of suicide. As we know ‘anxiety is [our] reaction to danger’ (Freud 2001, p. 50). Freud suggested that there are two types of anxiety: a *primary* anxiety whereby ‘anxiety appears as a reaction to the felt loss of the [love] object’ (Freud 2001, p. 138) and the ego feels

¹ Graeber (2014) suggests that private debt has brought together students and adult citizens at the *Occupy Wall Street* movement.

overwhelmed and unable to manage such a loss (Freud 2001, pp. 128-129); and a *signal* anxiety whereby the subject is alerted to the possibility of such a traumatic experience emerging (Freud 2001, pp. 134-137). The ego will attempt to manage the anxiety-released situations by either ‘avoid[ing] that situation or ...withdraw[ing] from it’ (Freud 2001, pp. 128-129). What is being felt whenever primary or signal anxiety is triggered is that the ego is either dissolving or is about to do so (Freud 2001, pp. 139-140). Whenever the ego is unable to *manage* the traumatic situation *or* the anticipated traumatic situation then anxiety ensues. If we follow Freud’s guide to anxiety, and Salecl’s proposal that times of extreme financial distress such as our’s can be called times of anxiety, we can see that the *Occupiers* and *Indignatos* managed this anxious and stressful period. They defied the fear and isolation that the 2008 financial crisis produced (homelessness, dispossession, debt) by reacting to it collectively and with solidarity: providing food and medical care; holding prominent activities in Syntagma square; making counter political demands;² and forming alliances. They were able to *find* in *collective* action and *solidarity* a defence mechanism with which to manage the anxious times that the latest financial crisis has unleashed. We can even say that they countered the individualist ethos of neoliberalism (Foucault 2004; Brown 2015) through neoliberalism’s nemesis: collective ethos and subjectivity (Dean 2016).

However, as stated, when anxiety cannot be managed or, put otherwise, when the fear of dissolution becomes so overwhelming, the subject may experience a panic attack. Whilst the *Occupiers* and *Indignatos* were able to manage these anxious times, there were

² The *Indignatos* in Syntagma Square have supported and enabled to a great extent Syriza (coalition of Radical Left) to be elected into power in Greece on 21 September 2015.

citizens that despite the collective political action and solidarity that surrounded them and despite their participation in it, were unable to handle these traumatic times. Their response to the financial crisis was that of suicide. And as statistics show in Europe (as elsewhere), there has been a steep rise in suicides³ since 2008. I am by no means suggesting that everyone that has committed suicide since 2008 was suffering from anxiety. It would be both stupid and presumptuous of me to infer such a thing from their deaths as I know nothing about their personal stories, nor anything about their medical histories. Even if I did have such information at hand I would not be able to say whether they were suffering from anxiety or not as I am neither a physician nor a psychoanalyst. What I merely want to bring to the fore in this article is that while we may have witnessed actions that managed in affirmative ways the anxious times of the financial crisis, we have also witnessed actions such as suicide. Suicide letters left behind make

³ See for example, Povole and Carvajal (2012); Kentikelenis, Karanikolos and Papanicolas (2011); Allen (2014); Branias et al. (2015). Povole and Carvajal track in their article the steep rise in suicides in the whole of Europe and correlate this to austerity measures. The other three articles focus on suicides in Greece. The most up-to-date extensive research, that of Branias et al, looked into the periods between January 1983 and 31 December 2012. The study observed that in those 30 years there have been ' [a] total of 11,505 suicides, 9,079 by men and 2,426 by women.' (Branias 2015, p. 1) Their analysis indicates that in 2011 there were 'sustained increases in total suicides (+35.7%, $p < 0.001$) and male suicides (+18.5%, $p < 0.01$). Sensitivity analyses that figured in undercounting of suicides also found a significant, abrupt and sustained increase in June 2011 (+20.5%, $p < 0.001$). Suicides by men in Greece also underwent a significant, abrupt and sustained increase in October 2008 when the Greek recession began (+13.1%, $p < 0.01$), and an abrupt but temporary increase in April 2012 following a public suicide committed in response to austerity conditions (+29.7%, $p < 0.05$). Suicides by women in Greece also underwent an abrupt and sustained increase in May 2011 following austerity-related events (+35.8%, $p < 0.05$)' (Branias 2015, p. 1).

explicit reference to either the financial crisis or the austerity measures and show how they are inextricably linked to these anxious and distressful times⁴. In this article by drawing upon these suicides and suicide notes I simply want to keep fresh in our memories that the financial crisis did not merely produce actions that managed the anxious times but also produced actions that clearly demonstrate an inability on behalf of some subjects to handle these anxious times. The suicide notes that I draw from in this article tell a different story about these anxious times and what type of actions they may require. As I argue, they offer a *critique* of the politico-economic *status quo* finance economics and Troika in relation to Europe (International Monetary Bank, European Central Bank and European Commission) as well as a *critique* of the political collective responses of *the Indignados* and *Occupiers*. I argue here that the suicide notes left behind by three Greek men⁵ that committed suicide at the beginning of the ongoing austerity⁶

⁴ Davis (2015) an American anthropologist with specialization in Greece, suggests that in relation to the Greek suicides we should be careful not to read these acts as political acts as the Greek mass media and generally the Greek public has portrayed them, but instead to understand them from a macro-historical perspective as ways in which Greeks react to adverse conditions, such as poverty. Nevertheless by suggesting that we can see suicide as a reaction to anxious times I am not necessarily saying that these suicides were political acts. I am only suggesting that that they were a response to adverse conditions of life that happened to be at least accentuated by the economic crisis. In this sense I am not in disagreement with Davis.

⁵ Allen (2014) in *The Guardian* has informed us of Antonakakis and Collins' research that reveals that most of the suicides since the economic crisis in Greece have been men.

⁶ Austerity here refers to the economic measures that European countries such a Greece had to take (i.e., reduction of public spending-pensions, investing in public work etc) in order to reduce their deficit. These austerity measures were forced upon European nations that were hit by the global economic crisis of 2008.

regime in Greece, can be viewed as records of *critique* that enable us to see the *limits* and *alternatives* to our contemporary social and political situations. It is to this task that I turn my attention below. At first I proceed to show how the suicide note or letter is a bearer of critique before I turn to the three specific suicide notes that I have chosen to focus on here.

SUICIDE NOTES AND CRITIQUE

Suicide notes, Simon Critchley writes in *Notes on Suicide* (2015) ‘[are] a form of display, the symptom of a deliberate exhibitionism...We are allowed to become voyeurs into a hidden or forbidden state of mind and the notes exercise a kind of sick attraction.’ (Critchley 2015, p. 45) but voyeurism is not prohibited in this instance because by looking at these suicide notes ‘[w]e might learn something’ (Critchley 2015, p. 45). I would like nevertheless to suggest that there is an alternative way of understanding the suicide note: the suicide note can be read not as a ‘...display[,]... a deliberate exhibitionism’ but instead as a *scream* that calls upon us to decipher it. The suicide note is a type of writing that presents to us a scream that we are required to attempt to decipher. Indeed if Heidegger is correct that for Nietzsche the *scream* fills in what cannot be described (Heidegger 2004, p. 49) then I want to suggest here that indeed there is something indescribable in the suicide note that demands from us some form of interpretation. Writing that attends or strives to describe the present is engaged with an impossible task. The present, despite what such writings claim, is un-representable. Such writings, Heidegger claims, are nothing but chattering (Heidegger 2004, p. 49). Of the present instead he writes, ‘its nature is indescribable, ...it lends itself to being thought

about only in a thinking that is a kind of appeal, a call – and therefore must at times become a scream’ (Heidegger 2004, p. 49). Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is akin to such a scream (Heidegger 2004, p. 49), as it does not describe or give a prognosis of the world but rather poetically provides us with a story about a world that can be accessed through the *senses*; literally through the low or high sound that it will be making and can be felt by the social body. Therefore the scream, we can say following Heidegger, is ‘a call’ (Heidegger 2004, p. 49); a call that demands an attentive pair of ears to listen to the nuances that its sounds evoke.⁷

The suicide note can additionally be seen or can be understood as a practice of *critique*. The suicide note represents a certain critical attitude. Critique or the critical attitude, Foucault writes, exposes us to ‘a certain way of thinking, speaking, acting, a certain relationship to what exists, what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others’ (Foucault 1997, p. 24). This critique or critical attitude that he proceeds to elaborate is also ‘an instrument, a means for a

⁷ Whilst the scream presents us with the limits of our reasoning this article provides us with the scream that is present in the suicide note as a critique of our socio-political conditions. This may somehow appear paradoxical, as if I am accounting to screams reason. This is not what I intend but I can see how this can be seen. In order to avoid this presumption it will be useful if the following two things were taken into consideration: (a) that if *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a scream then the suicide note is the scream. And as we have attempted since *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to try and understand it or sense it – despite its indecipherability – we will be trying to understand or sense the message in suicide notes, without ever settling with one reason or understanding. And (b) the suicide note as a scream is read parallel to the idea of critique. If critique brings to the surface the limits of what we know, then the use of scream in relation to critique attempts to alert us to the need to accept that we cannot assume that we know how to respond to the demands of our world, especially when in turmoil.

future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be, it oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate' (Foucault 1997, p. 25). Consequently, the suicide note may be seen as *screaming* a certain truth to the social environment (the Greece of austerity in this case) that prompted its author to take its life. We can even say that the authors of suicide notes are able to 'oversee', as Foucault says, the society that they want to see changing, but perhaps find themselves in an impossible position in which to transform it. The suicide note is precisely alerting us to the two interlinked ways in which *critique* makes itself manifest, as Foucault shows in his essay 'What is Critique?' (1997). Firstly, as disobedience. The suicide note may be screaming out 'we do not want to be governed...*like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them' (Foucault 1997, p. 28). And secondly, exposing us to the limits of intelligibility or that not all things make sense (Butler 2004, p. 319); in other words 'questioning knowledge on its own limits or impasse' (Foucault 1997, p. 63).

How do we conclude therefore that the suicide note manifests these two interlinked ways of *critique*? If we turn to our starting point, to the discussion around anxiety, the connection between critique and suicide notes will become more transparent. Anxiety, the ego's response to danger can be managed as we have seen either through avoiding a particular phobic situation or withdrawing from it (Freud 2004, p. 128-129). Nevertheless, there are occasions where the subject that is living in anxious times may not be able to either withdraw from a phobic situation or avoid it. When such a situation arises we describe it as a situation where there was a failure in governing one's ego, managing one's ego. As I have already pointed out earlier, the *indignatos* and *occupiers*

were able to manage these anxious times through their actions. Again, as I have suggested earlier, the suicide may be seen as the subject that fails to manage anxious times. The suicide is either unable to avoid a phobic situation or withdraw from it. The suicide simply disintegrates. The suicide note, as remnant and record left of the lives of Christoulas, Metoikides and Pieris, the three suicides that I will turn to below, becomes also a scream that puts into *question* all attempts to *manage* anxious times. As we have seen above, one of the primary functions of the critical attitude is to put into question the very conditions that organize our lives, to reach to a truth that is beyond the one that is on offer. Whilst we can very easily say that the *Indignatos*' and the *Occupiers*' attitude towards these anxious times was a critical attitude, one that shouted to the status quo – 'we do not want to be governed...*like that ...*' (Foucault 1997, p. 28), the suicide note questions the critical attitude of these actions and consequently it questions the extent to which we can read or understand these political actions as critique. Suicides put into question the very claim that we can *manage* anxious times – whether the management of anxious times is through demonstrations or austerity measures. Recall that another aspect of critique is 'questioning knowledge on its own limits or impasse' (Foucault 1997, p. 63) and a suicide questions the very possibility of knowing how to manage anxious times by the sheer fact that the suicide could not manage these times. The suicide note makes this explicit, as we shall see. The suicide note as critique, through the vehicle of the question on the one hand, questions the possibility of being governed or managed at anxious times and, on the other, puts forward a demand What does then the *question* demand? We may obviously suggest that it demands an answer but I would like to suggest that what the *question* most obviously does is to *act* as a *break* from the demands of anxious times. The

question provides us with a breathing space whereby time is given to think and be. What the suicide notes are telling us, as you will see, is that no-matter how much we try to *manage* the financial crisis and anxious times through demonstrations or occupations (saying no to the form of governing that is offered) we will not radically undo the conditions that produced the devastation in the first place unless we have a complete break from the ways of ordinarily doing things, even from the ways in which we respond – through demonstrations – to the ways in which we are governed. What the suicide notes are telling us implicitly is that demonstrations and occupations may be precisely practices that we habitually turn to when we want to challenge the status quo but, nevertheless, these very practices are not necessarily critical precisely because they themselves have become *habitual*. They do not, in other words, ‘question’ their own methods of challenging the status quo but rather they present such methods as diametrically opposite to the ways in which they are being governed and which they desire to uproot. The suicide notes nevertheless lay no claim that, as subjects, they have knowledge as to how best they can be governed. As we shall see in the three notes that I will be presenting, there is instead a desire to have a break from the deteriorating conditions in which they found themselves. This break in these three cases came in the form of suicide. If the scream from these notes has something to teach us, I argue it is that a critical subject requires also putting into question the very methods of resistance or disobedience in which it engages.

SUICIDE NOTES

Even the terrible cry even the gunshot

Of that despairing suicide

even though it should have broken all windows...

It was not heard beyond the tiny Syntagma square

Because Order rules once again in Berlin. (Polenakis 2015, p. 177.)

Let us turn to the suicide notes left behind by Christoulas, Metoikides and Perris, recording the distress caused by the austerity measures. Firstly I will present you with these letters and then show how they challenge affirmative responses (*indignatos* and *occupiers*) to the financial crises and austerity measures and how they ultimately call for a break; that is, from taking a distance from responding as a way of saying ‘we do not want to be governed...*like that ...*’ (Foucault 1997, p. 28).

The first suicide note was left behind by Dimitris Christoulas, a 77 year old Greek ex-pharmacist and pensioner. Mr Christoulas committed suicide in Athens’ Syntagma Square on 4 April 2012. A handwritten letter explained his actions:

The Tsolakoglou government has annihilated all traces for my survival, which was based on a very dignified pension that I alone paid for 35 years with no help from the state. And since my advanced age does not allow me a way of dynamically reacting (although if a fellow Greek were to grab a Kalashnikov, I would be right behind him), I see no other solution than this dignified end to my life, so I don’t find myself fishing through garbage cans for my sustenance. I believe that young people with no future, will one day take up arms and hang the traitors of this country at Syntagma Square, just like the Italians did to Mussolini in 1945. (Karahalis 2012).

Christoulas’ suicide was well publicized, discussed in both the national and international (see Kitsantonis 2012; Margaroni 2012; Apostolou 2017) press, perhaps because the suicide took place in such a public space as Syntagma Square (Greece’s constitutional square) and the note was found on Christoulas at the scene of the suicide. I

found out about the Metoikides⁸ and Perris suicides from Elizabeth Davis' research (2015). It is from Davis that I mostly draw here in discussing their suicide notes.

Davis informs us that

on 21 April 2012, Savvas Metoikides a forty-four-year old teacher and active member of the Athens teacher's union, hanged himself in the shed behind his family's house in Stavroupoli, a village in northeastern Greece where he had been spending the Easter holiday. (2015, p. 1017)⁹

Metoikides left behind two suicide letters: 'One was addressed to his family and included instructions for how they may settle his debts' (Davis 2015) and '[t]he other the press described as a "manifesto" with "clear political content," in which he explained his suicide as "a protest act for the impact of the crisis on the Greek society"' (Davis 2015). The third well-publicized suicide (Kolesides 2012; Lambadariou 2012) is that of a sixty-year-old musician, Antonis Perris, who on 24 May 2012 jumped with his ninety-year-old mother to their death. The suicide note that he left behind explains what prompted him to his death:

My name is Antonis Perris. For twenty years now, I have been taking care of my ninety-year-old mother. In the last three-four years she had developed Alzheimer's, and lately she has also been having schizophrenic fits, and she has other health problems, and nursing homes don't accept such severely ill people. The problem is that I didn't have the foresight to save enough in my account, because the economic crisis hit so fast. Although I have some assets, and I'm selling whatever I can, I have run out of cash and we can no longer afford to eat, and my credit card is maxed out at a 22 percent interest rate [...] and other expenses are building up. I am living a life of a relentless drama. And now, lately, I have my own serious health

⁸ Metoikides' suicide was reported in mainly local activist web-cites such as in Athens Indymedia (<https://athens.indymedia.org/post/1394018/> accessed 15 April 2017).

⁹ Other sources include the Athens Indymedia report of Metoikides' active role in the anti-austerity struggles.

problems. I have no solution in front of me. Some assets but no money, and how to live without food? Maybe someone has an answer. Powerful of the earth, for the economic crisis you created, you should be hanged, and that's not all. (Kolesides 2012; Lambadariou 2012)

The suicide notes of Christoulas, Metoikides and Perris are explicit about why they have decided to take their lives. They blame the financial crisis and the austerity measures. They also confirm what a number of studies have shown, namely that austerity kills (Stuckler and Basu 2013). The economic effects of austerity coupled with the political decisions of the Troika (the Greek Government, the European Union and its institutions, along with the IMF), turned the lives of these Greeks into an unmanageable mayhem that in turn pushed them to their deaths. This has generally been the diagnosis of these suicides by journalists, economists and psychologists.¹⁰

Most writings about suicides during this financial crisis present these suicides as political acts (see, e.g., Kitsantonis 2012; Margaroni 2012; Apostolou 2017; Kolesides 2012; and Lambadariou 2012). Other writings, like that of Davis, provide us with a cultural account for these suicides. They draw on historical and comparative specificities of Greek suicide to conclude that these suicides can be best understood as cultural responses to adverse conditions and *not* as political acts. Davis identified that Greeks tend to respond to adverse conditions such as poverty or economic devastation in suicidal ways. She drew this conclusion by contrasting the current suicide epidemic with a study that she undertook in Thrace (an economically deprived area) in 2004 (a time of prosperity in Greece) where high rates of suicides were recorded. She noted that there is something specific about suicides in Greece that she names the 'sociality of suicide' –

¹⁰ Supra n.3. [Elena, is this right? Does it refer back to footnote 2?]

that is, suicide is a way of creating a 'social world' (Davis 2015, p. 1028). Put differently, her research in 2004 revealed that suicides in Thrace were a way in which families, neighbourhoods and their immediate community bonded; they were a way of living the in and outs of calamitous conditions. Overall her study 'make[s] visible a continuity rather than a radical shift in social conditions between Thrace before the crisis and the rest of the Greece since the crisis' (Davis 2015, p. 1028). Therefore, she warns us not to take at face value the ways in which suicide are publicized by the media in Greece, namely being described as the result of a world economic crisis and neoliberal politics. After all, as she explains, statistically there are more suicides per 100,000 of population in Germany (the most prosperous member of the European Union) than in Greece (Davis 2015, p. 1013). Instead she urges us to look at the very social conditions (poverty, deprivation, unemployment, hopelessness, etc.) that prompt Greeks to their voluntary deaths through the lens of history, and to understand them both as a way in which Greeks react to adversity as a social/cultural group but also a 'social force' (Davis 2015, p. 1028), as a way of creating sociality in adverse ongoing socio-economic conditions. Davis insists that her historico/comparative analysis does not paint a definitive picture on the rise of suicides in Greece but, rather, adds to existent discourses that mostly interpret these suicides as economic and political. Davis wisely prompts us to note that '[t]he study of suicide, as suffering in a more general sense, paradoxically presents unknowability as the end of knowledge. Rather than trying to fix the causality of suicide, we may learn more by heeding its indeterminacy and abiding the unknown' (Davis 2015, p. 1032).

Davis' analysis (2015, p. 1011) is heavily influenced by Émile Durkheim's classic study of suicide, *On Suicide* (2006). Durkheim provide us with the first serious study on

suicide whereby, instead of focusing on individual reasons regarding suicide, the existence of which he acknowledged (see Sennett 2006, pp. xv-xvi), he focuses on the social reasons that prompt someone to take their life. As such, he has come up with three categories of suicide: (a) egoistic, which is prompted by a lack of feeling of social belonging; (b) altruistic, where one sacrifices oneself for the preservation or good of a group; and (c) anomic suicide, where one resorts to suicide because one's life has been disrupted to such an extent that living becomes unbearable. The types of disruption that cause anomic suicides according to Durkheim are things such as financial crisis, divorces and bereavements (Durkheim 2006, pp. 262-303). The Durkheim and consequently Davis readings of suicide draw on the sociality of suicide – in other words, the social elements that may have pushed one to death. If we follow Durkheim we can say that the three suicides that I will be focusing on here are anomic suicides. The suicides took their life precisely because their lives had been disrupted by the financial crisis and austerity measures. It is also important to note that Durkheim observed that statistically the people (mostly men) that are more likely to commit suicide as a result of anomie will be middle-class men (Durkheim 2006, p. 282). Christoulas was a pharmacist, Metoikides was a teacher, and Perris a musician; all of three, we can say, occupied professions that can be considered middle-class professions. Although, having said this, what interests me here is not how we can categorise these suicides. I have already pointed out that these suicides are directly linked to the financial crisis and austerity and this is not an issue that I think needs further elaboration. What I aim to do here instead is to read the suicide notes as a critique to the socio-political realm and see through this critique the limits in ways in which we respond to our surrounding discontent. I draw inspiration for this from Franco

‘Bifo’ Berardi’s book *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (2015), where he suggests that we can understand the global epidemic of suicides as a *critique* of neoliberalism. My core focus, therefore, is to invite you to see the aforementioned suicides (via the remnant of the suicide notes) beyond etiological discourses, beyond accounts that exclude them from the realm of politics, or accounts that try to envelop them in their cultural specificity as Davis does and, instead, see them *as* offering a *critique* of the socio-political realm that surrounds them, as well as a critique of the ways in which we respond to crisis. This latter point is not part of Berardi’s reading of suicides. We can nevertheless call this socio-political realm, along with Berardi, a neoliberal terrain.

This point becomes apparent as we reflect once more on the actual notes. Let us take Christoulas’ suicide note first. If we turn back to the letter we notice that part of the letter engages with the political and economic causes. Christoulas, as you can read, is indignant with the Greek government which reduced him to a scavenger. He feels shame for his state of being as well as shame for the Greek government. His suicide note brings together the personal and the political, providing us with causes that prompted him to commit suicide. I am concerned here not with the reasons for Christoulas’ suicide but rather with how we can understand Christoulas’ suicide as a *critique* of the social and political status quo as well as a critique of the political actions that were resisting the status quo. In Christoulas’ suicide note the first part of the critique – critique of the form of government that surrounded him – is explicit: recall that he wishes for a radical transformation of the economic and political conditions to such an extent that he will follow anyone with a Kalashnikov, *imagining* that the only way out of the devastating effects of austerity measures is through an armed civil war, and envisioning the young

generation bringing about such a transformation. He ends his letter by saying that he hopes the present futureless young people of Greece may someday hang, in Athens' Syntagma Square, those traitors who brought about the country's demise. This appears to be the explicit political manifesto that Christoulas' suicide registers, a civil war that will bring a break from the past and a better future. The break from the past can be also be seen as being a break from the *unfriendliness* of the socio-political environment in which he and Greece found themselves. Giorgio Agamben (2015) reminds us that civil war was a method that the Greeks invented to demonstrate both the hostilities within a family and the reconciliation that a conflict can bring about (2015, p. 5). It is this hostility and unfriendliness that we can see explicitly identified in Christoulas' suicide letter; it is this *unfriendliness* that he presents to us and proposes that, for the creation of a better socio-political regime, an armed struggle is required. This call to arms I would suggest may be interpreted as being also a call for a *break* from the past, a *break* from the usual democratic way of doing things. It is precisely the call to arms that allows us to see that Christoulas' suicide also puts into question the Greek *Indignatos* actions. How do we come to this conclusion? By suggesting that only an armed struggle can change the socio-political terrain, he is implicitly rejecting the types of actions that existed at the time in Syntagma Square. He is implicitly suggesting that such actions are not capable of providing the break that is necessary for a different, friendly form of governing to take place.

We do not have much of Metoikides' suicide note. We do know, though, that Metoikides explicitly blamed the austerity regime as the reason for taking his life, and naming his act as a political act. Metoikides was a teacher and an activist and part of the

Indignatos at Syntagma Square. As we know, Metoikides explicitly expressed his disagreement with the way in which the government at the time was handling the financial crisis as well as his disagreement with the way in which the Troika was imposing its might on Greece. However, was he in disagreement with the *Indignatos*? Of course, there is nothing to indicate that he was opposed to the social and political actions undertaken by the *Indignatos* in Syntagma Square. His suicide through the failure to stay and *manage* the difficult, anxious times with others (he tried, as we know) can tacitly be interpreted as a critique of the very movement of which he was also part. He chose a break from life, the type of life that was every day burdened by the effects of the austerity measures, whether cuts in public pensions or income or demonstrations. What Metoikides' suicide is showing us is that he desired a break from the very social-political conditions that surrounded him.

Perris' suicide note testifies to an unfriendly harsh environment, where he could not find a sympathetic ear either in the guise of the government or a private individual to help him find a way out from his difficult situation. We can interpret his sentences ('I have no solution in front of me. Some assets but no money, and how to live without food? Maybe someone has an answer' (Davis 2015)) as a description of living in this desert of unfriendliness. Jumping to his death with his elderly mother as both a testament of being unable to manage these anxious times and a *critique* of neoliberalism. In his suicide note we get a clear picture of how neoliberalism coupled with a financial crisis affects the lives of those that have had their salaries cut, with jobs less and less available, struggling with illness and with no savings. Perris' suicide is a testament to and *critique*

of neoliberalism; and a desire to have a break from constantly responding to neoliberalism's dance.

NEOLIBERALISM AND NECRO-NEOLIBERALISM

In the small essay 'The Simplest of Pleasures', published on 1 April 1979 in *La Gai Peid*, Foucault reflected on suicide by referring to certain psychological studies that ally homosexuality with suicidal tendencies. The article was written in response to such psychological studies. Studies like these and the discourses that they produce, Foucault tells us, imply that homosexuals take their lives because they are unable to enjoy heterosexuality. In problematizing this discourse and the connections that late 1970s' psychological research made between homosexuality and suicide, Foucault encourages us (and not because he is an advocate of suicide), to read these acts as the only moment whereby one can escape from the oppressive governmentality of our western neo-liberal world:

I believe that we're witnessing in these times a 'suicide spiral' because many people are so depressed at the thought of all these nasty things that are forced on someone who's aspiring to suicide (things including the police, the ambulance, the elevator man, the autopsy and what not), that many prefer to commit suicide rather than continue to think about it all. (Foucault 1996, p. 296)

One chooses death over and above the thought of the totalising government of life. And thus we can read these suicides as acts of both self-annihilation and release; as moments akin, as he writes, to the pleasure of releasing oneself from all stereotypes – something that happens when, for instance, one has anonymous sex in Japanese love hotels.

It is the same sentiment that we witness in the suicide notes from Christoulas, Metoikides and Perris above. There is something unacceptable in continuing to live in a country that allows the neoliberal force to continue battering its citizens relentlessly. Metoikides wrote a prosaic note in December 2008 recording the violent effects of neoliberalism:

Violence is to be working for 40 years for ‘peanuts’ and wondering if you’ll ever retire. Violence is the bonds, stolen pension funds, the stock market scam. Violence is to be forced to get a home loan that you’ll ultimately pay it as if it was made of gold. Violence is the executive employer’s right to dismiss you at any time he wants. Violence is unemployment, precariousness, the 700 euro wage (now 300) with or without insurance. Violence is all work ‘accidents’ because the bosses limit costs of workers safety. Violence is taking psychiatric drugs and vitamins to meet the exhaustive hours. Violence is being an immigrant, living in fear that you’ll be kicked at any time out of the country and experiencing a constant insecurity. Violence is being simultaneously employed, housewife and mother. Violence is the bosses tapping your ass at work and telling you ‘C’mon smile, what are we asking?’¹¹

It is this sense of having done with neoliberal governmentality and its effects – the unbearable thought of not being able to fetch for oneself in a dignified way (searching in bins for sustenance (Christoulas)), having no money for medication, working exhausting hours and having no break from all these demands – that neoliberalism or the anxious times have imposed; making somebody prefer death to life, to take a break from life, to break with life.

These suicides and the notes left behind reveal to us that suicide stands in as an account of the political stake of this financial crisis, entrusts us with an outlook that hopes

¹¹ Handwritten note of Savvas Metoikides (22 April 2012) quoted by Athens Indymedia article ‘Another political assassination in Greece’ <https://athens.indymedia.org/post/1394124/> (Accessed 10 April 2017).

to *exit* from a politics that destroys and corrodes any life that is considered not to be profitable as human capital for neoliberalism (Brown 2015, p. 29). Wendy Brown in *Undoing the Demos* (2015) provides us with an excellent and depressing account of how neoliberalism operates. She ‘concei[ves] neoliberalism as an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life’. (2015, p. 30) We are currently witnessing an ascendancy of neoliberalism, as she argues in *Undoing the Demos* (2015), that has even been absorbed into its political institutions such as that of democracy. Our challenge, as she argues, is to take back such institutions. In reviewing Brown’s *Undoing the Demos* (2015) and Lazzarato’s *Governing by Debt* (2015) Peter Gratton suggests that neoliberalism may not have captured every part of life as Brown and Lazzarato diagnose but, rather, it may be one amongst many rationalities that operate in our contemporary world: ‘Like the architecture of our cities, there are different “times” of economy at work in and alongside others. Ancient barter systems still exist even as neoliberalism, as an ideology, is ascendant’ (Gratton 2015). I propose that we can see these suicides as being both the effect of neoliberalism and also *critiquing* neoliberalism, demanding a break from it so that we could be able to recuperate or re-invent institutions that have been lost or are on the verge of being lost completely to the neoliberal logic, such as that of democracy. Wendy Brown suggests that we need to reclaim democracy from neoliberalism by curbing the accelerating grab that neoliberalism has made for democracy and democratic institutions. In other words, she is suggesting that our political sphere needs to imagine anew the meaning of democracy. Christoulas, Metoikedis and Perris, as we have seen, have

explicitly pointed to the devastating ways in which the financial crisis, along with a neoliberal fiscal policy, have destroyed the country, and have explicitly paid for this with their own lives. We have seen that their choice of taking a break from life is also a tacit critique of the *Indignatos* in Syntagma Square, suggesting that such actions could be seen as being equally co-opted by a neoliberal rationality. Their deaths and their letters left behind demand from us a reconsideration of how we can have a better social and political life away from the clutches of neoliberalism. It may be difficult to imagine how we can have such a life but the sheer decision of choosing death puts into the frame of imagination the idea of a break: having a break from the demands to continually respond (whether through demonstrations, occupations and solidarity action), that neoliberalism seems to be constantly demanding from everyone, most harshly from those that find themselves in austerity-stricken countries. For the three suicides this break was a break of no return, a break where the possibility of imagining a different life was not going to be possible. Nevertheless, we as ‘witnesses’ to these suicides may understand their scream for a break as a soft ‘directive’; directing us away from the types of responses and engagements that we have seen during the financial crisis and, as I suggested, from feeding the neoliberal monster and, thus, to stop living in *opposition*. Only if we free ourselves from this oppositional and dialectical logic will we be able to re-imagine different modes of living. The break that the suicide brings to the fore calls for a radical break from our contemporary way of being and acting in the world. But we should not necessarily see this as an easy way out – a brief vacation from this neoliberal life. The break that they seem to be calling for is a complete break from the usual ways of doing things or imagining our political institutions. Recall that Christoulas wishes for the

amelioration of the status quo and, equally, Perris is asking us to think of the transformation of property relations so people will not find themselves in a situation of having assets (i.e., houses, apartments, land) but still be unable to eat or buy medication. This is a very different call that they are making from the one that Brown is stating in *Undoing the Demos*. Both the suicides and Brown offer a similar diagnosis of neoliberalism but their similarities stop there. Brown is calling for the rescuing of democracy from the hands of neoliberalism. She is not suggesting that we should have a break from democracy per se; she is not making an explicit call to the radical amelioration of political institutions but just to their resuscitation. The suicide letters are pointing to the complacency and co-optation of democratic movements such as the anti-austerity movements to neoliberalism, and asking us to take a break to rethink and reimagine the ways in which we want to be governed, and to different ways or institutions that would put an end to neoliberalism.

Moreover, within our critical tradition, we have been asked to think and rethink critique. Judith Butler has asked us, in her essay ‘What is Critique?’ (2004), ‘to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, what Williams referred to as our “uncritical habits of mind” and what Adorno described as ideology’ (Butler 2004, p. 307). Butler encourages us to consider Foucault's proposition of critique as an un-doing of our habitual ways of thinking. Critique as we have seen is presented as a practice that questions the very processes of thinking; the norms that both govern us and form us, as well as the very ideas that guide our political trajectory. Critique, or more precisely the question or questions (which may either be uttered in words or executed through gestures or actions) that we pose at moments of

stagnation, or economic, social, relational crisis, may, as suggested by both Foucault and Butler, indicate the limits of our ability to know, to provide answers. If we are indeed to take seriously the howls and screams of Christoulas, Metoikides, Perris and all the other austerity suicides, we need to take a break; to stop responding to the calls of neoliberalism so we can begin reimagining the type of polity in which we may want to live. Brown asks us to rescue democracy from neoliberalism. The suicides ask us to reimagine our polity anew. If we are to reimagine our polity anew we may indeed have to have a break from responding knowingly to the political demands of our times. We need to stay for a while with the scream of the question that these suicides are posing for us: ‘How do we take a break from living in opposition? How do we begin reimagining the world anew?’

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