

The Problem Lies with the People, The Culturalization of Politics in the Greek Press during the Crisis

The outbreak of the Greek financial crisis in 2009 led to a wealth of interpretations about the cause of the crisis, interpretations that can be generally classified in two categories depending on their domestic or international focus with the former favored by the Liberals and suggesting the “Particularity” of the Greek case, and the latter associated with the Left.

This paper will examine one particular genre of liberal narratives, the narrative that imputes the Greek state’s insolvency, not to political, social or ideological factors, but to the backward culture¹ shared by the majority of Greek people, a discourse, thus, using the “culturalization”² of politics as its interpretative axis.

In particular, this narrative claims that Greek culture is incompatible with the demands of the 21st century due to its perceived chaotic distance with “Europe”, an entity which incorporates a higher level of civic and state responsibility, work ethic, rationalism and morality than the Greek equivalent. Europe, in this narrative, is a unified cluster of politics, economics and culture, whose superiority serves as the inverted mirror image of the deficient Greek culture and society.

In this light, Greece is described as a Balkan or, more often, an Oriental society with pre-modern characteristics that prevent its “real” integration in the European world and expose its claims on European identity as a self-serving fraud. The cultural thesis is interpreting the Greek particularity as a case of a permanent transition towards the European standard, a transition that is proven by the crisis as failed³.

The cultural backwardness is associated with two historical periods each one inheriting to Greeks distinct cultural traits that impede their progress and distance them from Europe. The first period is the Ottoman occupation which prevented Greece from knowing Enlightenment. This, in turn, allowed pre-modern Irrationalism to dominate Greek thought and manifest itself in a thousand ways, all of them leading to the current crisis.

Stripped of its historical context, Enlightenment and the offspring of its absence Irrationalism serve as umbrella terms justifying a plethora of self-denigrating stereotypes, and interpreting the broadest imaginable range of cultural, political and social developments not favored by 21st century liberals⁴.

The other landmark of Greek History is Metapolitefsi, a period whose permissiveness inherited Greeks a wealth of negative traits that can be summarized as

¹ The term culture itself is rarely defined by the analysts in question, but Huntington’s definition as the “*values, practices, symbols, orientations and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society*” in a similarly oriented book (Culture Matters, New York, 2000) covers the entirety of the interpretations presented here

² Culturalization is defined by Mamdani (Good Muslim, Bad Muslim, New York, 2003, p.), as the thesis that “ *every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence* ”.

³ It is revealing of the deeply ingrained “European” identity of this narratives’ proponents that their description of Greece’s permanent transition coincides with the West’s perception of the Balkans (see, Todorova M., *Imagining the Balkans*, (New York 2009), p.15-8)

⁴ Chief among them the protest against the reforms demanded by Greece’s creditors during the crisis

Self-Interestedness. This trait prevented the establishment of a “European” democracy and economy through the encouragement of laziness, clientelistic demands, usurpation of public funds, etc.

Both versions of the cultural narrative share the same ideological denominator. In its inherent negation of the political character of dissent and through the extensive use of stereotypes, this narrative equates the politically varied objections to the liberal, reformist paradigm under the label of “culturally deficient” constructing, thus, a unified cultural but, in essence, political, Other.

Expectedly, the perceived political representatives of the cultural deficit are the Radical Left and the Conservative Right, the two main opponents of centrist, reformist Liberalism during the last decades⁵.

The essay will examine the above described process of ideological formation of “cultural”, pro-European liberalism through the publications of the liberal Press from 2010 to 2015.

⁵ The rise to government of both SYRIZA and ANEL in January 2015 verified the fears of Liberals and justified their perception of a backward Greek society mirrored in its flaws by its representatives .