

Chevalier (2015) and the Rules of the European Game

On its surface, Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Chevalier* (2015) offers a commentary on contemporary masculinity, for the game called 'Chevalier' that the men in the film play is designed to show who is the 'best' man of them all. Writing in *Sight and Sound*, for example, Adam Nayman called the film a 'witty, affectionate satire of contemporary masculinity' (Nayman 2016, 32), while Violet Lucca in *Film Comment* claimed that the film was 'about male characters who obsess over the minutiae of their behavior and bodies' (Lucca 2016, 67). That *Chevalier* offers a humorous portrayal of contemporary masculinity is clear, but I want to argue that, even in its attempts to avoid it, the film cannot help raising the spectre of the recent Greek financial crisis. Tsangari has very strongly resisted such readings. 'The Greek crisis', she has claimed, 'is becoming a sort of fetishistic, exportable commodity for artists It's as if we as filmmakers are expected to be actively exporting a product, and that product is the national tragedy of Greece' (in Nayman 2016, 34). Nevertheless, against Tsangari's wishes, the crisis is, in fact, of utmost importance to the film. That is certainly what I argue here, adopting something akin to Fredric Jameson's notion of 'national allegory' by affirming that the personal conflicts played out in *Chevalier* can be read as allegories of the contemporary Greek political and financial crisis (see Jameson 1986).¹ My focus will not be entirely on Greece. Rather, I see the film as exploring the relationship between Greece and Europe, especially in the light of the strict economic austerity measures handed to

Greece by the European Union in concert with the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank – which together have come to be called the ‘Troika’ – in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

Chevalier does something substantially different from other films associated with the recent Greek ‘weird wave’, as it has been called (see Psasos 2016). *Chevalier* does not offer what Rosalind Galt has called a ‘cinema of refusal’, which is to say that *Chevalier* does not refuse the hegemonic neoliberal order so as to posit an alternate or subversive ‘other’ order that rejects current socio-political ideologies (such is Galt’s argument (Galt 2017)). What is at stake in *Chevalier* is a much broader set of ethical and political questions. And these questions are very broad indeed: *How ought I to live? What kinds of behaviour are acceptable to a community of other people with whom one has to live? How can one cope with rules of life that are not determined by oneself but are instead imposed on oneself?* Rather than refuse or default on the kinds of rules handed to them, *Chevalier*’s characters try to figure out how to work with those rules, that is, the rules of the game called *Chevalier*, in order to fathom how well, or how badly, those rules work.

My argument will assess a range of issues. These issues are primarily guided by a specific political perspective framed by political philosopher Étienne Balibar. Balibar has argued for many years of the benefits and challenges of European community and union, as well as providing some insightful comments on the recent Greek crisis. His theories help to position *Chevalier*’s themes in a wider European context.

Not a cinema of refusal

Chevalier is a comedy. It is certainly not a 'political' film, however such a thing may be defined. As I have already claimed, it does not stand as an example of what Galt calls a 'cinema of refusal', or what at other times she calls a 'default cinema'. Galt's arguments, which deal with both European and other cinemas, as well as recent Greek cinema, posit a form of cinema that refuses outright the terms and ideologies of contemporary capitalism (Galt 2013, 2014, 2017). On European films, Galt claims to be attempting 'to locate a cinematic form that could respond to the political question of Europe in the 21st century' (2017, 11). She goes on to claim that 'Austerity, debt, and precarity have become defining terms across the continent and beyond, intersecting the policies of the European Union with broader forces of globalization and the late-capitalist ideologies that have come to be clustered under the name of neoliberalism' (ibid., 11). The only appropriate cinematic response to the repressive regime of late-capitalist neoliberalism, according to Galt, is a cinema of refusal: a cinema that refuses outright to play the game defined by the contemporary neoliberal hegemony. At one point she simply refers to this as 'resisting the rules of the game' (ibid., 11) and, in her article on recent Greek cinema, her argument places the Greek weird wave firmly in this bracket. What these films present, films like Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (2009) and *The Lobster* (2015), as well as Tsangari's *Attenberg* (2010), are a search for something 'totally other to existing modes of living' (ibid., 20).

Galt's position of refusal or default posits an alternative regime whose rules counter the current neoliberal hegemony. In cinematic terms this amounts to reiteration of what was once called 'counter-cinema', that is, cinematic alternatives that directly aim to counter dominant ideologies and forms (see Wollen 1985). I remain unconvinced by such

counter-strategies that posit an escape from the ‘system’ (see Solanas and Getino 1976, for example). Escape is also not what *Chevalier* proposes. Rather, *Chevalier* proposes a rethinking of the ‘rules of the game’ from the ground up rather than rejecting or escaping from those rules outright. This sort of approach requires, not a refusal, but a renegotiation and reconceptualisation of how things came to be the way they are.

The kind of political approach I foster is one in which negation or refusal is not paramount. Trying to conceive of ways to construct a political community, of how to agree on what a community can call ‘good’, is foremost. A central question for such a perspective is *how does one consent to living in a community?* Allied to this is the problem of what one is to do if one does *not* consent to the rules of one’s community? Does one refuse those rules (Galt’s solution)? Does one try to change those rules? Or does one simply go along with those rules and do the best one can in the circumstances?

These are questions central to any conception of politics, but alongside my reading of *Chevalier*, I focus on the ways that Balibar has approached questions such as these, especially in relation to the European Union. His responses boil down to one particular contention: that contemporary political trends in Western and European democracies have given rise to a situation in which individuals have less and less of a say in how their communities are run. Rules and laws are now made in ways that are divorced from the lives and interests of the individuals who are subject to those laws. Balibar began making this kind of argument in the mid-1990s, specifically reflecting on the emergence of the European Union (Balibar 2002c).

The Judgment of the Community

One way Balibar conceives of this lack of participation in political decision-making is in terms of what he calls *reflexive individualism*. He means by this ‘the absolute right to judge oneself’ (Balibar 2017, 208). This means that individuals here assert their right to judge their own acts and decisions according to rules and laws they have made themselves. Reflexive individualism is not out-and-out individualism, for it is reflexive. This means that one’s judgments are never simply one’s own. Rather, as part of the process of self-judgment, the individual also ‘*bears the community within himself*’, as Balibar puts it (ibid.). In other words, my judgment is never solely *my* judgment, for any judgment all always be made in a social context. Balibar’s position is one in which self-determination or the judgments one makes are never merely matters for a self to determine but are instead ones that a self makes only insofar as they are part of a community: they carry the community within themselves. These are, of course, founding problems of modern political philosophy and modern democracies, and in this context Balibar has written extensively on the British tradition of ‘possessive individualism’ (Hobbes, Locke, Mill), but he has also related that tradition to the writings of Fichte and Hegel, as well as linking these traditions to the rise of modern democracies, especially via conceptions of the ‘Rights of Man and Citizen’ (see Balibar 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 2013, 2014b).

One of the reasons Balibar raises the issue of reflexive individualism is, first of all, to point out that these aspects can never entirely coincide: the *judgments made by oneself* and the *judgment of the community* will always be in tension (on a broader scale, Balibar refers to this as the proposition of ‘equaliberty’; 1994b, 2014a). Secondly, Balibar wants to ask how far in the direction of community such a process of judgment

can go before it loses all connection to ‘oneself’. If my judgment must also include a communal judgment, then how far towards communal judgment would it have to go to cease to be a judgment I could call ‘mine’? Balibar does not raise this question in order to answer it. Rather, he raises it so as to speculate that contemporary societies, certainly those of Europe, appear to have reached a point where the judgment of the community has overridden the judgment of the self: nowadays it appears that any self-judgment is pretty much deferred to communal authorities external to the self. Balibar makes this kind of assertion at a number of places, and stresses that something in the nature of reflexive individualism, as a founding concept of modernity, is on the verge of disappearing. And he does not believe this is a good thing. Balibar writes, ‘it seems that that technocratic and technological evolution of contemporary societies leads to the increasing expropriation of the judicial function and more generally of the citizen’s own capacity to judge’ (Balibar 2017, 211). The ability for any one individual to judge for herself or himself is increasingly being given over to experts, authorities, or technologies, and judgment is an activity that increasingly occurs outside the self, so that one now defers one’s own judgment to external authorities.

More explicitly in relation to the policies of the European Union Balibar has asserted that ‘the decisions of the Community bodies ... are not thought by the majority of the population in Europe as expressing common interests’ (Balibar 2013, 15). That is, the judgments made by the European parliament are rarely, if ever, based on a common consensus of the European people. Balibar makes similar claims specifically in relation to the Greek crisis. Speaking in 2010, he stated ‘The fact is that the purge, or the work of economic social measures and restrictions that are now placed on the Greek people on account of solving the debt problem, has been imposed in fact without any – without

the slightest – element of democratic discussion’. He adds, ‘These are purely technocratic measures’ (Lapavistas et al. 2010, 308). In short, from Balibar’s perspective – and it is this perspective I will highlight – the Greek crisis demonstrates some of the ways that, in the contemporary political sphere, as exemplified by the policies of the European Union, the *judgments of the community* have come to outweigh the *judgments of individuals*, either at the level of actual citizens acting as part of the European community, or perhaps even more generally at the level of the individual nation-states: the mandates, votes and policies of individual nation-states like Greece are now by and large ineffectual and must instead be brought into line with ‘technocratic’ decisions made in Brussels. The judgment of the community here overrides and renders ineffectual the judgments of individual nation-states, as so keenly noted in Yannis Varoufakis’ account of the negotiations undertaken by the Greek government in 2015 (Varoufakis 2017).

Chevalier

Tsangari’s *Chevalier* takes up these issues, that is, questions of who makes the rules of how to live, what kind of person should I be? or how ought I to act? The film finds its way to a point where none of the characters has the ability to judge for himself what a correct course of action is. What *Chevalier* foregrounds is that these characters find it impossible to determine for themselves as individuals what matters for them: acts of judgment are achieved only by appealing to external markers of ‘what one should do’ and of ‘how one should act’. In their search for meaning, these characters are not so much guided by themselves as they are guided by *what they think others think* they

should be doing. It is in this way that a logic of judgment as external to the self, a judgment that can no longer be located as internal to the subject, becomes a guiding ethos for the characters in the film.

In the film, six Greek men who range in age from their mid-30s to their late 60s are holidaying on a luxurious private boat in a kind of ‘back to nature’ getaway. All of these men are friends and associates of one another. As events transpire, they decide to play a game on their way back to Athens. The rules of this game are essentially that *all* aspects of the men’s actions and attitudes will be scored and rated by the other men. The reason for scoring everyone’s actions and attitudes is to determine who is ‘the best in general’ as they put it – they want to know who is the ‘best man’ out of them all.

Why do they play this game? A key scene occurs early in the film as the men are moored overnight as the boat continues on its return journey to Athens. The men play a game in which each of them tries to compare the others with an animal or object.

Dimitris (Makis Papadimitriou) has suggested that Josef (Vangelis Mourikis) resembles a panda bear, but the other men don’t possibly see how he resembles a panda, for he is not large enough, and so on. But Dimitris counters these retorts by declaring that it does not matter what the other men think because this game refers here only to how *Dimitris* sees Josef: it is a game of subjective perception. Dimitris’s logic is clear: he argues that the game exists because there is no ‘common perception’; ‘It’s because there is no such common perception that the game even works’, he declares. In short, if there were a common perception, they would all agree that Josef resembles a panda, and that would be that, there would be no discussion or argument. Thus, for Dimitris, the game is a matter of each of them giving their own account of how they see things, and that *is* the

game. If everyone agreed, if there were a universal, common perception, there would be no need for the game. One of the men, Christos (Sakis Rouvas), counters this by stating that there has to be *some* agreement as to what counts, there cannot simply be a radical free-for-all in which anyone can make up their own rules. He argues that there really must be some sort of agreement, what he calls ‘common sense’: ‘I think there has to be consistency in terms of common sense. Let’s call it that: common sense.’ Dimitris disagrees and angrily asks ‘Are you going to censor what I see?’

The dilemma for the men here is therefore one of a conflict between *judgment made by oneself* and *judgment made by the community*; that is, the question at stake is: how does one person’s view of the world compare with others’ views of the world, and what can be done if there is a disagreement between subjective views of the world and so-called objective ones? How can there be such a thing as ‘common sense’? These are precisely the kinds of questions that pertain to the notions of politics and reflexive individualism I have pointed to: how can the judgment or action of one person square with the judgments and determinations of the group or community? This dilemma is played out in *Chevalier* as Dimitris and the other men try to consider how any one person’s subjective impressions can be related to shared perceptions, what these men call ‘common sense’. Precisely how *Chevalier* goes about doing this is of great interest. The dilemma for *Chevalier* is to determine to what degree anyone’s subjective judgments can be trusted, and then, against this, to what degree the imposition of a set of objective rules – the rules of the community – can or should override a subject’s personal or individual judgments.

How does *Chevalier* explore these issues? The men continue their game of comparisons until one of them suggests that Christos resembles a pineapple. He takes offence at this and then another of them, Yorgos (Panos Koronis), declares that he's bored and no longer wants to play the game. In withdrawing from the game Yorgos says to Josef that just because he, Josef, is winning this game, that doesn't make him a better man than Yorgos. It's just a game. And Yorgos says this in a way that is meant to be intimidating: it is supposed to be a kind of threat or challenge.

Christos then suggests they play a game called Chevalier. Christos explains the rules of this game: 'Each of us thinks up a contest where we all compete. Anything you want. A physical test or a mental challenge. We each score each other. And he with the most points wins.' The men are interested in this game, but then Yorgos ups the ante. He says he will be willing to play the game, but only if they change the game so that *every single act and thing* done by each of the men is scored; the game will not consist merely of chosen contests but rather will consist of *everything*: 'Everything we do. How we speak ... What words we use ... How we laugh ... How we look ...' and so on. Yorgos continues, 'And whoever is the best at everything, he wears the chevalier'. The chevalier is a chevalier ring, to be worn by the winner. Yorgos wants to drive his point home: 'This game will show us who is "the best in general".'

On Europe

All of this is interesting as a fiction of masculinity – and indeed no women appear in the film, with the exception of conversations that occur by way of telephone or via internet

links. However, my claim is that, beneath this surface fiction of machismo and a crisis of masculinity, *Chevalier* is also a response to the Greek crisis. Most specifically the film can be seen as an allegory of the punitive economic measures imposed on Greece by the European Union in the years following 2008. I will not go into detail on what those measures were, other than to point to one commentator's claims that the situation features 'unprecedented austerity measures that have resulted in an explosive rise in unemployment and a corresponding deterioration in every aspect of people's daily lives' (Psaras 2016, 3). Here I want to identify more clearly the cultural relevance of these measures. To put it bluntly, the measures were seen as being something of an attack on the Greek way of life, on Greek practices and attitudes, in ways that were summed up by the charge that the Greeks are 'lazy'. Thomas Piketty condensed all of this neatly by arguing that the Greeks were being punished by measures that equated to moral sanctions which were not, strictly speaking, economically motivated (Piketty 2016). Rather, they were moral sanctions based on the logic of household economics. The implication is that what was being meted out on Greece had more to do with inflicting a moral lesson than an economic one.² In short – and this is where *Chevalier* can re-enter the picture – the Greeks were being told by the powerbrokers of the European Union that every aspect of their lives was now open to scrutiny, measurement and judgment. The free-spending, tax-avoiding ways of the Greek past must be reversed and every aspect of spending, as well as moral behaviour, must now be scrutinized and measured. This is the kind of atmosphere *Chevalier* is trying to evoke: the sense that every action of Greek life is now being monitored, and measured, subjected to a moral scorecard; these men are being judged on their behaviour, the way they act, the way they look, and so on. In short, what *Chevalier* portrays is a vision of the ways in which Greece itself

has become subject to scrutiny by the EU at every level of its existence. The personal fiction of *Chevalier* thus has relevance at the level of the political.

There is another level at stake here too. In response to the Greek crisis, the terms of judgment, as we have seen Balibar claim, were not to be decided by the Greeks themselves. Indeed, the period from 2010-2015 was littered with attempted inputs and compromises from the Greek side all of which were rejected by the EU leadership. Instead, for Greece it was a matter of either accepting the rules laid down by the EU or of ceasing to be part of the EU altogether. We know now that Greece went with the former option, even when the left-wing Syriza party was elected to government in 2015 with the specific goal of rejecting the EU's mandates (see Varoufakis 2016, 2017; Clapp 2018). And all of this was occurring as *Chevalier* was in production. In the final account this means that Greece lacked any possibility of self-determination: it could no longer make its own judgments. Its destiny was out of its hands. The conditions of this kind of external determination are precisely the dilemma *Chevalier* is dramatising: it is charting what happens when one's own destiny is taken out of one's own hands.

All of these issues are especially complicated for the Greek situation. Greek politics in the twentieth century is littered with compromises and interventions, especially the interventions of European powers following World War II. Greece's ability to determine its own destiny has in so many ways been compromised (for an excellent summary see Clapp 2018). Add to this the arguments made by Marios Psasos that Greece has typically been weighed down by a strong patriarchal tradition: 'individualism and equal rights collapse in the face of a paternalistic construction that secures both the bodily and social survival of its subjects' (Psasos 2016, 11). If

traditional patriarchy has been a burden, then European austerity acts as a reiteration of that burden. Where the tradition had placed the power of that burden with the father of the household, the post-2008 order sees that power shifted to the Troika.

Chevalier dramatises this crisis at the level of the individual subject in precisely this way: at the level of discovering that everything any individual does will be subjected to a sort of technocratic scorecard, for this is what the game of *Chevalier* is all about. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than when Dimitris complains to the other men, ‘Are you going to censor what I see?’ And, verily, as the film progresses, this is exactly what transpires: the game of *Chevalier* means that every action, gesture, look and thought by any one man comes to be censored by all of the other men who pass judgment on everything that occurs: brushing one’s teeth, sleeping, what mobile phone ringtone one has, polishing silver, salad recipes, building IKEA shelves, and so on

Demos and Ethnos

If this is the case, if it can be declared that what is being depicted here is something akin the handing over of acts of judgment from individuals to the community, then how did things get to be this way? Balibar has for a long time been a keen observer of the European situation and the European Union especially. Most notable is his collection of essays published in France in 2001, *We, the People of Europe* (2004a), but he has continued to reflect on the destiny of Europe since then. One of the frameworks he uses in his analyses of Europe, alongside the rhetoric of reflexive individualism, entails a distinction between two political alternatives. The first is to advocate more democracy,

a kind of supra-democracy that would surpass and exceed the democratic traditions of nation-states. Balibar sees this approach, which he advocates under the ancient Greek term *demos*, as the only possible positive option for the European Union to take. To be politically successful, Europe must include more democracy than has ever been available to single nations. As he put it in the late 1990s, ‘European citizenship is “impossible” except as a progress in fundamental democratic rights and powers in the European “framework”’ (2004b, 162). He defends this in theory, but, over many years of writing, he has failed to see it in practice. As Balibar conceives of it, democratic rights and powers have declined over the period since 1992’s Maastricht Treaty for the simple fact that European citizens have little or no say in what goes on in the European Community: there is no ‘active citizenship’, Balibar argues, no sense in which European citizens have an active role in the processes of the EU and its parliament (Balibar 2013, 14). Such a curtailing of democracy is nowhere more evident than in the Greek situation. Balibar, writing in 2013 on the Greek crisis, stated that ‘The current crisis [in Greece is one] which favours the increase in powers of a techno-structure without any direct legitimacy and of a minority of heads of state, with more or less diverging interests, negotiating with each other for compromises that are almost never submitted to the judgement of the mass of the people ...’ (ibid., 14).

Another option for the destiny of Europe, a negative and regressive option so far as Balibar conceives of it, is that whereby the citizens of Europe seek to define themselves in terms of *ethnos* rather than *demos*. Instead of *more democracy*, a turn to *ethnos* signals a return to traditional, national, ethnic interests. Balibar does not go so far to say that this is what has happened in the European nations, though he does note some of the tensions that have arisen in terms of ethnic nationalisms and what he calls ‘European

racism'. The chief cause once again, he argues, is a lack of active citizenship, the blunt fact that European citizens have little say in European policies. But a second reason for a turn to *ethnos* is the sense in which there has emerged a dividing line between what is 'properly' European, and that which is not, a distinction between the European centre and its periphery (as one scholar claims, 'the Eurozone has quite clearly become an area of structural generation of surpluses for core countries, Germany fundamentally among them, and deficits for the rest, primarily the periphery'; Lapavitsas et al. 2010, 293). Balibar had in fact already foreseen this kind of division many years ago (in the early 1990s) in terms of the ways that the EU had begun to operate on the basis of a 'true Europe' being distinguished from an 'outer Europe' (Balibar 2004b, 169). This distinction was originally one between the central European powers, chiefly France and Germany, and those of the post-Soviet bloc. Balibar wrote of the latter that it seemed, from the EU point of view, such countries were 'not "mature" enough for democracy' (ibid., 169). But now this is not merely a situation that involves Eastern Europe, as it is surely the case for Greece, for what has been applied in Greece amounts to a judgment by the EU that Greece is incapable of taking care of itself; that it is, in governmental terms, immature.

The *Staatsvolk* and the *Marktvolk*

Perhaps another perspective is necessary here. German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck has offered some penetrating analyses of Europe (and beyond) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. As a consequence of arguments relating to the ways in which nations handle contemporary debt structures, Streeck argues that nation-states have to answer to

two conceptions of ‘the people’. These people are ostensibly the same people: we are not here talking about class divisions, for example, and Streeck’s distinction is not one between *demos* and *ethnos*. These people are instead conceived as representing different models of community and interaction. The first type of people is defined by national boundaries. Streeck calls them the *Staatsvolk*: the people of the nation-state. A second is defined by international markets: the *Marktvolk*; the ‘market people’. Streeck’s analysis, in ways that shadow Balibar’s arguments, attempts to describe the ways in which what were once national issues of taxing and spending, which governments had to address in order to provide for a population – a *Staatsvolk* – are now less clearly national issues. Rather, nowadays governments must also be answerable to *international* markets, and it is much less clear exactly how national governmental politics can deal with such transnational issues. One way to conceive of this is to admit that, when issues are played out at a national level, at least the government knows who it is dealing with, for it is dealing with its citizens, those citizens who, in contemporary democracies, have elected precisely those governments which represent them. By contrast, in political terms it is harder to know precisely what kind of contract pertains to the logic of the international markets, especially in their contemporary guises. For Streeck, global markets require *investors* rather than *citizens*, *creditors* rather than *voters*, functions by way of *interest rates* (or fiscal policy) rather than *elections*, and certainly has no obligations for the provision of public services and welfare, or the protection of citizens’ rights, and so on, these latter being central to what the modern nation-state and welfare state had provided (see Streeck 2014, 80-81).

From this perspective, the stakes of politics are not merely those of negotiating a contract between an individual and a community. One of the key points Streeck makes,

and he echoes many of Balibar's statements here on the undemocratic nature of the European parliament, is that even though the European parliament is nominally elected, most of its deals and functions are carried out without any direct electoral responsibility. Streeck sums this up rather dramatically:

The European consolidation state of the early twenty-first century is not a national but an international structure – a supra-state regime that regulates its participating nation-states, without a democratically accountable government but with a set of binding rules: through “governance” rather than government, so that democracy is tamed by markets instead of markets by democracy (Streeck 2014, 116).

All of this adds up to a perplexing picture of contemporary Europe in the context of international and multinational monetary flows. I think it is possible to assert that the political tide has certainly swung towards *ethnos* (in Balibar's terms) and the *Marktvolk* (in Streeck's terms), which in itself creates interesting scenarios of fallout. The chief fallout is a substantial weakening of democracy as such, as ever more political decisions are wrested from ‘the people’, so that decisions are now made by technocrats who must answer above all to international financial markets rather than any electorate. What this leads to is a clear fracturing of social bonds. If modern politics is conceived in terms of a negotiation between the individual and the community (reflexive individualism, in other words) and if, as I have argued, individuals and their voices are effectively taken out of the equation so that the community as an entity external to individuals comes to define *what is*, then the consequences are profound. Where *governance* usurps *government*, where *technocrats* usurp *parliamentary representatives*, and so on, one

consequence is that there can be little or no possibility for reflexive individualism, that is, there can no longer be any strong sense of a dialectic between the individual and the community. Instead, the consequence – paradoxically, perhaps – is one of out-and-out individualism: no longer is there the possibility of conversation and negotiation. Rather, what exists is a notion of pure competition, each to their own, with each individual doing his or her best to conform to technocratic rules of governance in an ongoing attempt to fit in with those rules (See Balibar 1991a, 25).

And it is this attempt to conform to rules that *Chevalier* imparts by way of its game of Chevalier. A great deal of the film's comedy emerges from the characters' attempts to conform to the expectations of the other men – that is, all of their subjective actions are subjected to a stern 'superego' form of monitoring so that any one person's actions are not determined by what *they* think but by *what they think the others will think* of their actions. *Chevalier* brings out the ludicrous nature of this kind of constant surveillance and scorekeeping.

Inevitably the characters in *Chevalier*'s contests try to devise various ways of cheating or forming alliances with others so as to curry favour and garner extra points, all of this being part of the film's logic of competitiveness. The point here is that, when rules are formulated in such a way as to be taken out of the hands of individuals, then various ways of trying to circumvent those rules becomes pervasive. Note that these are not ways of trying to *resist* those rules or create new rules – we do not have here a logic of what Galt calls default or refusal. Rather, these ways pursued in *Chevalier* are ways of breaking the rules while nevertheless ensuring those rules remain in place. Josef, for example, appeals to Christos at one point in the hope that he will support him: Christos

had failed to speak up for Josef when, as part of one of the contests (a rather crude 'penis measuring' contest), Josef had been unable to sustain an erection. In an exceptionally nasty, sexist way, Josef brags about once having had sex in front of Christos in ways that, for him (Josef), clearly proved his manhood. But Christos had refused to bring up this incident in Josef's support on the grounds that such a thing would contravene the rules of the game: his attempt at collusion fails. Another example of collusion: Dimitri and Yannis (Yorgos Pirpassopoulos) are brothers, so they are often seen negotiating in one way or another behind closed doors. And deals are struck between other pairings: for example, Yorgos has breathing difficulties when scuba diving with Christos one day, but Yorgos urges him to not tell any of the others on account of the fact that he would lose points. Later in the film, various men are seen trying to discover what kinds of scores they have received from the other men; Dimitris and Yorgos, for example, confer at one point, each declaring to the other that 'I gave you high points'. All of this is the film's way of declaring that no one can live freely in an atmosphere of total surveillance such as this. What invariably occurs are so many strategies of evading or undermining the surveillance processes, ways of trying to gain a strategic advantage. In terms of the politics on display here, then, the film is saying something like: these rules will not and cannot work. By analogy, the sense that the measures imposed on Greece by the EU will put an end to Greek corruption or tax dodging or 'laziness', is doomed to fail. Anyone subjected to this level of surveillance will find ways of countering and undermining it. In short, the kinds of measures being implemented by the EU are destined to fail. And this is indeed what seems to have transpired since the 2015 deal brokered by the Syriza government. One account, from 2018, argues that the current city government of Athens fosters policies the point of

which ‘is not to streamline bureaucracy but to proliferate it, multiplying the opportunities at every level for favour-swapping and backhanders’ (Clapp 2018, 92).

Tensions and Conflicts

As the film progresses, tensions also emerge between many of the protagonists. Dimitris, for example, has spent a long time assembling a collection of pebbles throughout the journey, a collection he views with great pride and affection. So when Christos makes up a stone skimming contest whereby all the other men throw Dimitris’s pebbles into the sea, Dimitris is rightly upset. But in an atmosphere in which all self-determination must be ceded to external authorities, Dimitris simply has to suffer the consequences, he cannot protest.

The major cause of tension in the film is between the doctor (Yorgos Kendros) and his son-in-law, Yannis. The latter has not been entirely successful in his career as a life insurance salesman, and he feels his father-in-law judges him harshly in this regard. Furthermore Yannis has been unable to make his wife, Anna, the doctor’s daughter, pregnant. Thus, aspersions over his virility and manhood are cast. As if that were not enough, it emerges that Christos, the doctor’s assistant, and clearly someone the doctor likes a good deal more than his son-in-law, has been having an affair with Anna, and all of this is brought out into the open towards the end of the film. This issue is not resolved, which might be the film’s way of saying that, in amidst all the measures taken by the EU, there are still issues – call them ‘life’ issues, or human issues, the issues of

love and family and connectedness, as well as conflict – that are beyond the remit of EU measures to regulate.

Chevalier thus reaches a point where the only question to ask is *What is the point of the contest?* What is the point of the rules of this game? And what is the point of determining who is the ‘best in general’? Any attempts to play by the rules, to succeed at being the best, have merely produced suspicion, dejection and conflict. The competition has certainly not brought out the brilliance of any of the men. Allegorically the same kind of conclusion can be asserted of the EU measures imposed on Greece: the levels of austerity prescribed can only feel like punishment (‘moral’ punishment), not measures that could bring out the best in Greek life.

Chevalier also lacks resolution. There is a winner of the Chevalier game, but we do not see who the winner is. It simply doesn’t matter. What *does* matter are the reflections and behaviours that have emerged along the way. An important indicator of what the atmosphere of surveillance and competition produces comes to light near the film’s end. In a clear attempt to influence the scores, Yorgos suggests to the other men that they all become ‘blood brothers’. As he suggests this, he also slashes his hand with a knife in order to initiate the exchanges of blood. (Comically, none of the other men want to do such a thing – they are horrified! – until Dimitris finally agrees.) The key point is this: Yorgos declares that part of the rationale for their becoming blood brothers is to evoke the spirit and memory and the Greek Revolution of 1821, when Greece began the wars that would lead to its independence from the Ottoman Empire. This, therefore, is an appeal to Greek heritage, to Greek nationality and the bonds of Greek history and blood. What can this be other than an appeal to *ethnos*, as Balibar theorises it? This, then,

could be another outcome of the contest, as much as it could be an outcome of what the EU has imposed on Greece: an affirmation of national distinctiveness and ethnic heritage against the spirit of European Union and community.

One response, therefore, to the restrictive rules posed by the game of *Chevalier* is that it will eventually see characters turn to a version of community inspired by *ethnos* rather than *demos*. This kind of ethnic renewal – Balibar goes so far as to call it ‘neo-racism’ – has haunted the European community for many years; Balibar’s first writings on it were during the 1980s (Balibar 1991a). And a turn to *ethnos* is certainly a real possibility for the nations of the European Union (one might claim that it has happened first of all in the United Kingdom and its 2016 decision to leave the EU). In many ways this is the option preferred by Streeck: only a return to the logic of nation-states and the accountability of governments, as signified by the notion of *Staatsvolk*, can act as a brake on the ever-expanding efficacy of the market and its production of the *Marktvolk*. Balibar is rather more in favour of the pursuit of a universalistic democracy: a principle of ‘Absolute civic equality’ must take precedence over nation-states in ways that mean ‘setting an internationalist politics of citizenship against a nationalist one’ (Balibar 1991b, 63-4).

Some Points of Conclusion

The inconclusiveness of *Chevalier*’s ending is nevertheless optimistic. Each of the characters leaves the dock in Athens to which the boat has returned and they go their separate ways. What they have achieved is to have grappled with the ‘rules of the

game’, as it were. In that sense, each of the characters has engaged in activities that can be defined, in the end, in terms of reflexive individualism: they have subjected themselves to various rules of the community and have tried to excel in terms of the rules and judgments imposed by the community. But they have also found ways of questioning and potentially reformulating those rules. They do this by eventually discovering that *the rules of the game do not matter*. Matters of human relationships, of love and friendship, are not ones that can be sustained on the basis of prescriptive rules. They are matters that have to be negotiated, talked about, reflected on and acted on in ways that are active rather than passive. These are things that reflexive individuals can do. And these are things that matter, they go to the heart of questions outlined near the beginning of this article: How ought I to live? What kinds of rules are acceptable? Can I cope with rules that are not determined by myself? Ultimately – and this might be the lesson of *Chevalier* – these are aspects of a life that cannot be externally imposed. Rather, they are, under conditions of modernity, aspects of a life that must be negotiated; they are matters of trying out options, of making self-judgments at the same time as one also weighs up the judgments of others.

Politically, the logic of such issues is simply that individuals must have more say in and more chances to reflect on their own positions within the communities in which they live. None of this involves default or refusal, as Galt terms them: it is not a matter of finding ways of living that are ‘totally other to existing modes of living’, as Galt argues (Galt 2017, 20). Politics should not be defined only by that which *refuses*, or says *no* or declares itself *anti-*. Rather, politics involves re-building and re-negotiating what is possible for societies, communities and individuals. These are issues that Balibar has been articulating for many years and *Chevalier* gives a sense of how such political

gestures might be conceived at the personal level. *Chevalier*, even as it exhibits some of the surrealist or absurdist characteristics associated with the Greek weird wave, does not advocate a politics of refusal. Reading into the politics of the film entails seeking a version of politics that is constructive rather than destructive. It necessitates understanding politics as a response to question like *How did things get to be like this?* and *What steps can be taken to build a better set of social and political relations?* Tsangari's film does not deliver any conclusions or answers, but it does suggest that collective human voices engaged in processes of reflexive individualism might begin to discover ways out of the rules of the European game.

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¹ Jameson's argument has certainly been criticised (see Ahmad 1987), but I adopt the stance taken by Ian Buchanan in his defence of Jameson's arguments: that it is a crucial act of criticism to assert a relationship between the personal and the political (see Buchanan 2003).

² Peter Bratsis placed the whole situation in very bold terms by asking, 'Why are the PIIGS [a demeaning acronym applied to Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain in the wake of the 2008 crisis], like the Greeks, pigs? They are pigs because they cannot control their urges. They cannot refrain from immediate satisfaction' (Lapavitsas et al. 2010, 301). Bratsis is very critical of these kinds of associations being made in relation to the Greek people.