

## **The desire for disinheritance in austerity Greece**

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**Abstract:** Associated with notions of family continuity, lineage, national belonging, and cultural roots, in Greece property inheritance was once highly desired. Yet, in recent years, there has been a rising trend of people wanting to be disinherited because of the economic burden of new taxes introduced as part of the international austerity program and the need to focus all resources on the short-term future of the immediate family. The desire for disinheritance amounts to a longing for disconnectedness, for exiting not only political structures but also kinship structures that have been historically closely linked with a Greek sense of self as particular political subjects. A focus on inheritance demonstrates how the political can be located in the mundane and the everyday.

**Keywords:** austerity, belonging, dispossession, Greece, inheritance

### **Vignette: The problem with property**

Eleni's grandmother owned a house on a small island close to Athens that was inherited by Eleni's father, who subsequently added a small extension to the original building and passed it on to his five children. Now in their twenties and living in Athens, Eleni and her siblings oversee the maintenance of the second home. Although the island is only a few kilometers from the capital, there is no drinkable water. The corrosive nature of filtered sea water means that kitchen appliances and pipes rust extremely quickly. It is rumored that the local mayor has struck a deal with bottled water companies and is therefore reluctant to build a facility to pipe water from Athens. Eleni: "We waste tons of money maintaining rusty machines. Recently, the dishwasher stopped working and the bath tap needed replacing because of the salt. And we buy endless amounts of bottled water. There are extra problems caused by

humidity that eats away at the surfaces. And then there are the crippling extra property taxes introduced over the last few years.” As austerity ravishes every aspect of life, the inherited home has become a financial and psychological drain.

The irony, Eleni notes, is that by signing over the property, her father wanted to create social and economic security for his children “but managed to achieve the exact opposite.” The idea of “putting in order [*taktopoiisi*] the kids,” Eleni says, “is something really important in Greek families. . . . Postwar generations had the need to safeguard the future of their kids, but it’s such a huge burden now for the younger generations. . . . Now we run and can’t keep up [*trexoume kai de ftanoume*] with the costs.” She is passionate in her belief that “bricks and mortar (or, in her case, cement and wood) represent kinship and our roots [*rizes*] in Greece, but now an inherited home is something that weighs you down, it is a stress, a burden, not desirable.”

The idea of providing social and economic security for children is prominent in stories of property inheritance, as is the need to maintain a link to family history and roots in the nation. Even Greek migrants to northern Europe over the past 30 years usually retain or even build a new house in Greece to preserve connections to their “roots,” returning for Christmas and summer holidays. *Taktopoiisi* is now a double-edged sword, providing children with a home comes with added responsibility and financial outlay. The same may be said when a property is inherited upon the death of a relative. Among my research participants in western Thessaly, central Greece, over the past three years, there has been a growing desire to be disinherited, a disconnection from family history, from roots, and from nation.

### **Setting the scene: Finding the political in the mundane**

Europe is in an era of social, political, and economic upheaval, a period brimming with

promises of dramatic change and revolutionary futures (utopian and dystopian), filled with hope, speculation, anxiety, and apathy. The economic crisis of 2008, the resurfacing of Cold War tensions on the Eastern frontier, frequent terrorist attacks, political extremism and the rise of the far right, and real and potential “Bre/Gre/Frexits” have prompted a surge in highly politicized scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Recently, anthropologists working in the crisis-stricken “not quite Europe,” as Dace Dzenovska and Nicholas De Genova (this issue) term it, have passionately drawn our attention to solidarity movements (see esp. Cabot and Rakopoulos 2016), indignation and protest (Theodossopoulos 2013, 2014), and activism championing the political left (Dalakoglou 2012; Graeber 2013). In the course of long-term, fine-grained ethnographic fieldwork with people from diverse social backgrounds, there will undoubtedly be occasions when respondents’ opinions or actions do not sit comfortably with the researcher or when one may find an apparent void where political action perhaps ought to be located. For instance, since the 2009–2010 economic crisis broke out in Greece, I have regularly encountered informants who have come to accept the need to accommodate new living standards rather than resist change, people who state a desire to “disconnect” and “disassociate” from the extended family and state, and some who fear the post-crisis future, expressing feelings of comfort with their present situation in a manner that may be described as a type of Stockholm syndrome.

The details of seemingly mundane activities are often multifaceted, not solely located in hope, resistance, and positive action toward the future or, conversely, in apathy, exhaustion, and resignation. This is not to suggest that the study of protest and highly visible explosions of moral indignation is not important, but rather to say that one must look into every nook and cranny to understand how people on the margins of Europe but at the center of crisis imagine their futures and perform the political. Oft-overlooked aspects of everyday life can be pertinently political. For example, in a striking case that resonates with this article,

Dzenovska (this issue) demonstrates how not migrating but staying put and fighting to maintain life as a little bit more of the present can be more “political” than migration or protest. The choice to remain does not seem radical but is actually a highly politicized decision.

In the introduction to this special section, Dzenovska and De Genova argue that to truly capture the political, one must look at disruptions of an established order but not always disruptions that one might expect or wish. To this end, they suggest, it is sometimes useful to “establish critical distance from anthropology’s own project of critique, if only to understand the limits and possibilities of current forms of scholarly and political engagement.” Our informants do not always desire the political as understood by critical scholars, but rather employ coping strategies and livelihood diversification techniques and make seemingly paradoxical decisions that showcase their political agency. Hope, Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen (2016: 388) argue, is not always positive: “combinations of uncertainty, anticipation and aspirations . . . generate specific degrees, forms and intensities of hope, whereby it makes little sense to use ‘hope’ as a blanket feel-good word in the way that it often seems to appear in the contemporary moment.” Across the “not quite Europe” in crisis, one might safely say that hope is a symbol of the grave situation (people cling to fragments of hope in desperate situations) rather than a positive vision of the future, perhaps symptomatic of the fact that “the crisis”—the initial event, the rupture—has become chronic, static, with people feeling trapped within a time loop of the present where preventing further decline is a genuine desire (Knight 2016).

In this article, transformations in inheritance practices—a topic at the very core of Greek cultural and temporal landscapes—are where people critique long-established connections—between property ownership, familial roots, national sentiment, and belonging. Triggered by rapidly increasing taxes on immovable property that most people perceive as

unjust, undemocratic, and going against the social contract, the desire for disinheritance demonstrated by the vast majority of my research participants—something that could be termed a collective “movement” toward alternative relatedness—is a topic that does not necessarily sit well with the left-leaning ideologies of many researchers but offers a poignant insight into collective perceptions of Europeanism, modernity, and progress, raising questions of belonging, temporal trajectory, and imaginations of the future. The desire for disinheritance is a desire for disconnection. A mixture of anger and apathy toward successive governments has led people to express the need to disconnect from institutionalized politics, becoming disillusioned not only with individual actors and political parties from across the spectrum but also with the whole idea of “the nation” as a family unit comprising brothers with shared interests, goals, and a sense of responsibility toward social reproduction. As one informant put it, “Greeks no longer have each other’s backs. The trust in the nation of people with ethical obligations toward each other is gone. Now one must look after oneself.” Much classic Greek ethnography has engaged with how national identity informs mundane relatedness, especially the link between family and ethnos (Campbell 1964; Cowan 1990; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991, to name but a few). Owning a piece of inherited land, a house, or a family property in the countryside was once an integral part of belonging to the wider Greek collective; disconnection from the land, from family and village history, means estrangement from the nation.

On a wider scale, the desire for disconnection also relates to ambiguous feelings toward belonging in a modern neoliberal Europe (in terms of both space and time) (see Knight 2017), as recently documented by scholars of solidarity movements (Rakopoulos 2016). The desire to be disinherited offers a different angle on initiatives across the country to participate in other forms of sociality that exceed established ideas of relatedness. During the austerity years, much has been written on collective uses of land, the appropriation and

re-use of public and private property, health clinics, and resource-sharing projects (see, e.g., Cabot 2016; Papataxiarchis 2016; Rakopoulos 2014). Since the desire for disinheritance is an emerging field, the alternative forms of connectedness my informants seek are still rising to the fore. They are not engaged with solidarity movements as usually defined, but rather report similar feelings of disillusion with the current political status quo in Greece and Europe.

Spatially, temporally, and ideologically, my Greek informants feel increasingly detached from the European politico-economic machine and have started to actively cultivate this disconnection. This perception is only made stronger by the intense Greek media coverage of “the crisis,” which tends not to place the nation’s economic collapse in the context of global recession, market crashes, and resultant job losses, price hikes, and social unrest. Taking disenchantment into the private domain, there has also been a significant breakdown of once prominent extended family support networks. More than ever before, the immediate needs of the nuclear family have become the priority for financial and emotional protection, hence the increasing desire to disconnect from histories and futures inherited in the form of ancestral property, now seen as a millstone around the neck of both day-to-day survival in the present and the delicate crafting of future prosperity. It is to the desire to disconnect from the highly significant and culturally loaded practice of inheritance to which I will now turn.

### **The “Greek crisis” and emergent disconnectedness**

The so-called Greek economic crisis, which cannot be discussed separately from the history of European political and financial integration since World War II, has transformed how my informants perceive their futures, leading to feelings of detachment from once vital aspects of history and culture. Inheritance (*klironomia*) is overtly linked to imaginations of the future

and historical and political belonging in the family and nation, and is a site where the grassroots impact of international tutelage and financial restructuring become strikingly apparent—a prism through which to look at global involvement in mundane affairs (cf. Loftsdóttir 2014: 162). In Greece, immovable assets were once highly desired and inheritance of property was at the center of much sibling rivalry, but this has recently changed owing to increasing taxes on immovable property, the need to repay outstanding debts attached to property of deceased ancestors, an abundance of unlawfully built structures that require costly and time-consuming legalization, the lack of financial resources for property maintenance, and the feeling that the nuclear family must be of primary financial and emotional concern. Even during the Ottoman era, when central Greece was divided into landed estates where locals worked as peasant sharecroppers, the family home was outside the domain of the landlord, being passed down from father to son. The change in attitude toward inheritance is noteworthy, as property has formed such a significant aspect of social and political belonging since independence. Property has long been the marker of family continuity, lineage, ethnos, nation, honor and status, morality, and the sweat and blood of generations of ancestors, and central to the provision of a dowry (see Couroucli 1994; Sant Cassia and Bada 1992). National sentiment is often expressed in terms of social relations: family, blood, kinship, ancestry, fatherland, motherland, and patriline are the social categories that conglomerate in the individual as a set of duties and obligations toward other citizens (Campbell 1964; Herzfeld 1992: 100–101; Loizos and Papataxiarchis 1991). In most cases, “being Greek”—with the associated sense of duty to wider collectivities of family, neighborhood, and nation—is distinctly related to owning a home that has been passed down through the family. Images of the family—in our case, inheritance of familial property—are commonly linked to belonging in history, in place, and in nation, what Michael Herzfeld (1992: 101) terms a “simulacrum of sociality.”

One currently unemployed friend in his mid-twenties whose father provided him a house for his eighteenth birthday in 2007 laments the amount of tax he has to pay on his property: “On the one hand, I am grateful to my father and what I call ‘the Greek system.’ I will never have a mortgage or have to worry about buying a place. But I just can’t afford to maintain it and I am tied to this provincial town. I have no mobility and the anxiety from the mounting debts is killing me.” He says that once upon a time, pre\_crisis, financial problems could be overcome by taking out extra bank loans, and bureaucratic issues solved by calling in “favours from friends or paying someone off under the table.” But nowadays, “neither system works . . . civil servants are afraid to take bribes or do you favours in case they are caught and fired, and you can no longer get access to money in what you might call the ‘capitalist system.’” He is disillusioned with the European political quagmire that has left him in a once unimaginable situation: “I am a Greek man who does not want to inherit his father’s property, the property of my ancestors, a piece of my country . . . let them all be damned.”

While acts of civil disobedience or protest—including migration out of the European South and political uprisings (Kurtović, this issue)—have been highly publicized, everyday activities that constitute the political are easily overlooked. Inheritance in Greece is a site of politics where the consequences of neocolonial debt relief policies provided by international creditors are realized. One result of the ongoing political tutelage and economic waterboarding is that people wish to break away from the long-standing inheritance system, to disconnect themselves from what, until now, has been an extremely important aspect of what it is to be a Greek political subject.

### **The case of Antonia and Giannis**

“I hadn’t seen my father in 25 years,” Antonia tells me one Sunday morning in early 2016, nine months after her father passed away from a heart attack. She and her younger brother,



Giannis, had become estranged from their father after their parents went through a messy divorce in the 1980s. They learned from an aunt that he had been hospitalized but decided not to visit him and not to attend his funeral. Nine months later, Giannis received an unexpected telephone call from the same aunt. Antonia: “She said to Giannis, ‘Why have you not accepted your inheritance? The debts on the electricity bills are rising. What are you planning to do—pay the bills, disconnect the electricity, look after the property?’” Giannis was dumbstruck. He continues the story: “I just said, ‘What? Nobody informed us that we had inherited.’ I just felt my heart sink, that is the last thing that I need; to pay my father’s debts and take on his property. What the hell?” Antonia chimes in: “How were we to know that he would leave everything to us? Four plots of land and a substantial house, some parts of which are still in need of legalization. Is it a gift or a curse? Did he do it deliberately to get revenge, was it an act of reconciliation, or was he just lazy about getting his will in order?” When I meet them in the yard of their house on the outskirts of Trikala, Antonia and Giannis have only just learned of their inheritance and tell me that they had planned to reject it. “It is not ethical to accept the inheritance,” they both insist. “We don’t want anything from him, but legally we are screwed because so much time has lapsed since his death. But more than that, it is a huge financial burden that we just cannot take.” They say that there is a collective movement in Greece to try to “get out” of inheriting family property.

Greek inheritance law allows four months for the next of kin to reject the legacy before they are legally bound to accept. “The inland revenue will fuck me,” Giannis insists with an air of desperation. Antonia, who lives overseas, is legally entitled to reject her share of the inheritance for up to 12 months after the death, but she feels it necessary to show solidarity with her brother, who is a self-employed electrician earning a paltry and irregular wage. With a wife and two children under the age of 10, sometimes Giannis earns as little as one hundred euros a month, having to borrow money from his mother and extended family.

“He [Giannis] is on such a low wage; he cannot afford to pay all the taxes on the new property, as well as all the debt that our father has accumulated, including 1,800 euros of outstanding tax and 1,500 euros on electricity bills.” The siblings are on an emotional roller-coaster, not wanting to go near the house that holds such painful childhood memories yet being legally obliged to get the paperwork in order. The desire to disinherit is based on the current poor economic circumstances of many households, disillusionment with belonging to the nation and the extended family, and the inability to imagine futures of prosperity and plenty. Giannis laments: “We no longer feel the passion to own a piece of Greece. A piece of land or a house that once meant so much is now just a target for aggressive foreign taxation and a way for our own government to raise funds while not taking any cuts in their own lives.” For Giannis, the nation, being a Greek among others, is not as important as it once was. Detaching oneself from the land that ancestors worked, Antonia adds, is painful, but it is the new social reality for anybody who wants to survive the crisis and look to the future without the unnecessary burden imposed by “other people’s” property, even if this means rejecting the inheritance left by a deceased parent. Nodding in agreement, Giannis says that although “sweat and tears have gone into building the house or cultivating the land, now it is a curse and something that I, and many other people in Greece, cannot afford to incorporate into my life as a part of my future.”

Since the breakup of the Ottoman-era landed estates (*tsiflikia*) after the independence of Thessaly in 1881, land has been the marker of political subjectivity, familial status, and financial capacity (locals often lament the four hundred years of “slavery” under the Ottoman Empire without private property). *Tsiflikia* were originally land grants made by Ottoman sultans to Muslim settlers in Turkish-occupied lands, varying in size from 6 to 15 hectares. At the end of the seventeenth century, *tsiflikia* became part of much larger estates where the landlord held rights over entire villages whose inhabitants became his tenants. After the

annexation of Thessaly to Greece, the *tsiflikia* were purchased by Greek entrepreneurs of the diaspora, the majority of whom originated from the Ionian Islands and northern Epirus, and living conditions for the tenants drastically deteriorated (see Knight 2015: 43). The change in ownership coupled with broken government promises about the allocation of private property upon “liberation” triggered a series of legendary peasant uprisings in the early years of the twentieth century. Based on contemporary narrative accounts and local newspaper reports, Giorgos. D. Karanikolas (1980: 149) presents the collective feeling among Greeks that they were residing in “the state of the *Tsiflikades*; they were neither human, nor Greeks, nor Christian.”

The continued importance of the *tsifliki* system to twenty-first-century socioeconomic conditions and to notions of belonging within both the family and the nation becomes apparent when one considers the land reforms that commenced in 1917. The redistribution of land was supposed to allow a new route for social mobility, as people could theoretically sell their smallholdings and reinvest the capital elsewhere, often in educating their children (Mouzelis 1978: 78; Sanders 1962: 65; Sant Cassia and Bada 1992: 10). The redistribution of land meant that peasants could now choose what crop to cultivate, where to sell their surplus produce, and how to reinvest the profit (if any). They also had greater freedom to diversify or indeed sell up and reinvest the financial capital in another enterprise. Sellable private property became a valuable asset that could at least support a child through post-gymnasium (secondary school) education and became a significant aspect of a young girl’s dowry, enhancing her prospects of a beneficial marriage. Land and property has traditionally played a significant role in defining one’s social standing, and throughout the prosperous 1990s and early 2000s, inheritance of land and property was highly sought after. Land and property have long been at the heart of perceptions of political suppression, liberation, independence, social mobility, the provision of a dowry, and honor both vis-à-vis the local community and

as part of the new nation-state (see esp. Campbell 1964; Friedl 1962). Until the 2009 Greek crash, property was desirable.

### **Desirable dispossession**

And so back to the case of Antonia and Giannis. Whereas the inheritance of a house and four plots of land in a prime location close to town—“one of the four villages in the whole prefecture that one would want to raise their children,” as the family lawyer put it—once would have been a godsend to a hard-up family, potentially facilitating financial and social profit, in 2016 it brings nothing but strife. Now, in the grips of economic crisis, the pain of inheritance is twofold: taxes on immovable property have risen exponentially in accordance with troika austerity policy, and the housing market has crashed, meaning it is virtually impossible to sell both houses and land. For instance, apartments in the prestigious Kolonaki neighborhood of central Athens are advertised for as little as 15,000 euros—or in one case, 5,000 euros—while in some villages near Trikala a large farmhouse is unlikely to fetch 30,000 euros when once it would have been considered a bargain at 150,000 euros. Nowadays, parents threaten their children with the prospect of inheritance. Recently, Christina, 44, a long-term research participant and friend, insisted that her father visit the doctor about an ongoing medical complaint only for him to turn to her and, aggressively and only with the slightest hint of mischief, raise his voice: “Be careful, I will leave everything to you in my will. Then we will see who has to visit the doctor!” It has become a well-known ironic quip for parents to threaten their children with inheritance—for once, dispossession and disconnection is desirable. Herzfeld (1991: 147) rightly notes that once upon a time there was great pride in inheriting a father’s house—the house must “be heard,” not fall into ruin, be conserved to be passed on through the generations. A father’s house would also be perceived as channeling affect through intergenerational transmission.

At least Antonia and Giannis will share the pain of their father's legacy. "Even if he has left us nothing but stress and anxiety, as well as 5,000 euros of debt and legal fees, we will halve the burden." Giannis will have to raid his mother's savings to pay his half, while Antonia has sacrificed part of the down payment on an apartment but says that she has no choice but to stand shoulder to shoulder with her brother at this difficult time. She has mixed feelings about her inheritance. On a pragmatic level, the house is not worth as much as five years earlier, when prices were soaring. However, her mind is also on the long-term value of the bequest: "My brother cannot see it because he is blinded by the current crisis. He lives in Greece where he is bombarded all day by news of 'crisis, crisis, and more crisis.' The media have destroyed people's ability to see beyond crisis, as if Greece is the exception." Antonia believes that her brother is only planning for the immediate future—the today, the tomorrow. He thinks only of paying the outstanding electricity bill and the new troika taxes that he says resemble those of the Ottoman landlords (see Knight 2015: 54). He is "caught up in the hurricane" of austerity Greece, as Antonia puts it, "blinded by the storm that engulfs him." The crisis has made Giannis forget how land and property should be "desirable assets," historically a route to a better life, to respect and honor as well as financial gain. Even the family lawyer suggested that the siblings should be celebrating their inheritance, not bemoaning their bad luck and wanting to disconnect from what she termed their "ancestry." "But what would you expect her to say?" Giannis abruptly remarks. "She is a lawyer, on a good wage, taking kickbacks. She does not have to feed a young family while watching every euro in the bank." Antonia says that she can see beyond the crisis because she lives and works outside of Greece and that one day she and her brother will be grateful for the land, one small part of which she intends to pass down to her child as part of his inheritance. She is on the outside looking in, belonging spatially and temporally to another domain. If Greece is in the "not quite Europe," then her brother may argue that Antonia resides in the "not quite

Greece.”

Owing to our long-term relationship stretching back more than a decade, I was able to witness the process of Antonia and Giannis registering their father’s death and completing the complicated bureaucratic process of accepting their inheritance. The time-consuming and emotionally exhausting process of processing inheritance is fraught with bureaucratic booby traps in what is, in many ways, a failing state. After consulting a lawyer who was recommended by a member of the extended family, the siblings then engaged a notary (*simvolaiografos*) to track down all pieces of land and property registered to their late father. First, the death had to be registered in the tax office (*eforia*), an exercise that took two hours because of the amount of handwritten paperwork and lack of clear direction by the civil servant employees. At one point, after several trips up and down the stairs in the three-floor building in 30 degrees Celsius, Antonia broke down in tears. The death of her estranged father was recent, and nobody was willing to help explain to her the process of registering the death and paying the outstanding debts; many undesirable stereotypes about public sector services were empirically reinforced. After three days of regular visits to various public offices and calling in favors from civil servant friends of friends, Antonia eventually managed to pay the 1,800 euros in outstanding tax and 1,500 euros in old electricity bills and finalize the inheritance. And even then, the payment had to be in cash (there was a blanket absence of credit card machines and bank transfers were not accepted); a problem when Greece’s capital controls, introduced in June 2015 at the time the SYRIZA-ANEL government called a referendum on a new troika bailout package, only allowed Greek citizens to withdraw 420 euros per week, and Antonia’s foreign debit card has an upper daily withdrawal limit of five hundred dollars.

Greek bureaucracy has been discussed at length by Herzfeld (1991, 1992), who points to the intrusion on family life of a bureaucratically regulated economy with increased public

scrutiny on bureaucratic transactions, influencing the sense of kinship morality (see also Pipyrou 2016). At the time of Herzfeld's writing, Greece was undergoing dramatic reforms in tax law that would have significant consequences on how property was valued and tax declared. In a similar way, the recent avalanche of troika reforms has penetrated the local moral economy, creating increasing confusion between what citizens are supposed to do, how bureaucratic transactions are processed, and where it is appropriate for resistance against universally despised government prying on familial affairs (cf. Loftsdóttir 2014: 175). Until the late 1980s, sales of real estate between kin were often not put into contractual form, thus evading taxation and the government's bureaucratic regulation of familial transactions. Where property is concerned, the assumption that everyone evades tax is so deeply rooted, Herzfeld (1991: 148–151) suggests, that the rare occasions when people declare in full or wish to pay up front can cause great trouble, as Antonia and Giannis discovered.

Over the following days and weeks, Antonia and Giannis encountered numerous occasions of similar frustration, including attempts to pay fines and correct parts of the house that were built without planning consent. What is remarkable in this story is that Antonia was trying to pay her debts to the state. Usually through clumsy and ill-advised policies, for years the troika have been insisting on a more efficient and streamlined tax collection system, resulting in successive Greek governments emphasizing the need for its citizens to pay their taxes. Tax evasion, as Herzfeld (1991: 147) notes, is “a key locus for the struggle between the citizen and the state over the control, definition, and rights of the self.” “Imagine,” Antonia astutely observes, “what would happen if you were trying to get something from them rather than give them something? It is better to detach yourself from the state in any way you can. It is a failure; I want nothing to do with it.” Surely, she bemoans, the tax office should be delighted that somebody actually wants to pay their debts. Other hindrances to the process that contribute to the widely held perception that inheritance is now a poison chalice (all of

which Antonia encountered) include the complexities of locating and resolving court documents chronicling disputes between family and neighbors over land ownership (see also Friedl 1962: 48; Herzfeld 1980), for which a lawyer needs to be paid, the necessity to reimburse pension overpayments to public and sometimes numerous private bodies, outstanding electricity bills that include hidden taxes known as *haratsia* introduced as part of the troika austerity program, unpaid bank loans that require returning in full upon the death of the recipient, and, inevitably, the nigh impossibility of selling inherited property in the current financial climate.

Antonia and Giannis approached their father's sister about purchasing the property. The house, which stands close to the village square in an admirable location close to the major town of Trikala, was, in 2008, valued at 150,000 euros. It is now, according to objective valuation, worth 30,000 euros, splitting opinion among the siblings—Antonia believes that, in this desperate economic climate, to find a buyer for 30,000 euros (but keeping the separate small plots of land) would signify an unexpected windfall, while Giannis feels bitter that the price is so low; it is “far too charitable” to sell the house so cheaply, he argues. They both agree that they must try to get the house out of their names by selling it immediately, whatever the price, as because they both already own property in Greece the amount of tax payable on second and third homes can be financially devastating. Finding a buyer, though, will present a significant challenge—although, after three months, they did receive one offer of a paltry three thousand euros.

### **Property and belonging over time**

Previous shifts from prosperity to crises and back again have led to alterations in how property is linked to imaginations of the future and social belonging. In the 1950s, ownership of land and property provided great status and facilitated influence on local councils (du



Boulay 1974: 248). Land and immovable property was an incredibly valuable social asset. With market liberalization and increased access to global ideals of materiality, from the 1980s conspicuous consumerism became the primary way to demonstrate modernity and being part of “the civilized West” rather than the cultural areas of “the Balkans” or “the Orient” (Herzfeld 1987), yet land was imperative to long-term social mobility and essential for acceptance within the highest social circles of the town. Since the outbreak of economic crisis, the decrease in wages and the imposition of a plethora of new taxes, land and property, although still desirable in some utopian postapocalyptic version of the world, have become a burden on quotidian life.

Talk around disconnecting from long-established inheritance practices provides a lens through which people discuss belonging (or not) politically, economically, and culturally to the West, with people asking questions that resonate with Herzfeld’s observations in the 1980s that “whether as the land of revered but long dead ancestors, or as the intrusive and rather tawdry fragment of the mysterious East, Greece might seem condemned to a peripheral role in the modern age” (1987: 3). Giannis discusses his inheritance in terms of shame and disconnection from his cultural and historical roots. “What have you become when you are begging your father to disinherit you? This goes against any logical notion of progress or national solidarity, or family honor. Shame on them. Shame on them [*dropi tous*].” Giannis is here referring to both the international creditors and the Greek government, whom he sees as responsible for the dramatic shifts in sociality at the grassroots level. Frequently, comparisons with Balkan and African nations—which share a place in the collective Greek imagination as stereotypes of backwardness and suffering—arise in debates about dispossession, the breakdown of the family, and economic extraction for which neoliberal austerity is held responsible. Giannis feels sapped of energy for his future:

When they drain you of your past, your legacy, your lineage by making it impossible to inherit, how do they expect you to build a future for your family, your nation? You are removed from everything that is meaningful. In the end you want to be removed and actively seek disconnection. . . . That is what we are doing now, trying to get away from global and national processes that are holding us back and damaging our lives.

There is no understanding, he stresses, from the troika or his own government of the things important to everyday citizens. There is instead a desire to break from long-established patterns of inheritance that were until recently so central to the Greek social and political subject.

In my recent book (Knight 2015: 163–164), I discuss the case of Panayiotis, whom I met in 2005 when he was in his mid-thirties. Panayiotis, who owned two hundred *stremmata* of land and was financially very secure with no outstanding loans, had been courting a woman from Larisa for more than two years. Despite being in love, eventually Litsa was persuaded by her parents that Panayiotis was not a respectable husband, as he was uneducated and they had high aspirations for their daughter to marry into the town's elite. Panayiotis built a new house on his land to demonstrate that Litsa would be well provided for. In 2005, Panayiotis did not have a desirable future as far as marriage was concerned.

I have stayed in contact with Panayiotis for more than a decade. He has invested in European Union renewable energy programs, building small wind turbines on his arable land. In 2008, he married a local woman called Katerina, the daughter of the village mini-mart owner. They divorced in 2014. Panayiotis attributes the failed marriage to the lack of a future offered in austerity Greece and particularly to the crippling new taxes on land and property that prevented him from providing his new wife with the life she had expected. “This crisis is

killing relationships all over the country,” Panayiotis laments. He says that the stress of dealing with social and economic woe daily is tearing families apart: “I could not provide for her in the way she was hoping for. The way I was expecting and expected to. The agricultural markets crashed when the crisis struck and I couldn’t sell my produce at market and a big company I had a contract with went bankrupt.” Panayiotis says that he and his wife struggled on, hoping that life could only get better. “The arguments got more regular, usually about money. We were both so stressed out. We argued about politics, about how our country could be saved . . . [He pauses, ironically and with a smirk.] She supported PASOK. [We argued] about how our livelihoods could be saved. But whatever we did to try to better our situation, things only got worse; more tax, more austerity, more persecution.”

Panayiotis is keen to emphasize his belief that all political parties that have governed Greece since the 2009 crash (PASOK, New Democracy, and SYRIZA-ANEL) have been equally culpable for the worsening socioeconomic situation in the country and for breaking promises made to the citizens of Greece, forcing people to seek a break from the very things that were once at the heart of Greek collective and individual identity. Katerina, increasingly frustrated and already feeling that she had married beneath her, left her husband in 2014, three weeks after he had inherited his father’s land and two properties. “My father left us all his land, a property in a village outside of Trikala and a small dwelling in his ancestral home in the Pindos Mountains,” Panayiotis says. They were already listed as owning three homes between them, so for Panayiotis and Katerina, the tax burden resulting from the inheritance, coupled with the father’s unpaid debts, was too much to bear. According to Panayiotis, this was the straw that broke the camel’s back; Katerina moved back in with her parents. Once, Panayiotis says, smiling at me, land and property were the “ultimate sources of social, political, and economic power.” Now they are worthless, a burden and a millstone that people want to avoid at all costs: “I have no chance of remarrying. I tried to build a future. I did

everything I could. I diversified (by investing in renewable energy) to build a future, I scrimped and saved to build a future, but I was lynched by my own government's obedience to evil European dictators."

Panayiotis sees his inheritance as the decisive blow, a final nail in his coffin, so to speak, telling me that it is best explained by narrating a scene from a friend's father's funeral he attended in the town of Katerini in early 2016. The man, he says, had three sons, all in their forties with wives and children. At the funeral, the coffin of the dead man was in the center of a large room and the three sons were standing in three separate corners, some distance from the body. All the sons wore dark sunglasses, "not to hide their tears but to hide their anger and to shield the glares of suspicious eyes." No son wanted to inherit the father's estate or to deal with his substantial outstanding tax and loan repayments. They were seeking to disconnect from family, land, and nation. This issue, according to Panayiotis, had torn the family into three parts. The sons were not speaking to each other and not publicly mourning their father: "Once the brothers would have been fighting over who would inherit the father's property. In the richest and in the poorest families at least the family house would be passed down to one of the children. Now, brothers live in fear of inheriting."

In a similar case, a Scandinavian woman was married to a Greek man (they both lived in the United Kingdom). When they divorced, the man promised to give his house in his ancestral Greek village to the woman as part of the divorce settlement, much to her distress. "What do I want a house in Greece for, just to pay all the taxes?" she remarked. The woman believed that her former husband was trying to burden her with the house in Greece to escape paying the taxation himself. "He is so manipulative, so cunning," she bemoaned.

Juliet du Boulay once stated that "land . . . is immortal—it cannot die, it is always a secure investment," while expecting to inherit a house would ensure the "good behaviour" of the son and his wife (1974: 250, 21). Yet, in 2016, at the grassroots level, land and property

have been stripped of their social and economic value, as locals fail to see their long-term futures for the life-sapping smog of suffocating austerity.

## **Conclusions**

The emerging desire for disinheritance amounts to a desire for disconnectedness, for exiting not only political structures but also kinship structures that have been historically closely linked with a Greek sense of self as particular political subjects. There is the desire to disconnect from a failing state that is seen to be unscrupulously and arbitrarily punishing its citizens, going back on its promises of hope and redemption, as well as a radical reassessment of what it means to be part of the nation, with perceived shared roots and a set of moral obligations toward social well-being. Further, there is an increasing desire to disconnect with the European politico-economic program that is generally blamed for the rising tax imposed on immovable property and the never-ending tunnel of financial tutelage in the form of bailout packages and austerity measures. Finally, there is a striking desire for disconnection from ancestral history and family assets, once at the very heart of what it meant to be a Greek political subject. The nuclear family has become the focus of economic and emotional protection; the attempt by some informants to disassociate themselves from family history and collective perceptions of national culture by rejecting inheritance is painful but understood as necessary if the basic future needs of the nuclear family are to be met. Disconnection from global processes is an active attempt to protect one's future from the unknown, the outsider, an attempt to maintain some form of limited control over one's future that is rapidly disappearing over the ever-distant horizon. With such historical and cultural import, the significance of the desire for disinheritance as a political gesture should not be underestimated.

Inheritance is a subject of study where the consequences of the violent effects of

neoliberal austerity, democratic deficit, and colonial legacies are played out. The consequences of austerity policy on the fine-grained detail of the political in central Greece are expressed through the desire to disinherit, to disconnect from familial, national, and European imaginations of the future. In this emerging field, where alternative connections may lie largely remains to be seen. The creation of a “New Greece” (compared to the “New Iceland” discussed by Loftsdóttir, this issue) is, it seems, not to be based on the once culturally vital qualities of property inheritance. That is now a past future. Chronic austerity has provoked my informants to envisage a different version of the future based away from long-established concepts of family continuity, lineage, and tangible links to the ethnos through land and property inheritance.

By rejecting an established system of troika (read “European”) taxation and national government hoodwinking, people reassess their ideas of national belonging and family heritage associated with property ownership. It would be easy for the observer to criticize the abandonment of centuries-old inheritance practices that has come about in part because of the morally suspect pressures of international creditors. The desire for disinheritance is not so much a matter of solidarity but more a means of “maintaining a life,” a way of “reworlding,” as Dzenovska has put it, “even if only in the sense of making life go on for a little bit longer.” The Greek case study does poignantly show, however, how the political can be located in unusual, even paradoxical, spaces of everyday life. Where for Dzenovska (this issue), staying put means engaging with a different short-term political while cross-border migration entails a continuation of a familiar political environment in search of the near future, in central Greece when people actively seek disinheritance, they are engaging in a different form of politics than that prominent over the last decades. They are emptying their turbulent present of a past that has now become a burden in order to fashion a different future. The desire for disinheritance is thus a disruption of an established order that one might not anticipate or

even wish for, but it is becoming increasingly important for providing Greeks with the ability to imagine their futures in just as dramatic a fashion as the demonstrably political street protests or mass migration. The political can be equally found in the mundane.

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