

desiderata require a rethinking of the meaning of key economic and political categories from the immediate post-war period, including the meaning of territorial and popular sovereignty, government and governance, the forms of social welfare and role of self-organisation and the challenge of ecopolitics as a new site of capitalist contradiction and key issue for radical left politics.

In short, while it would be premature to treat this book as the culmination of a long-running intellectual and political project, because the issues it explores are still live and urgent, it is a book that demands careful reading and reflection as a powerful illustration of the continued relevance of serious engagement with the political economy of uneven development and its contradictory, crisis-generating dynamic.

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*Crisis Spaces* constitutes not only a much-needed synthesis of the impact of the crisis in SE, but also a discursive contribution to the development of incipient transregional solidarity networks. The book is based on a wide range of evidence drawn from political economy, governance analysis, the examination of institutional and academic discourses and the exploration of new forms of grassroots resistance, but it is more than the sum of these perspectives. This is above all a work written with that particular blend of indignation, bitterness and sad irony that feels so familiar for readers from any of the countries under scrutiny – it is also, though, a hopeful statement that a different Europe is still possible and that southern contestation might be the spark that ignites further struggles.

Hadjimichalis provides a coherent analysis emphasising the similarities between Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain while also taking into account the specificities of their previous developmental paths. In my opinion the book's chief strength is the robust political-economic elaboration that supports its main argument, that is, that debt is not the cause but one of the effects of a crisis whose origins should be sought elsewhere, in the EU's regulatory architecture and its inability to correct – or the attempt to take advantage of – existing uneven

development patterns in the context of regional convergence processes, to the benefit of central European countries. From this perspective the crisis is reframed as an opportunity to turn debt management into an experimental form of governance that consolidates and expands previous inequalities. Hadjimichalis identifies structural antecedents to the crisis in the trajectory of southern European productive areas since the 1970s, including amongst others the absence of conditions for monetary union on equal terms with central and northern regions, the prioritisation of economic integration at the expense of political cohesion and the subsequent reconfiguration of the continental division of labour, the erosion of the south's industrial sectors and its specialisation in secondary circuits of capital in a context of deepened financialisation. These arrangements, together with EU's undemocratic governance scheme, allowed the implementation of austerity policies that Hadjimichalis reads as symptoms of a new Caesarism, following Gramsci's analysis to suggest the consolidation of a new financial totalitarianism during the crisis. The book connects with broader theoretical and political debates, such as the strategic articulation of economic and regulatory scales in the production of the EU's institutional space or the critique of economic discourses and geographical imaginations based on mainstream academic narratives, in line with the author's earlier assessment of NR. These scholarly aspects, however, remain as a background to the pressing drama of a crisis of reproduction in the south, which Hadjimichalis portrays through on-the-ground aspects of everyday life. In the following sections I will comment on some of these aspects using the case of Spain to expand the book's exploration.

### **From political economy to discourse analysis**

The first two chapters trace the rise and fall of intermediate industrial regions with their complex, interwoven social, economic and regulatory specificities – a phenomenon traditionally associated with *Terza Italia*'s industrial districts that Hadjimichalis identifies with SE more generally, avoiding the usual

celebratory tone to present the contradictions of these productive spaces and their structural weaknesses. Along with other factors, the book presents the erosion of these regions' industrial fabric after the Maastricht Treaty as a result of EU's 'indifference' towards southern specificities, but the process could also be defined as a calculated project. The debate about alternative trajectories of integration was still open in the early 1990s, when some political forces from the south warned about the catastrophic consequences of existing regional inequalities if economic convergence was not coupled with common political and welfare structures. In Spain, a sector of Izquierda Unida opposed Maastricht for its foreseeable impact on the south's productive fabric and the overall European project (Izquierda Unida, 1992). The growth of the party's electoral base until the mid-1990s suggests that scepticism about this particular vision for Europe was well articulated and shared by a sector of the population against the discourse of the right and social democrats. In this debate, critical economists cautioned that certain regulatory mechanisms would actually operate as peripheralisation devices. With the deterioration of its industrial capacity vis-à-vis north-central European regions, the south would be more dependent on goods manufactured in core countries, especially Germany; during a crisis this uneven trade flow and the divide between export- and import-oriented economies could easily become a rift between creditors and debtors. Hadjimichalis reminds us, however, that the working class and the local administrations of certain core regions were used as a first laboratory for this strategy of precarisation, a situation especially obvious in Germany after the unification and the Hartz reform. In my opinion, the relocation of this pressure on the workforce abroad can be understood politically, as an attempt to contain the emergence of more aggressive contestation profiles in central Europe.

The financial dynamics of the crisis are also related to this deviation of political and economic pressure towards the periphery. The severe control over SE is, amongst other factors, an attempt to avoid further destabilisation of central European banks, exposed not only to American subprime mortgages but also to the real estate bubbles of the

south. It should be borne in mind that the latter – particularly in Spain – were made possible by regulatory manoeuvres in the second half of the 1990s that rendered capital and land markets more flexible to allow the entry of foreign investment (Portas, 2017). German financial interests in Spain skyrocketed in the late 1990s alongside the extraordinary cycle of housing construction and following special measures facilitating the securitisation of mortgages and other assets (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015: 39–41). As Hadjimichalis suggests, this is not to reduce the responsibility of a bizarre domestic economic model that goes back to the 1960s and that many of us have long criticised. However, it is impossible to understand the enormity of the economic bubble in this country without noticing that Spanish and central European elites, along with many Spanish families attracted by an overinflated real estate market in the early 2000s, were united by financial speculation.

The ensuing collapse has been equally disproportionate, with over 700,000 eviction procedures going through the law courts since 2008 (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, 2018). The outbreak of the crisis, of course, did not put an end to financial opportunism but simply changed its contours. The analysis of *Crisis Spaces* could be extended to explore the rise of new ventures such as vulture funds and other speculative players willing to exploit the vulnerability of southern real estate sectors. In fact, in Spain the main regulatory response to the housing crisis so far – the creation of SAREB, an asset management company or 'bad bank' similar to Ireland's NAMA – can be understood as an attempt to save the main national industry, avoiding the fragmentation and dissemination of assets in foreign funds and containing downward price adjustment. In relation to sovereign debt, some estimates suggest that the Spanish burden could have been reduced to around a sixth of the level in 2012 – when Madrid requested the EU's financial assistance package – had it been monetised by means of traditional mechanisms, that is, through national central banks, a procedure prohibited by Maastricht Treaty's article 104 (Garzón, 2012).

The book then moves on to examine institutional discourses about the crisis, dismantling the myth of a lazy and unproductive south with a few pages of

quantitative evidence. In discourse analysis the forms of reception and re-appropriation of a message are as important as the truth it may contain, and this constitutes another opportunity to extend the book's inquiry. No doubt, a fraction of the middle classes, at least in Spain, has assimilated the moralising harangue about an irresponsible people that 'lived beyond its means', legitimising harsh retrenchment policies that the right had been willing to impose for decades. However, these discourses have also become fundamental to articulate new narratives from the left. Think, for instance, of Alexis Tsipras' inauguration at the time of his first mandate with a symbolic visit to the National Resistance Memorial at Kaisariani to honour Greek victims killed by Nazi forces during WWII, or Pablo Iglesias' 2014 debut speech in Berlin – 'Spain does not want to be a German colony' – surrounded by young emigrants at the start of the European election campaign. Podemos' first steps were indeed framed as an inversion of dominant EU discourses, presenting its programme as a national-popular liberation project, borrowing explicitly from Gramsci in a sense that ties in with Hadjimichalis' interpretation of the crisis as a new 'Southern Question'.

### **The limits of new politics**

The final sections of the book deal with the political consequences of the depression, with special attention to the ongoing crisis of social reproduction and forms of grassroots resistance and their connection to a previous genealogy of urban social movements, including union and neighbourhood struggles or World and European Social Forums. Although Hadjimichalis considers the spatiality of these struggles, it would be interesting to see subsequent developments in comparative studies analysing how this new class composition – understood in the classic operaist sense as the subjective articulation of an objective social structure through new forms of struggle – has turned the urban into a fundamental feature of mass contestation.

The concluding remarks are dedicated to exploring how these struggles translate into new experiments in representative democracy, another phenomenon that per se would require a monograph given its complex

evolution in the last 3–4 years. Podemos was perhaps the clearest case of a new political force that tried to incorporate aspects of local activism to face the challenge of government through a hybrid of direct and representative democracy. The actual configurations and results of that project, however, remain irregular at different scales and contexts. At the time of writing this piece, the party continues its long decline after its auspicious prospect in early 2015 when the emerging formation was setting the agenda of public debate and defeating the social democrats and even the right seemed possible at the national level. Since then, Podemos has lost a good deal of its capacity for political innovation and there seems to be a setback in its internal democracy, in the context of concerted media efforts to discredit its leaders and a shift of public attention to the Catalan affair. To date, the greatest achievement of the new political parties in Spain and beyond may have been to channel mass discontent against austerity programs into an electoral threat, forcing European institutions to abandon a harder approach, at least in countries with a greater share of the EU's gross domestic product (GDP). The quantitative easing programme undertaken by the European Central Bank (ECB) in 2015 to purchase national bonds, for instance, can be understood as a measure to protect national economies from aggressive financial speculation at a time when 'anti-systemic' formations were on the rise and the spectre of Syriza threatened to extend across the south. By the same token, the 'fractious' Greeks, less significant in the structure of the European economy, deserved a deepened punitive therapy intended as a cautionary measure, especially after they had challenged the troika with a clear 'OXI' to austerity in July 2015.

Hadjimichalis emphasises the local state as a privileged spatialisation of new politics but unfortunately, at least in Spain, new municipalism has both bright and dark sides. A blend of strategy and pragmatism, Podemos' alliance with different groups of activists and popular personalities for the 2015 local elections was one of its most innovative and promising initiatives. Three years later, however, the uneven trajectories of the so-called 'councils for change' show the fragility of the overall design in the context of an immature class composition and fierce opposition from the media and the right. Trying to gain

credibility as an institutional force, their greatest achievement so far is their managerial capacity to reduce the debt burden inherited from conservative municipalities in accordance with the national state – that is, right-wing – prescriptions. Unfortunately, in most cases this strategy is not linked to a clear effort to generate a consistent, progressive social and territorial basis, and the approach in many municipalities seems to target an undifferentiated, passive and ambivalent middle class, casting a long shadow over the political subjects that emerged during 15M demonstrations. In Madrid, particularly, mayor Manuela Carmena and a section of Podemos have taken up a docile attitude vis-à-vis central government pressure and, even worse, have given in to the expectations of real estate and financial elites, prolonging the projects and models of previous right-wing administrations. Hadjimichalis' book was written when this could hardly be foreseen. This dramatic turn raises serious doubts about the possibility of a reformist approach in a context of deepened neoliberalisation, undemocratic economic governance from above and growing social polarisation.

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When, nearly two decades ago, Neil Smith (2000: 41) urged 'a clearer, sharper and more articulate focus' in critical geography, even the very term 'critical geography' was unlikely to have been mentioned in any Hungarian publication. There has been tangible progress made in both Hungary and central and eastern Europe in general since then, though. Nevertheless, when delivering university lectures on the fundamental approach of critical geography with its roots lying in Marx's thought, that is, that we want not only to understand, but also change the world, I encounter serious misunderstandings and doubts. Misunderstandings stem from publications by researchers of an older generation who were socialised in the positivist geography of state socialism, and who interpret the intention of change in a technocratic manner and who think that change means, for instance, modifications to regional development. Doubts are also raised mostly by politically

active leftist university students who have entered the political arena in the meantime and fail to find an answer to the 'how?' in the results provided by research seeking to facilitate changes. Furthermore, spurred by the intention of 'wanting to do something', they may easily skip the indispensable phase of understanding.

The book by Costis Hadjimichalis reflects an intention to both understand and to change. It is not only those interested in SE whose questions about crisis spaces are answered by the book, for the analysis of uneven development in this region (in particular, in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece) before and after the adoption of the euro, and that of geographical imaginations and prejudices about the south (i.e. the New 'Southern Question') identifies interesting facts while helping one to understand the capitalism of the day. Other equally important merits of the book (touching on ontological and epistemological issues) are as follows:

- It makes it clear that crises are essential to the survival of capitalism and challenges the dominant view that 'debt, public and private, is the sole cause of the crisis, arguing that it is the combined outcome of financialisation and the *longue durée* of uneven capitalist development' (p. 12).
- It points out that contrary to the radical leftist approach to uneven geographical development, 'Third Way' thinking cannot help one to understand the geographical foundation of the recent crisis. In fact, with uneven development having been de-politicised, both NEG and NR as two major schools of thought, although perhaps unintentionally, have worked to support dominant neoliberal policies. As a result, no EU policies capable of effectively managing regional and urban inequalities have been developed.
- It cites concrete examples of democratic policies challenging the de-politicisation of neoliberal austerity, and of the spaces of resistance and solidarity. It even shares a few ideas regarding the future of the EU and the Eurozone and the possible politics of hope.