

The politics of 'autonomy': Greek university students (dis)avowing clientelism and negotiating party relations

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Abstract

In a university campus, situated just outside a provincial town in island Greece members of a student collective constitutionally allied to socialist PASOK (a political party with substantial influence in the local context) in everyday rhetoric and in election campaigns emphasize their “autonomy” from the party’s politics and criticize the latter’s involvement in the use of clientelistic practices. At the same time however, they systematically depend on practices of vote exchanging both to form the collective’s internal hierarchy and to enhance its place in the university’s institutional context. Drawing systematically from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2006-2008 in Crete the paper stands in accordance with recent anthropological approaches that seek the political in daily life and in subjects’ interactions. It aims to problematize notions and practices which are closely connected with the recent crisis and are often referred to among the main reasons the latter occurred in the first place. By systematically focusing on the political subjects’ point of view it aims to highlight the different meanings students attribute to forms of connection or networks of power that have been analyzed as clientelism and to record indigenous conceptualizations and evaluations of them, thus proposing ways of looking at the notion anew.

Keywords: student collectives, party politics, political practices, autonomy

1. Introduction

February 2008 was a month of turbulence for members of PASP Rethymnou, a student collective institutionally subsumed under the Greek Socialist Party (PASOK) and operating in a branch of University of Crete, situated in Rethymno. It introduced a period during which the forms and the content of the relations the members of the student collective constituted with the party and its local politicians were strongly challenged. At the heart of turbulence stood a decision taken by students with prominent roles in the collective's hierarchy to ignore intra party rules, forbidding simultaneous officialdom, and to claim leadership in the party's local Youth organisation. Stathis Papadopoulos, a leading figure of the collective at the time, justified his decision to claim leadership of the party's local Youth organisation in parallel to his role as the collective's Secretary through a discourse on 'autonomy', which denounced the party's (and its local politicians') efforts to control and 'patronize' the students:

'I could clearly see then how a local politician wanted to appropriate PASP. How this person and the party sees PASP as nothing more than an aggregation of votes to be carried from person to person and from procedure to procedure. Before the elections I got a call from this person and he told me...bring me 100-120 people to vote for my candidate and I will then give you 60-70 votes to attend the party conference. I did not accept his offer. I want the party to know that we can work together but I am looking for autonomy and political comparability'.

(Interview with Stathis Papadopoulos, 7-10-2008)

Interestingly, the same discourse was simultaneously adopted by others who objected to such moves. Papadopoulos' intra collective opponents and members of the local party also highlighted 'autonomy' every time they criticized the former's initiative and talked of the need to keep different levels of political participation separate in Rethymno or as it was most often expressed to 'keep everyone in its own field'. At the same time 'autonomy' as denial of all kinds of political mediation organized the discourse and actions of PASP's political opponents in the university campus; members of student collectives that were at the time defining themselves through systematic claimings to 'the Left' and through references to collective forms of action and broader non parliamentary political organisations of 'the Left'.

In the present paper I rest on ethnographic material collected from extended fieldwork I conducted from 2006-2008 in Rethymno - Crete and attempt to shed light on the ways Greek university students practice politics and conceptualize the relations they constitute with the political parties they affiliate with. The notion of clientelism is central in the analysis I propose. Its centrality is attributed by a number of reasons. First, on an analytical level clientelism has constituted the primary prism through which relations between different levels of political participation, namely parties and student/youth organisations have been described in the Greek context. This links to broader issues that draw from the historically defined ways student collectives were constituted in the first place since the fall of the Greek dictatorial regime in 1974 and the beginning of the time known as *Metapolitefsi*. Back then Greek parties, PASOK most prominently among them, systematically rested on the forming of student collectives and in the establishment of broad systems of vote exchanges in their efforts to become massive and claim

governance (Spourdalakis 1988, Voulgaris 2008). Besides its analytical role however 'clientelism' has also constituted throughout the research a word of the ground. It has been used by my interlocutors as part of a discourse that was organized around the indigenous notion of 'autonomy' (*aftonomia*) and as part of a context of evaluation of political practice. Last but not least clientelism constitutes a notion that since 2010 has come to the centre of public discourse. The recent crisis has been described as part of a set of problematic relations the people are forming with the parties and the state and the state through the parties. Though it must be said that the ethnographic material I present is drawn from a time period that precedes the crisis (at least its 'formal' beginning in 2010), I argue that the way the subjects of my research responded to notions connected with the crisis, can set light on the understandings social scientists produce of them today (Rozakou & Gkara 2013).

In what follows I try to unravel my interlocutors' understandings of the connections they form with the party they affiliate with. I follow the impacts such understandings have on the organisation of the subjects' political practices and give prominence to the multiple meanings students attribute to the notion of 'autonomy', by recording similarly multiple conceptualisations and evaluations of clientelism. As part of the cultural critique in anthropology (Marcus & Fisher 1986, Clifford & Marcus 1986) my approach puts emphasis on meaning; on what *aftonomia* means and how its meanings draw or enrich existing or emerging meanings of clientelism. Such an approach relies on a post-Geertzian anthropological notion of cultural meaning and benefits from the enrichment of its analytical uses with practice theory (Ortner 1994, 2006) to inform bottom-up understandings of political practices and to privilege their approach in terms of the

subjects' point of view in socio-historical context (Ortner 1999). It is also a perspective that stands in accordance with other recent approaches that since the beginning of the '90s have appreciated the 'multilayered complexity of political reality' (Abeles 1992) and have highlighted the need for researchers to move beyond the study of 'formal' politics and to seek the political through the multiple and culturally defined ways in which it is produced and organised in everyday life and in subjects' interactions (Abeles 1991, 1997, Gledhill 1994, Kurtz 2001, Vincent 2002).

2. Sketching the field: History and the subjects

PASP was first established in 1975 and followed the establishment of PASOK by Andreas Papandreu in 1974. During these first post dictatorial years a discourse of 'autonomy', was popular among university students in part as a negative response to the appropriation of student collectives by the parties and as a graded critique to the existence of centralised party structures, which were already blamed for promoting bureaucratic relations (Papadogiannis 2015). PASP members of the time were not an exception. Making use of the collective's original designation to function 'autonomously', meaning that members of the student organisation were allowed but not obligated to be aligned with the party structures, until the end of the '70s they relied at times on a discourse of 'autonomy' (*aftonomia*) to express doubts about the content of the relations they formed with the party and occasionally questioned their place in the intra-party hierarchy and the extent of the party's interventions in the making of their decisions. However, while during the same period members of Communist student organisations (such as the Rigas

Feraios or the B Panelladiki) were resting on 'autonomy' to repudiate all connections between centralised party structures and student collectives, PASP members' version of 'autonomy' even when directed at the party, was in a way an echo of the party's central political discourses. It drew significantly from the notion of 'self-management' (*aytodiaxeirisi*) that at the same time was central in all PASOK procedures. 'Self-management' constituted a notion used to describe the party's attitude towards the workers' ability to exercise control on the means of their production and as such played an important role in PASOK's effort to legitimise itself as a socialist political formation and create a place for itself on the political map of the time (Lyrintzis 1984, Vernardakis 2004).

Things changed from the beginning of the '80s and onwards. After PASOK gained power, both the party's appeals to 'self-management' and the students' discourses on 'autonomy' altered. PASOK's engagement with governance directed its focus onto specific practices which could keep it in power, augmenting what Lyrintzis (1984) has coined as PASOK's 'bureaucratic clientelism'. During the same period, the party's emphasis on governmental power brought about different responses on the part of the members of the students' organisations; namely, some of the members of PASP could not accept the levels of control exercised by the party's leadership and abandoned their organisations in search of less hierarchical and more 'autonomous' modes of political participation, while others (the vast majority) complied with the party's new political agenda and worked according to its terms (Spourdalakis 1988, Papadogiannis 2015). In 1982 the first PASOK government inaugurated new roles for the student collectives by

introducing a Law which permitted students to take part in the institutional management of Greek universities.

In the context of Rethymno in particular, both PASOK and PASP have been enjoying massive electoral support ever since their establishment. Namely, PASP ever since 1978¹ has been the first student collective in terms of percentages gained in student election (the collective has gained percentages that reach 54% in the recent past) as well in the number of people participating in the university administration. In the years 2006-2008 550 people were enlisted in the latter's ballots and around 1000 voted in favour of it in the annual students' elections. Those are extremely big numbers especially when contrasted with membership numbers or election percentages gained by other student collectives at the same time, which occasionally did not overcome 25 or 100 respectively.

PASOK's electoral percentages in Rethymno (and broadly in Crete) have been equally high during the whole period that followed the party's constitution in 1974. In the mid '80s Herzfeld described the 'rise of the socialist movement in Greece' as 'a real opportunity to recapture for Crete a dominant political role consonant with the island's turbulent and rebellious history' and underlined the importance of being a PASOK supporter or else a pasokatzis in Crete by giving an account of the ways that the latter realised 'the cultural identity of the Cretan in political terms' (1985: 94). Strong party presence in all levels of political action was also recorded during fieldwork. Namely, in the 2004 and 2007 national elections one out of two Members of Parliament elected from the Prefecture of Rethymno was PASOK affiliated. At the same time members of the local party were also present in all central intra party committees and played significant

¹ Date of establishment of University of Crete in Rethymno.

roles in local contexts of administration (since 2006 the Mayor of the town has also been supported by the local branch of PASOK).

During fieldwork the power of PASP in Rethymno, systematically drew and interconnected with the power of the local party. Despite the student collective's original designations concerning non compulsory parallel participation most members of PASP (at least those involved with the collective's management) were members of the local PASOK organisation. Such a status of parallel participation enabled PASP members to be involved in various intra party procedures and also empowered them comparing to other student collectives operating at the same time in other Greek towns and other Greek universities. Most importantly, however, as it will be argued below, worked systematically in the production of a culturally specific version of 'autonomy' and in the organisation of practices adopted to claim and realize it.

3. The politics of 'autonomy' and the (re)negotiation of party relations

3.1.(Dis) avowing clientelism or else 'when the party expects us to be passive'

In my daily encounters with members of PASP collective in Rethymno I was frequently informed that in the local context PASP was operating under its own rules and was given as evidence of its 'autonomy' its ability to bypass a number of principles, set to predefine its connection with PASOK and to present the former as a 'vote tank' of the latter. As one of my interlocutors, 23 year old Eleni once noted:

‘Here PASP is different. It has nothing to do with PASOK. I mean, yes PASOK is our political and ideological carrier but the people of PASOK don’t tell us what to do, as it happens in other PASP organisations elsewhere. We function on a level of autonomy here. It is just us struggling for the university and our co-students. And because we are different from other PASPs and we have our distance from PASOK you will hear many of us say that here in Rethymno we are not PASP or PASOK, above all we are PASP Rethymnou’.

(Interview with Eleni, 21-10-2008)

In the quote offered by Eleni, as well as in Stathis Papadopoulos’ justification concerning his candidacy, ‘telling us what to do’ was often understood as ‘telling us what and how to vote’ in joint procedures. Eleni continues:

‘I have to tell you though that during my first year as a PASP member I was more hesitant and stiffed with all this. But then we went as PASP members to the Youth organisation’s conference and there I saw other PASP members shouting not for PASP but for PASOK and the specific people they supported, and I was very disturbed. I saw them as aggregations of votes of the one or other candidate and I saw us, PASP Rethymnou members, standing in a corner, watching all these outrages’.

Eleni’s recollections of the first intra party procedure she attended served as a way to juxtapose the collective she was participating in from other collectives whose members accepted being told who to vote and who unlike PASP Rethymnou members did not react

negatively to performing practices of vote exchanges with the party. For my interlocutors however being or becoming a part of such intra party exchange networks constituted evidence of accepting hierarchies that favoured the party. Of evidently accepting a passive role for the students by ensuring that the control of the exchanges (and also the power) remained in the hands of the party and its politicians. ‘Why to vote for a politician who wants to use our power for himself?’, my interlocutor at last wondered.

‘Autonomy’ (*aftonomia*) on the other hand was presented as a context that was meant to challenge such pre-existing contexts of power by challenging the party’s requests and by denouncing the practices that were meant to reproduce them. It doubted the party’s precedence by by-passing the practices its people were adopting. When the collective stated ‘autonomy’ in the voting and more importantly in the making of a candidacy for the local Youth organisation, its members were opting for a different role in the intra party structure. At the same time they were disentangling themselves from a party already connected in public discourse with “bad” state governance. The leading role they were having in the context of the university campus was not to be parallelised with the governance of the party. While the others were struggling for power and were involved in unequal redistribution of governmental power, they were struggling for their co-students. They were forming themselves politically through statements of what they were and most importantly of what they were not.

However practices involving vote exchanges were negatively conceptualised only when they were performed or introduced by the party. Or else the telling of what to do and who to vote had other uses and was differently evaluated when performed in an intra – collective level.

3.2. Avowing clientelism or else demarcating the limits of ‘autonomy’ in practice

In the case of PASP Rethymnou, the same people that criticized the party for the forming of relations of clientelism, in their everyday practices at the university campus and in student elections systematically invested voting control with positive meanings and relied on personal relations of exchange to constitute the collective and to ensure its numerical and electoral precedence in the university campus.

Instances of such parallel conceptualisations can be found firstly in Stathis Papadopoulos’ candidacy itself and in the ways this was advocated by an attempt to openly control PASP members’ votes. ‘No member of the collective should vote for anybody else. The only way to stay autonomous is for all of PASP members to vote for a PASP candidate’, had Stathis himself urged his colleagues a few days before the elections. Furthermore such instances of voting control often extended beyond the definition of who to vote and involved the exchange of votes and the forming of relations with members of the local party. The collective’s primary political practice, the ‘informing’ of freshmen students, is indicative of this.

At the beginning of each academic year members of PASP assisted freshmen students in enrolment processes in the university’s departments. Assistance was given in the name of their institutionalised role, as elected delegates in student associations, and was possible largely because of the collective’s presence in all local contexts. During this process, freshmen students were welcomed in the university campus and were assisted by members of PASP in a broad variety of ways that would affect their daily life in Rethymno. Help was offered in completing the bureaucracy of the enrollment process

and in finding houses for rent or gaining part-time employment, mostly in cafeterias or nightclubs, owned by people also in the local branch of PASOK. During research I observed numerous cases of ‘informing’² and recorded a large number of freshmen students who were able to find a job in places owned by PASOK people and later claimed leading roles in the collective. Jobs in cafeterias or in bars were those most often requested and respectively granted because of the perspectives they created for a future in the campus’ political arena. Such types of employment enabled students to participate in equally important practices, which were organized around alcohol or beverage treatments (*kerasmata*). It thus assisted them in becoming ‘known’ to the student population in Rethymno and created better perspectives for them, when they decided to claim the votes of their colleagues in the annual student elections. The results of such perspectives were also evident in intra collective elections.

PASP constituted a highly centralised organisation, with concrete roles and places of power. This hierarchy was the result of extensive use of electoral procedures (in fact every decision in PASP was the result of voting), in which candidacies were constituted mainly according to the interested students’ efficacy in practices as the ‘informing’ or the ‘treatment’. In such a highly concentrated structure the ability to be elected as Secretary or to gain a role in the hierarchy of PASP depended mainly on the network of people everyone knew (or expected) could vote for them. This was also true in the making of candidacies. Candidacies were announced depending on the number of votes individual candidates could a priori ensure (by appropriating individual relations with people that had assisted in ‘informing’) or by becoming part of already constituted networks of

² For example in the particular department of University of Crete in 2008, from the 145 freshmen students, 70 were ‘informed’ by a PASP member.

power and through relations formed with students already served in places of power. 'If you want to run for Secretary you must ensure at least 130 votes in advance' Giannos admitted in a kind of discontent a few days after an unsuccessful attempt to claim a leading role in the collective's 2008 annual elections.

Such exchange of votes furthermore ensured the numerical and institutional precedence of PASP in the university campus. At an intra-collective level help or assistance offered during 'informing' procedures was later (usually around Christmas) exchanged for participation in election ballots. PASP was known for the presentation of ballots that in some instances had up to 300 candidates. In terms of power, merely the total of votes PASP received ensured its supremacy in most student assemblies. Numbers were indicative of this. In 2006, 2007 and 2008 the vast majority of people elected to student assemblies or other institutional contexts of the university were members of PASP Rethymnou.

Practices such as those described above and the forms of vertical sociality they lead to, have been largely analysed through analytic schemes that are organised around the notions of patronage and clientelism (Campbell 1964, Waterbury & Gellner 1977, White 1980, Chubb 1982, Shore 1989). Moreover, in the Greek context PASOK constitutes a political party that has been primarily linked with such clientelistic practices (Lyrintzis 1984, 2011, Sotiropoulos 1993, 1994). However, in the context that I am examining here and according to analytic frameworks that focus on the emic ways that socio-political processes are being conceptualised by the subjects of research, the situation is different. Here practices that have been largely described in terms of clientelism are being made

meaningful in terms of ‘autonomy’. They are being re-conceptualised in ways that render them a prerequisite of ‘autonomy’.

In September 2008 the collective’s newly elected Secretary was giving his first speech to other members of PASP. It was the time of the year when the practice of ‘informing’ was taking place and he wanted to ensure that everybody understood its crucial role in PASP’s present and future:

‘It has forever been crucial for us to inform as many freshmen students as we can. This is the chance we have to show that we are different and to ensure our ‘autonomy’.’ (Tasos, 15-9-2008)

Linked directly to the students’ ability to claim ‘autonomy’, ‘informing’ involved PASOK in two ways. While on one level PASP Rethymnou relied on affiliation with the party and on relations with PASOK members in Rethymno to increase its electoral percentages in the university context, on another level the same practice enabled students to leverage numerical precedence in order to negotiate their place in the intra-party hierarchy and to organise discourses that dissociated themselves—from PASOK and from the clientelistic politics they (too) attributed to it.

‘The higher the percentages of PASP in the elections, the more autonomous we will be because the less we would be manipulated by people of PASOK here in Rethymno, who always rely on us, or think they can rely on, us for votes’ (Tasos, 15-9-2008)

PASP’s numerical priority empowered its members in their encounters with the central party too. Every time representatives of PASOK visited Rethymno, members of PASP

Rethymnou would demonstrate against the politics of the central party. In 2002, while the party was in government, PASP members publicly attacked the Minister of Education during his visit in Crete, making in this way a move that symbolised the collective's status of 'autonomy' and at the same time a statement toward members of the local PASOK, who would feel awkward by the actions of a student organisation they were unable to keep under their control. In an analogous move in October 2008 PASP members in Rethymno denied a role in all procedures connected to the party's public gathering, in which the main speaker was its President G.A. Papandreou.

The 'autonomy' my PASP interlocutors spoke of did not refute notions of mediation in political participation and it did not involve solely negative conceptualisations of vote exchanges and clientelism.. In addition, it was not contrasted against the students' participation in contexts that generally have to do with the exercise of power. On the contrary, it was constituted through the certification and realisation of forms of parallel participation in institutional and various intra-party procedures. Furthermore, it asked for more flexibility in the making of decisions and in the organisation of political action, echoing in this notions that featured in PASOK's speech in the '70s, while being selectively critical of the latter's ways of doing politics. The connections and the exchange of votes between the students and the members of the party were criticised only when seen as part of the party's practice of concentrating power, and not in reference to practices such as 'informing', which symbolised the subjects' effort toward the redistribution of power. What was, therefore, at stake with the version of 'autonomy' PASP was promoting or arguing for was not the total rejection of political connections with others per se or of the practices that lead to/ support the making of such connections,

but the (re)setting of the terms of those connections and the levels of control they left to the students. Members of PASP spoke of ‘autonomy’ in order to negotiate their place in the context of intra-party relations. Also, they relied on practices such as those presented above in an effort to enhance the collective’s role in every possible institutional domain (in the context of the university campus or more broadly) and to empower its members.

In 2008 the decision of PASP’s Secretary to run for office in the local PASOK Youth organisation constituted a tangible example of all these phenomena. It was an act of direct confrontation to the party’s constitutional rules and openly questioned the predefined set of intra-party hierarchies in the local context of Rethymno. As such, for PASP members it constituted the epitome of their request for ‘autonomy’ and a tangible proof of their ability to repudiate clientelism even when affiliated with a political party strongly connected in public discourse with patron-client practices. Also it contrasted them to other collectives of the same name which were not involved in such challenges.

4. Conclusions

Since 2010 the notion of clientelism has become an important part of public discourse and has been connected with a state of crisis itself understood as part of problematic relations individualized or collective subjects have been forming with the state and the parties. Yet in the ethnographic material presented above, practices that have been largely described as clientelistic are understood as part of a political agenda which was systematically organized around the notion of ‘autonomy’ and as such was meant to question predefined hierarchical connections among different levels of political

participation and the meanings attached to them. This was a political agenda which made use of the past and aimed to renegotiate relations between parties and youth/student organisations in the (ethnographic) present, and which rendered the kinds of relations and exchanges otherwise understood in terms of clientelism, into a fluid context to organise positive and negative evaluations of (appropriate or inappropriate) political practices.

The adoption of 'open' analytical categories that don't take forms of political participation as granted but perceive them as forms of sociality³ under construction and a focus on the indigenous notions that subjects rely on in order to make meaning of the multiple sets of power relations that inform their actions, offer new prospects for anthropological (and broadly social) studies of party politics. Most primarily such analytic viewpoints that look into political action 'from below', serve as a way to tackle recent arguments on processes of depoliticization. Phenomena of apparent depoliticisation of central-scene politics do not necessarily signal the end of politics (Mouffe: 2005). Instead, they are most often followed by parallel procedures, entailed in the development of other forms of individualised or collective political action, performed at everyday and non-'formal' levels or in institutionalised aspects of subjects' lives. Yet, more research in such directions needs to be done.

³ For the analytic uses of the notion of sociality, see Strathern 1988, Kuper 1992, Ingold 1996, Moore & Long 2013.

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