

Unpacking and undoing ‘the crisis’: database activism for strange times

IMAGE

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What is the role of social scientists (broadly defined) in times of crisis? How do we document, historicize, analyse and archive experiences at times of crisis? And how do we do it in a climate of anti-intellectualism on the one hand and information overload on the other? What might actually be meaningful in the long-run? Should we be creating new data or might there be a case to be made for pooling and organising existing scholarship? These are questions that have preoccupied us for some time now, starting with the so-called ‘Greek crisis’, and in response to which we set up [to archeio/the archive project](#).

Responding to crisis with a database

[To archeio/the archive project](#) and its first action/intervention, the [Greek Crisis Literature Database](#), came about in the summer of 2017, a couple of years after those heady early months of 2015, in which negotiations between the Greek government and the troika occupied the headlines both in Greece and abroad. Living through the crisis as well as watching the crisis from afar, as citizens and researchers, left us with a range of thoughts and emotions, not least of all [problematizing](#) our own and others’ impulse to respond in real time.

Real time responses, we argued, could be understood as ‘essays’: attempts to make sense of new and unfolding realities in contexts of uncertainty where existing frameworks of understanding had been decimated. Over time, however, how many of these responses ‘stick’? How many form part of future action? How many responses evolve into engaged scholarship? How might we contribute something lasting, meaningful, and substantial?

The **Greek Crisis Literature Database** was one response to these questions. The database contains references and links to the works of social scientists who have published their research on Greece over the last ten plus years. The database is currently organised by author, publication and date, with tags corresponding to author keywords, as well as tags created by the team (currently the authors of this article) that loosely categorise the publications thematically. Included are publications in English as well as Greek, and links are provided to institutional repositories, the authors’ own webpage and other repositories where visitors might be able to download the articles.

Databases, social scientists and activists

Databases are at the core of modern [institutional and everyday life](#), gathering, organising, and making accessible the search and retrieval of pieces of information that shape it.

As researchers, we are surrounded by and adept at using as well as creating databases: library catalogues, online searches, Zotero libraries, SPSS and NVivo analyses. We are also regularly asked to populate databases for audit purposes (institutional research repositories). We are interested in the literature review as a database.

A survey of past ways of thinking and carrying out research on a given topic, the literature review is part of our academic development and of becoming experts in a body of knowledge ([Hart, 1998](#)).

In the clinical and applied social sciences, the literature review plays an iconic role: it is the (systematic) literature review that forms the backbone of clinical and practice guidelines in medical, health and social care in post-industrialised societies as well as in the majority world (e.g. [Cochrane Review](#), [Campbell Collaboration](#) and [Eldis](#)).

The intellectual endeavour of the literature review lies in the attempts to order its individual items, to tell a story out of them. It is that ‘synthesis’ and the imagination we use in creating a review database, as Juliette Singh argues, that keeps us ‘tethered’ to an increasingly precarious academia ([Singh, 2018, p. 22](#)).

Yet, as [Manovich \(1999\)](#) pointed out over 20 years ago, databases also represent the world as a list of items which refuse to be ordered. Before a literature review becomes a story, it is a list of texts selected for their relevance to a topic. So, why do many of these literature review *databases* remain with their creators and/or in the realm of discrete academic and professional communities of interest? (for an exception see the [Hope Studies Database](#) and projects such as [Global Social Theory](#)).

By contrast, in the worlds of activism, releasing a database to the ‘wild’ is, what we have called and practised elsewhere, [a publics creating methodology](#): a set of practices aimed at connecting the cares and concerns of strangers that might otherwise remain private. Outside institutions of higher education, databases have increasingly become central to [activist practices on- and off-line \(Milan et al 2018\)](#).

Databases such as [Articipedia](#) and [Participedia](#), are open-access, crowdsourced/user-generated databases of creative activism on the one hand and public participation and democratic

innovations on the other. Both databases are intended as resources for various activist practices for social change.

Another example is [the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia \(A4BLiP\)](#), is a loose association of archivists, librarians, and allied professionals in the Philadelphia area who are responding to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement by, amongst other things, creating [an annotated bibliography](#) for anti-racist archival description.

Counter-public narratives of ‘crisis’

In launching the [Greek Crisis Literature Database](#), our wish was, and continues to be, to join others in broadening public narratives of the Greek financial crisis, and challenging their key tropes.

To understand rapid economic and social change it is important to go beyond polarised and entrenched narratives of, in this case, toxic political culture and human suffering, as well as to challenge the negative and often action-limiting emotional tone of such narratives ([Tsogopoulos, 2013](#); [Kyriakidou 2014](#); [Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2017](#)). Life, after all, during the period referred to as «η κρίση» / ‘the Greek crisis’, continued to unfold in a range of emotional hues. We knew from our own research [on families’ everyday lives during this period](#), as well as our own experiences, that the ground was rugged as well as smooth.

While the research contained in the [Greek Crisis Literature Database](#) is open for various syntheses, here are some things we have learnt in the process of constructing the database.

The essays and op-eds emerging from the social science community in the early days lacked empirical data and, especially, research on the ground that foregrounded people’s lived experiences of the crisis (for exceptions see [‘everyday life’](#) tag in the database).

The literature on the Greek crisis contains more articles which, informed by an anthropological and sociological sensibility that we bring to the database’s construction, we described as ‘theoretical/analytical’ pieces. These articles provide economic, political and policy analyses with little reference to people’s everyday lives and lived experiences through the crisis; they are analyses that focus far more on public life than they do on the personal and private lives that form the polis.

Although most, if not all, of the ‘theoretical/analytical’ articles do not inform us about specific actors, they do help us to make sense of the different, complex ways in which ‘Greece in crisis’ is called upon in the wider English-speaking scientific bibliography as a worst possible financial

'baseline' scenario against which the trajectory of other countries, also struggling with the global recession, is measured. In these more abstract pieces, Greece figures as an anti-paradigm; she and her crisis emerge as a sick, ailing and out-of-control body, a gendered figuration of a woman-child («γυναικόπαιδα») in need of parenting, rescue and resuscitation.

Furthermore, the 'crises' in Greece returned by the original search during the period of interest, were multiple: economic, political, migratory ('the refugee crisis'), as well as the crisis of values/rights/democracy, of citizenship, and of the environment. The geographical and temporal coalescing of different ruptures to everyday life and social structures suggests, on the one hand, that the 'Greek crisis' was far from monothematic; conversely, it also indicates a rise in 'crisis studies', a tendency to frame rapid economic and social change as 'crisis'.

Given these multiplicities, and mindful of how categories shape experience, one of the actions we took as a team was to change the way we spoke about the topic. We tried to stop using the term 'Greek crisis' and instead began to make reference to 'the last ten years'. By opting for the slightly longer, clunkier and more historically inspired phraseology, we opened up the possibility of attending to experiences beyond the familiar trope of crisis, as well as attending to how stories of rapid economic and social change are told, sedimented, gathered, stored and accessed.

Finally, and inspired by an '[epistemology of the south](#)', there is a case to be made that much of the research being carried out by colleagues in Greek institutions was not necessarily reaching either domestic or international publics.

'Protean' archives

By refracting the database through the medium of the ocean, [Melody Jue \(2020\)](#) reminds us that objects immersed in saltwater change their original state over time; they are in this sense 'protean', they take a plurality of forms.

Applying this thinking to the literature database, and releasing to the 'wild', disrupts our received understanding of it as a way of 'fixing' knowledge on a topic (by constructing a single narrative of 'crisis', in this case); it also disrupts notions of ownership (literature databases are, or at least should be, a commons). It is also a reminder that databases require 'cultivation' to be kept alive. But what does 'cultivating' a database entail for us?

An archive, it has been noted, is 'a place of dreams' ([Moss, 2008](#)), 'a space *and* time precisely so that we may find what is as yet un-lived in our lives' ([Giannachi, 2016](#)). Dreaming and searching requires us to think ourselves into different subject positions, those of [curators](#) and [memory](#)

[workers](#), who in collaboration with database users (who we imagine as members of the public as well as other researchers), might engage in ‘a process of refiguration’ ([Moss, 2008, p. 83](#)) of the ‘Greek crisis’. In this sense, the database and its archive home, are a methodology for collaboratively thinking through what other worlds are, something we look forward to pursuing with others over the coming years.

Additional information and acknowledgements

The [Greek Crisis Literature Database](#) is archived in [Goldsmiths Research Online](#) and can be freely downloaded. Funding details [here](#). We would like to acknowledge and thank Christina Tente who has supported [to archeio/the archive project](#) administratively over the last two years.

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