

# Porsche Cayennes and other material indices. Constructing narratives on the Greek membership to the EU

Christos Th. Kousidonis

UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY kousidon@prd.uth.gr

## Abstract

*The outbreak of the Greek economic crisis in 2010, and the developments that followed set the country's relation to the EU in a state of turmoil. Dialectically, along came the construction of narratives by the state, political parties and the media. Some narratives employ real objects attaining a symbolic status. Such is the case with the Porsche Cayenne. Many reports insisted that regions of Greece, or the country as a whole, scored extremely high rates of Cayenne ownership, interpreting this as an index of reckless behaviour and evidence of tax evasion that would justify effectuate austerity measures. Another media-favourite subject is the pawnshop, its economic functions, even the legal and moral status of the pawnshop business. Now a main feature in local centres and business districts, the pawnshop had a very rare and understated presence before 2010.*

*Taking the above into consideration, this paper focuses on the development and use of instrumental narratives structured on the Cayenne and the pawnshop, and the emergence of myths integral to, and sustaining, these narratives*

## Keywords

Narrative, myth, Cayenne, pawnshop, Greece

## Introduction

The developments in Greece since the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2010 present a case of a socio-spatial system undergoing a phase of turmoil. Dialectically, along with the developments in the economy and society goes the construction of narratives by the state, political parties and the media. These narratives, always instrumental in shaping perceptions and adjusting attitudes and behaviour, often clearly verging on propaganda, vary according to their temporary role and their 'author'.

Some narratives use visual imagery or make references to real objects attaining a symbolic status. Such is the case with the Porsche Cayenne car. Porsche, and even more the Cayenne, attained pivotal importance in narratives about the way Greece slid into its dire economic condition and, by extension, in narratives almost directly justifying the austerity measures taken to amend the situation. The case of the Cayenne presents the added interest of the somehow contradictory relation with the history of Porsche, and the visual and metaphorical image of the sports car and its driver.

Another, often recurring, theme is the pawnshop and the activities of the pawnbrokers. Barely present in Greece before 2010, and in an obvious correlation to socio-economic conditions, the pawnshop saw a very impressive boom from 2010 to 2013 or 2015. As opposed to the Cayenne, addressing the pawnshop phenomenon in communicative terms was more like taking a necessary step than deliberately inventing – or seizing the opportunity to invent – an instrumental tale.

## The crisis

Greece was failing to conform to the EMU (European Monetary Union) rules; its membership to the EMU seemed to be in jeopardy – or so the 'threat' was. Greece could be the first country to leave the euro or to be effectively kicked out of the Euro-zone (Elliot 2018, Kalaitzidis and Zahariadis 2015).

The critical point, from an institutional and communicative point of view, is Friday, April 23, 2010, when 'Speaking from the picturesque island of Kastelorizo [...] Prime Minister George Papandreou called on his European Union partners and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to send the lifeboat they have been promising. Comparing Greece to a sinking ship, Papandreou said he had no choice but to activate the \$60 billion aid package agreed on earlier [...] sending a strong message to the markets that the E.U. is serious about protecting its common interests and common currency' (Itano 2010). The bailout process asked for eventually led to three bailout agreements. The third economic adjustment programme for Greece started on August 19, 2015, and ran until August 20, 2018 (European Commission website, European Council website).

The Greek government(s) took a series of severe austerity measures, sustained, accordingly, by a series of institutional and legal framework measures. The austerity mea-

asures included dramatic direct cuts in the public sector and, rather consequently, induced dramatic loss in the private sector, high unemployment rate, and a very significant decrease in average income and purchasing power. The austerity measures had to be justified in the public opinion as much as possible, in order to avoid serious reaction, upheaval or even revolt. Narratives supporting the austerity measures were really prominent and clearly instrumental at certain points in time.

## **Porsche Cayenne**

### *Storyline*

In 2011 many reports popped up in the media claiming that the highest per capita Porsche Cayenne ownership in Europe, if not the entire world, was to be found in Greece or the Region of Thessaly or, even more specifically, in Larisa. Larisa is the capital city of Thessaly, a region with a very strong agricultural economic base.

For a long time, Porsche had been a household name signifying, as expected, a brand of highly expensive sports cars. The Porsche Cayenne is a relatively new, and rather differentiated, entry in a mythology still in the making.

Most probably, the streak of these reports can be traced back to allegations made by a former economics adviser to the prime minister of Greece (Stephenson 2012), and to a 2011 book by Jason Manolopoulos, with the title *Greece's 'Odious' Debt: The Looting of the Hellenic Republic by the Euro, the Political Elite and the Investment Community* that received a lot of publicity. Extensively reproduced statements claimed that 'Gorging on easy credit, the Greeks bought second homes, holiday homes and Porsche Cayennes' (Pressley 2011).

Evidently, in a relatively new, certainly didactic and instrumental, and already well-established narrative, the 'Porsche Cayenne' is used as a tangible signifier of socially irresponsible, if not anti-social, behaviour.

### *The mythology prior to the SUV*

The car or the automobile is a means of transportation that expands and transforms the spatial mobility potential of the driver/passenger and changes the visual and kinaesthetic experience of space and, simultaneously, it is an object that has visual, aesthetic, economic and symbolic or intangible dimensions. Its importance for the suburban sprawl and the spatial organization of society in general, not to mention the environmental issues, cannot be overemphasized. Accordingly, the car has been the focus of interest in fields as apparently diverse as sociology, social anthropology, cultural studies, economics, the arts, town planning, and engineering. The term 'automobility' has been coined to describe the complex socio-spatial system developed around and by the car, a complex non-linear system that, up to a certain point, 'generates the preconditions for its own expansion' (Urry 2004).

Driver psychology, 'the human-machine interface' (Tomlinson 2007), and the apparent connection to speed and acceleration, and to versions of masculinity, the significance of the car as a luxury item and status symbol, the issue of self-identity and self-creation through products and, of course, through the mediation of advertising and marketing (Heffner et al. 2006) or the 'driver-car *coidentities*' (Gössling 2017) are among the car-related topics explored by cultural studies.

According to Eco, the automobile can be considered on five different levels, namely the physical, the mechanical, the economic, the social, and the semantic one. On the social level, the automobile 'indicates a certain social status'. Further on, 'it becomes the sign-vehicle of a semantic unit which is not only "automobile" but, for example, "speed" or "convenience" or "wealth"' (Eco 1976: 27-28).

Tomlinson (2007: 44-45) offers a concise review of the issue of speed, mainly in the form of unruly speed: 'Alongside the reasoned course of velocity-as-progress, there has developed quite a different imagination of machine speed, associating it with the far less indisputably rational elements of excitement, thrill, danger, risk and violence'. He seems to associate violence mostly with the instances of actual war and the provocative rhetoric of Marinetti's futurist Manifesto, and to a lesser extent with driving at high speed.

It is hardly surprising that the car has been a privileged theme both in marketing, branding, and advertising practices and, consequently, the study of the strategies and techniques used in the field within an ever-changing socio-cultural framework (Williamson 1982, Goddard 1998, Cook 2001, Kotler et al. 2005, Hall 2021:16, 108). Beasley discusses in detail the topic of naming specific products and car models in particular (Beasley, 2002: 52-55, 116-118). Aronoff (1981) focuses on the categories being used to identify or designate a car, placing emphasis on the practices of American manufactures when naming their cars.

In the November 1955 issue of the *Lettres nouvelles* magazine, Roland Barthes devoted a short essay to 'The New Citroën', a model that had just been unveiled at the Paris Motor Show in October 1955. Written in a rather enthusiastic, although utterly caustic tone, the essay begins with the statement that 'the cars [...] are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals [...] consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object,' and goes on to expand on the connotations of the bodywork and the various characteristics of the new model, the D.S. (*Déesse* – the 'Goddess') 19: 'the *Déesse* is *first and foremost a new Nautilus*', and 'it is possible that the *Déesse* marks a change in the mythology of cars'. The 'New Citroën' was one of the 53 'little mythologies of the month' written from 1954 to 1956 and comprising the first part of the 1957 book *Mythologies* (Barthes 1972: 88-90). The caustic component in his tone in 'The New Citroën' is, at least in part, accounted for by his explicit stance against 'the bourgeois norm', and his claim that the mythologist's 'connection with the world is of the order of sarcasm' (p. 157).

While myth belongs to a higher order of signification, Barthes became also interested in what he called the 'car system', that is a first (lower) order 'language,' and asked the question whether, or rather how or to what degree, this car system sustains the Saussurian language/speech distinction. 'In the car system, the language is made up by a whole set of forms and details [...] and the scope of speech is 'very narrow because, for a given status of buyer, freedom in choosing a model is very restricted'. But seeing the cars not as objects but as 'sociological facts,' that is being driven and used, presents a wide field of choice that comes closer to what we expect on the speech level (Barthes 1968: 28-29, 33, 69). Apparently, this is a question of definition, pertinence or point of view (cars as 'objects' or as 'sociological facts' or, perhaps, as 'objects' *and* 'sociological facts'), not to mention the major issue of the (dis)similarity of systems of signification to linguistic language (Mounin 1971).

Focusing on the significance of various features of the car as an individual object, from the level of make and model, to form, to colour and other factory-offered options, to post-buy decoration, customization and hot-rodding, opens a wide field of topics. The well-known hot-rod tradition and the 'low rider' culture (Cross 2018) can be used to clarify the perspective this paper adopts regarding 'object' and pertinence or definition. Arguably, the 'low rider', referring mainly to a certain attitude, driving style, and suitable car-customizing by members of the Latino community of L.A., has already attained mythical status, as, for example, in the song 'Low Rider', first released in 1975 by the group War, and as in the name of Jack White's Three-Wheel-Motion *Low Rider* Fender Telecaster electric guitar, custom-made in 2020.

Porsche has been making sports and racing cars since 1948-1950. The company was founded in 1948, and commenced series production of its first model, namely model 356, in 1950. It was almost immediately associated with car racing, as in 1951 Porsche raced and won its class in the famous Le Mans circuit in France. Only to cement this association, class wins followed the consecutive years from 1952 to 1958, while in 1958 two Porsche cars finished in the third and fourth places overall. The marque ranks first among the manufacturers in the history of Le Mans with 19 wins (first place in the podium) (Henshaw 2011, Porsche museum-website, Wikipedia).

Porsche has become a household name since the late fifties. The fact that a miniature model of the Porsche Spyder 550/1500 RS was manufactured in France by Solido, from 1957 to 1965 (Pascal 2002), is an indication of the appeal of the marque. Lemonnier (2013) comments on the importance of miniature cars or dinky toys for the formation of car culture.

Commenting on product positioning, Kotler et al. (2005: 432-433) offer the example of Porsche by means of an 80s advertisement that is probably the most explicit attempt to connect freedom to (driving a specific) car. The ad includes the photo of a speeding Boxster S. The viewpoint is behind the car, at driver's eye height, and the surroundings of the car are

blurred, reduced to converging lines, to convey the sense of speed. Under the photo, the main part of text, in large and bold typeface, reads '*What a dog feels when the leash breaks*', followed by the secondary part of the text, in small typeface, beginning with the statement '*Instant freedom, courtesy of the Boxster S*'. Kotler et al. comment that 'Porsche positions powerfully on performance and the sense of freedom it generates – pure emotion'.

Besides the strong connotations of sports cars, racing, and speed fascination, in a complex, ironic or contradictory way, Porsche attained a somehow exotic allure owing to its connection with California and the transgressive lifestyle of celebrities like James Dean and Janis Joplin. Dialectically, Porsche not only became a household name, but also attained pop-cult status.

The connection with California begins in late 1954, with the introduction of the 356 "Speedster" model, a stripped-down, and substantially less expensive version of the regular 356, designed specifically for the American market, according to the Porsche importer to the USA. It had 'a low, raked windscreen which easily could be removed for weekend racing, [...] a minimal, folding top, and side curtains instead of wind-up windows' (Mercer: Speedsters website). According to the Speedsters website, 'The car was an instant hit, particularly in Southern California', which comes as little surprise given the weather conditions and lifestyle of California.

California also emerges in regard to two particular issues: One is the fatal accidents of at least two celebrities, most notably the James Dean crash of September 30, 1955. The other one, farfetched as it may sound, is a connection with the hippie counter-culture through Janis Joplin, who famously bought a 1964 Porsche 356 SC, painted the car with psychedelic images and, according to the *American Blues Scene* 'drove her beloved Porsche every day' (Nash 2018, Neal 2009).

Rather ironically, the most famous reference of the word 'Porsche' in popular culture is in the 1970 Janis Joplin's 'Mercedes Benz', a song with a sarcastic love/hate attitude. After the spoken introduction 'I'd like to do a song of great social and political import. It goes like this', she sings:

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?  
My friends all drive Porsches; I must make amends.  
(song by Janis Joplin, Michael McClure and Bob Neuwirth, Album: Pearl, 1971)

Tomlinson (2007:53-6, 124-125) commends on the contradictory and not always apparent dimensions of the famous 'live fast die young' motto, which Dean admired and has become part of cultural history. In this vein, Tomlinson makes a rather short reference to a 'curious popular mythology [that] has grown around celebrity auto-fatalities like those of Dean, Jackson Pollock [...] and princess Diana' (p. 53). Film actor and car enthusiast Paul Walker, of *Fast & Furious* fame, also died in a Porsche, in a single-vehicle crash in California in 2013, much later than James Dean.

## *The SUV*

The Cayenne is a 'luxury midsize SUV' [Sport(s) Utility Vehicle]. The popularity of the SUV greatly increased in the 1990s and early 2000s, especially in the USA. To capitalize on the growing market, and in view of the downfall in the sports-car sales, Porsche announced the Cayenne in 1998, although not yet with its final name, and introduced it in 2002/2003. It was its first SUV, 'a luxury 4x4 in the Range Rover mould'. Given the image of Porsche as a sports/racing car maker, it was a bold move, clearly intended to help the company to remain independent. Although it 'puzzled some journalists and outraged many enthusiasts', it turned out to be a very successful move in commercial terms (Henshaw 2011: 370-372, the Auto Editors of Consumer Guide 2007, Trop 2017).

There are four main factors in interplay to attract potential buyers: The brand Porsche itself (history, built quality, and reliability); the easily recognizable 'luxury' quality (high price tag), and the obvious social status connotations; the perceived/real practicality or utility of the SUV compared to other similarly or more highly priced cars, sports ones in particular. And, although not really an oversized vehicle in itself, even within the European as opposed to the American context, the physical dimensions – mainly its height – make the car easier to spot by passers-by or other drivers on the road. It borders to 'imposing'.

The multiple utility or multiple personality of the SUV, which apparently unites or is supposed to unite different needs, and need and want, relates to the Lacanian analysis offered by Williamson (1982: 57-8) of the ads for the Maxi and Chevette cars. The name 'Cayenne' connotes exoticism and adventure: Cayenne is the capital city of the French Guiana, located in South America; in written form and, to a lesser degree, phonetically 'Cayenne' recalls 'Cheyenne'. And, of course, it recalls the strong sensation of the Cayenne pepper.

A pivoting point in marketing, the Cayenne was to establish itself as a new member of the Porsche breed, sometimes making direct reference not just to the sports car element but to the quality and connotations of toy joy. The 2001 pre-production advertising campaign reads: *'Only one sport utility vehicle has bloodlines like these'* (main caption under a backlit photo showing the silhouette of sports cars). The 2003 campaign reads: *'You know those toys you buy for the kids are half for you anyway'*. This was the main caption under a photo of a Cayenne speeding in a country road, followed by a short text in smaller typeface, including *'Having kids doesn't extinguish the desire to play. At every twist, you'll feel the unmistakable joy of its sporting pedigree'*.

Yet, and besides the obvious differences between an SUV and a sports car in volume, shape, overall height, distance from the ground, and number of seats and doors, arguably the defining difference lies in the 'importance' ('position') of the driver in relation to the car. In contrast to, at least, the non-convertible SUVs like the Cayenne, the cars of the celebrities, in a clear California connotation, were either convertible or practically had no top at all, allowing for the visibility of the driver and the occasional passenger. The Cayenne covers/dominates the image of the driver. The driver is visible mainly when getting

into or out of the SUV. The driver/owner, in a sense, accepts the image of the SUV dominating/defining their own image/identity.

One should not fail to notice that, while the Porsche sports cars feature rather regularly in films and TV series (e.g. the 'Private Eyes' series), often as classics, often being referenced by name as 'Porsche', the Cayenne does not seem to come close to attaining similar status.

### Plot summary

As mentioned above, since 2011, many reports in the news, newspapers, sites etc. claimed, or reproduced the claim, that Greece had one of the highest rates of per capita Cayenne ownership. It was clearly implied that too many individuals were spending carelessly, and this was evidence of irresponsible behaviour that would justifiably lead to correction or punishment through the extreme austerity measures.



Figure 1: Proto Thema newspaper, front page, Sunday, December 16, 2012.

Cayenne ownership was strongly associated with allegations about farmers driving luxurious SUVs, which their income, as stated in their tax papers, could not justify. It should be underlined at this point that the prevailing social image of a farmer in Greece has been that of a hard-working peasant or villager.

Arguably, one of the most sarcastic and memorable titles of such reports, one that literally made the front-page, informs readers of the existence of a *Cayennetown*, or Cayenne-village (the original word, coined half in Greek, was *Cayennoxóπι*). The topic featured on the front page of *Proto Thema*, a newspaper with nation-wide circulation, on Sunday, December 16, 2012, as part of an extended report about the Financial and Economic Crime Unit (SDOE) applying FBI procedures in the pursuit of tax evaders, doctors and farmers being among those already having been caught in the act. The dedicated subtitle was: *Cayennetown*, in bold, substantiated, in smaller typeface, by the clarification *Nine Porsches in the village of Arma, Thebes, with false and forged invoices* (Figure 1). The village in question, Arma, at a distance of some eighty kilometres from Athens, had little more than 1,000 inhabitants in 2011.

Porsche and, more specifically, the Cayenne were rather quickly, and firmly, established as metonymies, almost synonyms, not just for wealth, but rather wealth acquired in questionable ways, most probably by way of tax evasion, as well as metonymies of flamboyant lifestyle, and nouveaux rich taste and behaviour. Accordingly, rumour had it that the state mechanisms threatened or promised to scrutinize the activities of those who could own and show off the Cayenne, an object arguably highly desirable, and clearly out of reach for common people.

The narrative bears obvious similarities to Aesop's fable about the Ant and the Grasshopper, the difference being that now the Grasshopper was not merely carefree and reckless, but someone consciously cheating, causing problems not just to themselves but to society as well.

Most importantly, it takes those real cases of 'irresponsible' behaviour and steps up to over-simplistic, but instrumentally useful, generalizations, reaching up to the level of a paradigm, namely a paradigm of sin, and rightfully pending punishment (in the form of austerity measures). This is related to constructing a general image of Greece or Southern Europe, mainly as perceived from the outside, in a feedback correlation with portraying and perceiving Greece as a 'moral hazard' to the EU.

The narrative is instrumental in pointing towards the spicy details of flashy lifestyle and tax evasion, and distracting the attention from what was already happening or about to happen, namely the austerity measures already taken at the time and being taken in a piecemeal manner, under various names or euphemisms, within a wider timetable, as well as their immediate and long-term impact and repercussions. These include, among others, emigration from Greece and, following the changes in spending power and spending patterns, socio-spatial phenomena set in motion from national to in-

ner-urban scales that could be filed under the trendy and probably somehow cliché term ‘shrinking’. Furthermore, the narrative is instrumental in provoking social envy (of those who own and show off the object of desire). Social envy makes the austerity measures acceptable, if not plainly welcome, as they claim to target those who not only cheated but chose to provoke, essentially offend, those with a prudent life and behaviour. And, obviously, it bears a meaningful similarity to the tried and tested ‘Divide and Rule’ or ‘Divide and Conquer’ (maxim and) strategy.

It is pertinent to remark on the incident of Mr. Dijsselbloem’s once famous and certainly controversial allegations about careless and irresponsible behaviour. In March 2017, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, the head of the Eurozone finance ministers at the time, was ‘facing calls to resign after refusing to apologise for saying crisis-hit European countries had wasted their money on “drinks and women”’. He ‘was dubbed “insulting” and “vulgar” by MEPs for remarks made in an interview with German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung’ (Khan & McClean 2017).

### *Hard evidence*

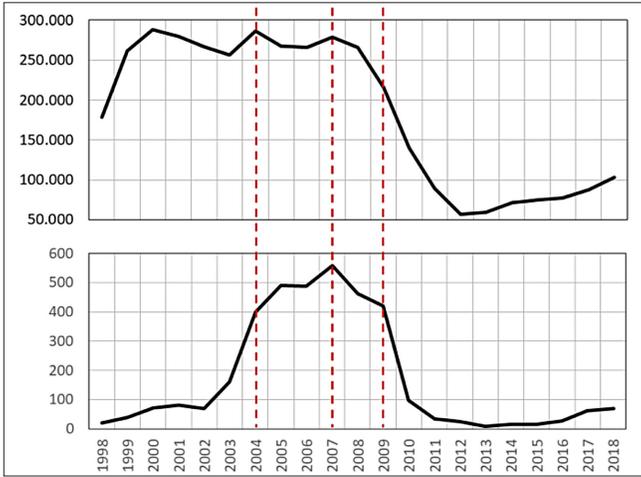
In April 2012, the BBC published an article by Wesley Stephenson on ‘The truth about Greek Porsche owners’:

‘One of the many eye-catching claims made about Greece was about the number of Porsche Cayennes. “A couple of years ago, there were more Cayennes circulating in Greece than individuals who declared and paid taxes on an annual income of more than 50,000 euros [...]” is a quote widely reported in mainstream media and on blogs worldwide. It came from Prof Herakles Polemarchakis, a former economics adviser to the prime minister of Greece [...]. But when asked, Prof Polemarchakis said his remark was casual, based on what had been circulating in policy circles in Greece a few years back. He said the only hard fact he was aware of was “the per capita number of Cayennes in Larissa was twice that of Cayennes in the OECD countries”. [...]

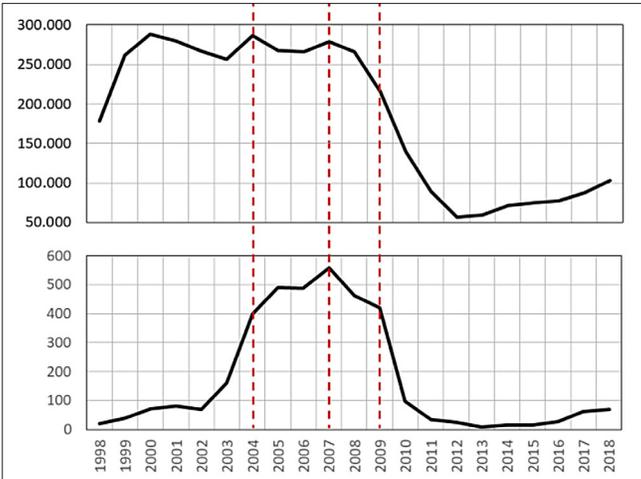
So what are the facts?

In 2010, there were 311,428 people with declared incomes of more than 50,000 euros (£41,260) paying tax in Greece. It was a figure that made a spokesman at Porsche laugh. Lukas Kunze says the story is “ridiculous.” In total, they had only sold around 1,500 Porsche Cayennes in Greece since the launch of the luxury car nine years ago.’ (Stephenson 2012)

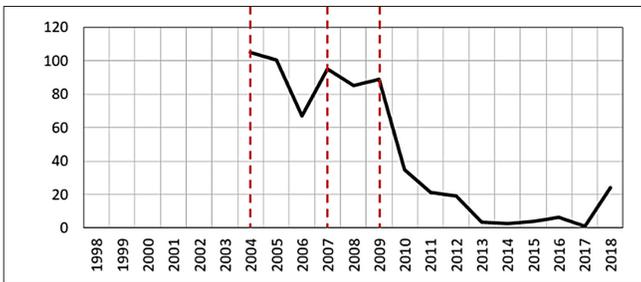
The five graphs in Figures 2 to 4 help in an attempt to estimate the allure of the brand, Porsche, and of the particular model, Cayenne, available in various editions/sub-models and price tags, based on the number of new car registrations in Greece from 1998 to 2018, using data available on the website of the Hellenic Association of Motor Vehicle Importers-Representatives.



**Figure 2. a:** New cars, abs. number (upper graph), and **b:** New Porsches, all models, abs. number (lower graph), in Greece, per year, 1998 to 2018.



**Figure 3. a:** New Cayennes, abs. number (upper graph), and **b:** New Porsches, all models, per 100,000 new cars (lower graph), in Greece, per year, 1998 to 2018.



**Figure 4.** New Cayennes per 100,000 new cars, in Greece, per year, 1998 to 2018.

Years 2004 and 2007 stand out, followed by 2009. The bestselling year for the Cayenne was 2004, its first year in Greece, closely followed by 2005 (fig. 3.a). It was also the bestselling year for the Cayenne in terms of the number of Cayennes per 100,000 of new cars (fig. 4), and the year with the higher number of all new car registrations (fig. 2.a) since the introduction of the Cayenne. 2000 saw a slightly higher number of new car registrations, but it was before the introduction of the Cayenne.

The number of new Porsches, counting all models, presents an almost symmetrical bell-like curve with a very steep upward turn from 2002 to 2003 and even more to 2004, reaching the apex in 2007, to a steep downfall from 2009 to 2010 (fig. 2.b). This trend is reflected in the percentage of Porsche cars in the new car registrations (fig. 3.b).

The number of new cars takes a steep downfall after 2008, hitting almost rock bottom in 2012 (fig. 2.a). The trend is closely followed by the number of Porsches, but the low rate in the case of Porsches continues from 2012 to 2016 and 2017, the absolute low being 2013 (fig. 2.b). Things are even worse for the Cayenne, with virtually no new registrations from 2013 to 2017 (fig. 3.a).

To sum up, the registration of new Porsches, and new Cayennes in particular, scored their highest between 2004 and 2009, only to follow – though a little steeper – the downfall of the total new car registrations. More significant is the sudden surge of new Porsches from 2002 to 2004; this could be attributed to the available income of certain social strata and, arguably more importantly, to their spending and lifestyle preferences and the allure of (the mythology of) the ‘Porsche’ brand. Nevertheless, as stated above, the statistical data, the number of the Cayennes registered in Greece, supportive as they may be of the Porsche allure and probably the nouveaux rich mentality, do not provide enough evidence to justify the destruction-of-the-economy narrative.

## **The pawnshop**

### *Storyline*

The pawnshop has been a very rare establishment in Greece in recent times. That is up to around 2010, as years 2011-2012 witnessed a spectacular boom in both the number of pawnshops, also called ‘gold market’ shops, and the publicity of the functions performed by pawnbrokers.

This publicity is twofold. Pawnbrokers advertise their business widely and, at the same time, the pawnshop business receives critical, if not plain negative, comments in the media, mainly the newspapers. The sudden expansion of the pawnshop business coincides with the outbreak of the crisis and the impact of the severe austerity measures.

A new police ordinance in 2011 made it easier to open new pawnshops but, obviously, the actual booming of the pawnshop business could only be sustained by the increase in demand.

### *In numbers*

The number of the new pawnshops that legally opened in 2010 was a mere 28, to climb to 121 in 2011, and to 245 in 2012. In 2010 the pawnshop firms were 81. In 2012 the firms were 274, and by October 2013 they were 939 with 309 local branches, which amounts to close to 1,250 shops. In February 2014, answering a question in the parliament, the deputy Minister of Development said that the firms were 1,136.

Strange (or not) as it may sound, rumour has it that there are many obscure or illegal pawnshops. According to the president of the Confederation of Professionals, Craftsmen & Merchants the real number of the pawnshops in 2013 was around six thousand. (Kolonas 2015, Fotiadi 2018)

According to the *Kathimerini* newspaper in December 2018, the real number of the pawnshops, legal or otherwise, from 600 (300 legal) in the beginning of the crisis, reached the ballpark of 4,500; according to others the total number has indeed reached 6,000 in the heyday of 2013-2015. As the demand side was booming, the pawnshops were reaching out to local neighbourhoods, making themselves more visible since the outbreak of the crisis, more accessible in spatial terms and somehow remodelling their physical looks or, as it has been said, getting 'modernized', trying to make the actual transaction seem as a normal process, not-degrading for the customer. Heavy advertising of the pawnshops, especially on TV, probably helps in slightly ameliorating the situation of having to pawn one's jewels or valuables.

The extremely high number at the heyday had to be adjusted to reach an equilibrium with demand. (Fotiadi 2018)

The most famous, and probably the biggest, pawnshop firm has one hundred chain shops (individual shops) in Greece alone.

### *Construction of meaning*

Several reports on the media point at widespread tax evasion and related practices in the pawnshop business, sometimes providing wide coverage of inspections carried out by the authorities. In 2012, the inspections revealed law infringements in more than 50% of the 300 firms inspected.

Typical of this trend are the four titles that follow: *The Goldfingers* (Skrivanos 2012); *Tax evasion orgy in the pawnshops* (Athens Accountants Association 2013); *Laundry orgy at pawnshops – They accept and melt stolen jewellery* (Pappous 2013); *Tax evasion and money laundering in the pawnshop "jungle"* (Kolonas 2015).

Some reports cover particular individual cases. The owner of the most famous firm was arrested on tax evasion related charges, in 2014 and in 2015. On November 27, 2018 he was arrested again on smuggling gold charges. He was remanded in custody, only to be released on bail on December 13, 2018. The case featured heavily on the media.

This particular pawnbroker has achieved an almost TV star status, not least because

of his in-person appearance in the TV ads of his shops featuring on a daily basis on nation-wide TV stations.

Media coverage of the activities of pawnbrokers on the one hand, and the degree of control exercised (or not) and the inspections carried out by the authorities, on the other, is rarely, if ever, short of connotations, at times constructing direct narratives about the social functioning and meaning of facts referred to, or used, in the reports. The 2018 adventure of the star pawnbroker, with its spectacular and dramatic turns (including a direct reference to the case by the prime minister in the Parliament, on November 28, 2018, while the pawnbroker was in custody) offers a well-known example.

Depending mostly on political affiliations and the overall political narratives on the crisis, the narratives constructed by the media and making reference to the pawnshop fell broadly into two categories, according to what the main focus of the narratives was:

(a) The crisis and certain politics were to blame for the people having to pawn their valuables, as a last resort after losing their jobs or most of their income.

(b) Pawnbrokers engage in ethically and morally questionable practices and, among other things, are to blame for ruthlessly taking advantage of the misfortune of their clients.

Obviously, focusing on either of those does not necessarily mean overlooking the other. The existence of a pawnshop entails the activity of a pawnbroker. Conversely, the coverage of the activities of pawnbrokers and, occasionally, of their legal adventures allows, at least through passing references in the reports or just by connotation, to consider the first element, namely that the crisis and certain policies should take the blame. In communicative terms, certainly in main-title media coverage, the activities of pawnbrokers take centre-stage.

## **The Cayenne and the pawnshop:**

### **Myths and narratives**

The crisis provides a stepping stone for constructing narratives about its causes, its manifestations, and implicit or explicit scenarios about the measures taken, or to be taken, in order to amend, ameliorate or overcome the situation or, depending on point of view, take advantage of it. Myths emerge or shift and adjust to the framework of socio-economic conditions.

The Cayenne presents an extremely interesting case. On the one hand, we have the emergence of a myth, a new variation or a new twist in the mythology of the car. The Cayenne burst onto the scene in 2009, just before the outbreak of the crisis, as a new, arguably *the* new object of desire, close to the status of the *Déesse* in the fifties. A common trait with the Citroen DS, although in apparent contradiction to the Porsche sports-car tradition, is its capacity as a family car. The Porsche tag, the practical advantages of

the SUV and, of course, clever advertising were combined in successfully marketing the Cayenne. One should notice that it was at the same time expensive enough to sustain the 'high class' economic and social success signification (probably, all things considered, more than the DS in its time), but not too expensive as to practically dissipate as a real object, becoming just an extreme oddity, *literally* out of sight for the person on the street.

Since 2011, the Cayenne is charged with yet another shift in signification, the connotation now comprising the elements of careless spending, heavy suspicion of tax evasion, and morally and socially irresponsible behaviour. In the context of the new narrative, constructed or taken-up and amplified by the mass media, the literal visibility of the car on the streets is (meant to be) perceived as a corroboration of the narrative. The literal visibility of the Cayenne is an important element in the construction of the 'moral hazard' narrative and of its instrumentality, in particular.

The person on the street gets to see the car as a *real object*, probably not every day but often enough, and is, accordingly, *frequently* enough reminded of the new narrative or, to paraphrase Barthes, frequently receives 'a presence of the [media-created] signified through the signifier'. Furthermore, this visibility helps to sustain the component of social envy, integral although not outright explicit in the narrative, clearly important in the distraction and divide-and-conquer strategy supported by the narrative.

In sharp contrast to the Cayenne, the pawnshop presents an (almost) quantitative index of the crisis. In contrast to the Cayenne case, the emergence of the pawnshop in economic and social life, and its visibility as a physical 'object' (the shop) and as appearing in various forms of advertising, was less of an opportunity to create or shift and use a myth, but rather an issue potentially threatening to 'social cohesion'.

Consequently, and as opposed to the Cayenne case, the media narratives on the pawnshop and pawnbrokers, although clearly sustaining the politics of distraction, avoid embracing the stereotype of careless spending and flamboyant lifestyle imbedded in the Cayenne narrative, at least not as the immoral character who triggers off the plot of the narrative. Arguably, this stereotype was deemed too harsh and offensive to be used explicitly or blatantly. It would be pointing the finger on people already pushed to the corner. And, more importantly, it would be difficult for the media and the political parties to sustain a public stance that could be perceived as sympathetic to those in need; even more so, given the considerable number of people who already pawned or were/are in danger of pawning their possessions. Yet, and insofar as media reports make references to formerly *nouveaux*-rich people selling or pawning their Rolexes and similar luxury items, the narratives on the pawnshop, at least by intertextuality, are not entirely incompatible with the careless spending Greek and the rightfully pending punishment connotation.

Shifting the emphasis to pawnbrokers and their activities creates a stronger, colourful and attention-grabbing narrative, a new myth that not only avoids the pitfall of directly holding those in need responsible for their dire situation, but features a new villain as protagonist, one who personifies the dire condition and exploitation of those in need, thus offering a very convenient, typical scapegoat.

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