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Greek and EU Mentalities

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IOANNIS TELLIDIS, JUN 27 2011

First of all, let's get the obvious out of the way: Greece has been financially ill even before it joined the then EEC. The symptoms were chronic cronyism, high levels of nepotism, severe clientelism and acute individualistic mentalities – the latter, ironically, were often expressed through collectives, f.ex., trade unions (but then again, 'irony' IS a greek word...). As a result, the patient developed a pathological indifference to development and progress, undermining one of the very basic pillars of any 'healthy' economy: Research and Development. The economic boom of the 1980s (thanks to EU membership) was followed by a degenerative era where the service sector (and the franchise sector) virtually became the only sector. "Greek industry" is now one of the shortest books in human history, along with "British cuisine", "Italian heroes" and "Zimbabwean peacebuilding". Anyone that could use their political connections for a civil service post, did so. Greeks themselves talk about this as the average Greek dream because it usually means you've got a job for life. Add to that some crazy benefits that accompany the civil servants' salaries, some nonsensical pension schemes and the overall spirit of "bribe" (or "little envelope" as the Greeks call it) when it came to dealings with any civil service department in general, and you can see how things went downhill.

However, one thing we should always keep in mind is the peril of stereotyping. Greece is not Mogadishu, despite the rising levels of violence the past few years. Not everyone steals, bribes, or evades taxes. Quite a lot of people, especially younger generations, don't really have much to hide anyway – in pre-IMF times they were known as "generation €700"; they are currently known as "generation 500", and even that is a rounded up figure... Contrary to what the Sun or the Bild may want you to believe, OECD reports that Greeks work the longest than any other Eurozone country (a fact verified more recently by the Wall Street Journal). The current mobilisation of the "Indignants" movement, then, is the civil society's reaction both to the impunity of the politically-networked, rich and famous, as well as the constantly falling levels of quality of life. More importantly though, it is a mobilisation that has brought to light the kind of problem that I see as pressing but it is questionable to what extent it is being addressed.

What the first paragraph made evident is that, rather than the economy, "it's the mentality, stupid!". I am under the impression that the squares consist of roughly two groups: those who want the system to become more meritocratic, democratic and viable; and those who want nothing to change because they've been "well accommodated" (to use another local term). Now, then, is the chance for all those spontaneous assemblies to begin addressing what is the next step, following the failure of a corrupt, useless and dangerous political system. Now is the time to face that things must change. Because, the only alternatives are a) to keep borrowing in the current terms, thus destroying the future of the next two to three generations, and/or b) to default, which would be far more catastrophic than other IMF 'experiments' (Argentina, Malawi), precisely because of the lack of industry. Unlike the Norwegian transformation of the 1960s precipitated by the discovery of oil, there have been very little efforts to turn Greece into a Green Energy superpower, taking advantage of two seas (Ionian and Aegean) and endless sunlight. Everyone in the European corridors and international fora talks of new loans and new bail-outs; no-one really talks of how to kickstart a dying economy... (Which is in a way similar to how the Greeks are accused of thinking... Irony?)

And if that lack of thinking is perhaps anticipated because of the ineptitude of the current Greek political classes, it is also rather disappointing when it comes to the EU. At the moment when the first signs of the Greek crisis emerged, the French and the Germans rushed to Greece's help by... making it buy gunboats and warplanes. Even now, stubbornness and petty nationalisms dominate the agenda. The interest in EU provided loans are competing with those of the open market – isn't solidarity wonderful? The same people that admit the country is going bust, the very

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same people are talking of ways to make more money? Is it me or is this slightly nonsensical? “If a plan is not working, stick to it” as the Economist put it. It is rather frustrating to see the institution degrade to something that values the very opposite of what it was conceived of. Bickering and antagonisms were always on the agenda, but (as with some terrorists) they now seem to constitute the end and not the means. More importantly, no-one seems to be concerned with the falling levels of social welfare and prosperity – two integral elements of EU's ontology. What is in everyone's mind, though, is whether the banks will manage to get their money back.

Citizens throughout Europe also appear indignant at the prospect of further bail outs – and rightly so; I would too and so should you. However, I would also like to know why my country's banks kept on lending to a country like Greece, especially since they knew the economic state of affairs the country has been in for decades? I would also like to know how Siemens, DePuy and others have succumbed to the system of bribes and corruption and why? Finally, I would like to know how is it possible that the European Commission did not know about the country's books? And if it seriously honestly didn't, then, surely, that is a recognition that things must change – at least as far as supervision and the keeping of books is concerned?

Both Greece and its extended family need to revisit and reformulate their mentalities. The ‘democratic deficit’ that all students of European Affairs/Studies/Relations are taught about seems to be gaining ground rather than being addressed. In Greece's case, the foreseeable future seems bleak, and tensions have been manifesting frequently. The EU, on the other hand, seems to be on the brink of serious troubles if it doesn't grasp the opportunity and address its structural and political weaknesses. I offer no genuine economic suggestion in this piece, because I have none – all I'm saying is that where there is no money, you try and create it and make it go round, so that you can get more in the future. What you don't do is try and take the little there is.

Hope is not lost in either case, however, because, the brink is often quite a useful place to be. As a former Rector of this University put it (John Cleese in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*), “it's only on the brink that people find the will to change. Only at the precipice do we evolve”.

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