

Constant Crisis and Political Byzantinism

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GEORGIOS ARABATZIS, MAY 21 2020

The economic crisis that tormented Greece in the last decade was followed by the recent coronavirus crisis; this sense of constant crisis is not new to the country. Between the War of Greek Independence (1821–1830) and the Cold War and after, Greece has experienced a wide variety of modernity's agitations. The constant turmoil is equally not unknown to the cultural heritage of Modern Greece going back to the Byzantine Empire that Edward Gibbon saw as the protracted decline and fall of the Roman Empire (Gibbon: 1974). Describing in these terms the one thousand year span of Byzantine history, Gibbon gave the definition of what a constant crisis might look like. In this article, I will explore the notion of political Byzantinism as the pure expression of what a constant crisis is and its impact on political legitimacy. I will start by looking at political Byzantinism as the exact opposite of enthusiasm and I will then try to delimitate their relation.

Enthusiasm and Crisis

Following the fall of the Greek military dictatorship in 1974 Greece experienced real political and economic advances which, however, were thought to be part of a period of disillusionment and corruption of political enthusiasm. Interestingly, on the global scale, nothing since the election of Barack Obama in 2008 as a US President has provoked a comparable enthusiasm in large sections of the world population (including in Greece). Barack Obama managed to bring to the fore the power of American idealism which is the idea that the United States is capable, despite adversity, of acting accordingly with the ideals of freedom and autonomy. The excitement with Obama's election was even more intense as it succeeded a state of governance that many found frustrating. If we look at the notion of American idealism in terms of moral and political philosophy we can trace it back to the Enlightenment which also influenced a large part of the US Constitution.

Enthusiasm, Cosmopolitanism and Corruption

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) whose philosophy was greatly influenced by the Enlightenment gave an analysis on political enthusiasm in great detail. In Kantian politics enthusiasm is a singular subject (see Lyotard: 2009). Kant asked whether there is a chance to predict political future, and answers in the affirmative: there is a possibility for prediction and it concerns the desire of people to live in a state of law and freedom, and realize the republican ideals (Kant: 2011). After all, the desire for freedom is the only, Kant claims, that is capable of sparking genuine enthusiasm among the people. For Kant, this enthusiasm can never be questioned and no method of behavior control can imitate or provoke it.

Something that can stand in the way of realizing the cosmopolitan ideal is corruption, which is defined by Kant as the spirit of secrecy that ultimately amounts to nothing more than the possibility to declare war without consulting the people. Corruption, thus, is an obstacle on the road to achieve cosmopolitan peace. This danger is due to the fact that enthusiasm is linked to the idea of humanity, while cosmopolitanism is a completely new universality that eventually will realize fully the humanity. It is legitimate, for Kant, to maintain a kind of optimism as to the outcome of the struggle between the two forces that shape our political future, i. e. republican ideals and corruption. The desire to realize the state of freedom and the enthusiasm that comes with it are clear indications that through them a basic structure of human nature is conveyed. We can consequently assume that corruption will be overcome again and again by political enthusiasm until the cosmopolitan ideal triumphs completely. However, Kant maintains some kind

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of skepticism, which concerns the destiny of humanity. As much as enthusiasm testifies to the general desire for freedom no one can prophesize about the ultimate fate of mankind and whether it will be able to survive all the difficulties ahead. Consequently, corruption, by fighting the cosmopolitan ideal, is considered, if it prevails, almost as a natural disaster that threatens the human species' potential of survival.

Social Crisis and the Morals of Person-to-Person Appeal

Clashing with political enthusiasm is the dreary reality of social crisis. Many studies during the economic crisis in Greece attempted to summarize what was happening to the Greeks, proposing a kind of a "theory of the present times." A good number of them displayed the Greek conflict with economic austerity through a perspective friendly to anti-austerity resistance. On the basis of this type of analysis, three aspects of the problem of crisis may be commented upon: political enthusiasm, moral miscommunication and the proper comprehension of the role of media. I'll start by analyzing the last two parameters.

The programme of anti-austerity was and still is largely based on the morals of person-to-person appeal. For many Greek intellectuals, the morals of person-to-person appeal is what constitutes the positive singularity of Modern Greece (Torrance: 2020). This morality seems completely incompatible with the rationality of economic liberalism. The main difference between the two lies in the relationship between sovereignty and personality; the economic rationality does not welcome the personal element, precisely because of the impersonal nature of its rationality. In pre-liberalist economic formations, of course, the relations of economic sovereignty could be subject to moral norms, and personal relations or negotiations, as they can be called, could make a difference. The archetypal relationship in economic liberalism, however, is that between a business manager and the shareholders of a company, an impersonal, objective, essentially amoral (but not unethical) relationship. In the negotiation between anti-austerity resistance and economic liberalist rationality, one actually witness two eras of economic growth clashing one with the other. For the logic of a society like the Greek one, which commonly perceives everything either in the light of charismatic leadership or through person-to-person morality, the negotiation with economic rationality appears to be extremely wearing.

One should also consider the role of media in times of crisis. The main accusation addressed to the media is that of ideological interpellation and deception. Yet, is this conception of ideology effective for the timely understanding of media? Here, in a fatal way, the specificity of media discourse on current affairs is ignored. Information experts do not perceive their discourse as a mere representation of reality. Their mission is, rather, to represent reality through a special discourse on actuality acquired after many years of apprenticeship in the field of journalistic specialization. Simply put, media experts have so many years of familiarity with the difficult subject matter of actuality that they do not allow themselves to be impressed by theories. Media experts have the same evaluative reservations about actuality as scientists towards the subject of their science, taking into account, of course, all the real differences between the two fields of specialization. Scientists do not accept a priori theories just as information experts do not see their work as part of an ideological conflict. If they did, they would lose touch with their subject, which is precisely the actuality itself. The understanding of the media as ideological deceivers impedes the understanding of the substance of news as the organization of actuality.

Finally, with regard to the first parameter, i.e. political enthusiasm, it is certain that the anti-austerity resistance was a manifestation of true political enthusiasm. This became evident in the public manifestations that marked the first years of the economic crisis in Greece (2010-2012) and later the rise to power of Syriza (2015), Greece's radical leftist coalition. One of anti-austerity's adversaries was a political discourse relative to political Byzantinism.

Political Byzantinism

Byzantinism is a term denoting, firstly, a political order characterized by dominant practices of occultation, verbalism, deception, hypocrisy, bureaucratic arrangement, and total distinction between ethics and politics. Byzantinism replaced the outdated notion of caesaropapism in the 19th Century. The term initially refers to the political life and philosophy of Byzantium and, in particular, the corrupted Byzantine imperial court (for Byzantinism, see Arabatzis: 2018). More broadly, Byzantinism is a kind of political discourse that indicates a suspension of historically

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conscientious practices and is used for institutions such as the EU and its bureaucracy as it is viewed by national-populists.

On the social level, Byzantinism is associated with the functioning of large social organizations (it is in such a manner that we are talking about the Byzantinism of European Union). There are various ways of interpreting political Byzantinism. One could argue that it is a form of expression of bad faith, a sign of inauthenticity, when every action is defined as predetermined and the use of any desire for political change is felt to be meaningless. The case of bad faith plays a particular role in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (Sartre: 1958, part one, chapter 2). Bad faith is a manner of having convictions and avoiding the responsibility to make them real or apt to change reality. Bad faith is, therefore, a form of (remorseful) conformity to the status quo.

Another way of approaching Byzantinism is through the concept of alienation, i.e. the deprivation of one's true and authentic self, due to the conditions of estrangement caused by consumer society. In a sense, alienation appears very much related to the idea of bad faith; they are both forms of inauthenticity, but the case of alienation has clearly Hegelian roots. However, alienation is not entirely negative and there is something positive about it since it marks the evolution of desire in human societies, its restraint and detachment from animal desire and its normalization in standard cultural process. Human desire probably begins in the context of animal desire but progressively manifests the need for mutual recognition in conditions of reciprocity according to the anthropological interpretation of Hegel's dialectics of Lordship and Bondage made by Alexandre Kojève (Kojève: 1980). The key and difficult part in the case is that in order to reach the stage of mutual recognition, one must surpass and move beyond alienation.

Byzantinism can also be seen within the context of a distinction in post-modern political thought, i.e. the difference between rational choice and behavior, which has replaced an older one between political realism and political idealism. According to the former distinction, every political actor appears to function either on the basis of rational choice or as a consequence of traditional political behavior. Although this is a post-modern distinction, it has very old origins and one can distinguish it amidst empirical theories of the historical Polybius and the philosopher Carneades. The subject of the analysis of both thinkers was the Roman rule. For Polybius, the Roman government was rational and yet destined to perish; it was a rational need for Rome to vanquish ancient Greece and rule the world yet there was no remedy for its political decline caused by time. For Carneades, however, the Roman government was no different from any other sovereignty and only its legitimacy was specifically and formally Roman; for him, the Roman Empire was a rule of force, such as any other that generally accords power to the powerful.

At the end, both rational choice and established behavior become almost synonymous with the imperial situation in itself and in its essential difference from the republican ideal. The imperial logic in recent history, in the sense of Max Weber's disenchantment and instrumental rationality, identifies itself with the rational choice and propels its opposites to outmoded behavior. It is thus a distinction that belongs to a clear articulation of knowledge and power marking the period after World War II.

The Eclipse of Virtue and Political Byzantinism

Our modernity is characterized by the eclipse of virtue, which was central to the ancient Greeks and consisted of the particular virtues of courage, justice, wisdom and prudence (sometimes in this set of virtues, holiness was included). It would seem quite strange to relate the political Byzantinism to Greek virtue and its political implications while the self-control that is consequent to virtue is equally alien to political enthusiasm. The moral act, moreover, was identified with knowledge. There are generally two ways of understanding ethics: the cognitive and the non-cognitive. When Socrates says that the good is achieved through knowledge, he clearly establishes what we call the cognitive ethics. At present, however, most of the study in moral philosophy takes place in the field of non-cognitive ethics. In some viewpoints, the moral ambiguity is identified with the ambiguity in taste – we have a tendency towards good as we have a tendency towards the beautiful. Another theory says that ethics is part of human communication and, in fact, the part where one prescribes to another what to do (i.e. moral prescriptivism); so when one says, 'this is good,' he is actually saying, 'that's what I'm going to do, and that's what you're ought to do.' At the end, virtue has been replaced by the modern notion of value. Although this last already existed, in the Stoic philosophy for example, in the modern era value acquired particular intensity as a moral concept and sometimes ethics is confused with axiology,

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i.e. the judgment on values.

However, the field of values is not unified but fragmented because morality has departed from what the Greeks thought is “natural” to humans and has become what is normal for a majority of people. The domain of modern values is divided and the clearest distinction among them is between (i) values of tradition and (ii) values of innovation. Every human being is split up between the inherited values to be reproduced and the values that are constantly created and innovative.

Already, in Aristotle there is a dualism at the level of social organization; on the one hand, man is naturally a political animal (a rather enigmatic premise). Roughly speaking, one would say that every human being has a drive for social organization. On the other hand, the goal of any social organization is happiness. Happiness is, however, a purpose not a precondition for the existence of social organizations. This is perfectly reasonable; social organizations – whatever they are, marriage, family or state – do not exist only in times of contentment. On the contrary, they must often function under difficult conditions where the main issue is the survival of the social organization and the largest possible number of its members. So, what is good for social organizations is sometimes defined by a single perspective, i.e. happiness, and in other times is understood by the collectivity as the desire for its self-preservation.

The individual has the freedom to choose but one quickly realizes that the terms of the dilemma are already given; the dilemma is not personal but part of a social context. This contextualization makes us talk not about a free subjectivity but about a process of subjectivation (see Foucault: 1985), which makes someone a subject only as far as to respond to a collective dilemma in a particular way. Through the relation of subjectivation with episteme, Foucault appears as a moral cognitivist opposing enthusiasm. The contextualization of dilemmas that everyone is facing is a technique or rather a technology of power. One can pretend that he ignores the dilemma and will not respond to it but this is regarded as a non-strategic inclination, or as bad faith, and not as a true refusal. The other thing one can do is comply with one of the two possibilities and the third is to try to contextualize the dilemma in personal terms or conditions that relate to a particular sub-community that he chooses to enter. Nothing, however, can guarantee that any of the above options is essentially ethical. What stands out, on the other hand, is that these attitudes have to do with power since they involve the use of force.

Conclusion

Modern Greece is a blatant example of the disturbing notion of constant crisis, a country that appears to pass from one crisis to another. The politics that deals with these multifaceted crises was lately limited to austerity and restrictive policies operating behind a rhetoric style that one could acknowledge as political Byzantinism. The critique of these policies voices a true spirit of resistance but does not fully apprehend two major trends: actuality and the new morals of economic liberalism that seems incompatible with a person-to-person morality. Political Byzantinism is a historical model for both constant crisis and political hypocrisy. Furthermore, Byzantinism seems related to an imperial situation and the examination of its rationality shows a specific form of rule based on rational choice or the use of force. The renunciation of Ancient morality may have facilitated the establishment of political Byzantinism but this last, in its origins, refers to two different historical phases: a phase of political expansion where Byzantinism appears under the guise of a universal discourse followed by a second phase of regression and diminution. In both phases the common element is the sentiment of piety. Speaking by analogy, one may say that the political Byzantinism is only an epiphenomenon and the true core of the matter is civic piety and its values of integration and allegiance. Both political Byzantinism and civic piety constitute one structure of rule and their disjunction accounts for constant crisis. In sum and following the recent and long term Greek experience, enthusiasm is a short term situation while the political Byzantinism is characteristic of longer periods of rule. Strangely, this experience seems consistent with political idealism and its distinction between humanity, corruption and enthusiasm.

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