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Legitimation Crisis and the Greek Explosion

Events belie forecasts; to the extent that events are historic, they upset calculations. They may even overturn strategies that provided for their possible occurrence. Because of their conjunctural nature, events upset the structures which made them possible.

- Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion*

The dramatic upheavals in Greece, sparked by the December 2008 murder of a fifteen-year-old student by the police, have been the focus of much interest and speculation. This ‘explosion’ has been one of the most acute challenges to the Greek political establishment since the end of the Greek Civil War. By the end of December, roughly 800 buildings (mainly in Athens but also in almost every other major urban center within Greece) had been torched, including many banks and government buildings such as police stations and the main courthouse in Athens. Daily clashes with police became the norm.¹ Despite government efforts to paint the uprising as the work of a few small groups and criminals, 60% of Greeks categorized the events as a ‘popular uprising’, according to a mid-December poll (Agence France-Presse 2008). Most every international news service featured dramatic images and story lines regarding the scope and intensity of the conflicts between the police and their antagonists. In Spain, Germany, France, Turkey, Russia, Italy, and elsewhere, those sympathetic to the Greek uprising and those with similar concerns and goals staged their own demonstrations. Nicolas Sarkozy, fearing that the intensity of the Greek explosion could easily spread to

¹ The assault continues, with attacks on banks particularly common, a situation that Andreas Kalyvas (2009) has termed a ‘low intensity civil war’, akin to Italy in the 1970s.

France, postponed his controversial education reforms; stating, “We do not want a European May ’68 in the middle of Christmas. (*Sunday Times* 2008).”

In the face of this unexpected and shocking uprising, two key factors were stressed by the vast majority of commentators and media ‘experts’ trying to make sense of the events.² First, that Greeks have a propensity for and ingrained history of direct political action, especially among students, and that the 1973 student protest against the Junta was a sort of precursor or model for the current uprising. Second, that the current economic situation in Greece and the plight of the many university educated but unemployed or underemployed youth, the now famous ‘€700 generation’, was a key factor behind the upheavals.

Both of these arguments are extremely tenuous and do little to shed light on the situation. To begin with, the current upheavals have been much more widespread and radical in their character than the anti-junta uprising of November 1973. It is important to remember that the anti-junta student movement was very liberal in character, largely in

² Unsurprisingly, analyses by commentators and academics have followed the Lacanian dictum that ‘the letter always reaches its destination’. Such commentators have largely received the message from these events that reflects their own political and ideological viewpoints (indeed, the naming of the ‘events’ itself is a significant sign of this, whether the term that ought to be used should be ‘riot’ or ‘movement’ or ‘protest’, and so on.) For some, Stathis Kalyvas for example, ‘the riots’ have little political content, they are the product of permissiveness on the part of the Greek state, which has not sufficiently cracked down and suppressed a propensity among some Greeks for disruptive and violent demonstrations (Kalyvas 2008). The recent collection, *The Return of Street Politics? Essays on the December Riots in Greece* (Economides and Monastiriotis eds. 2009), published by the Hellenic Observatory of the London School of Economics, reflects the overall neo-liberal and technocratic character of those who fund and staff the Observatory. Reading this publication gives the impression that the key sources of the ‘riots’ stem from the lack of labor market, education, and administrative reforms in the last two decades. Not enough liberalism seems to have been the key to the crisis. How else to explain unemployment or corruption in Greece? I suspect that those in the streets would be surprised to know that what their actions were really saying was that Greece was in need of more authoritarian liberalism.

defense of civil liberties and electoral politics. There is no doubt that the left, including both Communist parties at that time (the ‘external’ pro-Soviet version and the ‘internal’ Eurocommunist version), were very involved in the anti-junta movement but the substance of the resistance was very much in line with liberal values. Moreover, as much as the November 1973 efforts served as a transformative moment for those who participated in them as well as for subsequent leftist generations, it is simply false to assume that, given this history, by virtue of being young or a university student one is automatically aligned with the left or has a propensity for direct action against the state. In fact, in university elections from the 80s through today, students were far more likely to support the youth versions of the mainstream center-right or center-left parties of New Democracy and PASOK than any left wing party.³ Similarly, the idea that unemployment or underemployment is the key factor behind the uprisings is simply a vulgar reduction that does not take into account the political mediations and particularities of the situation. After all, levels of unemployment in Greece are not very different from those in Italy, Portugal and Spain and if low wages and lack of employment opportunities were sufficient causes of political upheaval then cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore should be in flames at this very moment.

Given the foregoing, how can we begin to make sense of the current political situation in Greece? What factors have made the Greek explosion possible? In the remainder of this necessarily brief and tenuous attempt to understand the conditions of possibility behind this explosion, I will highlight two interrelated sets of factors: how the

³ For example, in the student elections of 2008 New Democracy (DAP) received 39% of the votes in the senior universities and 48% in the technical and vocational schools while PASOK (PASP) received 26% and 28% respectively (*Odigitis* 2008, 11).

political space that this explosion occurred within was produced and how the legitimacy of the Greek state was eroded to the point that such a direct and forceful attack was made possible.

The ‘Void’ in Greek Politics

The Greek state has always been prone to periodic crises of legitimacy and has often resorted to heavy-handed attempts to coerce consent, as was manifest in the Civil War of 1946-49, the Junta of 1967-74, the Metaxas dictatorship of 1936-41, and many other less extreme examples. None-the-less, through the 19th and most of the 20th centuries, key mechanisms existed which both functioned to produce legitimacy and to bridge the gap between centralized state power and the agency of the popular classes. For example, episodically (most recently in the 1970s, until most labor unions were neutered through their colonization by PASOK) a strong labor movement emerged which was not confined to simple ‘private’ professional questions but served as a bridge to the core of state power. Villages and small towns were traditionally organized into ‘communities’, an administrative level below municipalities and prefectures, where the popular participation of residents also helped bridge the gap between centralized state power and concrete communities. This was eliminated in the late 1990s under the ‘Capodistrias Plan’, with the number of local administrative units being reduced by 80% in the name of efficiency and Europeanization.⁴ Both of these examples, and other similar changes, in part help explain the creation of this empty political space, the void, within which the explosion of December 2008 occurred and which made possible the reemergence of spontaneous political action.

⁴ It should be emphasized that this has no significant impact on the political organization of cities.

However, education and clientelism have been the most fundamental mechanisms through which the Greek state has been able to legitimize its power and the broader structure of society more generally, with clientelism being *the* key bridge between state power and popular agency (cf. Mouzelis 1978; Tsoukalas 1985). Clientelist networks, a mainstay of Ottoman rule as well as the Greek state, allowed for common citizens to have some degree of influence through their patrons, very similar to ways that ordinary people secured a political voice through machine politics during the Progressive Era in the United States. This not only helped cement party loyalties and the power of local party leaders, it also was fundamental for the legitimation of political power more broadly regardless of the party in power. Since all loyal party members stood to, or at least hoped to, gain from the typical distribution of favors and resources by their patrons, ‘normal’ Greek politics was a game that was of potential benefit to all concerned. Given that capitalism in Greece developed in a very peculiar and slow fashion, in comparison with the West at least, the state served as the main mechanism for the accumulation of wealth. Even by the 1880s, the salary of high government officials (ministers or ambassadors for example) was more than the yearly profits of the largest capitalist enterprise in Greece at that time (a textiles mill) (Tsoukalas, 1981). As such, the Greek state played an unusually powerful role in the social accumulation of wealth and, through client-patron relations, the sharing of this wealth with party clients served to cement their loyalty to their patrons, legitimize state power, and bridge the gap between a very centralized state and significant factions of the popular classes.

Characteristically, the political crisis that was concurrent with the fall of the Junta in 1974 was met with a redistribution of wealth by way of clientelism as well as some

new welfare state programs. From 1974 to 1986, there was a doubling of the number of people employed in the public sector; by 1990 the total number of public employees was estimated to be in excess of 700,000 (Charalambis et. al. 2004, 237). Most tellingly, fully one half to two thirds of all university graduates in the 70s and 80s were employed by the state (Tsoukalas 1996, 205). The student ‘radicals’ of 1973, but not only, were very well integrated into the sinews of the Greek state. This occurred within a period of remarkable economic expansion. From the early 50s through the mid 80s, Greece was transformed from a largely rural and relatively poor society to one that was urban, increasingly affluent, and fully committed to the typical Western patterns and values of mass consumption. Significantly, the per capita growth of private consumption from 1961 to 1977 was 142% (Tsoukalas 1996, 214). I stress these points in order to highlight how peculiar this pattern of growth actually was during the so-called ‘Greek economic miracle’. For, although Greece became a modern bourgeois society in many ways it was able to avoid many of the less desirable elements of capitalism, namely the commodification of labor. The economic expansion in Greece at this time did not correspond to a transformation of the labor market or a significant increase in wage labor. The economic growth, made possible largely through foreign remittances and a continuing pattern of emigration from Greece as well as significant increases in tourism, shipping, banking, and other examples of ‘comprador’ capitalism, occurred with relatively all the growth of employment within the state together with a corresponding increase in self-employment (as well as the informal economy). So, although Greece went through a very rapid and significant moment of economic expansion, Greeks largely avoided the disciplining effects and insecurities of the private labor market.

The question of education is fundamental in this context. Given the limited presence of capitalism and the paucity of the 'private' labor market, Greeks were faced with three options: work for the state, emigrate, or work the family farm/small business. Public employment was the best and safest way to escape a life of tilling the fields or mending the fishing nets. However, a university education was a prerequisite for most significant positions within the state. The attainment of academic credentials became a sufficient condition to secure one's life chances and to live a life of petit bourgeois security and comfort. Accordingly, the Greek educational system was one that was wholly focused on training students for entering the university system; there were no technical schools and no tracking within schools. All students, regardless of class background, 'aptitude', or geographic location, were subject to exactly the same curricula, teaching techniques and, more or less, quality of teachers. It was not until 1929 that the first technical schools were introduced in Greece, and even then they failed since very few parents were willing to send their children to such schools (cf. Tsoukalas, 1985). That the state functioned to accumulate wealth and distribute it to those at the top of the state machinery may have been obvious to all but the egalitarian character of the Greek educational system and the meritocracy this represented when it came to the securing of public employment did much to legitimize not only this pattern of state-dependent class formation but political power more generally. A universal, academically rigorous, curriculum and free higher education have been the cornerstone of the legitimacy of the Greek state. Tellingly, even today Greeks seem to value free education higher than any civil or political right. In a 1990 survey, when asked how much they would be annoyed if abolished, 85.5% responded 'very much' when it came to free

education as opposed to 71.9% when it came to the right to vote, 52.5% for the right to strike, 36.7% for the right to demonstrate, and 58.8% for the right to political parties (Tsoukalas 1996, 207).

It is in the context that the current crisis of political legitimacy in Greece can be better understood. When the current regime attempted to ‘reform’ higher education last year with its attempt to recognize private universities and introduce more managerialism to the Greek public universities, this was met by strong resistance on the part of students, especially high school students.⁵ The proposed reforms were interpreted as an attack on free higher education and as an attempt to rationalize universities according to market principles. One of the peculiar aspects of the December events was the number of high school students who took to the streets. This can be traced back to the spring and summer of last year where many of these students were radicalized, and took to the streets, in opposition to the education reforms.

Concurrent to all of this is the corresponding crisis of the political parties and the clientelist system. The great increase in public employment noted earlier waned in the 90s. The conditions that allowed for the ‘Greek miracle’ had ended. Lists of university graduates waiting for a permanent position in the public sector grew so much that many job seekers would have been of retirement age before they began working. Not only did public sector employment stagnate, it began to decrease substantially. Under the pressure of the EU as well as the mantra of market liberalization, many public enterprises were privatized (as with the recent sale of Olympic Airways, and the previous privatization of

⁵ Similar attempts at ‘reform’ are currently afoot across the EU, partly as a result of the Bologna Process and the hard line neo-liberal reforms that the EU seeks to make in higher education. As in Greece, students in France, Spain, and Italy, most notably, have organized in opposition.

the national phone company and other utilities). Moreover, some formerly well paying non-skilled public jobs, such as custodians for public buildings, vanished as these were privatized and sourced out to large agencies that rely on low-waged immigrant labor. The clientelist system collapsed for the simple reason that now political parties had increasingly fewer spoils to dole out. This not only weakened party loyalties but, more importantly, makes the remaining clientelist relationships appear more and more as blatant political corruption, as is manifest in the near constant stream of political scandals and cover ups of the last few years. It is not that such high-level clientelism was absent in the past, it was simply that many in the dominated classes also benefited from these relationships and this tempered any tendency to perceive clientelism as illegitimate on any level. Rather than shoring up political legitimacy, clientelism now served as a source of its erosion.

This dual development of the attack on the integrity of the educational apparatuses and the demise of clientelist networks that were able to incorporate large segments of the dominated classes has resulted in a pronounced structural crisis of the Greek state. If anything saved the Greek political order up to now (beyond some well timed stock-market and housing bubbles as well as huge public works projects in preparation for the 2004 Olympics) it was the deep seeded cynicism that prevailed in Greece, and which also plagues most other political orders around the world. The December events broke with that cynicism. The idea that nothing can change, that the political game is fixed and well beyond our capacities to transform it, has now been brought into doubt.

The 'void', the political space that was created by the erosion of the linkages between common citizens and the centralized institutions of state power, made possible this great explosion that we witnessed and which is still playing out. Without recourse to political representation, without the voluntary servitude of public employment, without any reasonable alternative to the boredom and humiliation of daily life, with the great legitimizing idea of educational meritocracy under attack, it is little wonder that one spark was enough to set off a political maelstrom throughout Greece. The cities throughout Greece, not only Athens, bore witness to the depth and breadth of the legitimation crisis of the Greek state.

From Protest and Resistance to Organization and Social Transformation

The foregoing section is an obviously schematic attempt to begin to understand the political conditions that made the Greek explosion possible. There is necessarily much more to the story. For one, the role of immigrants in Greek society has reached a new moment. Even more than native Greek students, the children of immigrants have many reasons to strike out against the state, and the police in particular. Although many have been born in Greece and may feel themselves to be Greek, they are often without official papers, endure much more extreme versions of humiliation at the hands of state bureaucracies, and have little hope or chances of social mobility. The children of immigrants are the paradigmatic example of the failure of the Greek state to incorporate the dominated classes into its traditional techniques of political legitimation. In fact, one of the greatest achievements of the December events are the linkages that have been formed between the current, largely immigrant and very urban, proletariat in Greece and the student, anarchist, and other autonomous leftist movements.

In spite of the general crisis of the state and the emergence of the proletariat and leftist extra-parliamentary movements as potential political subjects, the current situation seems unlikely to progress to anything approaching a overturning of the Greek political establishment. For sure, many of the tactics used in the December events were not only learned in the wake of the student movement of last year which opposed the education reforms but were also very tied to the recent experiences of the anti-globalization movements. Thousands of Greek anarchists, the Black Bloc in particular, have trained and been educated through their participation in anti-globalization protests throughout Europe. The tactics of protest and resistance were utilized with extraordinary effectiveness in Greece, typically outmaneuvering the police and demonstrating a capacity to cause much mayhem and disruption, once again illustrating the impotence of the state in the face of popular movements from below.

However, tactical acumen and the use of mobile phones and the internet are no substitute for political strategy. Without a cohesive political organization in the substantive sense, there is no chance for social transformation that is purposeful. The fundamental ideas of Antonio Gramsci are still insightful today, the war of maneuver needs to be complimented by a war of position. Unfortunately, the dominant tendency today, and not only in Greece, is for protest and resistance (at best) in the absence of political organization or strategy. Where are the organic intellectuals of the extra-parliamentary left? Where are the movements for popular education? What are the preconditions for the political autonomy, the self-rule, of the disenfranchised masses? Given the explosion, one would think that the bookstores in Athens would have long ago sold out (or been dispossessed) of titles from authors such as Castoriadis, Poulantzas,

Machiavelli, Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Korsh, and Lefebvre, or, at least, Lenin, Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Marx. One would think that in back rooms and smoke-filled coffee houses throughout Greece, study groups and attempts at popular education would be flourishing; lecture halls packed with students engaged in spirited debates and serious contemplation of core questions; new strategies of political organization and self-rule emerging; a new generation of political subjects ready to embrace political autonomy emerging. None of that seems to be the case.

Of course, it also seems very unlikely that the Greek state will be able to overcome its structural dilemmas anytime soon. The agents of the Greek explosion have yet to rise to the level of political subjects. Although they are very clear in their rejection of the '73 generation and its complete abandonment of any progressive ideals through its subjection and servitude to the state, it should also be obvious to them that they have yet to reach a point where the mistakes of the past can be undone. The spontaneous political action made possible by the void in Greek politics will also become a nostalgic memory rather than a decisive political break unless its participants can transform themselves into political subjects. Greek politics finds itself at this crossroads, either we can expect the Greek state to suffer through a more or less constant legitimation crisis and protests from below for the foreseeable future, with little chance for any actual social transformation, or a deepening of the movement will occur and the subject of a new political order will emerge. As bleak as the chances for the latter may be, the December events have now brought this possibility into existence. In opposition to the cynicism and political malaise that existed before the events, a new possibility now exists. In this sense, the shock and educational value of the events have already transformed the structures that made them

possible. They have shown the fundamental antinomies between Europeanization *qua* liberalization and the political stability of the Greek state. There is no longer any doubt as to the limitations of the authoritarian neo-liberal agenda of the EU (although, in Greece and elsewhere, the multiple bank bailouts and similar interventions had also very clearly demonstrated this point). It is clear to all now that change is possible and maybe probable. What remains to be seen is if a new political project will emerge from this energy and discontent with the strategies and thought necessary to realize the revolutionary possibilities of the moment.

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