

# The Politics of Abstract Action; Syriza Governmentality in Greece after the Summer of 2015

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(Please, do not cite without permission as the article is currently under review)

## Introduction

In an interview with Sharmini Peries for the website [www.realnews.com](http://www.realnews.com), Leo Panitch gives the following interpretation of the event that reshaped Greek politics this past summer - the signing of the third memorandum of austerity by the government of the leftist, anti-memorandum party of SYRIZA:

“Well, of course if you have been involved as a union in a long, long, long period of collective bargaining against a management which has been making the life of the workers in the plant miserable, and you finally say we're going to call a strike vote to show you we really have support. And you win that strike vote overwhelmingly, and you come back to the negotiating table and say you see what kind of, the support we have? And they say you know, what, forget it. We're closing this plant.

It's just not worth it for--we see you're not just the problem. The problem is that these workers can't be disciplined enough to make us a lot of profits. Then what is that union leader should do? We're closing the plant. We're closing it this week. Most usually the union leadership signs the agreement. If it has any integrity and comes back and says, this is not a good agreement. We're never going to say it's any good. We'll find loopholes in it as much as we can. But of course it dispirits the workers. They voted for this, they're militant. Many of them--some of them at least want to let off steam in the strike. And that's what's happened inside Syriza.”<sup>1</sup>

In fact, this is exactly what Leo Panitch said in response to a previous version of this paper which was presented at the GCAS World Conference in Athens in July 2015.<sup>2</sup> The argument of the current version of the paper is that the event that reshaped Greek politics this past summer (the signing of the third memorandum of austerity by the government of the leftist, anti-memorandum party of SYRIZA) and its interpretation by Leo Panitch should both be understood in terms of *the politics of abstract action*.

I use the term *abstract action* to refer to the activity of an individual in conditions in which the shared practices that this activity would otherwise embody if successful are now devastated; or else, in conditions of radical social-practical crisis. The transformation of human life in conditions of radical social-practical crisis (what has been described as *the precariousness of human life*<sup>3</sup> or *the state of exception*<sup>4</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup>[http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=14289](http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=14289)

<sup>2</sup> <https://globalcenterforadvancedstudies.org/gcas-the-university-of-athens-school-of-economics-and-political-science-democracy-rising-program-2/>

<sup>3</sup> Butler, J., *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London and New York: Verso, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*, tr. Kevin Attell, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago; 2005; *Il Stato eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

has been the focus of much contemporary theory. But much of this theory makes gross assumptions about the metaphysics of life and action. Thus, in the first part of the paper I suggest that Agamben's account of *bare* or *naked life* rests on the assumption that an individual may live two kinds of life: the species or formal life on the one hand and the generic or material life on the other. The former is determined by the form of life of the species to which the individual belongs and the latter is indifferent to any species form of life. But, I argue, the very idea of life is a formal concept, so that it is not possible for any individual to live a generic or material life. On the proposal of this paper, to be active in the way that is recognizable as living just is to embody the form of life of the species to which the individual belongs. Contrary to what Agamben assumes there is no *bare* or *naked* life. To live just is to embody the form of life of one's species. In fact, I argue, what happens in conditions of radical social-practical crisis is not that the individual activity is cut off from its form of life, as Agamben assumes, but that it comes too close to it. For in such conditions, I will explain, individual activity embodies its form of life abstractly: without, that is, the mediation of shared practices. This, I shall explain, is the right way to understand the transformation of life in conditions of radical social-practical crisis. And, contrary to Panitch's interpretation, this understanding affords a radical interpretation of Syriza governmentality in Greece after the summer of 2015.

### 1. The predicament of radical social-practical crisis

Our capacity to act may be affected by a variety of crises. A liver crisis may affect my capacity to drink alcohol, a political crisis may affect my capacity to roam the streets freely after hours, a financial crisis may affect my capacity to buy, etc. These are crises which affect our capacity to perform a specific type of action (drink alcohol, move freely, buy, etc.). But there are crises which may affect our capacity to perform most or all action. A stroke may be an example of one such crisis. But even such crises are *not* properly speaking *practical*. That is, they are not defined as such in terms of the fact that they tear apart *the fabric of action*: the part of reality that is constituted by the norms which an *activity*<sup>5</sup> must meet to count as *one's action*.<sup>6</sup> But now consider the following examples of crises:

- a. I am pressing my head against the wall and I explain doing so by saying "I'm pressing my head against the wall to make a headache go away"
- b. I am squeezing lemons and I explain doing so by saying "I'm squeezing oranges to make an orange juice"
- c. I am putting my finger in my mouth at the end of one of my lectures and I explain doing so by saying "I am expressing my gratitude to the audience for having listened to me".

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<sup>5</sup> When I use the term *activity* I refer to the self-caused movement of any living or non living being in the world. When I use the term *action* I refer to the activity that a human individual may attribute to herself as arising out of her personally. For a distinction between the various uses of action verbs see Hyman, J., *Action, Knowledge and Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> For the view that the reality is action is constituted by norms see Korsgaard, C. M., *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

In a. above my failure is a failure *of action* (and in this sense *practical*), because to act one must have the capacity to *successfully* put together a conception of what one wants to do with a conception of the means to it. In b. my failure is a failure *of action*, because to act one must have the capacity to *successfully* check whether what one thinks is doing is indeed being done. And in c. my failure is a failure *of action*, because to act one must have the capacity to *successfully* embody or instantiate a shared practice – a thing *we* do to live well. So that we may say that the fabric of action is weaved by the agent’s capacity to be guided by norms concerning a) instrumental connections between acts, b) cognitive connections between the agent and the world, and c) social connections between the agent and other agents. And thus a practical crisis may be further defined as *instrumental-practical, cognitive-practical or social-practical* crisis.

I may say now that the focus of this paper is the transformation of life in conditions of a *specific* sort of *social-practical* crisis. I said above that social-practical crisis is the failed exercise of the capacity to embody or instantiate a shared practice – a thing *we* do to live well. In c. above I imagined a case in which the agent fails *practically* because she fails to act in a way that embodies or instantiates a shared practice. Perhaps this agent is suffering a psychotic episode. But now imagine that something very bad happens in the world, as a result of which the shared practice of expressing gratitude simply falls apart. In the dystopian new world, it is no longer the case that there is anything that may count as recognizably expressing one’s gratitude, for there is simply nothing *we do* to express our gratitude and thus live well. But now say that an agent who had been in a comma while the world was transitioning into this dystopian state suddenly wakes up from it and upon being told what has happened starts hugging the doctors to express her gratitude for their help. In this new world, like the example in c. above, it is true to say that the agent is facing a social-practical crisis; her failure to express gratitude is a failure *of action* because it is the failure to embody or instantiate a shared practice – a thing *we* do to live well. But in her case, unlike the example in c. above, the social-practical crisis is *radical*.<sup>7</sup> For there is simply nothing the agent might do such that it would count as acting in the circumstances. There is for her, unlike the case in c. above, nothing she could do to correct her failure; for, in her case, there is no conceptual room for success. In the dystopian world in which she wakes up nothing she could do might count as succeeding in acting, for in this world the shared practice she would be embodying or instantiating if she were successful in her acting (the shared practice of showing one’s gratitude) is now gone. But, now if there is no conceptual room for success in her acting, then it does not make sense to say that the agent has failed in her acting either. But, if the agent’s action is neither here (successfully located in the social weave of the fabric of action) nor there (failing to be part of the social weave of the fabric of action), then where is it? How should we make sense of the awoken patient’s hugging of her doctors? In other words, how should we understand the activity that remains when the shared practices which the activity would otherwise embody if successful are now gone?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For an elaboration of the nature of this crisis see Lear, J., *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> For a treatment of this question in Hegel see Pippin, R., *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

The question is metaphysical; for it is a question concerning the status of a part of the real as real. But it is a metaphysical question of political urgency. For if what has been happening in Greece for the last 7 years is that the politics of austerity have disrupted the shared practices within which our individual activity might otherwise count as our, then the question of the metaphysical status of the activity that remains may, for us in Greece, be a question of life or death. For depending on the answer we give, we may ground or uproot the foundation for the prospect of a radical – and not compromised – recovery from the radical social-practical crisis.

## **2. Bare Life; life which has been stripped off its form**

According to Agamben's answer to the metaphysical question, the activity that remains *in the state of exception* is an activity which constitutes the *bare* or *naked* life.<sup>9</sup> Taking our clue from this, we might suggest that the activity that remains in conditions of radical social-practical crisis may also be understood as constituting this *bare* or *naked* life.<sup>10</sup> Bare or naked life is, on Agamben's conception, the activity which has been stripped off its formal element. And in an Aristotelian fashion Agamben takes this to be the activity which is deprived of its potential for living well by the standards of the form of life of the species to which the individual belongs. Activity which is thus deprived of its potential to live the species' good life may, on Agamben's conception, constitute the so-called *biological* or *generic* life;<sup>11</sup> the life which might – in principle – be recognized in an ameba as much as in a human being. And this life is supposed to be the material on which the biopolitical governance imposes the form of the free market or the form of the neoliberal governance.

On this account, the activity that remains when the shared practices have been disrupted is the activity which may be recognized as living although it may not be recognized as living a species form of life. But if an individual's activity may exist and be recognized as living in separation from the form of life of the species to which the individual belongs, then either it must be subject to generic norms or standards of living or it must be identifiable as living without reference to life specific norms or standards. If the former, then this new, generic living (what Agamben calls *bare* or *naked life*) must have its own standards of success or failure. If, on the other hand, this new generic sort of living is identifiable as living without reference to life specific norms or standards, then it is hard to see why it should count as living to begin with. Perhaps, one could insist, the activity that remains when the social element of the

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<sup>9</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998; *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Giulio Einaudi, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998; *Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Giulio Einaudi, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance *Ibid*, p. 91: "Precisely because they were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they came to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life."

fabric of action has been disrupted is the activity that living beings share with clocks and natural elements.

But now if this bare or generic living has its own life-specific standards of success or failure, then the species' standards of success or failure from which it is separated in radical social-practical crisis must be external to it. Thus, if we say of this generic living that it is *bad* we may mean two things: either a) that it is bad by the standards internal to generic living (and in this sense by the standards internal to itself), or b) that it is bad by the standards of the life of the species and so by standards external to itself. For if the standards of the life of the species are external to this generic living, then in conditions of the crisis I am envisioning, this generic living will be bad in accordance to external standards; standards that are external to what it is. So that if this generic living manages to ever become good again by the standards of the species life-form that previously belonged to it, it will be good by standards that are external to what it is. And so the only radical prospect for the broken individual within the Angambean scheme is the disrupted life's prospect for a sort of goodness which will be external to itself. In other words, the only radical prospect under the Angambean abstraction is the artificial and hybridical living goodness, of which one part will be living judged by the standards of generic living and another will be living judged by the standards of the life of the species.

But an account of the disrupted activity (the activity that remains when the shared practices within which this activity might count as the agent's successful action are disrupted) is radical only if it makes room for the following possibility: the possibility that the disrupted subject may once more achieve the goodness that belongs to her internally or essentially (as herself being her species) and not externally or accidentally, as Agamben must assume. Therefore, to manage a radical account we should not assume that the activity that remains when shared practices have been disrupted is an activity deprived of its potential to constitute the species' good life; or a life that is deprived of its formal element.

*But now if the formal element of human life, what I called above the fabric of action, depends on the agent's potential to embody or instantiate shared practices as conceptions of doing well, then when the shared practices are disrupted or simply gone, how can I still say that the activity that remains is an activity which is not deprived of its potential to constitute the species' good life? Is there room for an alternative? Yes. On the account I will propose below, the problem of the disrupted life is not that it has been separated from its own form, as Agamben assumes, but that it has come too close to it.*

### **3. Abstract Life: Life which embodies its form abstractly**

To see what this means consider the case of the disruption of shared academic practices that austerity has brought about in Greece. Before the first memorandum was signed, academics who had just earned their PhD would often spend a few years working as adjuncts to prepare for a proper academic job because the greek law requires teaching and research experience for any new academic hiring. When the first memorandum was signed in 2010 it more or less banned new hiring in the public sector and so also at universities. And now consider the case of me teaching as an adjunct within the context of the closed Greek Academia in the fall of 2015. Before the Greek Academia closed for new members, I could when

asked explain why I am teaching as an adjunct as what we academics do to prepare for our first academic job. But now that the Greek Academia is closed for new members, I can no longer explain what I am doing as what we academics do to prepare for our first academic job. For the shared practice of teaching as an adjunct in order to prepare for academic jobs has been disrupted by the memorandum's ban on new hirings. And yet, to the extent that I am teaching as an adjunct, I am active. How should we understand this activity?

I said above that before the Greek Academia closed for new members I could when asked explain why I am teaching as an adjunct as what we academics do to prepare for our first academic job. And in embodying this shared academic practice my activity of teaching as an adjunct embodied a thinner conception of *the life of academia* as the life worth living. In fact my activity embodied this *thinner* conception of the life of academia as the life worth living by embodying the *thicker* shared conception of what we academics do to prepare for our first academic job. In conditions of crisis, it is no longer possible for me to explain what I am doing as what we academics do to prepare for our first academic job. And yet, I want to say, I may still explain what I am doing as embodying the thinner conception of the life of academia as the life worth living. Only now, this embodiment is not mediated by the embodiment of a thick practice such as the practice of what we do to prepare for our first academic job. I am now teaching as an adjunct because this is part of the life worth living as an academic, even though teaching as an adjunct no longer embodies the shared practice of preparing for an academic job. In general, we might say that while in the condition of canonicity an individual action embodies a conception of the life worth living in and through embodying a shared practice, in conditions of radical social-practical crisis, an individual action may only embody a conception of the life worth living *immediately*, without the mediation (of the embodiment) of a shared practice. This is, I want to suggest, what makes activity in conditions of radical social-practical crisis *abstract action*.

In his seminal *Intellectual and Manual Labor*<sup>12</sup> Alfred Soth-Rethel presents a Marxian account of abstractness as having real and not merely conceptual being in the world. Some things are certainly *thought* abstractly, as when we think of this thing right here as *an elephant*. But, Soth-Rethel argues that some things may also *be* abstractly in the world. Commodity is for him such a thing: a thing whose existence in the world is abstract, for a thing is a commodity, he explains, precisely to the extent and in so far it is, *qua* exchange, the abstraction from itself *qua* use; or else precisely because "the economic concept of value resulting from it is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market".<sup>13</sup>

Now the suggestion I want to make here is that activity in conditions of radical social-practical crisis – activity which embodies a conception of the life worth living immediately – is *abstract action* in Soth-Rethel's sense. Paraphrasing Soth-Rethel we might say that the conception of the good life in conditions of crisis is characterized by a complete absence of shared practices, a differentiation purely by

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<sup>12</sup> Soth-Rethel, A., *Intellectual and manual labour : a critique of epistemology*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J : Humanities Press, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

quantity and by applicability to every activity that may be performed. When in conditions of canonicity the conception of the good life is embodied in an individual activity *mediately*, through and in the activity's embodiment of a shared practice, the conception of the good life is differentiated in each individual activity by the shared practice it embodies. For instance, in the example above, in pre-critical times I may be embodying a conception of the good life both when teaching as an adjunct and when writing papers to communicate with other academics, but in each case the conception of the good life embodied in each activity, and so each activity, is differentiated by the shared practice my activity embodies (in the former activity by what we do to prepare for our first job and in the latter by what we do to communicate with our peers). But when in conditions of radical social-practical crisis the conception of the good life is embodied in an individual activity *immediately*, and not through and in the activity's embodiment of a shared practice, then the conception of the good life is differentiated in each individual activity by mere quantity; that is by answering the question of how much goodness each individual activity bears. So that in critical times my activity of teaching as an adjunct is differentiated by my activity of writing papers merely in terms of quantity: by how much goodness is embodied in each activity and not in terms of the shared practices each activity embodies. And in this sense the critical conception of the good life is characterized by a complete absence of thick shared practices and a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of activity an individual may perform.

But now, echoing Soth-Rethel<sup>14</sup> we may say that this, the abstraction from shared practices (the individual activity which embodies a conception of the good life *immediately*) is a thing which itself may be done *by other agents* as well. For this abstraction is in so far as it is also an action and not an abstraction, a reality whose fabric entails that it is shareable. And now by its own potential to be done by others in so far as it is an action, the abstraction from *shared* practices (which the immediate embodiment of a conception of the good life enforces in conditions of disruption of shared practices) establishes itself as a practice *in the abstract* or as a kind of *abstract practice*.

#### 4. The Politics and Theory of Abstract Practice

With these theoretical tools at hand I would now like to end this paper by making the following suggestions: 1) The governmentality of Syriza in Greece after the summer of 2015 is an instance of the politics of *abstract practice*. 2) The theory which explains the political activity of the Syriza government in the summer of 2015 not in terms of genuinely shared practices but in terms of metaphor (the shared practices of union activity) assists the politics of abstract practice.

To see what I mean when I talk of the politics of abstract practice consider the following political event. The night Syriza government signs the first austerity measures of the 3<sup>rd</sup> memorandum agreement in the parliament (the 15<sup>th</sup> of July of 2015), Tsipras talks in the parliament about the coup his government is suffering and the demonstrations of solidarity occurring throughout Europe, *exactly as* his government is dispersing the demonstrators protesting the austerity measures

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

about to be voted outside the parliament with the use of tear-gass. In the absence of shared practices (with previous right wing governments which voted for austerity measures) of doing *what we do to effectively vote for austerity measures*, the leftist government's activity of violently dispersing demonstrators while it itself voted for austerity measures was interpreted by Leo Panitch as on a par with the union's compromise before the factory owner's threat to close down the plant; or else, as the government's embodiment of the thin conception of good leftist politics in the face of a coup. But the leftist government's activity of violently dispersing demonstrators while it itself voted for austerity measures did *not* embody this thin conception of good leftist politics in the face of a coup by embodying a shared leftist governmental practice. For no shared leftist governmental practice involves the practice of violently dispersing the demonstrations of our own people in order to tactically face a coup. On the contrary, this activity embodied the thin conception of good leftist politics immediately, and in doing so it constituted the government's *abstract action*. But now this abstraction from shared practices of leftist governmentality itself constitutes an action (albeit an abstract one) may in its capacity as an action (and not an abstraction) establish itself as *a practice in the abstract* or *an abstract practice*. (See the social element of the fabric of action in section 1 above)

How is this established in Greece right now? For one thing, by the Syriza government's repeated individual embodiments of a thin conception of good leftist politics in the face of a coup without the mediation of shared leftist governmental practices. So much so that we may now, in December of 2015, be talking about *the abstract practice* of leftist politics of voting for more taxes for the poor, voting for job cuts, replacing the welfare state with state sponsored charity, etc.. And for another, by the theoretical approach which masks the abstract nature of these individual embodiments (that is, the lack of mediation by genuinely shared practices) by surreptitiously filling in the lack of shared leftist governmental practices with metaphor; or else, with practices which are genuinely shared in a different context; just like Leo Panitch did in his explanation of Syriza's failure in the interview abstract quoted in the beginning of this paper.

If what I've said in this paper is right, to face the reality of the politics of abstract practices, such as the reality of Syriza governmentality in Greece right now, we should first of all free ourselves from the theoretical illusion, manifest in Leo Panitch's interpretation, that this governmentality may be mediated by the embodiment of practices that are not in fact shared (i.e. that are shared by different agents in different conditions); or else that the mediation of the embodiment of a conception of goodness may be effected without the embodiment of *genuinely* shared practices. But, to face this reality of the politics of abstract practices it is not enough to point out that the reality of Syriza governmentality in Greece right now is not 'honest' or 'genuine'. For all we know, this might be true, but it is a different issue. The issue that we have to deal with in Greece right now is that of the reality of Syriza governmentality. And this reality is lost if we explain it as merely constituted by a hypocritical or dishonest discord between Syriza's self-conception and action. This reality is properly appreciated only if we shed both of these illusions (that it may be understood either as mediated through the metaphorical embodiment of different shared practices or as a mere lack of parity between words and deeds).



What we appreciate if we shed both of these illusions is that the reality of Syriza governmentality in Greece right now is the reality of the politics of abstract practice.

Our task as theorists is to think *mediately*, and ask how we will manage to effect the shared practices to fight off austerity, now that it *abstractly* takes on the guise of good leftist tactical governmentality.