About political change in Greece

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Abstract

There have been almost 40 years after the restoration of democracy in Greece and a peculiar prosperity, which was consciously cultivated by the leaders of political and economic elites, was promoted before the onset of the financial crisis. However, from the beginning of the financial recession, the temporal illusions have been revealed and the need of a complete transformation of the financial policies has been expressed, while a significant transformation of the entire political culture has started. Parties such as SYRIZA, Independent Greeks(ANEL) and Golden Dawn took advantage of the growing social discontent by propagating their selves as exponents of ordinary people and of their concerns or their fears, as the expression of resistance against an avoidable sellout of public values. However, crisis has exposed a number of successive truths which were elaborately hiding in the underbelly of the detaining political and socioeconomic system. These truths were exteriorized once it became clear that the foundations on which the Greek society was based after the restoration of democracy, were weak and insufficient to guide the country's way towards a modern future.

1. The main achievement of the political change of 1974

There is wide literature about the “political change” (μεταπολίτευση-metapolitefsi) in Greece after 1974 and the restoration of democracy, but a few are wondering about its main characteristics. Within a very condensed approach we try to define this political change as the transition from a long period of entrenched parliamentarism, which resulted in a brutal dictatorship, to a modern constitutional democracy. In other words, it is the obvious transition to the European system of guaranteed rights and freedoms and respectively of a structured charter of obligations. Actually, it is the transition from “Balkan provincialism”to a modern but limited Europeanization. In philosophical terms,it can be called as the transition from regime’s obscurantism, from arbitrary insolence of power and uncontrolled state authoritarianism,to a freeevolutionary period.

Besides the political freedom and the introduction of the concepts of popular power and the welfare state in politics, this regime change was associated with the rapid expansion of social prosperity and unbridled consumerism. Relatively, Kondylis (2015) refers to the prevalence of a parasitic consumerism “indifferent to the long-term national implications, especially with regard to the country’s independence andnational decision autonomy”. Kondylis uses the term “parasitic consumerism” to characterize the weakness of Greece “to produce everything that it consumeswithout having sufficient restraint - and dignity - so as not to consume more than can produce and in order to consume it parasitizes in two directions: internally, bymortgaging the future resources, turning them into current repayments, and externally, byborrowing large amounts of money not for future –fruitful- investments, but in order to pay these vast quantities of consumed products, which were mainly imported” (Kondylis, 2015). This position,as reasonable as it may seem, it is actually simplistic as long as it ignores a whole range of material needs which had to be covered after the restoration of democracy. Among others, after the political change in Greece social inequality and poverty were drastically reduced as well as the total welfare of the society was significantly increased (Mitrakos&Tsakloglou, 2012, 33-35; 40-43; 55).This development was necessary not only as a way to establish decent living conditions for

the population but also as part of the convergence procedure with the rest of the European Union. Significantly, despite the huge reduction of inequality and poverty that occurred after political change, Greece continues to encounter higher inequality and poverty levels and lower social justice levels than most of the European Union countries (Mitrakos&Tsakloglou, 2012: 56; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015). Moreover, the new regime marked rapid changes in the political field. In any case, the democratization of the country is related to the period of "change" from 1981[1] onwards in the sense the "change" of the 1980s delivered a strong societal need: to overcome the hegemony which was established in the foundations of anti-communism domination. The negative effects of the "change" are well known; we tend to ignore though the consequences of a possible "non-Change" (Prevelakis, 2016).

The fact is that the new regime as well as previous phases of Greek political history, integrated and generated varying structural "Greek pathologies" which derive their origin from the Turkish occupation. Despite this, however, the social, political and economic achievements of this period contributed to the adjustment of the country to modern international and European standards after a long phase of obscurantism and authoritarianism. Even if someone can criticize the new regime, no one should deny the positive aspects.Such positive aspects of the new regime with which the country should bereconnected,is the establishment of the National Health System, the introduction of labor and family law, the process of democratization of public institutions and of the army, the introduction of the transparent procedures for hiring in the public sector (ASEP) and of Citizens' ServiceCentres(KEP), the establishment of welfare institutions, the creation of modern infrastructure but with disproportionate costs, the computerization of the public services, a fair redistribution of income and opportunities, regional convergence, decentralization and investment in education and innovation. Allthe abovementioned should not be underestimated.

2. Some irrefutable truths

The current economic crisis is frequentlylinked the period of thenew regimewith fiscal derailment and the creation of the sovereign debt problem. Specifically, the

[1]"Change" was the main slogan of the social democratic party (PASOK) which won the 1981 elections and symbolized the national reconciliation and the reduction of socioeconomic inequalities.

political and party system was totally eclipsed with the legitimate category that for a long period it has cultivated a cliental state with high corruption levels instead ofpreparing the countryfor theEuropeanisation process. Indeed, crisis has exposed a number of successive truths which were elaborately hiding in the underbelly of the detaining political and socioeconomic system (Mavrozacharakis, 2015). Thesethuthwere externalized once it became clear that the foundations of the new regime on which the Greek society was formed,were weak and not sufficient to guide the country's process towards a modern future.

The first obvious truth that is not assimilated by the existing political system is that an economy with weak productive base and hence with foreign trade deficit, produces continuous financial problems instead of producing sufficient job vacancies. The second truth is that the Greek political system is being reproduced for itself and not with the civil society. It is therefore a self-reporting system with embedded entropy mechanisms, i.e. self-destructive mechanisms.The third truth is that the state shouldnot become a key employer in the context of a capitalist economy, let alone if it is not supplied with the required performance conditions as well as egalitarianism and fairness. Ultimately,asLavdas (2013) aptly indicates,there is a fundamental deficit ofmodern Greek pragmatism,which actuallycomprise a significant obstacle to any rational attempt to recast the Greek state.

3. The anti-political stateness

The political forces, instead of trying to resolve the abovementioned urgent problems and peculiarities thatdeplore Greece, avoided to be placed in the axis of the real truths and remained exclusively locked to the dilemma "memorandum versus anti-memorandum". Unfortunately, the enlightened, progressive and democratic forces in Greece have failed to reunite the country with those productive aspects of the new regime which is stagnant,as a result of clientelism and fruitless "anti-political"stateness.

The anti-political stateness is interwoven with the specific character of the modern Greek state which does not manage to promote the collective interest, but enhances self-interest patrons, trade unions' interests and cliental relations. The state in Greece

after 1974 is used by multifaceted cartel parties, naturally as themain toolfor electoral victory. Even political parties such as PASOK, which in its origin had the characteristics of a mass party that according toAbedi (2004: 89-90) is distinguished by a broad and socially cohesive organized membership base, specific internal party processes and a statute authorities map, have totally been changed. Such parties hadthe character ofa movement with successful demands on social and political rights andfinally, were characterized by an intense process of transformation and alienation of their original character to take the form of an inclusive party and lately a cartel party. The inclusive party is now characterized by heterogeneity of its electoralbasewith electoral successbecoming its main objective. Unlike mass parties,which focus on a socially homogeneous audience, the inclusiveones appeal to a diverse electorate on the basis of modern communicative methods. Currently, the ideological differentiation passes into the background.Greek political parties formed patronage networks in the whole spectrum of society and did not function as intermediary civil society restraints but as mediatorsof specific interests and expectations of their clientele, transferring and representing segmented and specific requests within state. To the extent that vested political parties functioned more as state clientele representation, they gradually lost their organized basis and their number of active members has rapidly decreased. At the same time,parties' subsistence costsincreased significantly as well as the communication cost with their electoral clientele.

The abovementioned situation led these parties to a complete focus on the state as a supplier of the necessary resources. As Abediindicates (2004: 90), the need for resources and the deficit of large ideological and political conflicts turned the survival objective into the sole aim of incumbent parties. This common objective boosted the creation of a cartel which supplied its members with the necessary means for survival, while ensure that potential risks are limited. The invasion of incumbent parties in state power and the imposition of their survival over institutions'function,not only secured the necessary resources through, which vested parties perpetuated their survival, but also enhanced the ability of incumbent parties to resist facing challenges posed by emerging radical political formations of the left and the right of the political spectrum. Under these conditions, as stated by Katz and Mair (1992: 16), the statewas transformed into an institutionalized structure that only supports the"networked" and

the“insiders” and excludes those who have not crept into the inner of such network (outsiders). In other words, these parties lost their mediatory function with civil society and were digested by the state.

Especially in countries with great tradition in cliental distribution of privileges, such as Greece, cartel parties have found lucrative ground. Theonset of the economic crisis decreased significantly thepublic funds, which had catalytic role for the enhancement of the traditional cartel parties and consequently, their position in power was challenged by a new inclusivecoalition which was formed under the aegis of the left SYRIZA.

Therefore, the total presence of political parties can be regarded as “anti-political” as long as there is aproblematic relationship with the collective well-being and the public interest. This means that the political parties in Greece did notservethe“common”, in the Aristotelian sense, namely the policy for the benefit of the society. At the center of party actions was the aim of the reproduction in power through the state rather than the public interest that determines the general concept of policy. For Aristotle, the coordinated society can be achieved through policy that promotes the common good. In this sense, the policy reduces individual harnesses and fragmented interests that endanger the social body and aims to maintain state normality and continuity (Brunkhorst, 1992). In modern societies the proper state is not possible to be established through a homogeneous community of virtue, as Aristotle introduced it, but through a community of law (rule of law) among unknown citizens. Political justice is achieved through the separation of those elements which are positive for everyone under eternal conditions and those that are positive for a specific group of people at a particular juncture. In other words, in modern democracies, justice and its promotion through respective institutions and relationships that are based on justice under conditions of autonomy of a conscious person, override the subjective and individualized parameters (Rawls, 1993).

Regarding the subjective dimension in Greece, it turns out that the concept of rational citizen who promotes the cooperation with fellow citizens under commonly accepted conditions, has never been cultivated. According to Rawls, rational citizens are “willing to propose and abide by mutually agreed rules, provided that others will do

the same; and will respect these rules even if this means that they have to sacrifice their personal interests. Rational citizens want to belong to a society where political power is legally used"(Wenar, 2010). However,in Greece the political system suppressed the real political, economic and financial imperatives, which, even in latent form,became an existential danger to the country. Generally, the state in Greece historically embodies only superficially the concept of financial rationality and balance of public expenditure and revenues, while rule parties represented with great zeal the essence of offering more benefits, in order to obtain citizens'trust. Therefore, citizens invested successively in benefits as an attempt to avoid unpleasant policy measures.

In conclusion, these 40 years after the restoration of democracy in Greece, citizens lived in a sham prosperity founded on imaginary obsessions, consciously cultivated by the leaders of political and economic elite. However, since the beginning of the financial crisis, the temporal illusions and the need to change the whole political and economic system, became the main priorities which enabled enormous changes of the established political culture.In the beginning of the crisis the social democratic PASOK lifted the burden of fiscal adjustment. In 2010 PASOK took over the responsibility to implement austerity measuresthrough memorandums of understanding with the European Central Bank the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund, in order to avoid the bankruptcy of Greece. With the subsequent electoral collapse of PASOK, the right-wing New Democracy - along with PASOK - continued from 2012 the implementation of austerity measureswhich led to their electoral defeat in 2015. Parties such as SYRIZA, Independent Greeks (ANEL) and Golden Dawn took advantage of the growing social discontent propaganda to becomethe main exponents of ordinary people and of their concerns and fears, by expressing the resistance against avoidable oversell of popular values.

4. The replacement of"anti-political" parties by an"anti-political" populism

Especially, SYRIZA emerged to power through a combination of circumstances which abruptly and without intermediary interval adjustingperiod, entrapped Greece in a sovereign debt crisis. The origins of the crisis are in policies that previous governments implemented,which were arbitrarily addicted to irrational redistribution

without the establishment a vigorous welfare state with efficient services and significant results in social inequality reduction throughthe promotion of social cohesion. Therefore, theeconomic crisis management, which is a tough and demanding task,changed the founding values of several political groups in Greece.

Definitively, the rise to power of SYRIZA overturned the conditions which were used in order to maintain the traditional bourgeois parties in power. From 2008 onwards,the sudden elimination of those terms and conditions which reproduced the established cliental consent after the restoration of democracy in Greece, amid broad distribution of benefit and privileges, gradually led to a populist radicalization of the masses under the auspices of the left SYRIZA (Mavrozacharakis, Tzagkarakis,Kamekis, 2013). The main keynote address of SYRIZA, which was the world “hope”,can be characterized as“anti-political” in the sense that it was based on the versatility and on a high degree of ideological ambiguity. Therefore,there were no direct real class placements and external commitments. This fact is obviously contrary to the “left political verbosity” of SYRIZA which considers the “Greek people” as a single collective alliance against specific financial policies and international obligations of Greece. With anti-political way, namely by a methodology which is deeply contrary to the public good, SYRIZA cultivated to Greek peoplea deep feeling of antipathy towards political elites, the European Union, the German government and the employers in general.

Specifically, in the midst of the economic crisis populism and its respective multipliers increaseddramatically. The pressure of unemployment, the new poverty, rage against politicians and the fear forsocial and economic collapse, offered more than ever, lucrative ground for a policy that worked with simplistic slogans fueling aggressive feelings, prejudices and resentments. However, over time, in the case of the SYRIZA, leftist self-determination was reversed into a peculiar mixture of “right, capitulated or even neoliberal left”, which reveals a huge gap between promises and implementation (Munchau, 2015; Kotroyannos, 2016).

On the one hand, the rise of the left in power was a result of thestructural problems and economic weaknesses of the Greek state and the inability of the previous

governments to promote the necessary reforms in order to establish a modern rule of law and an effective state with universal, efficient welfare state and fiscal tolerated social services. On the other hand, the imposed austerity programs from the European institutions and the International Monetary Fund (troika) are also responsibleas long as they did not let fiscal space for the promotion of social cohesion.The current contrast between financial authoritarianism and social achievements preservation comprises the continuation of a dangerous approach which considers the citizen mainly as a “customer”. Therefore,in this conflict there are neither visible boundaries nor clear dividing lines since the implemented austerity policies are defended both by right-wing and left/center-left-wing parties.

SYRIZA, instead of analyzing the current situation with caution and realism, in order to propose long-term responses to the difficult circumstances, was either trapped in the search for ways ofthe new memorandum management or was assimilated by a fruitless intolerant logic. Apparently, this happened because the political tradition expressed by the new government of the left, comes equally from the past and does not represent anything really “new”. Therefore, thefirst dangerous and sensational alternative responses to the crisis, were followed by the usual manner of maintaining the power even by implementing anti-social and unrealistic measures, such as massive tax increases.

5. Basic directions of a progressive response to the crisis

It is clear that Greece needs a new productive system and in this context, a new political system, which produces goods and ideas that will be connected with a strategic framework,which increase employment. A meaningful progressive response to the crisis is not unilateral and obsessive, it should promote the necessary reforms but always maintain a certain level of social cohesion and not dissolve social cohesion to supposedly increasecompetitiveness. Germany can be areferring example, as long asit currently increases social spending and has introduced,under the pressure of the Social Democrats, the minimum wage of 8 euros per hour. A progressive response to the crisis should not hesitate but put the core European countries and particularly Germany, in front of their responsibilities.It should not be underestimated that Germany had offered to South European countries, for a specific time,extended loans

and had promoted lending with attractive rates and favorable repayment terms. In fact, Germany has created inflation to other countries while it kept its own inflation in low levels through low wages. This fact, combined with the enormous public and private spending on innovation, was actually its competitive advantage. In that period in Greece the real challenge was the promotion of modernization and reforms. Twenty years later,the challenge has not even slightly changed and is high time to implement the necessary changes without neoliberal or leftist obsessions.

If there is no real democratic and social shift in Greece, the group of voters who prefer electoral populism and especially the extreme right, will enormously increase. Moreover, these voters are at least“losers, unfinished consumers” (Bauman, 2010). This means that they do not prefer the abolition of the current society and the establishment of another but eventually claim to participate in it as full consumers, i.e. citizens of a capitalist consumerist society.

Based on Bauman’s argument (2009), it turns out that people in post-modern societiesare only considered useful if they operate as integrated consumers. Consumption is actually the individual’s contribution to a market economy. An “unfinished consumer” has entrenched social status and is considered useless because his position is utterly hopeless. Modern societies reactcynically topoor people, who are unable to function as active consumers, converging in some way to a tendency for their disappearance from their apparent bourgeois façade. It is no coincidence that the poor are expelled from the west urban centers. This trend explains why the modern welfare state is unable to protect the unemployed and especially the long-term unemployed, considering that these people are no longer useful and only affect the taxpayers. The political consensus around the core features of the welfare state that takes care of the vulnerable and needy graduallybecomes finite. Only nostalgia remains alive. But nostalgia generates protest and centrifugal tendencies.

The active solidaristproletariat has become a social layer of permanent precarity (the precariat), which supports dubious political directions (Standing, 2011). This shift is logically inevitable in the sense that the existing political forces that manage the power are possessed by the same fiscal obsession. According to Bauman (2009; 2010), the reduction of social spending is an objective of both the right and the

(center) left policy. Regardless of the party which is in power,the objective is the same just because they believe that according to the conventional economy they do not comprise financial advantages. In conjunction with the political behavior of impoverished social groups, populism is supported by relegation fears which occupy an increasing part of the middle socio-economic groups within the thorough process of modernization and globalization. A progressive reaction to these problems should consider all the abovementioned and implement a policy which will be concentrated both at financial normality and social cohesion promotion.

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