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CHILDREN OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

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Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, Christos Varvantakis and Vinnarasan Aruldoss

What does the recent financial crisis look like through the eyes of children in the intimate spaces of everyday life? Over the last three years we have been carrying out a comparative ethnography, the **Connectors Study**, funded by the European Research Council (ERC-StG-33551), to understand how children in Athens, Hyderabad, and London encounter, experience, and engage with the civil and the political in their everyday lives, and might become oriented towards social action.

One of our points of departure were the classic cohort studies of children growing up in the Great Depression (**Elder, 1999; Elder, Modell, and Parke, 1993**). Elder and his colleagues understood that ‘children’s lives and [the] ever-changing world’ around them were connected. Children do not grow up in vacuum and one motivation behind the original US cohort studies was to find ways of creating knowledge about children’s lives that was not divorced from the historical, economic, and political events of their times.

So, in 2014, we set out to sample children of the ‘global’ financial crisis: children who had been born between 2007-2009 and who, when we started our research, were around 6 years of age. We ended up with 45 children and their families across three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London) who agreed to take part in the study and gave us permission to walk alongside them over a three-year period.

We used a range of creative methods to explore the lives of city children in these locations including: drawing, mapping, playing, photographing, talking, walking, and a workshop. Like Elder and his colleagues, we thought that these children would be growing up in a world different to that of their parents. The world they would come of age in was being rapidly reconfigured which, for European children at least – who are the main focus of this article, we imagined would be punctuated by the economic downturn of 2008.

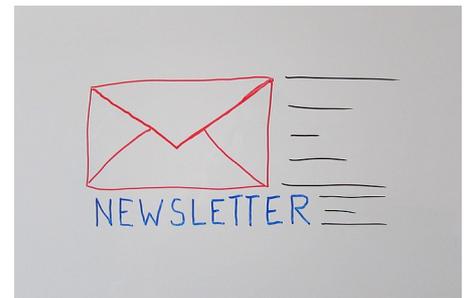
But what does that reconfiguration look like and how is it experienced and encountered by the

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children in the study?

Tales from the field

It is the beginning of June 2015 in London. The previous month the Conservative party won a second term in office, the five-year Coalition government with the Lib Dems is now history, and the policies of austerity are set to continue and even escalate.

Melissa, one of the researchers, is spending the day with Alessio, one of the children from London. She has attended school with Alessio and the pair are now waiting for the bus. The two make their way to the upper deck, Alessio leading the way.

The bus drives along Seven Sisters Road, which is busier than it had been in the morning, the hustle and bustle of the shops is now in full swing. They drive past an Arts Centre where a few people are standing outside chatting. There is also a low wall with a comfortably sized ledge. A man is lying on the ledge sleeping. Judging from his clothes and appearance he looks homeless. Melissa and Alessio spot him at the same time and Alessio exclaims: 'Look at that poor man. He doesn't have money to get a house. You need to be rich. Well, not rich, but you need a lot of money to buy a house'.

Later that same year, in mid-December, in Athens a more domestic scene, within the confines of the research, unfolds. It has been a long, and politically intense year. The new Syriza government took office in January of 2015, and protracted negotiations with the 'troika' over debt repayment ensued, culminating in the **June 2015 referendum**.

Christos, another researcher, is spending the afternoon with Fotini, a participating child from Athens. Whilst playing Fotini has found an old, black leather handbag and starts modelling it for Christos.

Fotini assumes that funny and pretentious tone she sometimes does, as if presenting something for telemarketing. She declares that the bag was of the highest quality and starts fishing around inside for things to show Christos: a plastic bracelet which she will need if she has to urgently go on a social visit because she's not wearing any jewellery right now; a few phone cards, for making calls; an old broken mobile phone (that's why she needs the cards); a few small plastic animals.

At some point, Fotini fishes out a small colourful purse: 'Let's see what's in there,' she says opening it. The purse is empty. She turns it upside down and says by way of explanation: 'Ehm, we have the crisis, you know.'

Tropes of crisis

The excerpts above were selected from a wealth of ethnographic and visual data collected over an 18-month period because they are emblematic of the two most prominent tropes of the financial crisis – housing and currency- as these are relevant to each national-cultural context, and because they illustrate how the crisis finds its way into children's everyday lives, reconfiguring representations and experiences of dwelling and consumption in the process.

The financial crisis is intricately linked with the housing market in terms of how it was triggered economically, as well as being the primary social field in which it is encountered in everyday life.

Alessio's comments connect to the leitmotif of public and private conversations about the crisis in the UK. Housing and money are concepts Alessio has encountered enough times to be able to recognise and comment on during a fleeting manifestation of crisis encountered on the move. A routine bus ride provides the serendipitous setting for encountering the financial crisis in its most intimate of forms, of sleeping out in public.

The financial crisis in Greece had a different cultural hue. Currency, the debt, debates about exiting the single currency, and the capital controls, were a more prominent national-cultural demonstration of financial crisis.

Fotini brings the public narrative of crisis into her home through playful enactment of typical cultural and communication practices. However, the wallet, a material object at the intersection of private and public life, is empty because 'it's crisis'. Uttered in a slightly unusual possessive form in Greek of 'having crisis' (*έχουμε κρίση*), as opposed to the more common, observational statement 'there is a crisis' (*υπάρχει κρίση*), suggests a routinisation and familiarity with a 'crisis' that has embodied and embedded itself in Fotini and her everyday life.

However, working transnationally reminded us constantly that the tropes of crisis, and their lived experiences, are products of particular places and times. The 'financial crisis' is often portrayed

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as a global event. Hyderabad, our third study city, is a key city in Southern India's 'I.T. triangle', a hub of commercial activity with many connections to international markets. Yet India was relatively buffered from the crisis. As such, the credit crunch did not make an appearance in the study children's everyday lives and stories.

Coda

Public images of the 'financial crisis' oscillate between, what Greek visual anthropologist **Konstantinos Kalantzis** calls, an aesthetic of destitution and an aesthetic of dissent, each invoking powerful, and often extreme images of misery on the one hand, and resistance on the other. Both dissent and destitution fall within the realm of the spectacular, the 'shock and awe' conception of crisis we have become so accustomed to in the media.

Our research, like other **sociological** and **policy** studies, paints a more nuanced picture. In the intimate settings and practices of every life, 'crisis' is managed through incremental changes, adaptations and accommodations. Crisis insinuates into and traces its way through everyday life weaving together biography and history, the private and the public.

This observation is not to undermine the very real consequences that the financial crisis has had, and continues to have, on family lives. It is instead a reminder that, as **Bauman and Bordonni (2014)** argue, crisis is a period of 'conjecture' from which, not without pain, new experiences and connections may emerge. The many **solidarity movements springing up across Athens** are a testament to the possibilities for renewal, and a minority of families from our study also reported being engaged in such practices of social intervention and critique in Athens and in London.

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas is a critical social psychologist, the Principal Investigator of the ERC funded Connectors Study, and a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Sussex. Her research areas include: childhood publics, children participation, youth development, women and children's experiences of family violence, civic and political practices across the life course, and publics creating methodologies. She has published widely on these topics. You can read more about the ERC Connectors Study [here](#). **Christos Varvantakis** is an anthropologist, currently working at the University of Sussex, carrying out research in Athens for the ERC funded Connectors Study. His research areas are currently: childhood, politics, urban environments and visual research methodologies. He has published on politics around urban public space, on childhood and politics, on media and youth activism, and on the theory and history of visual anthropology. **Vinnarasan Aruldoss** is a Research Fellow for India in the ECR funded Connectors Study at Sussex University. He completed his PhD in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh looking at early childhood education and children's everyday experiences in three different pedagogical settings in Tamil Nadu in South India. He has published papers on early childhood policy, creative learning spaces, children's participation in early years, and childhood and politics.



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