Emotions of protest in times of crisis: representation, dislocation and remedy in the Greek ‘squares movement’

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the 2011 ‘squares movement’ in Greece to enquire into the importance of (popular) sovereignty for mobilized individuals in relation to representation and crisis. We draw on tools of political theory and discourse analysis, adopt a ‘bottom up’ ethnographic perspective, and incorporate insights from social movement studies and the sociology of emotions. The aim is to reconstruct the key narratives and frames used by individuals to make sense of their motivations and aspirations, but also to trace the movement’s legacy. Our data is drawn from archival research in media outlets and semi-structured interviews with individuals that participated in or observed the ‘squares movement’. Our findings highlight the importance of the moment of dislocation and its destabilizing effect on individuals, while stressing the positive/productive aspect of crisis. Using emotions as a thread that runs through the mobilization and links it to subsequent ones, we highlight the explanatory value of our analysis for understanding the radical realignment of the political system and the rise of anti-establishment parties, and show how a cycle of tensions at the heart of representation that opened up in 2010 seems to have now closed.

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Introduction

Greece, with its severe socio-economic crisis, social unrest and radical realignment of the political system, has been making international headlines for several years (Tzogopoulos 2013; Mylonas 2019). After a decade of austerity and three consecutive programmes of economic adjustment (the so-called ‘memoranda’), the country recently celebrated its return to ‘normality’. This was a rhetorical scheme put forward by European Union (EU) elites and the SYRIZA-led government (2015–2019), the last one to implement a ‘memorandum’. On June 2018, the then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras celebrated measures that would relieve the country’s enormous public debt and declared that Greece was ‘becoming a
normal country again’, that it regained ‘its political and economic sovereignty’, that it was ‘able to stand on its own feet’ (Kathimerini 2018). A couple of months later, he affirmed his conviction that Greece had gained its fiscal and national sovereignty as the country was officially concluding its third adjustment programme (Georgiopoulos and Papadimas 2018).

Tsipras’ main opponent and leader of New Democracy (ND), Kyriakos Mitsotakis (Prime Minister after 2019), challenged this narrative, claiming that it was his government that would put an end to Greece’s long crisis, restoring the country back to ‘normality’ and to the status of a stable and sovereign state within the EU (TANEATeam 2019). Something that both Mitsotakis and top members of his cabinet would often repeat after ND assumed office (Kokkinidis 2019). Without judging the validity of such claims, what they reveal is that, even according to the country’s top political personnel, Greece, until recently, was regarded as a state of limited, undermined or ‘weak’ sovereignty, an almost non-sovereign state (Papataxiarchis 2018, 231, 237).

Discussions about eroding or hollowing-out sovereignty are not new. Member states of the EU have often found themselves under pressure both ‘from above’ (EU) and ‘from below’ (regional autonomy, devolution) – a result of what is also often called ‘multi-level governance’ (Keating 2004; Lynch 2016). What makes Greece different, and worthy of study, is the severity with which tensions around the question of sovereignty (economic, national, popular) and democratic representation have exploded in the years of crisis and austerity, as well as the comparatively disproportionate time it took for the country to recover (Karyotis and Gerodimos 2015; Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2018; Matsaganis 2018). In this sense, Greece is not an exception to the norm, but a case where political and socio-economic stakes and contradictions have manifested in a much denser and deeper way when compared, for example, to Portugal, Ireland or Cyprus, countries that went through similar programmes of economic adjustment and faced the consequences of an ensuing crisis of representation (Armingeon, Guthmann, and Weisstanner 2016; Perez and Matsaganis 2018; Sotiris 2018). Not surprisingly, the Greek crisis was marked by a series a massive social movements and protests (Karyotis and Rüdig 2018), sometimes of different aims and ideological bearings, which often revolved around various understandings of sovereignty.¹

From the Greek ‘squares movement,’ the so-called Aganaktismenoi, in 2011, to their half-hearted and short-lived revival in February 2015 (‘Breath of Dignity’) (Katsambekis 2014; Katsambekis 2019), and from there to the competing YES and NO rallies in the run-up to the July 2015 referendum, to the nationalist gatherings against the Prespa Agreement that settled the name of Northern Macedonia (Dendrinou and Stamouli 2015; Hagemann 2019), ‘sovereignty’ seems to have been an issue that mobilized masses of heterogeneous people in the streets and dominated public discourse for almost a decade.

We assume that a series of overlapping ‘crises of sovereignty’ lies at the heart of ongoing transformations within the Greek society and political system. We hypothesize that the positions taken by people towards the issue of sovereignty during the years of crisis and austerity (whether ‘negative’: blame-attribution attitudes against those held responsible for its loss or concession; or ‘positive’: developing alternatives and investing with hope those that would restore it) have significant explanatory value for understanding shifts and developments on the societal and political level. In this paper, we focus on the 2011 Greek squares movement to explore the role that perceptions of ‘sovereignty in crisis,’ along with democracy and representation, played in motivating and sustaining the
movement. We also examine the emotions that underpinned such perceptions and corresponding collective action. We do this by means of media archive research, attempting a ‘return’ to the squares through the study of journalist reports and commentary that attempted to capture the voices, moods and motivations of people ‘on the ground’, but also to identify key narratives used by reporters covering or commenting on the events. We acknowledge that we are dealing with material that is already filtered and mediated. However, we consider this a crucial and illuminating exercise as it can be plausibly argued that the image of a given movement communicated by various types of media plays an important role for its broader impact but also for attracting more people in the streets, if said movement is sustained over a long period of time (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993).

We supplement our analysis based on media reports and secondary literature with semi-structured interviews with individuals that participated in or observed the ‘squares movement’ as well as subsequent mobilisations. Again, insight gained through these interviews is mediated, as time has passed since the actual mobilisations. This means that we are not dealing with individuals that are mobilizing in the present tense (as done in Papapavlou 2015; Georgiadou et al. 2019) but with individuals that recall what they did, their motivations, thoughts, emotions and aspirations when participating in the movement. Acknowledging this limitation, we use the time that has passed to incorporated into the interviews questions related to subsequent mobilisations to explore whether there are any common (discursive and emotional) threads running throughout and across them as well as to examine how the memory of the mobilisations and their outcomes are viewed and affectively invested today. Our aim is to reconstruct the key narratives and frames used by individuals to make sense of their motivations and aspirations as well as to link this to key shifts in the political system.

Most of the relevant existing approaches so far have remained within the strictly confined borders of their disciplinary area, with contributions from radical political theory drawing on poststructuralist frameworks and looking at the ‘official’ discourse of the movement (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2012; Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2014) or operating more at a conceptual/normative level (Douzinas 2013; Kioupkiolis 2014); comparativists and empiricists looking at electoral dynamics (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014; Rori 2016; Tsatsanis and Teperoglou 2016); anthropologists drawing on ethnographic methods to highlight from-below perspectives and practices (Papapavlou 2015; Dalakoglou and Agelopoulos 2018); and social movement scholars looking at organizational aspects, repertoires of collective action and collective action frames (Theocharis 2015; Kanellopoulos et al. 2016; Varvarousis, Asara, and Akbulut 2020). Building on the advances of such works, the novelty of our approach lies in an effort to combine the tools of critical political theory and discourse analysis with a ‘bottom up’ ethnographic perspective, while incorporating insights and tools from social movement studies and the sociology of emotions, in a bid to foster inter-disciplinary research and the cross-pollination of conceptual models. This allows for a more nuanced and multi-faceted discussion of processes of signification in social movements as well as a more reflective account of the role of emotions with regards to perceptions around sovereignty, crisis and representation. This, in turn, facilitates a critical understanding of the ‘squares movement’ itself, its relation to subsequent mobilisations and the radical changes of the Greek political system. Indeed, adding this temporal dimension of exploring the ‘legacy’ of the 2011
squares movement by using emotions as a pathway, along with significations of the gap in representation, is another contribution of our work.

In the following sections, we first offer a brief background about the Greek crisis and the ‘squares movement’. We then survey the relevant literature on the erosion of popular/national sovereignty, the notions of dislocation, moral shock and crisis of representation and offer a first theoretical synthesis, taking into account the role of emotions. After that, we outline our data and methodology and then move on with conducting our analysis. We conclude the article, summarizing our findings and highlighting potential paths for future research as well as links with other fields of study.

**Case description: the Greek crisis saga**

The Greek crisis, that broke out in 2010, can be understood as part of the global financial crisis of 2008. The then newly elected centre-left government of PASOK under Prime Minister George Papandreou found itself under pressure from international financial markets as it was unable to refinance the country’s soaring public debt due to severely increased bond yields, which increased the risk of a sovereign default, something that would devastate the country’s economy. A first round of restrictive fiscal measures in February 2010 did not bear fruit and soon an ad-hoc mechanism comprising the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF (the so-called ‘troika’) intervened, offering a bailout programme to Greece which was conditioned on a set of harsh austerity measures (Karyotis and Gerodimos 2015).

PASOK had come to power in autumn 2009 promising a fairer and more progressive taxation system, which would favour the middle and lower classes, building a mildly anti-neoliberal profile (Pantazopoulos 2009; Pappas 2010, 277). Not surprisingly, social reactions to the austerity that PASOK ended up implementing instead (including cuts to salaries, pensions and welfare, and increased taxation for lower and middle social strata) were massive and sustained (Karyotis and Rüdig 2018). The unprecedented wave of social protest soon wore down the Papandreou government, which resigned to pave the way for a technocratic coalition government under ex-central banker Lucas Papademos in November 2011 (Gemenis and Nezi 2014, 24–25). This government was supported by PASOK, ND and a smaller radical right party, LAOS. PASOK and ND continued to govern together after the double ‘earthquake elections’ of May and June 2012 (Voulgaris and Nikolakopoulos 2014). Public protests subsided as SYRIZA, a party of the radical left that supported anti-austerity struggles throughout 2010–2012, was catapulted to official opposition in the summer of 2012 (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). As it has been suggested in the relevant literature, many citizens, especially on the left, saw SYRIZA as the institutional representative of anti-austerity struggles, what was also described by Myrto Tsakatika as ‘a logic of delegation’ (Tsakatika 2016); the assumption that the anti-austerity struggle would now be ‘delegated’ to SYRIZA as the official opposition and a ‘government in waiting’.

The 2011 squares movement marks a pivotal moment in the genealogy of the Greek crisis both in terms of its social protest aspects and that of the transformation of the political system (Aslanidis and Marantzidis 2016). It symbolized the accumulated frustration of broad popular strata with austerity, unemployment, rapid impoverishment and socio-economic marginalization. However, the foundations for the movement’s
emergence had already been laid since the mid-1990s. In conditions of chronic post-political fatigue (Katsambekis, 2016b), piling popular grievances, once expressed and contained at the informal/unofficial political margins, were now multiplied and amplified as the growing rift ‘between the lived experience and the official representation’ created the conditions for generalized dissent to burst out (Papataxiarchis 2018, 231, 237–238). The movement also expressed popular anxieties regarding the impasses of representative politics in Greece as it framed the austerity policies pursued by the government not only as harmful for the vast majority of the population, but also as going sharply against the popular-democratic mandate, thus annulling popular sovereignty (Gerbaudo 2014; Katsambekis 2014; Aslanidis 2016b). In this sense, the Greek squares movement, along with its global predecessors and successors (i.e. Spanish Indignados, US Occupy movement), has been described both as populist (pitting the majority of ‘the people’ against local, European and international ‘elites’) and sovereignist (putting the issue of regaining popular sovereignty at the core of its endeavours) (Gerbaudo 2017).

Within the Greek context, the 2011 squares movement can be understood as part of a broader protest cycle that revolved around the issue of sovereignty. For the 2011 aganaktismenoi and the February 2015 pro-government protests (‘Breath of Dignity’), it was popular sovereignty that had been rendered obsolete through the imposition of austerity policies without the people’s consent. In the former, a more bodily and direct notion of democracy/participation was mobilized. In the latter, it was rather representation that defined its core, as people protested not with the intention to oust those in power, but to express their support to the newly elected government’s negotiation efforts at the European level. For the July 2015 referendum rallies it was competing understandings of popular and national sovereignty that came to the fore and were contrasted. On the one side, people campaigning for YES to the EU’s proposal for a new economic adjustment programme saw Greece’s place within the Eurozone and the EU as non-negotiable, and the concession of its sovereignty as the only way that the country could ensure its economic stability, geopolitical security and liberal-democratic polity. On the other side, people campaigning for a NO to the EU’s proposal, were not willing to tolerate further austerity and sought to take back some degree of control, even if that meant risking the country’s place within the Eurozone. Finally, people campaigning during 2018 and 2019 in Athens and Thessaloniki against the agreement with Northern Macedonia considered the compromise achieved with the Prespa Agreement as a humiliating concession of national sovereignty, as a ‘sell-off’ of the country’s history and heritage to another nation.

**Theoretical background**

The 2011 squares movement exposed a significant gap in representation, challenging the legitimation of the political system (Katsambekis 2016a). It also symbolized a moment of structural dislocation (Laclau 1990). The notion of ‘dislocation’ in poststructuralist political theory refers to moments when a hegemonic system’s inability to symbolically incorporate the experiences of individuals is exposed; the moments in which established narratives and frames fail to ascribe meaning to the lived experiences of individuals (Biglieri and Perelló 2011). This can be linked to what scholars working on the emotional dynamics
of protest call moral shocks, a ‘visceral unease in reaction to information and events which signal that the world is not as it seemed’ (Jasper 2014, 210). As James Jasper further clarifies, this shock is most common when something that people previously took for granted is taken away (ibid.). In the case of Greece, this is exemplified in the sudden and severe loss of income, employment, welfare and prospects. This creates a feeling of disorientation and anxiety to social subjects, as they realize that what they had taken for granted crumbles in front of their eyes.

As Ernesto Laclau explains, every dislocation also has a positive, productive aspect. It triggers new narratives, pre-figuring possibilities that aim to either heal the trauma or to even radically re-signify the system (Laclau 1990, 40–43, 50). In other words, a structural dislocation always entails a process (and a battle) of resignification; a resignification of the culturally and historically given, but also of what is aspired to come. In this sense, dislocation, as a notion, incorporates what is often discussed as ‘crisis of political representation’ in comparative politics (Roberts 2015), but provides a more holistic account of social processes able to incorporate both the individual and the collective, the social and the institutional, allowing us to move beyond the restrictive schema of the voter/party bond. Our study illuminates that moment of dislocation within the Greek crisis, as a moment that creates both a sense of ‘destabilisation’ and motivation to ‘create new meaning’ from the perspective of social subjects.

To better situate the analysis of this dislocatory moment into broader societal developments and corresponding scholarly debates, we can refer to works maintaining that societies in established democracies are undergoing a process of radical transformation towards a post-democratic orientation. In this context, the erosion or even the active suppression of popular sovereignty is crucial as parties become increasingly attached to the workings and necessities of the state (‘cartel party’ thesis), while citizens feel all the more ‘detached’ from representative institutions (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005; Torcal and Montero 2006; Mair 2013). Such findings are reinforced by studies arguing that in the age of globalization, multi-level governance and deeply inter-connected economies, ‘traditional’ ways of understanding sovereignty are becoming obsolete, stressing the unavoidable tensions and contradictions of what can be described as a rather transitory and transformative era for the nation-state (hardly a static concept and entity) which also has consequences on representation and the democratic process (Camilleri and Falk 1992; Keating 2001; Quiggin 2001; Scholte 2010).

This literature, looking at the transformation of contemporary political systems, party politics, the changing perceptions of sovereignty and an ongoing crisis of representative democracy is most often focusing on political organization, institutional processes, interactions among political actors and elite discourses; what is often called the ‘supply side’. When it does turn to the ‘demand side’, this is done either through value surveys or electoral data that look at voter engagement/disengagement or by looking at broader socio-logical shifts. What is often missing is a discussion of the lived experiences of such processes by individuals and groups, and their effort to give meaning to their experience (Lyrintzis and Papataxiarchis 2013). This is a gap that our research purports to fill through empirical inquiry by applying a discourse-analytical approach combined with ethno-graphic and social movement studies insights to the Greek case to look at how this sense of crisis of representation and loss of sovereignty was experienced and signified ‘from below’. At the theoretical/methodological level, our contribution lies in building
bridges between discourse analysis and Frame Theory (Goffman 1974; Howarth 2000; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), on the one hand, and social movement studies and the broader sociology of emotions tradition (Benford and Snow 2000; Jasper 2014), on the other. This makes it possible to better understand the aforementioned processes of signification, while taking into account the role of emotions, something that has not been adequately developed in the field so far.

According to the ‘Essex School’ of discourse analysis, society is discursively constructed through the privileging of certain central points of reference (nodal points), which structure the meaning of other elements around them, as well as through the construction of identity via asserting difference (Howarth 2000, 101–142). Locating nodal signifiers as well as ‘constitutive outsides’ (or antagonists) is crucial for understanding the operation of examined discourses. One of the distinctive characteristics of this school of thought is that discourse as a concept does not only refer to mere words, language, but to any practice that produces meaning, and may thus include rituals, gestures, images, sounds, symbols. Even though scholars working within the ‘Essex School’ of discourse analysis have rarely ‘spoken’ with those of social movements and framing practices, there have been significant research works which have highlighted how discourse and frames can be understood within an integrated framework (Ferree and Merrill 2000, 455–456; Aslanidis 2016a; Roussos 2019). We understand ‘frames’ as interpretive schemes that operate according to a specific logic and enable individuals to make sense of the world and their position in it (Goffman 1974). Robert Benford and David Snow (2000) highlight how social movements develop and use collective action frames, which are distinct in the sense that they fulfil three core tasks: (1) identify a problematic situation and who is responsible for this (diagnosis); (2) suggest a solution or way to respond/act against the problem and the culprit(s) (prognosis); and (3) generate mobilization through calling people to action (motivation) (Benford and Snow 2000, 615–617). Linking this back to the moment of ‘dislocation’ or ‘moral shock’ produced by the outbreak of the crisis in 2010 in Greece and the ensuing battle of (re)signification, we expect such framing practices to manifest discursively and play a key role in the material we analyse. After all, ‘[e]vents do not speak for themselves but must be woven into some larger story line or frame; they take their meaning from the frame in which they are embedded’ (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 117).

Data and methodology

For our analysis, we conduct a study of discourses ‘from below’ (individuals voices captured in media reports and semi-structured interviews) and ‘from in-between’ (framings of the mobilisations by journalists and commentators). We then return to the broader theoretical questions regarding sovereignty, its crisis, and representation, to reconfigure the Greek experience. We use a flexible interdisciplinary framework that combines methodological concepts and tools from poststructuralist political theory (Laclau 1990) with advances in the sociology of emotions (Jasper 2014) and social movements studies (Benford and Snow 2000). Despite the limitation of not having the space to fully elaborate on any of these traditions in particular, the article aspires to both draw on and contribute to those three areas, building on and highlighting their compatibilities and possible synergies, while using the former (political theory and discourse analysis) as the basis.
In terms of data, we have collected a representative sample of articles from the Greek press, which comes from big nation-wide outlets, covering the ideological-political spectrum from left to right, pro- and anti-austerity, friendly and opposed to government. We collected all the articles that referred to the ‘squares movement’ during their peak (May 20 to June 20, 2011), to capture certain frames that were common across media outlets, regardless of their ideological orientation, as well as voices ‘from below’ (protesters) and ‘from in-between’ (journalists and commentators) that were expressed when the movement was at its peak. We also sampled more articles in subsequent months to capture framings and narratives about the movement as it was becoming a thing of the past (Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix). When processing and analysing this material, we were aware of the mediating and possibly distorting role of media outlets themselves that have their own agenda and the ability to choose their own story line, highlighting certain voices and marginalizing or even silencing others (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). We tackled that by focusing on the movement’s frames and narratives that come through in the form of direct quotations (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993, 118–119) from protesters and by specifying when we are reflecting on commentary from journalists or pundits, thus differentiating between data ‘about the movement’ (which is the vast majority of data used and quoted in the analysis) and data about how certain journalists or commentators wrote about the events. Moreover, by collecting data from a broad variety of media outlets across the ideological spectrum and by focusing on common themes/frames that emerge, and by checking the correspondence of the latter with those emerging from the interviews, we manage to check our material against particular media agendas.

We also conducted a sum of 11 semi-structured interviews throughout the period between December 2018 and July 2019 with individuals that had either participated in the movements/mobilisations under investigation or closely observed them (sometimes being critical or in opposition) in order to get in-depth insights regarding the views, sentiments and motivations of people ‘on the ground,’ while being able to add a temporal dimension to our research and discuss how subjects consider the result of the mobilisations as well as their connections to subsequent protests related to other issues.

Finding individuals that participated in the ‘squares movement’ proved harder than initially expected. Some of the individuals that were contacted were not willing to discuss their experience. This might be explained by the profound disappointment of a significant part of citizens that mobilized in the anti-austerity movement and who then supported SYRIZA in the 2015 elections. One of our interlocutors described the sense of hope and joy resulting from the participation in the movement in 2011 as well as by the rise of SYRIZA to power in January 2015, and the aspirations and expectations with which the party was invested. They explained how this was frustrated by the party’s capitulation in July 2015 and the acceptance of a new ‘memorandum’, which led to alienation and disappointment among their supporters and sympathisers, even depression and a retreat to ‘private lives’ (Interlocutor 5). Another individual, positioned in the broader anarchist movement, described similar feelings of disappointment and disengagement, not just among SYRIZA supporters/sympathisers, but citizens that opposed austerity and were hoping that something would change after the 2015 referendum (Interlocutor 3).
Such accounts of frustration of people that once mobilized in anti-austerity protest explain, at least partly, the reluctance of certain individuals to share their experiences. Some seemed to recall the movement as something to which they were deeply invested, devoting personal time, effort and energy, without seeing the change they were fighting/hoping for. Others seemed to be influenced by the negative representations of the movement by a series of mainstream politicians and commentators.

In terms of sampling, we used the ‘snowballing’ method in which one informant leads to the other, starting with some initial contacts (Berg 2001; Ritchie, Lewis, and Gillian 2003). However, given the time that has passed and the reluctance of several contacts to be interviewed, we understand that the sum of our interviews cannot be regarded as representative of the movement and that this is effectively a ‘convenience sample’ (Robinson 2014). We acknowledge this limitation and we thus do not suggest that we can generalize any findings from the interviews alone. Our contribution is a modest one and the findings generated from the interviews refer to a certain demographic. However, we still consider them significant, in accordance to new research highlighting the value of convenience sampling (Leeper 2016). Regarding the demographics of the sample, the respondents/interlocutors selected for this research were in their 30s and 40s at the time of the interview, so they were among the young people that participated in the movement or observed it and were either university students or professionals at that time. Dealing with fewer respondents also gave us the possibility to go more in depth during the interviews, while we were able to check the correspondence of key ideas and framings with those we found during processing the relevant media reports.

When processing the material collected, we drew inspiration from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). We surveyed our material taking two steps: First, we went through all articles collected and the full transcripts of all interviews in order to map recurrent themes and narratives. Second, we tracked core thematics (recurring themes/issues) related to our main area of interest. The resulting areas of focus can be codified as follows: (i) dislocation and its signification; (ii) blame-attribution, identity formation and common enemies; (iii) remedying the trauma, responses to the impasse. These broader themes/dimensions, inform the structure of our analysis, which is based on the discourse-analytical theoretical framework outlined in the previous section. Through qualitative discourse analysis, we trace and analyse the operation of nodal signifiers, discursive divides, key frames, and signifying practices. In order to capture the role of emotions in particular, we turn to works in the sociology of emotions and the emotions of protest fields (Goodwin et al. 2001). We capture emotions through their ‘linguistic labels’ (Jasper 2011, 298), as they are reflected in the discourse of interviewees and of individuals in the texts that we have processed. We are aware of the varying methods in capturing emotions in different disciplines, however we agree with Jasper that the study of emotions through the labels that individuals use in their discourse to describe them is the best starting place for relevant studies (ibid.). Indeed, social constructionist works on emotions affirm that ‘people learn cultural norms to interpret their affective states and learn to name their feelings with specific labels’ (Ruiz-Junco 2013, 46).

In the remainder of this article, we look for the organizing logic and key motifs in what people do and say as exemplified in relevant reports, journalist accounts and interviews with individuals that have lived the experience ‘on the ground’. We return to key concepts
throughout our analysis to the extent that these allow us to ‘codify’ our findings and thus render them both comparable to other studies and potentially generalizable.

**Sovereignty at the square: from grievances to healing the representation gap**

**Frustration, grievances, anger and their sources**

When surveying media sources regarding the Greek squares movement, one immediately notices the importance of *grievance narratives* among both journalists and individuals. Emotions of being unfairly treated, marginalized or supressed, silenced or unheard, are drivers and mobilizing triggers for social protest and movements well-registered and documented in the literature on social movements, so this does not come as a surprise (Law and Walsh 1983; van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013; Jasper 2014, 291–292; LeFebvre and Armstrong 2018). People in the squares are described in media accounts as ‘people frustrated, desperate, with no job and [no] future’ (Kartalis 2011). ‘If something connects’ this heterogeneous multitude of protesters, another commentator adds, this ‘is their need to express their discomfort’ (Karaiskaki 2011). These descriptions are accompanied, in some cases, by remarks justifying the people’s anger and indignation, and in others by worries that in this emotional state, people might be easier manipulated or influenced by radical groups with more subversive goals. The people, it is argued, could become an uncontrolled ‘mass’ or ‘mob’ (Galiatsatos 2011). Journalist framings of anger and indignation as righteous manifests more vividly in progressive, left-leaning outlets (e.g. *Eleftherotypia*), while framings of such emotions as dangerous and linked to the image on a ‘unruly mob’ are more often in progressive outlets (e.g. *Kathimerini*).

A left-wing intellectual and participant in the movement noted that ‘the movement of the indignant citizens is a […] movement born and fed by desperation of people that seek equality, justice, dignity’ (Kavouriaris 2011). He then drew parallels between that movement and historical uprisings or revolutions, from the French revolution to the Russian one. An anonymous citizen (A.T.) commenting on social media platforms, stressed, in a comment targeted against the political class: ‘Yesterday I lost my job for the second time within a year and a half. Frustration and desperation are now part of my daily routine … but I am there every day sirs robbers!!!’ (In.gr 2011). Finally, a local member of SYRIZA in Northern Greece expressed the same kind of frustration and anger: ‘[…] we warn you, we can’t take it anymore!!!’ (Papamatthaiou 2011). From this brief sampling of discourses of commentators and participants in the movement, sympathisers and critical observers, as they are reflected in the media, we see that feelings of frustration, discomfort, loss and anger were at the heart of the movement in its initial phase.

This frustration was registered in the ‘official’ discourse of the movement too. When, after its peak in summer 2011, the *Aganaktismenoi* attempted to re-assemble at Syntagma square in early autumn, the official call of the Popular Assembly noted that the 3rd of September (day of mobilization but also the anniversary of the foundation of PASOK) ‘is the day that reminds us of the frustration of the desires of the people for democracy, freedom and dignity. That reminds us of the lies and the mockery of those in power’ (Syntagma Popular Assembly in Pontiki 2011). The activists of the ‘lower’ square strongly influenced
the tone and content of the assembly’s texts, focused on democracy, equality and participation. Another element that plaid a significant role for the mobilization of the less politicized citizens that is revealed here is the breaking of the political bond and its ‘transactional’ or even clientelistic character: ‘mainstream political actors […] were unable to deliver the “traditional goods” and were held responsible for the bankruptcy of state finances’ (Papataxiarchis 2018, 231).

Contrasting narratives found in the media with those of individuals in our interviews, we encounter a similar picture. One individual recalls an almost amorphous anger as the main motivation for participating in the protests: ‘I remember that I was very angry’. They add how being together with other people brought also joy and happiness, something that they recall seeing around them, among other participants: ‘There was a lot of enthusiasm […] a lot of participation, a lot of anger but a lot of joy at the same time […]’ (Interlocutor 11). This is reminiscent of the ‘moral batteries’ scheme of Jasper, that describes the combination and interaction of contradictory emotions (in our case ‘anger’ about the situation, and ‘joy’ from participation and interaction with others) in a way that motivates action through the tension it produces (Jasper 2011, 291).

Another person notes that the primary cause behind the eruption of the movement ‘was the devastation of society’s dignity […] the dignity of the people that was seriously hurt by the policies of the past years [years of austerity], especially with the acceptance of the memorandum. […] The devastation of lives […]’ (Interlocutor 3). They move on to give a more tangible texture to the notion of dislocation: ‘I might also include the issue of searching for meaning. It was a period, it still is, that meanings, the image that we have about ourselves and society started to crumble as an effect of the political crisis […] both on the individual and on the collective level’ (Interlocutor 3; emphasis added).

‘Dignity’ emerges as a key emic term here (Tsibiridou and Bartsidis 2016), both in the ‘official’ discourse of the assembly and in that of individuals trying to make sense of their motivation, participation in and aspirations for the movement. As a notion, it refers to social standing and the perception of the self in relation to the ‘other’ and can be seen through the lens of an old anthropological discussion about ‘honor’ and the exchange of challenge-and-riposte (Bourdieu 1966; Kuhn 2018). In this sense, ‘the squares’ seem to be a response to an insult. Citizens have not only been hurt, deceived and let down (broken promise of prosperity), but they had been actively degraded and dehumanized.

According to this perspective, the economic and social crisis did not only affect the material conditions of individuals, their jobs and incomes, but had a deeper effect in terms of how they made sense of themselves and of others, of how they understood society and their role as citizens. Even a citizen that self-identifies as a centre-right liberal and pro-European and was active in 2015 in the YES rallies for the referendum, stressed that in 2011 ‘the administration of our economy had reached a point where it was not bearable, that no one could endure it … neither the heavy taxation nor the impoverishment of society,’ it was a point, they stress, that conditions for the majority of the people had started to feel insufferable, fuelled by a sense of deep uncertainty regarding the causes of the crisis as well as the prospects of the country (Interlocutor 8). It is this sense of ‘crumbling down,’ of vulnerability and hurt dignity that pushed people out in the streets, not necessarily with a clearly specified common goal, but with the common need to (1) express that anger and frustration against those perceived as responsible, and (2) search for a solution (for meaning) as a means to remedy the
trauma of individual and collective devastation. What we see here is something similar to that described by Susana Narotzky with reference to the Spanish case, a framework of ‘moral economy,’ centred around calls for dignity, while underlying the failure of the state in protecting and caring for citizens (Narotzky 2016, 75).

This moment of dislocation, the response to the moral shock, seems to have been reflected also on the practices that other movements were used to employ up to that point. According to an activist, the ‘squares movement’ emerged as a response to a feeling that the existing modes of protest and disruption no longer worked. The crisis of the system seems to have had disrupted also the prospects of mobilization and subversion:

[…] we reached a point where, after a lot of traditional demonstration, rallies, etc., saying that something, for several months, that something needs to be done, something different, something persisting, permanent, something that is not, how to say, the traditional parade/demonstration. (Interlocutor 5)

The notions of ‘permanence’ and ‘persistence’ are particularly interesting as they reflect the idea of fixing protest in space – taking control of space – which is at the heart of the logic of squatting, a practice with long history in Greece, that seems to have evolved into the occupation practice adopted by the movement (Papataxiarchis 2018, 233–235).

Other individuals stress that anti-austerity protests, involving traditional forms of mobilization (e.g. national strikes) ‘did not bring the desired result, the overthrowing of the memorandums or even political change. It was natural that the people would embrace a new form of protest’ (Interlocutor 2). The bottom line seems to be that at a time when the very terms of how government and party politics is configured are doubted or subverted, ‘traditional’ forms of struggle are also rendered ineffective, prompting individuals and collectives to improvise and innovate.4

The notion of sovereignty does not appear central at first sight, at least not with its ‘proper’ name. On the other hand, this notion seems to be important in the movement’s practice, that of exercising control over space via occupation and ‘permanence,’ but also, as we will see later on, in the aspiration of individuals to ‘create meaning’ for themselves through certain practices and pre-figurative politics as the ‘square’ did things; it established groups, processes, informal institutions, certain rituals and socialities (Papapavlou 2015). It also manifests in the way that respondents experienced the breaking of the representational bond with the political class. If ‘the people’ and their will was sovereign, at least to some extent, then the government would have not turned directly against them and their mandate.

Moreover, the role of sovereignty is revealed when looking closer at the root of social grievances. Why are individuals frustrated and revolting against the political class? Why is anger channelled against the government but also against the parliament and against external institutions, like the EU? It seems that blame-attribution frames are targeting these actors and institutions as the ones responsible for the country’s downfall and the devastation of people’s lives, which leads us to the next section and the role of the ‘antagonist’ in shaping the movement’s collective identity.
The ‘antagonist(s)’ as a common point of identification

Frustration and anger triggered the mobilization and motivated people to protest and occupy the squares, yet there were more factors contributing to the endurance and massive character of the movement. One such factor is what lies at the heart of every collective identity: the identification of difference, of the ‘other’ as both external and constitutive of our own identity. In certain social/historical junctures, difference can easily translate into antagonism and the ‘other’ may be identified as an opponent or even enemy (Mouffe 2000; Papataxiarchis 2014). As Jasper notes, collective identities ‘become political when an external enemy can be blamed for a group’s problems’; and while negative emotions like anger are directed outwards, groups are held together by positive feelings like love, hope and trust (Jasper 2014, 209). For the external observer, an antagonist that is quickly identified in our case is the ‘political class’. The very spatial dynamics of the movement performed a struggle between the institutional politics of the parliament and the ‘direct democracy’ incarnated in the square’s assembly. As the Popular Assembly stressed, protesters would not leave the squares if they did not first kick out ‘Government, Troika, Banks, Memoranda and all those that exploit us’ (Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos 2011, 280).

This opposition was expressed in various terms. We can see the rejection of the political class in the famous Greek gesture of ‘moutza’, often directed against the parliament, as well as in vitriolic slogans like ‘thieves,’ ‘crooks in prison,’ ‘get the troika and out of here’ (Votsis 2011). Such views, seen and performed in the so-called ‘upper square,’ often entailed the rejection of current parliamentarism itself, as it identified parliamentary politics with corruption and self-serving politicians. The gesture was repeated some months later by students at national parades commemorating Greece’s ‘No’ to the Italian invasion of Greece in 1940 and the country’s entrance in the Second World War. To return to the theme of dignity, the ubiquitous ‘moutza,’ a characteristic ‘informal gesture of dishonour,’ seems to have been the spontaneous way of symbolizing citizens’ distancing, the breaking up of the political bond with the ruling class, a ‘return of the insult’ (Papataxiarchis 2018, 238). In this sense, the existence of a common opponent or enemy, of actors or entities that were considered as exterior and hostile to the movement was not only a crucial mobilizing factor, but also an element that connected and held together individuals and groups that might have had little else in common.

When asked what the link among different people in the squares was, a participant in the movement spontaneously responded: ‘the common enemy,’ adding ‘also participation itself’ (Interlocutor 3). When prompted to clarify who that enemy was, they explained: ‘I think it was primarily the incumbent government […] and secondary the European elites, Germany’ (Interlocutor 3). Another activist, coming from a different political camp, answered in the exact same way when asked about what linked the people in the squares (‘the common enemy’) and described the process of what seems to be an almost spontaneous building of cross-class/cross-sectoral links among frustrated individuals and groups:

What happened in the mobilisations […] is that the walls between citizens, right-wing, centrist or left-wing, fell, and what rose was a wall between the citizens as a whole, as a block, and the government, the parties that supported austerity and neoliberalism, the economic elites, media elites, etc.; those were the enemies. […] Mobilisations were against austerity and
against the corrupt elites [...] [people] came from everywhere, from the far left to the far right. (Interlocutor 2)

The moment of crisis, the sense of ‘losing the ground beneath one’s feet’, was directly linked to the wrongdoings of specific actors and the consequences of a specific ideology and mode of governance (‘neoliberalism’, ‘capitalist globalisation’).

The movement was primarily against the government, but also the [official] opposition, which [...] was ready to come to things and do one of the same [...] it was against the European Union, as it was obvious that [austerity] policies were imposed by the EU [...] it was against [...] capitalist globalization. (Interlocutor 5)

[The movement] was against the government and of its handling [of the crisis], but also ... primarily [...] there was a lot of anger against the EU, and how they handled it [means the crisis], and how [...] either Markel or Sarkozy treated Greece. (Interlocutor 11)

Along with these narratives, we find classic bread and butter grievances: the anxiety of suddenly being unemployed, with no social or health security, being burdened with more taxes while being impoverished at the same time (In.gr2011). The ‘plain people’ frustrations and the more ‘ideological’ interpretations, the personal and the structural met, and in some cases converged. These accounts of the movement and blame- attribution narratives circulating within it are crucial for understanding the catalyzing effect of the crisis itself, but also what can be described as a state of uncertainty and contingency in terms of channelling anger towards the formation of a common sense of identity and the orientation of political action.

We can see above how the ‘shock’ of the crisis, as reflected in the words of respondents and voices captured in media accounts, generated frustration and anger, an anger that was turned into outrage and indignation once the government (‘robbers,’ ‘the common enemy’) along with other external actors (EU) were identified as those that have not just failed to fulfil their role, but also have turned against the people (see Jasper 2011, 291–292; 2014, p. 210). In a sense, this forms the first element (diagnostic) of the movement’s master frame, which is an injustice frame, adopted by groups of people when the actions of an authority (e.g. government) are defined as essentially unjust; something that leads to moral indignation once the ‘problem’ is linked back to the authority that is held responsible and/or blamed (Gamson 1992). This is not surprising as this kind of framing is ‘fairly ubiquitous across movements advocating for some form of political and/or economic change’ (Benford and Snow 2000, 616).

To summarize, what was clear at the peak of mobilization was the ‘problem’ (the realization of the crisis) and the identification of the opponent/enemy, which was expressed in targeting the two traditional parties (PASOK, then incumbent, and secondarily ND, then official opposition) and also EU ‘elites’. Maybe this explains why in the first general election after the movement, in May 2012, ND and PASOK were plunged, with the protest vote being spread in myriads of other parties. In this sense, the anger that was expressed in the streets in 2011 was also expressed in the polls in 2012 initially as a rejection of the political ‘establishment’ (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis 2014). After the initial shock, most of the protest vote was directed to the radical left SYRIZA – that promised to restore popular sovereignty and reinvigorate democracy (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014) – and secondarily towards the radical right ANEL – that built its rhetoric more on national sovereignty.
and national pride/dignity (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2013). Indeed, these were the only two parties that had openly spoken in favour of the squares movement (although with sharply contradicting ideological framings).

**Remedying representation’s impasse: the performativity of presence**

A significant function of the movement focused on articulating a response, a remedy to the shortcomings of representative democracy under conditions of economic stress and limited sovereignty (part of the second element, the *prognostic* function of the movement’s framing). This was incarnated in the performative operation of the assembly: *the remedying of a malfunctioning representation with ‘presentation’*. Both in media reports and in our interviews, a characteristic catchphrase was recurrent: ‘*We are here!*’. Interestingly, the declaration of *being present* was often accompanied by the acknowledgement that people are not even sure about what they are aiming for: ‘*We are here, and we react. We might not know how and what exactly we want, but we moved, we escaped hypnosis. And we are willing to continue. Towards where? We’ll see …*’ (Papamatthaiou 2011). This sense of ‘not knowing’ what to fight for, not having a clear sense of orientation, evident in the early days of the movement, was also described in the conservative press: ‘*Today, they are all together in the streets […] no one among them knows what exactly they want, nor how to demand it*’ notes a journalist spending a night at the square with a heterogeneous company of young people (Margomenou 2011). A left-wing intellectual and later SYRIZA Minister, described the movement in similar words, stressing that what the square created was a sense of rediscovering what it means ‘*to be present […] in a public space,*’ a notion of ‘‘I am here,” along with others, trying to find what we have in common, or maybe [what] we should have had in common for a while now’ (Anagnostopoulou 2011).

Participants in the movement recall the same sensation, adding the dimension of ‘producing meaning’ through certain practices:

>[P]eople entered a process of finding new meaning […] with everything collapsing around them, you know, when you enter a form of struggle that you control yourself and you are not simply following someone … I mean, in the squares, there was no ‘line’ coming from someone else […] So, when someone enters this kind of struggle, at the same time they create meaning for themselves, for what they do, they do not follow a party, a vanguard […]. (Interlocutor 3)

In this sense, despite the lack of clear goals and specific demands, the presence at the square, the participation in the assembly and in the various groups, both for ‘ideologues’ and ‘plain people,’ was understood as part of ‘filling a void,’ remedying the trauma of the absence of meaning.

>[P]articipation was bodily, constant, it had to do with the production of discourse, with practices, propaganda towards outside, towards society, towards those from above […] There was a mentality that what we live was something like a dictatorship, so we need to confront it with our bodies. (Interlocutor 5)

Presence, then, was experienced and signified by individuals as a kind of symbolic and bodily re-assertion of control in space (and of space), indeed of the sovereignty of the people, whether this had to do with taking collective decisions on activist action or
with opposing police suppression with their bodies. For the ‘lower’ part of the square, and for the more politicized activists participating in the assembly, a crucial operation of what can be called ‘political pedagogy’ in radical thinking was also taking place, against a political system that was considered not only unrepresentative but also suppressive or even outright anti-democratic (Interlocutor 3).

At the ‘upper’ square, sentiments of radical rejection of the political system, even of anti-parliamentarism and nationalist resentment seemed to be more significant factors motivating protest. There, along the bottom/up opposition (people/underdogs vs political elites) an in/out divide (Greeks vs external forces and especially Germany) was articulated (on articulations of populist with nationalist logics, see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). As an emblematic figure of the upper square – an orthodox bishop riding his quad bike during the mobilisations – put it, what was at stake was to ‘not sell-off Greece,’ in an interview full of references to the ‘resistance ethos’ of Greeks and to external forces that supposedly always wanted to subjugate the nation (Bitsika 2011). The response to the country’s maltreatment, then, seemed to be a call to be more patriotic, to restore national sovereignty. Interestingly, the borders between radical-democratic ideas and nationalist/patriotic sentiments were not always clear cut. On the one hand, the bishop of the upper square managed to bring together in his narrative Ancient Greece with Marx, and national indignation with EAM, the resistance movement of the 1940s against German occupation associated with the Greek Communist Party (Bitsika 2011). On the other hand, an anarchist participant in the movement openly acknowledged the nationalist tendencies of the upper square, yet insisted that this was ‘one movement’ (Interlocutor 3).

The very presence at the square seems to have given a sense of belonging and purpose that kept the people together (Jasper 2011, 290–291, 2014, p. 209), this emotional reciprocity that also motivated them to keep mobilizing in the pursuit of ‘new meaning’ (Ruiz-Junco 2013, 50), despite their differences and often unclear orientation in a way that seems to have fused the means (occupying, protesting) with the ends of the movement (the practice of assembly as a sense of taking back some control, becoming relevant, or even ‘sovereign’ in the sense of deciding movement strategy in common).

**The ‘legacy’ of the square: a ‘healed’ representation gap?**

The first time that protesters tried to re-capture the mobilizing momentum of the 2011 squares movement was in February 2015, when people gathered in Syntagma square to express their support to the newly elected SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government while it tried to negotiate an end to austerity policies with Greece’s European partners. Both progressive and conservative media outlets immediately drew a direct link from 2011 to 2015: a commentator in the left-wing Efsyn noted that these mobilisations were a ‘continuation of the spirit’ of the squares movement; another one in the conservative Kathimerini commented, rather sarcastically, ‘Second time indignation’ (Gavriilidis 2015; Kounalaki 2015). People that had participated both in the 2011 Aganaktismenoi and in the 2015 ‘Breath of Dignity’ mobilisations drew similar links but did not consider these new rallies of significance. In 2015, there was no subversive potential, no aspiration for the radical creation of something new through self-management and popular initiative from below, no intention to assert control over space, to ‘occupy’. Now, the mobilizing
citizens were happy to be represented by the new government as they saw their voices, grievances and critique being expressed at the EU level:

[...] it is the first time that we have pro-government demonstrations [...] it was relatively spontaneous, but at the same time also organized by SYRIZA, however the people in the streets weren’t only [voters of] SYRIZA. [...] we somehow demonstrated our support towards the government that was negotiating, and it was the first government that negotiated the terms of ... a new loan agreement? Of the exodus from the memoranda? Whatever was significant for that government. They seemed sincere, doing the job that they were elected to do, so it was a spontaneous and pleasant process [...] in practice, it wasn’t just people that were members of SYRIZA ... they were also voters or friends [of SYRIZA], people that were curious, that might have wanted to vote for SYRIZA but didn’t, because it was a period with very high approval ratings of the Greek government [...] so, it was a nice story. I didn’t think that we could achieve something other than just state that the Greek society stands by the government (Interlocutor 5).

Another participant in the 2015 pro-government rallies added that this was connected to the squares movement, ‘it is the same people [...] but not equally massive, and because it was a similar form of action, of course there is continuity’. The key difference in 2015 was that people now wanted ‘political delegation’, as they were not in the mood to mobilise all the time. They want a political representative that does what they delegate them to do. [...] with the SYRIZA government, there was no reason for most people to get to the street. [...] didn’t we elect a government? They should do [the job] ... . (Interlocutor 2)

Elements of continuity did exist, yet there was clearly a different demand: one now based on delegation/representation. The moment of dislocation, the ‘moral shock’ along with the radical rejection of the political system had been partially healed, as anti-austerity movements had found (at least partially) institutional representation in the new government. The demand for the restoration of popular sovereignty and an end to austerity remained, but now was directed outwards. Thus, the enmity of the rallies was directed against those frustrating popular aspirations: European and German ‘elites’. However, one needs to be cautious to not overestimate the significance of those events. It is very telling, in this sense, that one of our less politicized interlocutors, that was active in the 2011 squares movement, did not even recall the ‘Breath of Dignity’ rallies: ‘No, I don’t even remember them [...] I don’t remember it at all’ (Interlocutor 11).

A ‘third return’ to the squares came with the NO rallies for the referendum of July 2015 on a new economic adjustment programme put on the table by the EU Commission. This time, the link with the incumbent SYRIZA was almost organic, with Tsipras addressing the masses gathered at Syntagma square (Bolton 2015). These mobilisations were broader than those of February of the same year, as more radical groups saw the opportunity of reviving the subversive potential of 2011. What our interviews revealed however is that, in the end, people mobilizing for NO to a new austerity programme were rather pragmatic with their hopes and goals. A significant part of them seems to have treated this more as a symbolic gesture, ‘because no one believed that they would achieve something’ (Interlocutor 3). ‘People, then, had started to understand that [...] we are losing the game, so let’s throw a last “shot in the air”, let’s see what happens, let’s help a bit more’ (Interlocutor 5).
There are different ways in which one can interpret the trajectory from the 2011 squares movement and the demand for direct/genuine democracy and dignity to the 2015 referendum rallies and this symbolic ‘shot in the air’ against austerity, and there are always normative pitfalls at both sides of the argument. One explanation is that the significant gap in representation in 2011 that made mass mobilization sustainable for several weeks was finally healed and that political representation rebooted under a new realigned party system. Another explanation, more pessimistic, would be that SYRIZA capitalized on the subversive potential of the squares only to make a ‘pragmatic’ shift and capitulate to EU pressures in the end. Yet the fact that SYRIZA maintained most of its electoral base after capitulation hints towards the assumption that the party in practice represented the inherent ambiguity of the 2011 mobilisations (Balampanidis and Katsambekis 2018). It pushed towards a radical break with austerity yet backed down right before this could turn into rupture with the EU, which could have had unpredictable consequences for the country and most of the population. The demand for popular/national sovereignty found its institutional materialization in a non-binding referendum, which, however, did not provide mandate for a ‘Grexit’, thus leaving enough room for manoeuvre to Tsipras after he chose to accept the third economic adjustment programme for Greece in the summer of 2015, while the snap election of September 2015 (in which SYRIZA won again with its voter share practically intact) provided another ‘point of diffusion’ for popular frustrations and a fresh democratic mandate under the new circumstances.

This ‘third return’ to Syntagma was linked to the squares of 2011 in the sense that it was an act of empowerment. It empowered those who spoke on behalf of ‘the people,’ those who in 2011 had challenged the political system and established political parties. The rally was massive, but now reversing the spatial dynamics of antagonism. At the NO rallies of 2015, people rallying outside the parliament were not extending a dismissive ‘moutza’ against the government. They were there to empower it as their representatives. We could even go as far as to suggest that this rally was the official conclusion of Aganaktismenoi movement, and more generally of the mass anti-austerity, anti-establishment movements that were born in the crisis. It reaffirmed the outcome of the ‘squares’ and the radical realignment of the political system with the replacement of PASOK by SYRIZA as the second pillar of Greece’s two-party system (Tsatsanis and Teperoglou 2016).

Recurring emotions in the discursive data we analysed, provide a useful pathway here. Returning to Syntagma square as a place of hope (hope in restoring ‘power to the people’) and common identification could be understood as part of an effort ‘to recreate the effervescence that launched the movement’ in the first place (Collins 2001, 31). This was facilitated by the fact that SYRIZA had made ‘hope’ – the positive pole of the ‘moral battery’ that energized participation in 2011 – the core signifier for its campaign in 2015 (Katsambekis 2016b). To put it in other words, the third element of the movement’s injustice frame, that of motivation, seems to have endured and resurfaced. Then, it seems that what was initiated in 2011 (partly) ended in 2015 with the capitulation of SYRIZA, to which protesters had delegated their hopes for change and a reversal of austerity. In this context, we can also understand the passage from ‘hope’ to the kind of ‘depression’ earlier described by some of our respondents. Identification with a movement’s goals, as indicated in the relevant literature, explains ‘why participants can feel despondent or bitter when a movement ends’, even more so when its goals are not attained (Adams 2003; Jasper 2014,
In this case, a key goal not achieved was the ‘end of austerity’, while the key goal achieved was overthrowing those that were held responsible for the crisis.

The next time that masses would attempt to return at Syntagma (2018–2019 Prespa Agreement protests) would be to challenge exactly this new configuration of the political system and SYRIZA’s position in it, thus signalling that a new cycle had opened. But that is well beyond the scope of our study (see Balampanidis et al. 2021).

**Concluding remarks**

In our analysis of popular mobilisations during the outbreak of the Greek crisis we have focused first on the moment of dislocation, the collective ‘trauma’ or ‘moral shock’, the uncertainty triggered by the realization of the country’s collapse and the deterioration of living standards. We then examined the operation of blame-attribution and of identifying an ‘enemy’ to finally look at explorations for a ‘remedy’, whether that was an abstract notion of presence against a failed or malfunctioning representation or that of improvised institutions of self-government and self-realization (assemblies). What this revisiting of the squares highlights is not a clear picture about the role of sovereignty that we initially anticipated, but rather that of essential ambiguity. The undisputed common point of reference for frustrated masses at the heart of the Greek crisis remained one of affective nature (anger, frustration, grievance against identified culprits, mixed with hope and aspiration invested on possible alternatives), which was not a priori necessarily channeled towards a specific ideological orientation. However, emotions around ‘crisis’, malfunctions of representation and the loss of (popular) sovereignty, provide a useful pathway for us to trace the conclusion of a mobilization cycle that results in the radical realignment of Greece’s political system.

What elevated the common point of reference of the movement in 2011 to a common point of identification, was the recognition of a common enemy: the then government, as well as national and European political ‘elites’ responsible for enforcing and implementing austerity. The framing of blame-attribution led to different significations: those at the ‘upper square’ built more on a sense of national humiliation, something encapsulated in slogans about ‘traitors’ to the nation or against Germany, identifying contemporary political figures with Nazi occupiers and stressing the need to restore national sovereignty; those at the ‘lower square’ built on narratives of direct-participatory democracy and aspirations for self-government and self-realization, advocating for a more genuine revitalization of popular sovereignty. What remained common for both strands that were discernible in 2011 yet diverged and were dispersed in different kind of mobilisations after that, is the symbolic significance of the Syntagma square itself, as it remains today the emblematic topos for mass mobilisations of different kinds of groups and initiatives, which links back to hope and aspiration, and thus the energizing role of a ‘moral battery’. What significantly changed, and this, we assume, influenced both the numbers and endurance of consequent mobilisations, was the role of representation. The ‘logic of delegation’, often invoked by activists with regret or frustration, seems to have marked a moment of closing the trauma of radical uncertainty and dislocation thus leading (temporarily?) to a realigned and more stable party system from 2015 onwards. The emotions of protest captured in our analysis show that a contradictory dynamic between frustration/anger and hope was at the heart of the political system’s realignment...
that saw the rise of SYRIZA to power (2015–2019) and its establishment as a key pillar of the political system.

Our analysis demonstrates the merits of combining conceptual tools and insights from poststructuralist political theory, discourse analysis, social movement studies and the sociology of emotions. It demonstrates how such an integrated methodology can shed light on how a ‘crisis of representation’ is lived and experienced from below, providing crucial insight not just to the internal affective workings of a movement, but also to how these can help us understand its legacy. Finally, the capturing of emotions and the mapping/analysis of signification processes of ‘crisis’ and representation from below, provided a more concrete and tangible account of the rather abstract notion of dislocation and its relation to the concept of ‘moral shock’. This highlights the need for more interdisciplinary work in this area and the untapped potential of better grounding works that are either mostly theoretical/conceptual or focused on ‘supply side’ actors and explanations to the lived experiences of groups and individuals.

Notes
1. According to relevant research, the issue of ‘sovereignty’ has been among the most persisting ones in media discussions around the ‘memoranda’ throughout the period between 2010 and 2015 (Kostopoulos 2018).
2. If one shifts the focus here from discursive formations to cultural practices, and from political theory to anthropology, an analogy can be found in what ethnographers identify as ‘key symbols’ in certain cultures (Ortner 1973).
3. Material devastation was a crucial contributing factor to the demonstrations: ‘We were discussing about our impoverishment and about how this could be opposed,’ notes one activist. Then adds: ‘Violent impoverishment, constant austerity policies, the broadening of inequalities, rising unemployment, the inability of institutional actors, like parties and trade unions, to mobilise people’ (Interlocutor 5). This last point, links material devastation and frustration to a crisis in the representational bond which does not only affect parties, but also interest groups and institutional actors, like unions. The failed promise of prosperity mentioned earlier along with the breaking of the representational/political bond (Papataxiarchis 2018) surface here vividly.
4. What to some appeared as a novel form of organising protest (the ‘occupation’) actually has a long tradition in Greece, especially among anarchist circles, with the most recent wave of autonomous ‘spaces’ being established after the ‘December’ youth uprising of 2008 (Papataxiarchis 2018, 234).
5. Participant observation shows that the discourse expressed through the Popular Assembly documents was not necessarily an ‘unmediated’ expression of the people participating in it, as individuals and groups already active in radical left political parties and anarchist political groups significantly influenced the content and character of those texts. In this sense, the indeed unprecedented and often improvised practice of ‘direct democracy’ seems to have co-existed with ‘institutional politics’ all along (Balamanidis 2011).
6. ‘[A]n insult emblem that involves a forward hand gesture, palm outward, with fingers spread upward’ (Matsumoto, Frank, and Hwang 2013, 80).

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**Appendix**

**Table A1.** Articles collected/processed on the ‘squares movement’ of summer 2011.

| Newspaper/website | Number of articles processed |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| *Eleftherotypia* (centre-left) | 52 |
| *Kathimerini* (centre-right) | 40 |
| *Avgi* (left-wing, affiliated to SYRIZA) | 93 |
| *To Vima* (centre-left) | 19 |
| *Athens Voice* (free press, centrist) | 9 |
| *Proto Thema* (right-wing) | 5 |
| *Protagon.gr* (liberal-centrist) | 4 |

**Table A2.** Articles collected/processed on the pro-government anti-austerity protests of February 2015.

| Newspaper/website | Number of articles processed |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| *Kathimerini* (centre-right) | 6 |
| *Efimerida Syntaktou* (left-wing) | 30 |
| *Ta Nea* (centre-left) | 4 |