

Section I

The Politics of Memory



Chapter 1

Austerity Talk and Crisis Narratives

Austerity Talk and Crisis Narratives: New Memory Politics and Xenophobia in the European Union

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Introduction

This chapter has two purposes: first, to explore what the current focus on “crisis” in international and global politics reveals, both empirically and normatively, about the state of citizenship in Europe; second, to use the concept of crisis to call for an alternative rendering of citizenship, belonging, and social cohesion. The empirical focus is on the two defining crises of our time: the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 and the migrant crisis in Europe (starting in 2011 and continuing). I address these crises as narrative devices that intersect with memory politics in ways that heighten and intensify xenophobic and nationalist anxieties; at the same time I call for a re-imagining of both crisis and citizenship in ways that can sustain inclusionary and integrative narratives of a European future.

I begin with a broad discussion on citizenship as a construct for understanding the complex relationships between states and individuals in our current era; in particular, my focus is on how citizenship can help us think through the complex and deep webs of mutual obligations and interrelations that bind individuals to one another and to states and how citizenship can simultaneously call forth exclusionary and inclusionary narratives of social, economic, and political belonging. I follow this with a discussion of “crisis” as an empirical, normative, and narrative construct, and as one of the defining narrative constructs of our current era. I then focus on the framing of the economic crisis and the migrant crisis and how these framings intersect with reigning memory politics. I conclude that the most pressing current policy challenge that we face is the thinning of citizenship; as such a discussion of how crises exacerbate this thinning but could also be deployed in ways that support integrative agendas for social change is extremely timely.

The 2008 Economic Meltdown and the European Migrant Crisis: Challenges to Narratives of European Citizenship

My focus in this chapter is on crisis as narrative device that draws on and is constitutive of collective memory. While the first two decades of this century have been dominated by various crisis narratives (including in particular climate crises and political crises), I focus here on the two crises that have most immediately preceded the current challenges facing European integration: the GFC (starting in 2008) and the migrant (or refugee) crisis in Europe. The use of the term crisis for both sets of events masks real and significant differences in the causes and outcomes of these events. For my purposes, however, the fact that both sets of events were predominantly framed as crises is significant, as is their combined effect on European discourses and narratives of citizenship and integration.

The GFC is generally dated to the fall of 2008 when the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression swept across the globe (Crotty 2009). Failures in the US subprime mortgage market in late 2007 triggered a series of other bank failures, leading to a crisis that then spread through the global financial market, giving rise to deep recessions across much of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) countries. Much has been written on the economics of the 2008 global financial crisis, as well as of the global economic downturn that followed in its wake (Crotty 2009; Rose and Spiegel 2011; Stockhammer 2015; Stiglitz 2016). Recovery from the GFC was slow and varied considerably across Europe; in addition, the GFC solidified the dominance of austerity policies and discourse as the only valid response to economic downfall, and, in many of the worst affected countries, led to significant cutbacks to social services and a general retrenchment of the welfare state.

It is clear that the disruptive effects of the economic crisis are still playing out across Europe. On the one hand, there has been a resurgence of nationalist politics, including both ultra-right-wing parties as well as the mainstreaming of populist nationalist ideas within established parties (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015; Melzer and Serafin 2013). At the same time, activists from both the right and left have parlayed the financial crisis and the policy responses to it into a narrative that renders mainstream macro-economics, as well as liberal democracy itself, as morally and intellectually bankrupt (Serricchio, Tsakatika, and Quaglia 2013; Fukuyama 2012). In Europe, the Brexit referendum results, the rhetoric used by the far-right and far-left candidates in the French presidential elections, alongside of the waning influence of social-democratic ideals in nations on the periphery of Europe, such as Turkey, point more specifically to an emerging normative crisis with regards to the European integration project (Bruszt 2015).

The rise of populist politics, on both the left and the right, appears to be the most significant legacy of the GFC. A large-scale comparative study commissioned by the *Guardian* showed recently that the proportion of Europeans voting for populist parties has risen from about 15% in 2008 to over 25% in 2018 (Lewis et al. 2018). This trend has to be viewed within the context of austerity policies, welfare state retrenchment, and rising inequality in Europe. It is also important to identify the formation of nationalist parties as not just an outcome but also a cause of rising nationalist sentiments, in that nationalist and xenophobic politics also require resonant narratives in order to produce political outcomes.

The recent rise of nationalist and xenophobic politics that frame the works presented in this volume is thus embedded in a particular historical context. The financial crisis and its political fallout is one part of this context, while the European migrant crisis is another. The

European migrant crisis is both harder to date and define, however, than the GFC. The term is used to refer to an increasing number of people on the move from the Global South to the Global North starting in 2011 and continuing. However, mobility has been a feature of globalized social and economic relations for some time; the features that make this a crisis have to do with the scale of movement and the growing proportion of unauthorized migrants. In 2010, the World Bank estimated that about 216 million, or about 3.2% of the world's population was on the move; of these between 10 to 15% were unauthorized migrants (Tilly 2011). By 2017, this figure had increased to 244 million (United Nations Report on Sustainable Development Goals 2017). However, the term "crisis" came into more common use following significant media coverage of the tragic deaths of migrants attempting to enter the EU via the Mediterranean Sea, but soon came to connote not just the risks inherent in the crossings and also the risk to Europeans and European institutions posed by migrants once they arrived (Holmes and Castaneda 2016). As many scholars have noted, this rendering of the movement of people across borders and into Europe has fostered further representations of migrants as dangerous, undeserving, and of posing an unsustainable burden on the social services of receiving nations.

These narratives of migration are linked to and embedded with xenophobic politics that draw on nationalist narratives of inclusion and cohesion, aided and abetted by zero-sum renderings of the social good, which were given particular currency and life by the 2008 financial crisis. In this way, narratives of migration are hooked into narratives of citizenship. In our current context, these citizenship narratives are fueled by a rich resource of "forgetful" renderings of the past. As I aim to explore below, however, even though citizenship can be seen as a potentially exclusionary construct, in that citizenship denotes belonging and established boundaries and limits to that belonging, citizenship narratives also have integrative potential, one which was unlocked to a greater degree in past European crises.

The past is therefore a permanent dimension of the human consciousness, an inevitable component of the institutions, values and other patterns of human society. (*Hobsbawm 1972, 3*)

As elsewhere in this volume, I engage with the concept of memory as a social and collective phenomenon; collective memory is simultaneously a body of knowledge about a culture, an attribute of that culture as well as the process by which it is formed (Wertsch and Roediger 2008; Halbwachs 1992; Dudai 2004). Collective memory is about what we know about our past(s), how we know it, and why; and, as with all collective engagements with the past (whether through memory or history), social memory reflects and shapes our understanding of our present moment (Hobsbawm 1972). The social memorialization of the past is thus inherently a political act (Olick and Robbins 1998). Beyond this, memorialization of the past, as an ongoing, engaging, and emotionally intense social project, builds national identities and, importantly, conceptions of citizenship (Habermas 1996).

The politics of social memory are particularly relevant to citizenship studies in the European context. Pan-European citizenship — both as the legal status that affords mobility rights and civic, social, and political protections to all members of the EU, and as a mode of identity — is itself a mnemonic community centred around accepted memorializations of the Second World War (Mälksoo 2009; Rigney 2012). These memorializations counterpose the notion of a divided past against the integrated present, value universalism over fragmentation, and locate nationalism and xenophobia as part of a shared traumatic European past. Thus, the shared history of World War II and the memorialization of the Holocaust provide both meaning and content to European citizenship identities while also challenging ethno-nationalist constructions of citizenship (Rigney 2012; Rothberg and Yildiz 2011). However, recent years have seen the emergence of new nationalist politics in Europe that have formed new mnemonic European communities; these re-articulate and re-define the relationship of shared history to belonging, by, for instance, placing language, identity, and place at the forefront of citizenship identities (Misztal 2010). In other words, the politics of memory

are central to the construction of citizenship and the exercise of citizenship rights in Europe today.

Clearly, the relationship between citizenship and the politics of memory is well worth interrogating. Citizenship is the anchoring concept of the nation-state. The development of citizenship as a global, universal status, and one that puts, at least in principle, values of equality at its forefront, is the foundation of contemporary democracies. As argued by T.H. Marshall (1950), robust and “thick” citizenship — that includes not just civic freedoms but also social rights and economic protections — provides the basis of political equality as well as for social cohesion and sustainability, and political and social stability (Marshall 1950, 1964).

While Marshall cited universalism as a fundamental attribute of citizenship, it is clear that in practice citizenship is both particularistic and differentiated (Soysal 2000). Birthplace, gender, race and ethnicity, language, and legal status all interplay to create hierarchies and inequalities between and amongst citizens (O’Connor 1993). Indeed, citizenship’s potential to create inequalities has received much more recent scholarly attention than the reverse; in the European context, inequalities around birthplace, race, and ethnicity have been shown to be associated with significant “thinning” of citizenship rights for immigrants and migrants (Soysal 1994; Schierup, Hansen, and Castles 2006; Brysk and Shafir 2004; Dell’Olio 2017). In Canada, current debates about “birthright” citizenship as well as existing laws that do not allow for the transmission of citizenship beyond one generation have the effect of further differentiating citizenship in Canada. In the EU, legal regimes around work and mobility create significant differentiations, especially between migrants and residents, and produce both precarious and contingent citizens.

Nonetheless, I argue here that citizenship has conceptual potential to address concerns around integration. In particular, I argue that citizenship can carry the seeds of integrative discourses just as easily as of exclusionary discourses. Hannah Arendt’s thinking around the communal roots of citizenship is helpful here. Writing from a republican, or rights-based tradition, Arendt reminds us that co-existence with others like us and not like us — living collectively and in communities — is a fundamental condition of humanity. Further to this, all meaningful human rights to existence (i.e., life) are guaranteed by membership in a community. Thus, for Arendt, the genocide of the European Jewish community during World War II was possible because

Jews had been deprived and removed from community — from “a place in the world” (Arendt 1973, 268). The *right to have rights* is the fundamental premise of citizenship; the right to have rights requires a community that gives content and meaning to those rights (Arendt 1973). This is an important counterpart to the more dominant (at least in our current time) overtly individualistic rendering of citizenship.

In other works, including “The Human Condition” and “Freedom and Politics,” Arendt further clarifies the framework that citizenship provides to communal life (Arendt 2013, 1961). Citizenship requires both political engagement and civic responsibility; the exercise of these obligations is required in order to realize freedom. Arendt distinguishes between freedom from politics and political freedom: whereas the latter expresses and is dependent on a legitimate public sphere, the former leads to the erosion of the public realm, the attenuation of citizenship, and its replacement by clientelism. In our current context, clientelism is represented by a move, among other things, to the emphasis on services for rate-payers as opposed to a rights-based framework.

This emphasis on the communal dimensions of citizenship reinforces also the relationality of citizenship. Citizenship is embedded in and re-embeds social relations of mutual obligation: paying taxes, military service, voting, obeying the law (on the part of the citizenry) in exchange for the provision of services by the state, protection from enemies, and freedom from illegitimate exercise of violence (Somers 1993; Joppke 2007). The relations of citizenship extend into social, civil, and cultural realms, to include not only economic participation (i.e., the worker-citizen), but also social reproduction (the mother-citizen) (Hallgrimsdottir, Benoit, and Phillips 2013; Stoltzfus 2004; Anderson 2015).

Citizenship is thus a complex and multi-layered concept that involves not only the rights that flow from the legally recognized residence within a particular territory, but also identities and statuses that accompany those rights as well as the processes and actions that realize them (Isin and Turner 2007; Turner 1990; Isin and Nielsen 2013; Somers and Wright 2008; Somers 1993; Soysal 2000; Marshall 1950, 1964). Citizenship’s complexity is seen at one level in the fact that it can be wielded as both a weapon of exclusion as well as an integrative tool. However, at its foundation, citizenship is a normative construct that expresses equality as a social good (Somers 1993); as per Arendt, citizenship, at its best, expresses and rearticulates communities, sustains the autonomy of civil society, and safeguards against the tyranny of the state

(Arendt 1961). Citizenship conceived of as community-derived rights that draw on responsibility, mutualism, and political engagement has thus the potential to recast the conversation away from the *differentiation* of rights towards *universalism*.

This kind of universalism is the normative foundation of the pan-European project; as we detailed above, pan-European citizenship is effectively a mnemonic community rooted as much in memorializations and memory politics as in policy and practice. However, it is clear that in our current moment, universalism is not at the forefront of citizenship narratives in Europe. I argue below that the language of crises — cultural, political, and economic — presents a significant normative challenge to universalism in citizenship narratives. Instead, narratives of crises, given new content by alternative memorializations of Europe that draw attention to identity, culture, language, and place, give rise to attenuating and exclusionary narratives of citizenship. I turn now to a discussion of crisis.

Crisis and the Making of History

The language of crisis pervades our current context: environmental, economic, political, and demographic events are predominantly expressed through the vocabulary of crises by scholars, commentators, and politicians. My goal below is to unpack how crisis functions as a narrative device and how this shapes current understandings of belonging in Europe — that is, citizenship.

Crisis, like citizenship, is a multi-faceted and complex construct. For our purposes here, it is important to point out how crisis operates simultaneously on multiple registers: as a theoretical or methodological lens, as an empirical descriptor, and as a normative and narrative device. For instance, the concept of crisis has played a key role in epistemologies of social change: crises trigger contingent events (events that alter path-dependent patterns of historical change) (Pierson 2000); and crises can operate as “external shocks” that shift policy solutions from the incremental to the substantive (Nohrstedt and Weible 2010; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1999). Crises are also understood to generate critical junctures that force new choices or decisions upon institutional actors (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Peters, Pierre, and King 2005).

In the European Union context, crisis has a long empirical and theoretical history. The European integration literature itself is dominated by functionalist and neo-functionalist perspectives that place crisis at the core of European integration: the European project itself was triggered by the economic and political disarray that followed the Second World War (Desmond 2004). In addition, initial steps towards integration triggered further, smaller economic and political crises that were then solved through further integration, through for instance policy parallelism or economic and political unification (Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2014).

The notion that crises are necessary for creating systemic change is rooted as well in Marxist and post-Marxist theories of large-scale social and historical change. James O'Connor, for instance, expands on and develops the role that economic and ecological crises play in terms of restructuring the social relations of production in a post-capitalist context (O'Connor 1988); crises foster contradictions that need to be resolved in order for the system to sustain itself.

Crisis need however to be identified as such in order to effect historical change. The meaning and directions of crisis is driven by context, and of course, the decisions and actions of human actors. Gramsci reminds us that on their own, economic crises cannot cause political change, but that rather they “simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life” (Gramsci 1992, 276). Crises are always simultaneously narrative devices and constructs as much as they are historical “things.” The European migrant crisis, for instance, was as much a crisis of European migration policy, of European citizenship, and of European identities, as it was a crisis of migration; the valences and meanings of the migrant crisis were clearly driven by national and domestic political agendas (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore 2016).

As a narrative device, the concept of crisis is often nested in dystopian, even apocalyptic understandings of events: the future is both uncertain and unknown. Gramsci's definition of crisis as “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci 1993, 276), captures how crisis can take on opposing valences, as simultaneously a moment of openness and possibility and risk, danger, and uncertainty. Crisis as a narrative calls for action and immediacy; in Europe as well as in the North America, positing the flow of migrants as a crisis has justified

moments of exception to the rule of law and the suspension of human rights (Turner 2005; Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015). The use of camps, detention zones, and expanded border zones within which migrants are reduced to “bare life,” within and inside established and wealthy welfare states, such as Italy and France, illustrates in part the power of a crisis narrative to suspend normal modes of state operation.

There is an additional difference between the responses to this most recent economic crisis and the kinds of responses that earlier crises in the European Union engendered, and that is the shift away from Keynesian economic responses and towards austerity economics (Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2014). To the extent that there have been coordinated policy responses to the crisis, these have largely been driven by an austerity agenda (Karanikolos et al. 2013); interestingly Iceland has generally been understood as an exception to this pattern. This is important because austerity politics have in general led to poorer social and health outcomes but have also generated declining trust in politics and in public institutions (Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2014). In addition, while the financial crisis was instigated by increased economic inequality across Europe, as well as increased economic polarization (Stockhammer 2015; Cynamon and Fazzari 2015; Galbraith 2011), there is an emerging consensus that the policy responses to the crisis have, in general, exacerbated these trends (Vaughan-Whitehead 2011). Of particular importance from a European perspective is the variegation of these effects, seen in terms of both within and between nation economic inequality (Vaughan-Whitehead 2011).

In sum, the link between crises and integration in our current context is far from clear or certain. As Polanyi and MacIver argued, political, economic, and social change only comes from conscious human decisions (Polanyi and MacIver 1944). In turn, a crisis instigates change through necessitating new kinds of decisions and paradigmatic shifts (Block 2003). The logic of economic crisis in neoliberal regimes suggests that there is no endogenous mechanism by which crisis will trigger integrative reactions. Rather, if crisis is to trigger further or deeper integration, it will need to be explicitly made by policy actors. But the larger point here is that whether seen as disruptions to stable systems or as necessary triggers of progressive change, or the catalyst to societal transformation, in these readings crises *make history*. This understanding of crises is an important counterpart as we consider how crises as a narrative device function in political rhetoric.

Conclusion

Crises are the key narrative device of our time. As a narrative device, it is a double-edged sword: while framing historical events as crises denote urgency and the need for action, this also creates totalizing narratives that fosters polarized binaries. Narratives of the migrant crisis rested on binary understandings of citizens versus non-citizens; deserving versus non-deserving migrants; and, importantly, rule of law versus lawlessness. In turn, the migrant crisis narrative was clearly framed by the narratives emerging out of the GFC: the need for austerity, the scarcity of resources needed to support the social good, the unsustainability of rich welfare supports. These narratives were in fact accompanied by real and significant action of the state, resulting in noticeable withdrawal of the state from providing social services and a general disassembling of the welfare state.

The power of the economic austerity narratives that took hold after the GFC can, at some level, be seen by examining social and political changes in European nations that were the least affected by the financial crisis, such as Sweden and Norway (Finnsdottir and Hallgrimsdottir 2019). Both of these nations have seen a resurgence in support for right-wing populist parties with anti-immigration agendas, in spite of not having suffered the kind of economic set-back that has fuelled the rise of left- and right-wing populism in Greece, France, Spain, and Italy.

In fact, the narratives of economic restructuring and recovery that emerged out of the GFC were equally polarizing and totalizing as narratives of the migrant crisis. While the GFC was a complex historical event with an equally complex etiology, as a narrative, the GFC is a relatively simple story of victims and villains that links together national debt with profligacy and moral failure. In this story, austerity and cut-backs to social spending are valorized as strength and determination; the political agency of state actors is in effect minimized, as there is only one plot-line, one solution. As a general comment, the very casting of the GFC as an economic story, as opposed to a story of political action, inaction, and failures, is interesting in and of itself.

In terms of the discussion above, the GFC can be linked to a *thinning* of citizenship while the migrant crisis can be linked to a *thickening* of borders. The basis for social inclusion, cohesion, and integration in Europe has thus simultaneously become more exclusive as well as more precarious and contingent. The kind of universalism that was the

foundation of the normative project of European integration is thus significantly challenged.

As I stated above, however, seeing crises as sets of contingencies and catalysts that trigger historical change is also suggestive that both the GFC and the migrant crisis could have been (and maybe still can be?) cast as opportunities and openings to new ways of social and economic organization. Certainly, the Occupy movement of 2011 attempted to draw on the disruptions of the GFC in order to instigate new conversations about economic inequality. While the reasons for the failure of Occupy to create meaningful change are beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that one of the challenges faced by the Occupy movement was the lack of institutional infrastructures of cohesion and belonging — in particular, political parties, unions, and civic associations — that in other contexts give meaningful collective identity, shared goals, and membership in mnemonic communities, to protestors and social activists. Drawing on Arendt again, we can understand that the Occupy protesters dissented without clear reference to a membership in community. Occupy was protesting neo-liberalism, but did so within a context of the already thinned fabric of citizenship and community created by neo-liberalism.

I end here with a brief call out to utilize and draw on a richer and fuller understanding of citizenship as a way of recasting crises as catalyst for progressive change. This requires drawing and considering several propositions. In particular, I conclude here by suggesting some alternative ways in which a narrative of crisis can be used to mobilize alternative renderings of European citizenship in which inclusionary and integrative politics are a possible outcome.

First, we should, as scholars and commentators, embrace the notion of crisis as a catalyzing construct when describing challenging historical events. A crisis *should* call for new solutions to social problems, not iterations of past policy solutions. Second, to the extent that citizenship denotes a mnemonic community, overlaid on the physically bounded community of the nation, let us encourage memorializations of European citizenship that emphasize the connections between universal values and the diversity of the European community, so that notions of Europeanism can exist in comfort alongside strong identification with a nation-state. Third, let us also recognize that while the austerity measures that emerged out of the GFC were a chosen outcome and not an inevitable outcome of the economic crisis, the resultant social and economic polarization is an expected outcome of austerity policies.

Building stronger, integrative, and inclusionary politics will necessarily involve addressing the social, economic, and political inequalities that have widened across Europe since 2007. It is worth returning to the seminal statements on citizenship discussed earlier in this chapter. Marshall's warning that political and civic inequality was impossible without some mitigation of social inequality can be expanded in our current context with the addition of the dimension of cultural citizenship to foster integration and inclusion in diverse societies.

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