

Book Review: Kostas A. Lavdas, Spyridon N. Litsas, Dimitrios V. Skiadas: Stateness and Sovereign Debt: Greece in the European Conundrum

Voinea, Camelia Florela

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“Stateness and Sovereign Debt: Greece in the European Conundrum”

by Kostas A. Lavdas, Spyridon N. Litsas, Dimitrios V. Skiadas

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Book Review by Camelia Florela Voinea

Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania

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During the past years, much of the European media has presented the Greek Crisis Case as a mix of economical news, political analyses and commentaries of various nuances and tones which often combined in quite unexpected ways charges with pity, compassion with clemency, incomprehension with ignorance. The echo of the impressive media news and images succeeded to nearly convey the feeling that, actually, a single request has been heard by the Greeks: money. And none of the answers seemed to have been loud enough and credible enough to this terrible request. Many European news programs and newspapers mirrored a nation in distress, people experiencing a living nightmare, overwhelmed institutions and political turmoil.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Camelia Florela Voinea, Associate Professor
Affiliation: Department of Political Science, International Relations and Security Studies, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest
Address: #24, St. Stefan Street, 023997 – Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: camelia.voinea@fspub.unibuc.ro

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Beyond any other, one question is still open: how could all this happen to an EU member country in the 21st century? – The invariable answer concerns the 2008 economical and financial crisis. However, is this the only true answer?

In one of the most thorough books of this year, "*Stateness and Sovereign Debt: Greece in the European Conundrum*", Kostas Lavdas together with Spyridon Litsas and Dimitrios Skiadas, have succeeded to draw the picture of the unbelievable Greece Case:

"Not unlike the former Warsaw Pact countries during the 1990s and Argentina during the turn of the twenty-first century, Greece has been presented in segments of the international press as the new rogue element of our times. Yet it was only a few years ago, during the Olympic Games of 2004, that the entire planet was celebrating – in a literal or virtual sense – in the streets of Athens one of the most successful Olympic Games since the institution's revival, in Athens, back in 1896. Since 2010 Greece appears to have become the scape-goat for a systemic failure of huge proportions, while Greeks were presented in some European tabloids as a nation of non-productive, lazy, and unmistakably corrupt people. Undoubtedly this is the outcome of a war lost but never systematically fought; it has been the result of signals, perceptions, and misconstrued statements, as much as it has been the result of longer-term structural deficiencies [...] it is equally important to remember that the Greek people were never asked to fight for something; they were told that they lost a series of battles at which they were never actually given the opportunity to be present. At the end of the day the Greeks were not given the opportunity to return from the battleground 'with their shield or on it'. This generates a profound sentiment of defeat for a fight that was never actually fought." (p.176)

and to start a research on the causes of this impressive and very complex picture.

The authors are relevant voices of the Greek intellectual elite and all of them have intensively published on the issues connected to the Greece Crisis Case.

Kostas A. Lavdas is Professor of European Politics at the University of Crete, Greece, where he is currently the Head of the Department of Political Science. Among other books and articles, he published in 1997 the book "*The Europeanization of Greece: Interest Politics and the Crises of Integration*" (London / New York: Macmillan / St Martin's Press), in 1999, together with M. Mendrinou, the book "*Politics, Subsidies and Competition: The New Politics of State Intervention in the European Union*" (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar) and in 2011, together with D. Chrysochoou, the book "*A Republic of Europeans: Civic Potential in a Liberal Milieu*" (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar). Lavdas proves a huge interest for the research on the profound roots of the EU management process, on the cultural aspects of the current EU architecture and on the contribution the civil society might or should have in the times of the major changes EU undergoes at structural and institutional levels.

Spyridon N. Litsas is Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Department of International and European Studies of the University of Macedonia, Greece. His book of 2010 "*War and Rationality: A Theoretical Analysis*" (Athens: Poiotita Publications) especially recommends him as an expert in the theories of International Relations and Strategic Analysis, Balance of Power in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in European Politics.

Dimitrios V. Skiadas is Assistant Professor of European Governance at the Department of International and European Studies at the University of Macedonia, Greece. His book of 2000, "*European Court of Auditors: The financial conscience of the EU* (London: Kogan Page)" recommend him as an expert in the European Union Law, Public Law, and Budgetary Law.

As the book title itself proves, "*Stateness and Sovereign Debt: Greece in the European Conundrum*" offers the interested reader a chance to understand in political, legal, financial, economical and cultural terms the roots and the nature of the terrible turmoil in Greece especially after 2008. However, the Greek Crisis, which bursted out with unexpected strength after 2008, proves to be just an instance of a much complex milieu of phenomena which concern not only Greece and, in general terms, the Southern

Europe as a geopolitical context, but the very essence of one of the contemporary challenges which EU has to face: the nation-state. This problem does not concern the Greek case only, it addresses the concept of “stateness” which EU should develop and use as a theoretical and pragmatical background of its political, financial and economical strategies for the next decades.

In spite of the expectations concerning the Greek picture which make the subject of this book, the picture which the book actually reveals proves to be quite unexpected. A picture which has not been known by many as it is presented by these authors. The reason is that many of those interested in understanding this picture expected to see rather the “cliche” which has been extensively used in the entire European media during the past years to describe the Greek phenomenon. While many are still prisoners of the picture constructed by the media, the book actually deconstructs it and suggests that it is not just a fake, but a picture constructed from a wrong perspective and for reasons and interests which go far beyond the nature of the political and social phenomena we witness in Greece and in Southern Europe. While it may look as a picture of the political effects of an economical and financial crisis, the truth revealed by this book is that we might be looking at the brush instead of looking at the picture itself. If we have to choose where to start chronologically in order to describe it, then 2008 crisis is far from being the right initial point. The start point we should look for is rather in the geopolitical, economical and cultural history of Greece and of the entire Southern Europe.

The idea which this book is trying to explain is that the Greek experience might have shed light on some of the most important problems of the EU: (a) the idea of stateness under late developments of economic and political crises in Europe; (b) the management of a community of states like EU and the need to build-up new institutions and develop new institutionalized frameworks for this management; (c) the impact the EU integration process has had on the political cultures of the different member countries from Western, Southern and Eastern Europe.

The first and most relevant characteristic of this book is provided by the depth of its analysis: an interdisciplinary, complex analysis which joins conceptual means and empirical expertise from several major areas like political economy and institutional analysis, comparative politics and international relations, combined with a legal, financial and cultural perspectives over the European history, in general, and Southern European zone, in particular. This characteristic makes the contribution of the book to appear as innovative since it shifts the analysis from the “economy” background to the “stateness” background or, put it in other words, from the “market” to the “polity”. It approaches a fundamental aspect: the role of the state. The innovative character of the book relies in the new concept of “*interactive institutionalization*” introduced by Lavdas (Chapters 1 and 2), which is used to explain contemporary concept of “stateness” from a combined theoretical perspective which joins neoinstitutionalist theories and value change theories. The innovative character appears also from the analysis of the “*linkage between institutionalization and cultural traits*” (p. 8), which joins theories of international relations with theories concerning the role and effect the institutional change, on the one hand, and political culture, on the other hand, have onto the transformation of stateness.

The second relevant characteristic of the book is its impressive capacity to change fundamentally the perspective over the recently emerged and ongoing crisis phenomena in Southern Europe. The book offers a new understanding of the Greek crisis. It extends the analysis from the single country level to the Southern European and then to the European one. It actually succeeds to embed the Greek political crisis case into the larger picture of the nation-state crisis which seriously challenges the EU capacity to conceptually and strategically approach the definition, role and future of the “state”, “stateness” and “sovereignty”.

The third characteristic concerns the remarkable ability to combine arguments from political theory with legal and (neo)institutional theories in order to approach the stateness and sovereignty subjects in their proper complexity and in various but interdependent contexts – regional, European, international. No other approach has succeeded so far to associate the 2008 European crisis analysis with the analysis of the spirit of stateness vs. corporateness or, even more interesting, political sovereignty vs. global non-state actors. The book has an excellent approach on both analysis and prediction, making of the Greek phenomenon the kernel of an interesting theory concerning both the capacity of the state to survive in the contemporary Europe and the capacity of the EU to tackle the problem of nation-state vs. union polity.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an interesting description and analysis of the problem which emerged from the Greek political crisis: the stateness. Lavdas makes a complex analysis of the state in the Southern Europe taking into consideration several aspects which are often missing from the bigger picture of the Western European Political Analysis. His analysis mirrors not only the feelings of frustration of the Southern European periphery, but also those of the Eastern periphery. Lavdas approaches stateness from both regional and international perspectives, introducing a theoretical challenge: the role of the global non-statal actors which heavily influence the (neo)liberal perspective over the relationship between the state and the market, between polity and the civil society. Political sovereignty, defined as a synthesis between the state and the civil society, looks rather like a texture with various degrees of granularity. Situatedness on this texture is a difficult problem which, as in the ancient classical tradition, involves the concepts of order, measure, and legitimacy such that any type of political governance would point to a variable position on a continuum between centralized and decentralized forms of political power. Analyzing state's role and activity from this perspective, Lavdas introduces several dimensions of research which are meant to combine theoretical backgrounds from new institutionalism, political science and political sociology: (i) the relationship between the degree and strength of the institutionalization, on the one hand, and the cultural characteristics, on the other hand, (ii) the interdependence of change processes of both economy and state policy, (iii) the territorial character of stateness, (iv) the various and continuously changing government structures at the regional level, and (v) the relevance of regionalism in the time of powerful globalization processes (p.8).

Chapters 3 and 4 (authored by Spyridon Litsas) approach the notions of state and sovereignty from a combined historical, political theory and international relations perspective. From the ancient to modern times, the notion of "state" and its role have been studied from various perspectives. Contemporary political perspective of analysis departs from the conventional rationality and accepts new dimensions of evaluation which are introduced by Litsas as conceptual areas of research: the *interdependence*, *self-help* and *survival*.

Chapter 5 (authored by Dimitrios Skiadas) makes a legal-institutional analysis of the financial crisis in Greece from domestic, regional and international perspectives. Legal and institutional arguments are provided in order to both explain and justify (sometimes, with severe critical, but realistic evaluations and commentaries) the Greek governmental actions, on the one hand, and the international actors' direct or indirect influences, on the other hand.

Chapter 6 provides a prediction over the potential dimensions of transformation of stateness in Europe. All three authors cooperate to a general analysis of the ways stateness might evolve in the domestic, regional (European) and international perspective. They assume three scenarios. The first one describes the contemporary crisis as a driving force towards increasing the international involvement and decreasing the process of the European integration. The second scenario describes a potentially emerging EU consensus in the context of EU-based model of regional economic governance and new arrangements resembling federal organisation but, politically, much weaker and much less effective than contemporary

arrangements. The third scenario would be that of EU disintegration. This potential trajectory would be facilitated by the lack of solidarity among EU member states. In the context in which “...*EU members are states that maintain an EU-embedded sovereignty; a relapse into pre-integration mentalities would reinforce the role of interdependence (rather than integration) as a leading norm.*” (p.178). The prediction is mainly aimed at making everybody aware of the major changes Europe is likely to undergo in the next years.

The point which this book makes is that currently economical and political analysis at European level should focus more on the fundamental concepts which represent major challenges to our times: stateness and sovereignty. Greece Case is a sad but strong message of awareness that political instability could grow more when economical and financial constraints meet the various and profound cultural traits and their subtle long-term changes. The Greek lesson is not only about economy. And not even about politics only. It is about the complex and insufficiently known milieu of cultural evolutions and constraints which clash in the times of major European economical, social and political change. It is this milieu which might feed and uncover another explosive picture: Eastern Europe. Frustration, economical crisis and the clash of political cultures in the East might provide the next “*rogue element of our times*”.

This book shows how to proceed in order to avoid fake answers to difficult questions and wrong solutions to unavoidable challenges. But this show is quite exquisite.