

## THE MEDITERRANEAN IMAGINARY

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### THE MEDITERRANEAN IMAGINARY: A NATIONALISM OF THE SUN, A COMMUNISM OF THE SEA

“Indifference with regard to punctuality appears in all kinds of behavior...All the acts of life are free from the limitations of the timetable, even sleep, even work which ignores all obsession with productivity and yields...Free from the concern for schedules, and ignoring the tyranny of the clock, sometimes called the ‘devil’s mill,’ the peasant works without haste, leaving to tomorrow that which cannot be done today. The alarm clock and the watch do not regulate the whole of life...

The attitude of the Kabyle peasant toward nature and time coincides with the profound ‘intention’ and meaning of the mythology which he acts out implicitly in his daily life.”

— *Pierre Bourdieu, “The attitude of the Algerian peasant toward time”*<sup>1</sup>

**E**.P. Thompson’s classic *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* traces the challenge that new capitalist bosses and the Protestant moralizers who were their cultural support had in resocializing English commoners out of just the kind of relaxed time and work sensibility that Bourdieu attributes to the twentieth-century Algerian peasant. Thompson discusses an “older, more natural time-sense” that he says characterizes all preindustrial cultures: work is done on an as-needed basis, according to the rhythms of nature, and people don’t objectify time as something to be used or sold. Instead, they are connected to the moments of their lives, which are to be lived rather than used.

The struggle of Thompson’s (and Max Weber’s) harsh Puritan ministers and greedy early industrialists to reshape the cultural common sense around time, work, and life, rages today, I’d like to argue, around the Mediterranean, most prominently but not exclusively in Southern Europe. In particular, I see the contemporary Greek “crisis” as part of an attack on the unproductive

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, “The attitude of the Algerian peasant toward time,” in *Mediterranean Countrymen: Essays in the Social Anthropology of the Mediterranean*. Julian Pitt-Rivers, ed., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1963.

pleasures of Mediterranean culture, a new iteration of the cultural and economic battle that capital wages in order to extract more and more profit from every moment and every iota of the lifeworld, even within areas that are already putatively “capitalist.” Austerity—privatization of public resources, the cutting of social welfare benefits, the deregulation of labor markets—is, at root, a classic speedup.

I want to argue that the most effective political challenge to this speedup is a countercultural transvaluation of the Puritan values around time and work that animate it. In this effort, Mediterranean culture and its popular image is a ubiquitous and too frequently disavowed weapon in the battle between northern European bankers and the residents of southern Europe. At this writing, the struggle between Greece and its creditors rages (with the creditors winning), but whatever the outcome, the limits of an electoral victory in a single nation-state have become apparent. It’s time to go back to the drawing board, to think through the lessons of the spring and summer of 2015, and, perhaps, to entertain a new kind of long-term political strategy. One fueled, I’d like to suggest, by a Mediterranean dream that is shared in both northern and southern Europe, and beyond, and thus can effectively challenge the quasi-nationalist discourses that animate the battle lines in the euro “crisis” today.

Simply put, a speedup is opposed by a slowdown. But today even the smartest, most radical leftists in Greece and in other peripheral European nations challenge the discourse of austerity with an alternative that is still based on the model of growth, development, and material “progress.” Growth on one side, austerity and recession on the other: both, as Peter Bratsis points out, are still animated by the vision of humanity as *homo economicus*. I’d like to propose that the key to real international solidarity with the brave Greek struggle is an articulation of the good life, one that goes beyond anti-austerity struggles and begins to embrace an alternative imaginary—one closer to Huizinga’s sense of man as *homo ludens*: man the player.

## THE SLACKER ROOTS OF RESENTMENT

Since the start of the so-called sovereign debt crisis around 2010, those paying attention have been barraged with a discourse that pits hardworking, frugal, and ultimately victimized Germans against lazy, profligate Greeks. In the mainstream press, the narrative is clear: the slacker Greeks lied their way into the Eurozone, borrowed beyond their ability to repay, and keep trying

to skip out on what they owe the honest Germans who lent them the money. This narrative is false.

Fortunately, in recent months, it has lost some of its power. Even relatively bourgeois economists are coming, like much of the public in the developed world, to follow their more radical colleagues toward a few key corrections. First, Greece's public debt is attributable as much to a massive recession and to the work of vulture funds and speculators, as well as to the now-common practice of socializing bank losses, as it is to any kind of public sector generosity to folks who won't work. Political corruption and the power of a small oligarchy are all too real in Greece; however, the "crisis" around Greek government debt has far more to do with the massively leveraged lending that German and French banks did with newly-minted euros, and the threat that a Greek default in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and resulting worldwide recession would trigger a string of other defaults that could seriously compromise the banks.

So the trope of Greek laziness as the *cause* of the so-called crisis is nothing but a fantasy. But fantasies are more than just true or false. Fantasies, I submit, don't maintain cultural prominence unless they tap into powerful desires. Consider that although the German taxpayer is actually bailing out northern European banks and not Greek people, 70% of Germans at this writing fully support their finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble; his actions in the face of Syriza's now-failed efforts to challenge the colonialism of debt and memoranda are, all protestations notwithstanding, more than just math. They constitute aggression, pure and simple. Even the (US dominated) IMF, the guys who invented the vise of global debt/structural adjustment/austerity are breaking with the troika, being "reasonable" technocrats of capital and in the process, demonstrating the irrationality of the German will to punish.

For just one example, consider the fact that the deal that Tsipras signed after the Greek referendum of July 2015 was worse for Greeks than the one on the table before the referendum. When the Greek government was forced to capitulate after two resounding anti-austerity victories, an election and a referendum, and came to the troika crying "uncle," the German response was "we're not sure we can really trust you. Implement more and more crippling austerity and then *maybe* we'll talk about debt restructuring." This is a level of sadism that can only come from the most repressed of people. It's about money, but there is something deeper too. It is simply beyond all rationality, economic or political.

Thus, the rational Keynesianism of Syriza's center is no match for the punishing rage of the creditors. And to know how to oppose it, we need to understand where it comes from. The idea of a creditor punishing a debtor out of sadism rather than rationality finds, of course, its first and most convincing elucidation in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. For today's Germans, though, it's not just cruelty, the compensatory pleasure of punishing, though it's partly that. Under the rage, I believe, is frustrated desire.

In this sense, the Greek/German dynamic is of a piece with a familiar black/white welfare discourse in the United States. This racialized narrative encourages downwardly mobile working and middle class whites in the US to see black "welfare cheats" as the source of all their economic problems. According to this account of the causes of black unemployment and the moral and economic cost of the welfare state, immoral and lazy blacks are "stealing" all the money of the hardworking, honest white folks. This discourse fuels not only the decimation of the welfare state and public goods more generally, but also the widespread support among whites for brutal policing and mass incarceration of blacks. In Germany as in the US, behind the punitive rage (in one case over debt, in another over welfare) lies resentment of a perceived freedom, real or not. And in both cases, this resentment is a barrier to the kind of class solidarity that could make this dream of freedom real for everyone—north and south in Europe, whites and blacks in the US.

The fact is that the riches of "Germany"—that is, German capital—have come from the wage repression and lengthening of work hours of the German working class over the past twenty years. So it's been easy for the German bankers to drum up nationalist, aggressive anti-Greek sentiment among German workers with a discourse very similar to the one that American capitalists use on white downwardly mobile folks in the US. It's a bait-and-switch, but without a powerful counter narrative, it works like a charm. The key thing to understand is that German working-class anger toward the fantasy Greeks who have been getting something for nothing while they've been working like crazy, is a function *not of a Protestant work ethic but of its opposite*. People who love work pity those who do not work; they don't resent them. Resentment against perceived work-shirkers and money-blowers is an index precisely of the desire to work less. Capital knows how to use this fantasy to divide and conquer workers. It's high time for the labor side to understand its political power as well.

The laziness/hardworking narrative is rich with political possibility, if we just stop disavowing which side we'd all really like to live on. This is why a counter narrative matters. My goal in this essay is to outline the Mediterranean fantasy that gives rise to so much rage and so much fascination, to show the way it is not only the object but also potentially the challenge to the moral and economic dominance of the discourse of work and productivity, and to discuss how fantasies can function as more than the ultimately passive repository of the un-real, and more than the handmaiden of Orientalist subjugation. I will argue that the imaginary has a creative capacity, one that the left can use to challenge the regime of endless work and the "dream" of economic growth and productivity with a vision of a truly good life, and to challenge the anti-solidaristic and aggressive dangers of nationalism with a shared political project.

### READING THE MEDITERRANEAN

The popular idea of Greek culture that I've been referencing is really one with the rest of the Mediterranean region—coastal Italy and France, Spain, Portugal, and Algeria, for starters. The primary insight here is that the Mediterranean is both the most highly securitized and militarized sea on planet earth, increasingly becoming a death trap for desperate refugees attempting to enter "fortress Europe," and it is also, more than perhaps any other body of water, represented by an image of peace, leisure, pleasure, and connection. It is a sea of contradictions, bifurcated between the powers of libido and destrudo, as is the ocean of the unconscious with which its image so intensely resonates. I want to read this Mediterranean fantasy in terms of its significance in two senses—both what it signifies and what it produces (its political significance). War and pleasure, and the inverse relationship between the two, define both.

Here my analysis is guided by Marcuse's Marxist (and hippie) Freudianism in the classic *Eros and Civilization*, in which he reads both Freud and world history to argue that the repression of libido is the real origin of aggressiveness. He identifies a dangerous dynamic whereby in contemporary society, Eros undergoes not only the repression made necessary by the scarcity inherent in the "reality principle" but a surplus-repression that functions to turn the body from an instrument of pleasure and intercourse with nature and other people, into an instrument of alienated labor under what he calls the "performance principle."

Under the performance principle, the historically specific reality principle that characterizes capitalist society, Marcuse says Eros undergoes such an intense level of repression that it becomes unable to hold back or “bind” aggressiveness—and Freud posits Eros as the only force with this capacity. In a sense, the only thing stronger than hate is love; the only thing more satisfying than violence is libidinal connection. So when Eros is repressed in modern society by the ever-intensifying imperative of work, and the manufactured scarcity that enforces it, violence and aggressiveness are unleashed on a disastrous scale.

Thus, as Germans and other core-nation Europeans are worked longer for less, they become more susceptible to aggressive discourses. And as a characteristically leisurely and nonproductive orientation of Mediterranean culture is beaten back with the clubs of debt, austerity, and the “need” for southern Europeans, epitomized by the Greeks, to work harder, then, inevitably, *their* aggressive side is strengthened as well. We need only to consider the relationship between policies of austerity and the rise of the far right in Europe to see one obvious example. Obviously, there can be no single variable to explain fascism, racism, violence. Still, the danger is real. Surplus repression kills.

What is coming to be known as a Mediterranean imaginary opposes the dominant social imaginary that asserts the following: endless work is inevitable, the calculus of profitability should determine what a beach or a village or a city should look like, privatization of common pool resources and spaces is just “common sense,” constant war is inevitable, and there is simply *not enough* to go around, so the only solution to the refugee crises that war generates is to build larger and more deadly barriers to migration. The Mediterranean imaginary replaces this austere and dangerous logic with something that appeals to libidinal desire for flow, timelessness, pleasure.

To read a mass fantasy, we begin with an iconic film.

## THE ANTI-FASCISM OF THE SEA

Just as the sea itself is a site of the great struggle between communal pleasure and war, so is its popular representation. Gabriele Salvatore’s *Mediterraneo*, the 1991 Italian film about a group of Italian soldiers who become stranded on an idyllic Greek island, is as perfect an example as any of the classic image of the Mediterranean as home to the love and slacker leisure that is potentially far stronger than its violent, nationalist, authoritarian opposite.

The film's opening shots lay it out clearly. The first is a quote by Henry Laborit: "In times like these, escape is the only way to stay alive, and to continue dreaming." Next, we see a warship, guns pointing toward the sea. As always, the image is bifurcated. But in the film as in the Mediterranean image more generally, the dream of love and pleasure is more powerful than the imaginary of endless war. The film tells the story of Italian soldiers sent on a WWII mission to a remote Greek island on the Aegean, which, we are told, has no strategic value. The soldiers are a classic band of misfits—seasick brothers, a man in love with his goat, a deserter, an aesthete—slackers who seem to be emblems of Churchill's sentiment that Italy was "the soft underbelly of the Axis."

Here is the first chord of the Mediterranean chorus: somehow, Italians are just culturally unable to be the cold, mind-melded fascists that the wartime Germans are in the popular imagination. When we first see the island, Greek graffiti greets the viewer, saying, "Greece is the tomb of the Italians." When through a series of mishaps, the soldiers lose their radio communication with the outside world and their countrymen believe that they've been blown up with the ship that came to rescue them, they dive in to the culture and "go native." The Greek island is indeed the death of the Italian nationalist fantasy.

The film's most important character, Sergeant LoRusso, a macho nationalist military type, is baked by the sun and some Turkish hash into going native as well, abandoning his militaristic desire for agency writ large in favor of island idleness. In one key scene, a Turkish sailor disembarks on the island with no news from the "front" but with plenty of hash and a new twist on the film's main refrain, "Turks and Greeks, one face, one race." (A similar sentiment about Greeks and Italians floods the rest of the film). The background music becomes more Ottoman, the sailor gets all the soldiers high, and a classic stoner conversation about war ensues: why do we bother? Who is it even for? Even LoRusso winds up laughing, coming to feel the absurdity of fighting for a nation. He finally gives in after strenuously advocating a return to the front, saying eventually, "yeah, fuck it."

When, in the morning, it becomes apparent that the Turkish sailor has stolen all the Italians' weapons, LoRusso is at first horrified—"how will we occupy the island?"—but later in the day, when he is having a massage and smoking more of the Turkish hash, says, "maybe it would be better this way, if they took your guns and left this stuff instead." It is his transformation that is the central metaphor for the impact of the Mediterranean lifestyle:

the sun, the sand, the love, the leisure, trumps tightly wound nationalism every time. The region can soften even fascism, the uptight boundaries of which are simply no match for the waves and the love and the sunshine. When the Greek priest is shown that the Italians no longer have weapons and thus are no longer “occupying” the island, he opens up a trap door to show LoRusso that the islanders have had plenty of weapons all along. “We are friends, right?” he asks the lieutenant, indicating that their peace was made not by weapons and forced occupation but by the island culture of relaxed hospitality.

The papa was no dummy in this regard: early in the film, he asks the lieutenant to repaint the ancient frescoes in the church, clearly the amateur painter’s dream come true. The others find their bliss as well: LoRusso organizes Olympic-style games of sport, the two (previously seasick) brothers meet a beautiful shepherd girl who just wants to play and make love with them, the other soldier finds a new donkey to love. It’s a classic libido-beats-destrudo story: much of the soldiers’ experience on the island involves unauthorized sexuality, like a man’s deep love for his goat, two brothers in a playful threesome with a pretty girl, and a sudden admission of homosexuality. Rigid national and sexual identities are relaxed, and war starts to seem pretty stupid.

The Lieutenant, a high school history teacher and weekend artist, has always wanted to come to Greece but could never afford it before. “Maybe this is destiny,” he says, comforting his young protégé, Private Farina, a melancholy orphan. The Lieutenant explains that 2500 years ago, Greece was the center of philosophy, art, learning, warriors, goddesses... “everything was born here... we’re all their descendants. Even you can find your origins here.” Farina responds by devouring Greek lyric poetry and quoting from it to his newfound love, the island’s one heart-of-gold prostitute. When escape from the island is finally possible, after several years, it is Farina who hides out so that he can stay and open a taverna with his newfound love, Vassillisa. He has, finally, found his place in the world.

When the Brits come, toward the end of the film, to repatriate all the island men who’d been taken prisoner by the Germans and to escort the Italians off the island, it’s clear that the Greeks have more in common with the Italians than with their British “allies.” In the film, the Mediterranean identity is far more powerful than the inter-imperialist alliances that have come to shape the world, of WWII *and* of the 1990s gaze back on it. LoRusso, who despite his island transformations in the film never totally lost his nationalist



military adventurism and quasi-imperialist leanings, is the figure in whom all that is put to rest at the film's end. In the epilogue, the Lieutenant returns to the island as an old man to see the faded frescoes he painted so many years ago. He visits Farina, now a widow at the end of what had been a happy life running the taverna with his now-deceased Vassillisa, and to the Lieutenant's surprise LoRusso is there as well. "Life wasn't so good in Italy," he says. "They didn't let us change anything..." The three old men end the film smiling and cutting eggplants, as another quote fills the last frame: "Dedicated to all those who are escaping."

Consuming the popular image of Mediterranean culture, in Italy, in the US (where *Mediterraneo* won the Oscar for best foreign film), and in Northern Europe, is certainly an escape, as is the consumption of tourist experiences along the coast. It's an escape from the regime of endless work and the stressed-out aggressiveness that this regime inevitably unleashes. There is a seminal labor politics to this regime and to the desire to escape it: as the neoliberal profit strategy forces more and more work out of everyone, globally, the market is flooded with labor, which invariably lowers the price. So people become more and more impoverished the harder they work. Who wouldn't dream of escape?

For southern Europeans, with their leisurely pace of work, austerity is the punishment that capital hopes will discipline them out of their "unrealistic" culture's privileging of pleasure over productivity. Not surprisingly, then, the region has been at the forefront of the struggle against the logic of austerity and endless work, as well as against authoritarianism and the aggressive policing that enforces it. From Athens to the indignados to Gezi Park to the Arab Spring, to the growing electoral power of anti-austerity movements around the Mediterranean, especially in Spain and Greece, the Mediterranean imaginary is defined not only by the leisurely culture, connection with nature, and port-city cosmopolitanism of the region but also by the very real struggle to defend those things against the logic of capital and of the nationalism that is so often a weak and immoral response to it.

So much has been written about the idea of the Mediterranean that I couldn't possibly do it all justice here. But I'd like to interrogate a couple of scholarly works that I think have been particularly influential in shaping this sense of what the Mediterranean means, especially the parts that help us understand why the region can be seen as a space of hope in the world today. I am thinking in particular of the work of Braudel, of Kahanoff, and above all of Camus.

## CAMUS: A NATIONALISM OF THE SUN

One of the richest and most controversial twentieth century examples of the Mediterranean imaginary is a speech Camus delivered in 1937 in Algiers at the Maison de la Culture (a group that aimed to, in the words of Camus, “serve the cause of ... Mediterranean regionalism”), in which he outlines a celebration of Mediterranean culture as a cosmopolitan mix of East and West and as more vital, more alive, than either the culture of northern Europe or the Italian imperialism that would subjugate the whole Mediterranean region to its dominating designs. When he espouses what he calls a “nationalism of the sun,” he challenges the Italian nationalism vying to dominate the Mediterranean militarily and create a new Roman Empire in the “mare nostrum,” in favor of a humanistic internationalism centered in a much mellower Mediterranean culture that provides a natural Other to both the uptight productivism of the Protestant Ethic and the Roman imperialism of Italy during WWII.

The postcolonialist critique of Camus as unconscious defender of French domination of Algeria is well known. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said cites Conor Cruise O'Brien's detailed deconstruction of Camus as unconscious colonizer and says simply that Camus' “colonial mentality was no friend to revolution or to the Arabs.”<sup>2</sup> But Neil Foxlee, in his 2011 reading, challenges this critique, defending the pan-Mediterranean cultural idea as an imperfect but earnest challenge to the nationalisms he saw around him everywhere in 1937.

According to Foxlee, it was the rejection of nationalism that is most important in his speech: he actually challenges both Latinity and Hellenism as nationalist ideas invoking the Mediterranean as origin of all Western civilization, both of which, Foxlee argues, are saturated with anti-Semitism: “Seen against this background, it is clear that any appeal that Camus makes in his lecture was made in the face, not of the Muslim majority, but of a parallel appeal by the anti-Semitic and pro-fascist Right in Algeria. The clear connection between Latinity [the celebration of the Roman Empire as the seed of western civilization] and fascism had a particular resonance in the Algerian context that would not have been lost on his audience.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, Foxlee's essay makes the case that Camus' speech was in no way anti-Arab, with the caveat that being pro-Mediterranean may be nationalist in some way because, like all

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<sup>2</sup> Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978, p. 312.

<sup>3</sup> Foxlee, Neil. *Albert Camus's The New Mediterranean Culture: a Text and its Contexts*. Bern, Germany. 2010. Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers. P 209.

nationalisms, it excludes an Other. But the Other is not the Arab or the Muslim but the culturally Northern European and the fascist. Foxlee argues that Camus was engaging, especially in the context of some of his political work with the Maison de la Culture, in a transvaluation of dominant values rather than a masked colonialist devaluation of the “native.”

This is in addition to his lifelong advocacy for Muslim and European equality, which culminated, just before his speech, in his being kicked out of the French Communist Party for opposing its change of line on Algeria and abandonment of anticolonial politics there in favor of popular front anti-fascism. According to Foxlee, “the postcolonialist approach disregards the fact that the political problem that [the speech] addresses is the rise of fascism, and that this was just as much a problem in Algeria as it was in Europe. However, as is shown by the pro-Muslim policy of the Maison de la Culture, Camus’ other activities and above all the manifesto in favour of the Viollette plan, he was far from ignoring the colonial problem. While he did not see independence as the solution and indeed seemed to take the French presence in Algeria for granted, his commitment to Muslim civil rights placed him among the most progressive European Algerian voices of his time.”<sup>4</sup>

If Arab culture is not Camus’ main subject, it’s because his larger goal is to divide the cultures of Europe between north and south:

“Those whose voices boom in the singing cafes of Spain, who wander in the port of Genoa, along the docks in Marseilles, the strange, strong race that lives along our coasts, all belong to the same family. When you travel in Europe, and go down toward Italy or Provence, you breathe a sigh of relief as you rediscover these casually dressed men, this violent, colorful life we all know. I spent two months in central Europe, from Austria to Germany, wondering where that strange discomfort weighing me down, the muffled anxiety I felt in my bones, came from. A little while ago, I understood. These people were always buttoned right up to the neck. They did not know how to relax. They did not know what joy was like...”<sup>5</sup>

Foxlee interprets the line with a caution: “[Camus] supports his argument that Mediterraneans share a common temperament and taste for life by favourably contrasting their lack of inhibitions with the stiffness he encountered during

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 219.

<sup>5</sup> Camus, Albert. *Algerian Chronicles*, Alice Kaplan, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 189.

a two-month trip to Central Europe, from Austria to Germany...[he] can obviously be accused here of lapsing into anti-Nordic prejudice and regional/national stereotyping. These slippages suggest that a Mediterranean identity, like any other identity, can only be constructed in opposition to an Other or Others, raising the question of whether a specifically and self-consciously Mediterranean humanism can claim to be truly universalistic.”

However, this idea is clearly *both* a challenge to nationalism and an embrace of an alternative cultural imaginary, which, given Camus’s humanist sense of the universality of the love of life and sun and water, are simply not the same thing, Other or no Other. Camus disses the “buttoned-up, hardworking, uptight” Germans and praises the more relaxed life of the peoples of the Mediterranean, and this analysis has certainly in many ways been borne out by the attack on the leisurely southern European way of life—siestas and working to live, not living to work—coming precisely from the centers of European finance, namely, Germany. All postcolonial critiques aside, if you’ve been to both Germany and to southern Italy and haven’t felt deeply the very cultural difference that Camus so inelegantly, to our ears, describes, well, you missed something kind of big.

The thing about the primitivist fantasy is that it may just be true. People feel more relaxed when they are in the sun, by the sea. Warm coastal cultures are more leisurely and enjoyable, and everyone knows it. Still, Camus’s Algerian essays have been widely criticized on the basis that they invoke an Algeria that, according to Pourgouris, “is an imaginary place, in accord with his philosophical, political, and aesthetic ideas but in discord with the ‘real’ Algeria.”<sup>6</sup> Fair enough, on all counts. Our goal is to analyze not the validity but the outlines and political significance of this “imaginary place.”

The politics of the Camus essays and their relationship to France and Algeria are complicated, to be sure, and this debate won’t be settled here. The larger question, though, is whether the postcolonialist critique exhausts the significance of this kind of fantasy. First of all, Camus grew up on the shores of the Mediterranean so although he may have seen himself as French, his essays invoke an identity more connected to the sea than to any nation. And what he celebrated in the Mediterranean culture and other essays in which he hails life by the sea as the other of the alienated twentieth century West was less the primitive per se and more the pleasures of a life not totally interpellated by the logic of profit: of sunlight, of the body, of swimming and

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<sup>6</sup> Pourgouris, p. 45.

relaxing and the community that inevitably forms around those activities. This is why the Mediterranean dream matters. It's why although a certain primitivism has been an instrument of imperialist power, it functions as more than that too.

Especially today, when daily there is another news story about the way that the Mediterranean diet and relaxed, sunny lifestyle can, if adopted by the Anglo-American audience especially, give the adopter a long and happy life. In this context, it's worth noting that inhabitants of the Mediterranean are progressively losing their ability to afford both the diet and the leisurely pace of life that, we all know as well as Camus did, is just better for you. The key to the "Mediterranean lifestyle," as it's laid out in one news article after another, is both a relaxed pace and a local, balanced diet, that southern Europeans at least are, under the austerity of the German currency called the euro and its characteristic work speedup and social and private wage repression, finding it harder and harder to actually afford.

Mediterranean spaces are being enclosed by the forces of privatization; Mediterranean time rhythms—more leisurely, more human than the profit-driven quantified clock time of capital—are being interrupted, sped up. Today the region is a major, perhaps the major, site of uprising against both the nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment of the far right and the neoliberal policies that tap into these hyper-nationalist currents to crush the solidarity among the region's peoples—a solidarity necessary for effective struggle against the work speedup enforced on north and south alike by global banks and corporations. The Mediterranean imaginary in this context must be more than an Orientalist fantasy.

For Camus, the uptight Protestant northern European identity was contested by the Mediterranean culture, which he saw not as a unified identity but as something that could really only be understood aesthetically and with the senses: "a certain smell or scent that we do not need to express: we all feel it through our skin." According to Pourgouris in his *Mediterranean Modernisms*, Camus saw the power of the Mediterranean as "the only hope for the present and the future of the region...[for him] the Left's future is not to be found in the fake and oppressive collectivism of Stalinist Russia, but in the service of life and the inheritance of the sun. Camus concludes his lecture with a solidaristic affirmation for change: 'Can we achieve a new Mediterranean culture that can be reconciled with our social ideas? Yes. But both we and you must help to bring it about.'"

There is more than that to be said about what real world effects this dream—of free spaces and of free time, of the coming together of the north and south shores of the sea—can have. For this, we need to turn away from Camus's enthralling descriptions of Mediterranean culture and toward a political philosophy of the imaginary. But first, let's look at how several seminal treatments of Mediterranean culture—some classics, some new—echo Camus's articulation of the antinationalist and antiwork meaning of the Mediterranean.

## MEDITERRANEAN MARKETS

Obviously, fascination with the Mediterranean region is nothing new. The work of Braudel arguably created it as an object of scholarly study in the modern world, and shapes our ideas of the relationship of the Mediterranean, capitalism, and the quality of everyday life still. Braudel's key intervention, I think, is the conception of the Mediterranean as a space of flow rather than boundaries, a space defined not by nation but by trade, mixing, migration, and interconnection.

How we identify a place characterized by a constant refusal of boundaries is problematic, to be sure. But the oceanic resistance to the rigid identities that so often result in nationalism and war is not unrelated to another important piece of Braudel's analysis of the region. Braudel saw trade and migration and fluidity of identity as inextricably linked. And he very clearly distinguished between the market and capitalism.

While capitalism itself is subject to a kind of popular critique that we haven't seen in decades, the market as a space remains beloved. There, people find novelty and cosmopolitanism, strangers and spontaneous interactions. It's why, as they say, you can't keep them down on the farm once they've seen New Orleans. According to Braudel, "The market spells liberation, openness, access to another world. It means coming up for air."<sup>7</sup>

Part of the sick genius of the neoliberal project was to equate the market with global capital and its imperatives. Braudel's analysis tears this false equation asunder: arresting capital's ability to consume human lives and the environment does not mean an end to the colorful, vibrant display and

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<sup>7</sup> Braudel, Fernand. *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: Volume 2, The Wheels of Commerce*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985, p. 26.

trade of local abundance and the convivial, democratic space that constitute markets, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. And it's no surprise that alternative markets—time banks, barter markets, and ones that use made-up currencies like the TEM—are springing up in Greece as one way to escape the crushing austerity of the European common “market.”

Where participants in actual markets are defined by the specialization that makes exchange possible (and the market interesting), big capital by design refuses to specialize, and will concentrate wherever, abstractly, returns are highest. Markets are decentered; big capital tends to concentrated monopolies of larger and larger amounts of money. Markets run on horizontal communication and competition; capitalism runs on vertical inequalities of power. Unlike the market, which doesn't need the state as guarantor, capital and its monopolies depend on it.

Immanuel Wallerstein puts it thus:

“Braudel sees... a continuing tension between the forces of monopoly (so-called real capitalism) and the forces of liberation, which seek liberation through self-controlled economic activities within a complex of competitive markets, one in which their activities are 'barely distinguishable from ordinary work'...Braudel's 'liberatory' market is not what we have come to recognize as a market in the real world. It is truly competitive, in that supply and demand really do determine price, that is, potential (or fully realized) supply and demand. The 'profits,' it would follow, would be miniscule—in effect, a wage for the work.”<sup>8</sup>

Manuel DeLanda puts the same point this way:

“Fernand Braudel has recently shown, with a wealth of historical data, that...capitalism was, from its beginnings in the Italy of the thirteenth century, always monopolistic and oligopolistic. That is to say, the power of capitalism has always been associated with large enterprises, large that is, relative to the size of the markets where they operate. Also, it has always been associated with the ability to plan economic strategies and to control market dynamics, and therefore, with a certain degree of centralization and hierarchy.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wallerstein, Immanuel, “Braudel on Capitalism, or Everything Upside Down,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 63, No. 2, June 1991, pp. 354-361

<sup>9</sup> DeLanda, Manuel, “Markets, Antimarkets and Network Economics,” *Found Object*, Vol 8, City University of New York: Center for the Study of Culture, Technology and Work, p. 53

Simply put, the cold, dominating logic of capital, the quest for profits and for higher and higher profits above all else, is not the same as either the spatial or the social reality of actual markets. And the fact that markets and exchange are such a big part of the Mediterranean, from the feudal town to the coastal ports to the walled souks, is part of what makes its culture so alluring. Braudel's discussion helps us to see that Mediterranean culture traditionally contains all the spontaneous pleasures, democratic translations of desire, and free public space that constitute the market, and that oppose the disciplines of the so-called global "free market."

The difference between capitalism and the material space of the market echoes the difference that Marx laid out in *Capital* Volume I between simple circulation, in which currency is simply a means of exchange and functions as little more than a wage for the producer, and the circulation of capital. The latter is a process totally abstracted from anything qualitative or human and operates not according to a logic of the satisfaction of a need or desire, as simple circulation in the market does, but according to a logic of the endless growth of profit, independent of any qualitative measure of the satisfaction of needs or the creation and circulation of use-values.

For Braudel, the small-scale makers and sellers could not have been more different from those capitalists, interested not in specialization but in abstraction, whose line of sight extended far beyond trading and markets to world domination. And military commanders have always seen the Mediterranean as a key strategic sea—controlling access is the route to economic power, and that is as true today as it was during WWII, WWI, and the wars that fertilized the ground for them. (In one important example, controlling access to the Mediterranean started the entire cold war: the British abandoned the leftists in Greece after the war because Churchill was more interested in making sure Stalin didn't gain control of the sea than he was in fighting fascism.)

And in fact, DeLanda sees the militarism as fundamental:

"That specific form of industrial production which we tend to identify as "truly capitalist," that is, assembly-line mass production, was not born in economic organizations, but in military ones, beginning in France in the eighteenth century, and then in the United States in the nineteenth. It was military arsenals and armories that gave birth to these particularly oppressive control techniques of the production process... This largely ignored military component of large scale enterprises is, I believe, another good reason to replace the term "capitalism"



with a neologism like “the antimarket,” since we can simply build this military component right into our definition of the term.”

Furthermore, it's not actual markets that demand military support, it's antimarkets that do. The militarized Mediterranean has far more to do with profits and monopoly power than with the exchange, trade, freedom and diverse abundance of the marketplace.

## LEVANTISM

The market, then, is an open, cosmopolitan space, constituted by flow, exchange, and liminality rather than by borders and rigid identities, as is the Mediterranean region itself. Jacqueline Shoheit Kahanoff, the Egyptian-born Jewish and later Israeli writer, innovated a new concept of Levantinism to reflect this key aspect of the region and connect it to the refusal of capitalist rhythms of time and work. Kahanoff repurposed the term from a derogatory name in Israel for non-European Jews who were seen in the fifties as a threat to the unified Jewish national identity that underlay the Zionist project. In her reframing, Levantism came to reference a model of multicultural cosmopolitanism that Kahanoff felt she'd experienced growing up in Cairo and that she saw as hope for peace in the region in the face of the forces of both Arab nationalism and Zionism.

It is worth quoting the editors of *Mongrels or Marvels*, a collection of her essays, at length for historical background:

“The Levantine is a ‘borderline figure that marks the slippery lines between West and East and as such is found to be inferior not only to Europe but also to Europe’s imagined other, the Orient.’ When in the early 1950s Israel experienced large waves of immigration of Jews from the Arab and Islamic worlds, there was much consternation over the effect their cultural integration might have on the relatively new state.” (This was anathema to Zionism and its hero, Ben Gurion, “who viewed Levantinization, or the infusion of Oriental tendencies into Israeli culture, as a corrupting force.) Absorption of these immigrants was conducted with a patronizing attitude toward their cultural heritage, and education programs assumed developmental backwardness in terms of both skills and intellectual potential. By labeling her model Levantinism, Kahanoff appropriated the loaded term that had taken on these negative connotations as a tool for redressing the discriminatory policies it fostered. In the words of one critic, ‘Kahanoff caused a revolution in the term Levantinism. This was a revolution in the meaning from a shameful word to a possible description

of honor for people who exist in dual cultures.' ... throughout her life Kahanoff indeed validated hybrid cultural identities...but her writings transcend a feel-good multiculturalism in order to explore its potential to function as a model for constructing a just, pluralist society."<sup>10</sup>

Kahanoff flipped the script on Levantinism, single-handedly transvaluing the meaning attributed to the "culturally impure" non-European Mizrahi Jews in the region. This flipping informs our analysis here: precisely what is most disparaged about Mediterranean culture by the European troika, among others—the relaxed, oceanic pleasures that subvert the work discipline that profitability demands—is a formidable weapon against this logic of profitability. This relaxed mode of being is Levantine. According to author Marinos Pourgouris, (who points out that Kahanoff was reading a lot of Camus when she innovated Levantinism) "the word was used in European travelers' writings to designate an individual, not necessarily a native of the Levant, who has been 'infected' by the sluggishness, disorganization, and undisciplined life of the Levant."<sup>11</sup>

Like many Mediterraneans today, those coded Levantine were seen as lazy, and this leisureliness—as well as a refusal to pay their debts, another enduring connotation of the term—was related to their inability to perform a proper and unitary Western identity. This slacker connotation is key here. Again, the surplus repressions of work under capitalism are not at all unrelated to the aggressive putting up of national and other borders. And significantly, one does not have to be from the region to be "infected" by the culture she describes.

## THE POLITICS OF THE IMAGINARY

To understand the subversive-of-capital power of the Mediterranean imaginary, we have to dig into the concept of the imaginary, as laid out by essentially libertarian theorists like Sartre and Castoriadis, who thought through the idea of free subjectivity in terms of both the psyche and the economy. Although Lacan's concept of the imaginary tends to be everybody's go-to, his work was actually a response to Sartre's concept of the imaginary,

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<sup>10</sup> *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, Starr, Deborah, and Sasson Somekh, eds. Stanford: Stanford University press, 2011, p. xxiv.

<sup>11</sup> Pourgouris, Marinos. *Mediterranean Modernisms: The Poetic Metaphysics of Odysseus Elytis*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2011, p. 41.

elucidated in two books: *The Imaginary* and *The Imagination*, both written in 1934 (though the latter was published in 1940).

For Lacan, the imaginary coincides with alienation: the mirror stage involves the attempt to take into oneself, as the self, something that is alien, outside. And this imaginary relationship is precipitated by lack, fear, and anxiety. It operates primarily through identifications, but it doesn't create anything new: it simply reproduces subjection. Lacan, in his virtual abandonment of Freud's notion of the libidinal substantive content of the unconscious (he said clearly that the structure of the unconscious is more important than its content anyway), is animated by the idea that our most primitive layer of ontogenetic and phylogenetic being is not oceanic, but instead, broken, in pieces, and terrified. If the essence of human being is fragmentation, any imagined wholeness can only be alienation. Althusser's Lacanian theory of how subjects are always already interpellated makes plain the political dead end this reading of the unconscious, in terms only of structure—broken, made subject only through subjection—and not libidinal content, inevitably leads to. The question of freedom just doesn't really come up.

Things look far different when imagination is conceived as an act of consciousness, even if we do have to abandon the notion of unconscious drives for the moment. Sartre's own philosophical trajectory toward Husserl's phenomenological understanding of consciousness as intentional, always, shaped his sense of the imaginary as different from both perception and representation, and as born not out of lack or demand, but out of its own logic. That is, if all consciousness is the consciousness of something, then consciousness in itself has intention; it moves toward its object, it is an active relationship with the world. Imagination is part of consciousness; it aims at something that is not actually there. Thus, it is radically generative, and it's this creative capacity that makes us free. Imagination brings something out of nothing, and it is the essence of the subject's future-orientation, which is what makes radical, irreducible human subjectivity possible even under conditions of structural constraint.

According to Sartre, situations are always a mix of givens and transcendence, but freedom is always the ground of every one of them. Structural realities create the horizon of possibility within which we act, but because they create a possible future, even they orient us toward our own freedom. So if there is anything that structurally determines the present, it's not the psyche or the past, it's the future. In Sartre's later *The Progressive-Regressive Method*, he states that:

“to say what man is is to say what he can be—and vice versa. The material conditions of his existence circumscribe the field of his possibilities...thus the field of possibles is the goal toward which the agent surpasses his objective situation. And this field in turn depends strictly on the social, historical reality...yet the field of possibles, however reduced it may be, always exists... [it is] a strongly structured region which depends upon all of History and which includes its own contradictions. It is by transcending the given toward the field of possibles and by realizing one possibility from among all the others that the individual objectifies himself and contributes to making History.”<sup>12</sup>

Another inspiration for the Situationists and the rebels of 1968, Cornelius Castoriadis has a similar conception of the imaginary as the key to freedom. For him, it is the essence of the human and the builder of cultural forms. But unlike Sartre, he doesn't abandon basic psychoanalytic principles in order to assert the free and creative nature of human being. Both Castoriadis and Sartre go back to Aristotle, whose idea of imagination, they both say, has shaped that of all philosophy going forward. And both of them find, beneath Aristotle's discussion of the imagination as characterized essentially by falsity, a brief but key discussion of a more primary, more creative imagination, which was the fount of all thought, all forms, all human creations.

Castoriadis had to deal with the same problem that Sartre did—how to account for subjectivity and praxis given the intensity of what Sartre called the in-itself and the practico-inert. Castoriadis's intervention rejects the idea that psychoanalysis is purely deterministic in its claims about the conservative nature of the instincts. Like Marcuse, he sees implications of Freud that Freud himself did not. He asserts that Freud, in looking at the unconscious strictly in terms of determinations “manage[d] to conceal its indetermination as radical imagination.” But in invoking the mysterious, the libidinal, and the generative essence of the unconscious, Freud's theory supports the idea of the radical creativity of libido. Despite Castoriadis's involvement with Lacan's group, his reading of psychoanalysis filled in the subjectivity that he came to think (erroneously, I believe) was absent in the work of Marx, whom he saw as purely a theorist of the logic of capital and not of what inevitably opposes it.

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<sup>12</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Search for a Method*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1958, 93-94.

For Castoriadis, as for Althusser, adherence to the imperatives of capital is ensured by a culture that capital's productivist and consumerist imaginary builds. However, for Castoriadis (and not for the Lacanian Althusser, who saw revolution as only possible with the alternative subjectivities built by revolutionary ideological structures, namely, the party), revolution is possible in the context of a culture that a truly libidinal imaginary builds—and Marxism and Soviet Communism simply reproduced the productivist, dominating imaginary of capitalism and its repression of the human and natural. According to Castoriadis, within Marxism there is no positing, in theory or in fact, of a radical other to the repression and alienation under capitalism. This positing is what he calls culture.

For him, culture is the way we “give form to the chaos,” or structure what he refers to as the “magma” of life. It is a product of this primary capacity to imagine, and to imagine collectively. It follows then, that whatever pumps up both the imagination of a different culture, one focused on life and freedom and love, is part of our revolutionary repertoire. Whatever participates in a productivist, dominating imaginary that sees work as more important than play, and repression as more necessary than freedom, is not.

The journal Castoriadis founded with his Paris comrades, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, invokes the stark choice that I have highlighted here as characteristic of the struggles around the Mediterranean Sea: either people are satisfied and autonomous and happy and free or they are subject to repression and thus potentially vulnerable to bureaucratic totalitarianism and fascism. The journal's critique of both Soviet and capitalist repression and the dangers of unfreedom reverberated through the most important intellectual movements of the twentieth century: the Johnson-Forest Tendency of the WP, headed by CLR James and Raya Dunayevskaya, the Situationist International, (Guy DeBord was a S ou B member) and the Autonomia movement within Italian Marxism. Significantly, many of these folks agreed with Castoriadis on the question of cultural resistance but, rightly I think, disagreed with his sense that Marx's theory could not account for it properly.

In any case, we don't even need to remember that Castoriadis was a product of the Mediterranean—who crossed the sea from Athens to Paris on the ship, *Mataroa*, that inspired the name of a 2013 conference that was first to discuss the notion of a Mediterranean Imaginary—to see this as a profoundly Mediterranean logic, as a revolutionary oceanic imaginary. An imaginary that can build, and that has already done its part to build, a radical culture counter to the dominating space-time logic of capital. A

counterculture capable of smashing through the ideological supports of capitalism. David Graeber calls neoliberalism a “war on the imagination,” and says its greatest weapon is the incessant proliferation of meaningless, useless work. In Castoriadis’s words... “the system holds together because it succeeds in creating people’s adherence to the way things are.” But, he goes on, “this adherence is, of course, contradictory. It goes hand in hand with moments of revolt against the system... moreover, if people didn’t effectively adhere to the system, everything would collapse in the next six hours.”<sup>13</sup>

Capitalists, we can assume, know this. As a matter of fact, the very thought of it leaves them quaking in their boots, behind more and more militarized police forces, and bigger and bigger fences. They know that if we just imagine collectively that life could be organized around pleasure and not productivity, all bets would be off. Mediterranean culture transmits that message, and not surprisingly, it’s attacked as lazy, irresponsible, and morally wrong in the dominant social imaginary. But like the unconscious, it tends to overflow the structures of rationality and repression. As I hope I’ve shown, the cultural current of the Mediterranean imaginary is alive and growing, and it’s a more and more serious threat to the neoliberal vision of what human life ought to be.

When whole groups of people refuse the logic of crisis and scarcity that has cowed so many for so long, they inspire those watching by showing what is possible, by transforming our sense of what is realistic. When our visions of the good life look like real places, like the Mediterranean for instance, and when radical intellectuals and artists make clear to people the anti-capitalist, anti-work politics of which their dreams are essentially made, there is hope and inspiration. And change.

This is the promise of the Mediterranean imaginary.

## THE RED ROCK: A COMMUNISM OF THE SEA

As I’ve written in this journal previously, I was introduced to the idea of a new “Mediterranean Imaginary” at a conference on the Greek island of Ikaria called “Mataroa.” The conference brought together a number of scholars and activists to discuss issues like the defense of the “commons,” a challenge

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<sup>13</sup> Castoriadis, Cornelius, “From Ecology to Autonomy,” in *The Castoriadis Reader*. Blackwell: Malden, MA, 1997, p. 241.

to the productivist and austere logic of the dominant capitalist work ethic, and an embrace of countercultural imaginaries like “slacker politics,” (that one was mine) “the politics of laughter,” (especially in Taksim Square and Gezi Park), and “degrowth”<sup>14</sup> as well as an anti-nationalist solidarity among people of all the shores of the Mediterranean. As conference organizer Nikolas Kosmatopoulos and his coauthors argued,

“[In the Mediterranean] new liberating knowledge and achievements arise daily and become integrated parts of a new imaginary for organizing collective life on the basis of solidarity and self-organization. In the Mediterranean region this imaginary is peeking through the convulsive uprisings against military or parliamentary dictatorships and is being fed with more and more ingrained structures of self-organization and intense politicization processes, along almost all of its shores...”<sup>15</sup>

The authors exhort readers to refuse the imposition of a crisis imaginary that both Timothy Mitchell and, in a different way, Naomi Klein, have identified as weapons in the arsenal of profitable, vitality-strangling austerity.

This refusal is alive in the Mediterranean region, which, conference participants agreed, situates a challenge to the dominant defining discourse of crisis and the alienated, technocratic logic of so-called experts to which it gives rise. These “experts” peddle privatization, austerity, and productivity as common-sense crisis management. They frame everyday life in peripheral zones as fundamentally broken and offer the old fix of more uneven development. But just as the region today is materially shaped by the radical imagination of the neoliberal project’s craven architects, those subordinated by it can flip the script, giving form to the imagination of something far better.

The setting of the conference on the Aegean island of Ikaria was significant here. There is lots to say, and lots that been said, about this rugged little island, nicknamed the “Red Rock.”<sup>16</sup> But what struck me was that the island setting itself provided a novel vision of communism. Ikaria is a KKE-dominated

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<sup>14</sup> Degrowth: a Vocabulary for a New Era. Edited by Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis. Routledge, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> <http://mataroanetwork.org/mataroa-2013-aims-organization-organizers/mataroa-2013-concepts-objectives-organization>

<sup>16</sup> Papalas, Anthony J. *Rebels and Radicals: Ikaria 1600-2000*, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers: Wauchonda, Illinois, 2005; Buettner, Dan, “The Island Where People Forget to Die,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2012; Lawler, Kristin, “The Politics of Austerity and the Ikarian Dream,” *Z Magazine*, February 2013.

island, largely due to the fact that during the Greek civil war, thousands of Greece's communists were exiled there. So not surprisingly, the island is, for better or worse, a stronghold of the KKE and a bastion of a rigid party line among many of its inhabitants. However, as another of the conference's key organizers, anthropologist Maria Gaglia-Bareli, writes eloquently, Ikaria was communist long before all the Communists showed up.

Ikaria was always already a communist space, based on the principles of equality and the easy sharing of common-pool resources. Consider the traditional village festival, or paneyiri. According to Bareli, the festivals are a central part of collective life and an instance of the commons—the true basis of communist society and precisely what is under attack by neoliberal enclosures today.<sup>17</sup> Crucially, it's a commons made not of gray uniforms and shared austerity, but of dancing and food and music and communally enjoyed abundance. The island, after all, is mythically the birthplace of Dionysus and traditional home of Dionysian cults, and the paneyiri is, it seemed to me, the commie Dionysian imaginary become real.

## BENEATH THE STREET, THE BEACH

Spaces like Ikaria are more than just a place. The Mediterranean is an idea, a text that overflows with meaning—meaning which is fuel for liberatory politics that challenge the logic of capital.

John Fiske, in "Reading the Beach," talks about the seaside as a text overflowing with meaning. And I would add, with political significance. According to Fiske, "the beach is an anomalous category between land and sea [and culture and nature] that is neither one nor the other but has characteristics of both. This means that it has simply too much meaning, an excess of meaning potential, that derives from its status as anomalous."<sup>18</sup> The Mediterranean coast can be understood in a similar way, as a liminal space between nations, partaking of both everyday activity (like markets and festivals) as well as the respite from the workaday world. It points us toward the possibility of a utopian (and always unconsciously desired) coming together of the seemingly opposed poles of real life and pleasure.

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<sup>17</sup> Bareli, Maria, "Aspects of the Gift and the Commons in the Ikarian Paneyiri: Issues of Social Reproduction and Change", paper presented at the MGSA Symposium, November 14-16, 2013, Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Fiske, John. *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 34.



The Mediterranean meta-beach is neither Europe nor Africa nor the Middle East; its meaning overflows the national and other borders that, among other things, make the sea today such a space of gruesome horror for refugees trying to enter “fortress Europe.” This new imaginary challenges the neoliberal privatization of Mediterranean beaches and all the other enclosures of common resources in southern Europe and around the world, as well as the violence that provides the muscle for privatization but that also emerges on its own from the scarcity and overwork that neoliberalism generates.

The Situationists, inspired in part by Sartre and Castoriadis, took the imaginary seriously in their insistence on play, pleasure, and freedom in everyday life. Theirs was a refusal of alienated labor in favor of really living in the moment: “All power to the imagination!” Also, “Never Work.” And no slogan captured their politics, and ours, better than this one: “Sur La Pave, La Plage.” Beneath the street, the beach. It reminds us that deep down, under all the layers of personality that have come to convince us that everyday life must be colonized by the structures of work and alienation, there is a part of us that knows better. That knows another world is not just possible but actually at our fingertips if we’d just be audacious enough to go for it. That we are meant to really live, to enjoy, to love, and not just to produce. The slogan also refers to the cobblestones that the Paris 68 protesters threw at the police: we must dismantle and destroy all the concrete that keeps us from the oceanic within and without.

Although the concept of the Mediterranean imaginary is a new one, the fantasy image of the Mediterranean, corresponding to a different, more fluid, relaxed lifestyle, has been around a long time. What makes it significant now is the growing and very real battle between the cultures of southern Europe and their enemy, the profit motive of global capital and the racist, nationalist violence that so often enforces it. The mass desire for a relaxed lifestyle of communally shared abundance is evidenced by both positive and negative responses to Mediterranean culture. Those who consume Mediterranean films and tourism are clearly amenable to a politics of the Mediterranean imaginary, as are Mediterranean thinkers like those gathered in Ikaria for the Mataroa conference.

But so are those who are its loudest critics. These latter, decrying the “laziness” of others and touting their own work ethic, are actually highly amenable to the liberatory message that life should primarily be lived and not instrumentalized for profit; their resentment of a perceived leisurely culture is nothing more than an index of their frustrated desire for it. What

all these groups need is a left that broadcasts this narrative—simply put, the right to be lazy—clearly and without apology. Only then can our side truly oppose capital's speedup with a life-affirming slowdown. The Mediterranean Imaginary clarifies the terms of the battle between capital and what opposes it. Take your pick. But first, maybe, take a swim.