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BOOK REVIEW

Economic crisis and civil society in Greece new forms of engagement & 'deviations' from the past

Jennifer Clarke, Asteris Houliaras & Dimitris Sotiropoulos (eds.) (2015). *Austerity and the Third Sector in Greece: Civil Society at the European Frontline*. Ashgate Publishing, pp. 251, £70.00 (hardback), ISBN 14-7-245269-0, 978-14-7-245269-6

Greek Civil Society was always weak, with few volunteer and non-governmental organizations operating in the country until the beginning of the twenty-first century. Very low was also the participation of Greek citizens in these organizations, which, it must be stressed, were not only dependent upon the state for their survival, but were also unable to develop an autonomous pole in the context of the high polarization that characterized the operation of the party system. The landscape of civil society began to improve in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The funding from the European Union, as well as the penetration of the 'global' in Greece, facilitated the emergence of a more active and vibrant civil society in the areas of human rights, welfare and the environment. The question that arises, therefore, is to what extent Greece's economic crisis has weakened or enhanced this development?

The book edited by Clarke, Houliaras and Sotiropoulos provides us with substantial answers. The authors of the 13 chapters analyse how the:

- (a) Greek NGOs struggle to cover the gap between the increasing social needs and the inability of the state to provide essential welfare services;
- (b) declining trust in the political system facilitates the emergence of new forms of civil society mobilization; and
- (c) emerging trends in Greek civil society are sustainable.

The reaction of NGOs, as it emerges, is ambiguous. Large and established NGOs, as well as small ones, have significantly increased the social services they provide, not only to immigrants/refugees but also to Greek citizens that are suffering from the economic crisis. However, when considering that the economic crisis has inevitably influenced their funding, NGOs exhaust themselves in trying to cover the gap created by the absence of the state. As result, small and large organizations find it increasingly difficult not only to coordinate their activities, but also to share information and expertise on the design and implementation of social policies. In this environment, NGOs are obliged to operate as 'representatives' of the state and abide by its priorities and agenda.

This reality, as well as the criticism that NGOs have received during the last five years for the splurge of public money, has led to the emergence of unofficial and non-hierarchical networks of social solidarity. In these networks, the participation of citizens is determined not only by their desire to demonstrate solidarity to those who suffer from the economic crisis, but also by a critical understanding of the political, economic and social causes of the crisis.

The austerity measures, as noted, also encouraged the participation of citizens in spontaneous/informal movements, such as that of the *Indignats* in 2011. On this development, two different approaches are analysed in the book. The first approach, the 'confident' one, supports the development of such movements, by underlying that they provide Greek civil society with new participatory frameworks for discussion/communication that are not filtered by mainstream

parties and media. The second approach, the ‘pessimist’ one, suggests that these social movements were largely the result of the bewilderment the crisis created, especially among the middle-class citizens who reacted by identifying the safeguarding of their position with the Indignats.

The editors of the book, and rightly so, also point to the emergence of violent and antidemocratic forms of civil society. Civil society, as it is rightly stressed, has an official as well as an informal character. The official character is expressed through NGOs which not only enjoy a legal status, but in many cases also cooperate with states and international organizations. The informal character is found in the non-hierarchical and spontaneous efforts of citizens ‘from below’, which may be expressed not only ‘positively’ with the development of social solidarity networks, but also ‘negatively’ with citizen initiatives that are racist and anti-democratic in their content, such as those which under the guidance of Golden Dawn have mobilized to provide social services only to Greek citizens, or the extremist left-wing/anarchist groups that invest on the destruction of private/public property in the centre of Athens. The recurrent presence of such groups, as well as their ability to mobilize citizens, not only points to the existence of a radical segment of civil society which is willing to operate in ways that are not in line with liberal democracy, but also to the need to study further the worrying coexistence of democratic and violent/nondemocratic forms of civil society in Greece.

The question, therefore, still remains. To what extent has the economic crisis provided Greek civil society with an opportunity of empowerment? As most contributors of the volume suggest, it would be wrong not to acknowledge certain positive ‘deviations’ from the past.

Firstly, the significant increase of political and social activism as evident from the impressive emergence of unofficial and informal social solidarity networks. This is a qualitative change, as it points to emergence of an independent, critical and active civil society in comparison to the more traditional forms of volunteerism through NGOs.

Second, the significant, but minor, shift in the nature of the relationship characterizing the state and civil society. The sudden but necessary freezing of the funds diverted to NGOs, obliges them to invest on strategies of economic sustainability/democratic accountability. In addition, social solidarity networks not only stand with scepticism against ‘established’ NGOs, but also against the state as they consider that its involvement controls and curbs civil society.

Can these ‘deviations’ from the past, however, positively influence the direction of Greek civil society? As Houliaras argues in chapter two, Greece is still very far from being a society of solidarity. In the 2008 round of the European Social Survey 59, 8% of the respondents noted that we should be cautions of other people. Similar results come from the World Giving Index, according to which only 6% of the respondents had given money to an organization or helped a stranger who needed help. Greece occupies the last position of the 135 countries examined.

Bearing that in mind, the emergence of informal social solidarity networks, it might be argued, denotes the need to cover the gap created by the state during the economic crisis. This is a significant shift in a highly introverted society. But this shift was imposed by the economic crisis, and it is not the result of a gradual transformation of civil society towards the development of more collective/associational forms of citizen engagement. Indeed, as Clarke notes in chapter five, we need to distinguish between volunteerism that is developed in times of crisis and volunteerism that is developed in times of normalcy. As her study on Greece indicates, the increase of Greek activism and volunteerism during the economic crisis is related more to the social and psychological needs of the citizens, and less with the need to overcome Greece’s low social capital/social trust.

As Houliaras argues in chapter two, most analysts explain Greece’s low social capital and trust through historical interpretations, such as the long period of Ottoman rule, the country’s late industrialization and modernization, and culture and logic of the post-1974 political system. These interpretations, however, he considers, and rightly so, as ‘problematical’, as they indirectly imply that the fate of a country is primarily determined by the past, with very little

that can be done today to empower Greece's social/trust capital. Consequently, it is necessary that the debate/future research of Greek civil society shift from the dependence on historical interpretations. It must concentrate on the 'neglected' issues related mainly with the decisions and choices regarding public policy, and how these weaken or could empower civil society in Greece. Indicatively:

- How the tax system and in particular how the very few and complicated exemptions provided to civil society organizations have weakened their position?
- How the relationship of the state with the Greek Orthodox Church and how the 'nationalization' of religion inhibits the development of civil society?
- How the educational system discourages the participation of students in civil society activities?
- How the absence of effective political and administrative structures, and mechanisms of transparency and accountability, does not facilitate the emergence of healthy and vibrant civil society?

In many respects, as Houliaras stresses (23):

Greek civil society cannot become strong while the Greek state is a 'lane Leviathan', a state unable to collect taxes and offer reliable services. After all there is little evidence of a reverse causality: civil society is not a remedy for poor governance. Civil Societies cannot build societies.

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