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# 'Take Five': understanding Greek manifestations of 'disrespect'

Rodanthi Tzanelli, 17th November 2011

## Subjects:

- [Rodanthi Tzanelli](#) [1]

Parading on Greek National Days used to be the quintessential celebration of Greek identity. In the age of austerity it has evolved into an arena of contestation of rituals Greeks used to take for granted.

About the author

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Political and economic analysts speak of an economic '[End Game](#) [2]' for Greece. The country has now seen past this point, with disorganised riots and protests that put unemployed youth, pensioners, family breadwinners, union leaders, anarchists and principled ideologues in the same boiling pot. Sociological explananda of 'social movement' are highly unstable in this context that is dominated by economic, political and social uncertainty. For the first time since the 1974 political restoration public anger and frustration directed towards those who appear to (mis-)manage Greece's political and economic future and image in Europe has produced some very serious cracks in national self-narration in public. People look back to the past to articulate their grim future, crafting rather bleak narratives that put the custodians of official historical records in a pretty embarrassing position.

The attack upon institutionalised self-narration manifested during this year's 'Ohi' celebrations, a National Day commemorating the alleged refusal of Greek dictator John Metaxas to accept the Axis Forces' demand for Greece to surrender on 28 October 1940. This year protests and demonstrations swamped the country, disrupting the usual ritual of speeches, school festives and parades. In several towns and cities the parades – themselves a controversial fascist ritual revived during the colonel's regime (1967-1974) with vengeance – had to be cancelled, as protesters shouted insults to officials and the government, accusing them of playing now the role of dictators. This strange historical montage slowly liberates Greeks from the shackles of authoritarian traditions – but at what cost? YouTube is today populated with such un-choreographed outbursts, accompanied by vicious anti-government jokes but also accusations of exploitation of the common folk. In difficult moments such as the present, we fail to recognise that the 'state' and the 'government', these shadowy arbitrators of freedom, are an externalisation of public will. In Greece some overlapping messages are more concise: as the complaint goes, PA.SO.K. has failed to deliver on its promises for 'recovery', allowing international loan sharks to devour the country's last few breadcrumbs and the major European players (France, Germany) to re-establish a Mediterranean 'protectorate'. On the back of such discourse one observes the resurrection of World War II racist stereotyping that portrays those who just want to rescue some of the money they lent to Greece as an evil 'Occupation Army'.

The rest of Europe is watching in agony as Greece slides into an all-embracing chaos and the European Union's biggest players desperately strategise to change this detrimental situation. From my standpoint the chaotic public response makes perfect sense – not only as a reaction to constant cuts that condemn people to penury, but also as a pervasive feeling that classroom lessons on a fictional Greek glory were a sham. Forget Acropolis and ancient Greek philosophy's contribution to European civilization already (forget relevant modern tourism for a while too, as foreign visitors to the country fear for their safety these days); but don't you dare forget that foreigners took everything and our rulers left us bankrupt. The burning bonfires in Syntagma Square, Athens, are solid proof that mobs have now moved beyond consideration for the long-term consequences this situation might have on Greece's global credibility as a healthy polity. The underdog culture made its triumphant return for the first time after the hard-earned democratic restitution of 1974.



I want to unpack the deeper structures of Greek thought through [an image](#) [3] that circulated in cyberspace widely and arrived in my Facebook feed (twice). Reminiscent of old Greek slapstick traditions, the photo depicts a student in Larissa's parade extending his hand towards the spot designated for officials during parades. With his palm facing local administrators and army officials, all five fingers stretch in a gesture any viewer would mistake for an enthusiastic greeting. But I grew up in Greece and know a bit about the significance of this embodied dramaturgy, which speaks volumes about the chasm between the 'people' and its designated sovereigns: on such national ceremonies, parading students are supposed to turn their head in the direction of the local elite as a sign of respect. Just a few days before the 'Ohi' Day, I (mistaken for a student?) received via Facebook several invitations not to pay attention to this custom (apparently, a widespread invitation on the web). On 28 October this call was followed by the aforementioned photograph, making it even more clear that the schoolchildren – probably following the general spirit – had joined the crowds of the so-called 'Greek Indignants'. The proliferation of episodes on the same day across the country made this incident a centrepiece in the news for a while (see as examples of parade disturbances videos from [Xanthi](#) [4] in Western Thrace, [Kalamata](#) [5] in Southern Greece, and [Thessaloniki](#) [6], where the military parade was cancelled due to demonstrations and the visiting President of Democracy had to flee the event).. A relevant Facebook page was subsequently set up in support of this pupil's cause, which today has over 3,000 followers and discussants.

What can cultural outsiders make of this picture? Not much: the photographed pupil's gesture articulates a kinaesthetic of indignation decipherable only within Greek culture. Showing five fingers to your interlocutor – analogous to Fatimah's hand fortune-tellers use both as a charm and a spell – was an old curse prompting the recipient to lose their five senses and thus all sensory communication with the world. In Greek folk cultures of the village such so-called *moútzes* were 'offered' to those deemed to be socially incompetent, cognitively impaired or plain stupid (to the date, Greek culture is not kind to disability). The gesture is now widespread across Greece as part of habitus slang. In electronic channels the image of the student with the *moútzza* was also accompanied with the Greek expression 'Parte ta, na min sas ta chrostame' (=have the *moútzes*, so that we owe you nothing), which often follows the act of *moútzoma*. The expression nicely (even though indecorously) draws the image of a broken social contract, the demise of a civilized relationship between rulers and ruled and its replacement with a variation of what anthropologists term 'negative reciprocity' ('Receive my slang, which amounts to nothing, for I gave you my trust and you betrayed me - I owe you nothing!').

Perversely, negative reciprocities develop where two parties are locked into a relationship of mutual recognition (of status). Instead of completely breaking down, this relationship turns into its negative equivalent in critical moments. Counter-intuitively Greeks destroy public property in the knowledge that those they harm are essential partners in the damaged political relationship they cannot escape (harming themselves along the way). The state's current retaliation (in arresting, expelling from school and investigating the 'moútzza maker') also sustains a negative reciprocal discourse of sorts. There is a raging debate at the moment on whether the said student is to be targeted at all, as he merely articulated public sentiment at large. In [Patras](#) [7] the 'Ohi' parade was interrupted by the local band itself, which replaced the Greek national anthem with a Mikis Theodorakis resistance song that invoked the junta days, prompting the crowds to join this bizarre pilgrimage to another dark page of Greek history. The global circulation of these acts of defiance (via blogs, YouTube clips and newspapers) generated a simulacrum of history, blending the past with the country's future. As a caustic article on the incident pointed out, the military elite present in such parades do not appear to respect the custom, why should the future generation play a conformist game already rooted in those pasts the country struggles to forsake?

Such small acts of defiance to tradition reveal both a fissure to a, till yesterday, inviolable social contract, and the return of a resentful, underdog attitude toward national and global democratic institutions. Giving five is not just an innocent joke but an embodied articulation of resentment with global implications (and applications).





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Created 11/17/2011 - 13:13

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[3] [http://to-gamato.blogspot.com/2011/10/blog-post\\_5654.html](http://to-gamato.blogspot.com/2011/10/blog-post_5654.html)

[4]

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[5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obsruZ9XGjg&feature=related>

[6] [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5G\\_rpnJJC4&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5G_rpnJJC4&feature=related)

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