The Myth of Europa: Greek Nation-State, Europeanization and European Identity

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Abstract

The paper discusses the interactions between the Europeanization process and the Greek national identity in order to acknowledge the impact of an institutional, political process like Europeanization on the immaterial values and bonds of a nation shaped community. The European polity, redefining the border of the state’s sovereignty has deeply shaken the link between state and national community. The creation of a European public discourse opened a political and social space constructed through support, opposition or alternative projects. The political culture of a country carries the political traditions with which member states internalise the European political objects and contribute in defining the European space. The questioning of boundaries of sovereignty and legitimacy in specific policy areas stimulates identitarian responses that on the one hand affect national identities and on the other concur in defining and shaping an ideational space specific to the European polity. The Greek choice to be part of the European construction can be defined as an identitarian investment, that is, the choice of a political option that in the long run could change the lifestyles and identitarian allegiances of a society through new allegiances to norms, political and social models that the participation into the European polity entails. The attended result from this investment is the definitive attainment of the Western European modernity, an attainment that was at the core of the construction of the nation-state itself. Thus, at the national level the integration of Greece into the European polity is strictly associated to a discourse referring to the country's modernisation. Though the major parties of the Greek political system at the end of the twentieth century were fully committed to the European path of the country, the process met many oppositions and shortcomings, well represented by the collapse of the state finances, during which both the European polity and the national political system suffered a deep crisis of legitimacy.
Political cultures and legitimacy

Joseph Weiler made a distinction between formal (legal) and social (empirical) legitimacy. Formal legitimacy implies that all requirements of the law are observed in the creation of the institution or system (Weiler, 1999). Social legitimacy connotes a broad, empirically determined, social acceptance of the system, what, in the definition provided by Lipset, is the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society (Lipset, 1983). Legitimacy gains an additional substantive component when the government process displays a commitment to, and actively guarantees, values that are part of the general political culture. The social legitimacy of political institutions is therefore strictly linked to their adherence to values, identities and narratives constituting the political culture in which they are embedded. In the case of the European polity the question can be paradoxical, since one may doubt the existence of a political culture specific to this polity, whose institutions rely basically on the formal legitimacy provided by the treaties. At the same time, the European process is called to display a commitment to, and to actively guarantee, the values of (so far) twenty-seven national political culture, in order to enjoy a social legitimacy other than the public opinion's passive acceptance. Therefore, the mechanisms by which the social legitimacy of both the European and the national polities is constructed and reproduced have to be detected in the political culture specific to each political community. The establishment of a European public space is a social enterprise where the actors entering the process, be they political elites, public opinions or social movements, have been socialised to politics basically in a national context. The attitudes towards national institutions, the political experience as a citizen of his/her own country, the meanings attached to political object and ideas as well as the creative interaction with the political messages and their sources provide as many cognitive maps with which the European polity is explored and its space shaped. Thus, following the definition of Almond and Verba, the political culture of a society, refers to the political system as internalised in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population (Almond and Verba, 1989).

The relationship between political culture and institutions in a polity is not unidirectional: the former can be conducive to the establishment of a particular institutional order while successful institutions can help a political regime to spread specific values that prove to be functional to its legitimacy. The misfits between political regime and political culture can be the source of conflicts and contradictions that can led to the alienation of members and groups not directly involved in the decisional process or to major conflicts whose resolution can both strengthen the regime or led to its demise.

Europe, nation-state and identity

The European polity and its norms in creating a European public discourse opened a political and social space constructed through support, opposition or alternative projects. The political culture of a country carries the political traditions with which the member states internalise the European political objects and contribute in defining the European space. As a result, the Europeanisation process is followed by a discourse shaped mainly by codes or languages whose denotations and meanings are enshrined in the national political culture. Among these denotations and meanings there are those related to the identity, the myths, the memories and the historical experiences of a national community, as well as to the emotional and affective attitudes of individuals and groups towards them. These identitarian materials are the main resources with which Europe is imagined. Nevertheless, the question of a European identity-building cannot be simply addressed as a conflict between national identities and a European emerging one, nor this latter can be considered as the lowest common denominator of the former. At the same time, looking for the political culture more appropriate to fit the European polity building can be misleading since it does not correctly address the fluid nature of the European process. Rather, we should speak of political cultures
and identities that better adapt to or influence the European political space. Finally, though our focus is on national identity it should be remembered how other types of identities and sub-national, regional, transnational and supranational mechanisms of socialisation concur in shaping the process. The theoretical challenges posed by confronting the Europeanization process with national identities and political cultures can be only overcome through a multidisciplinary approach where the instruments of sociology and history, notably the history of cultures and of ideas and studies on nationalism and state formation, help in clarify how political institutions and organisations shape identities and vice versa, how social and legal legitimacy interact in a particular historical context and institutional setting. In order to understand these interactions it is important to consider that the concepts evoked so far -legitimacy, political culture, identity(ies), nation- are themselves fluid processes subject to continuous redefinitions. We can represent the effects that Europeanization has on national identity as a loop where the political culture stand between the European political process and the state's political systems, mediating inputs and outputs in both directions. The questioning of boundaries of sovereignty and legitimacy in specific policy areas stimulates identitarian responses that on the one hand affect the national identity and on the other concur in defining and shaping an ideational space specific to the European polity. Furthermore, the comparison between national political cultures helps in detect clusters of countries sharing institutional arrangements, historical experiences and related path dependence mechanisms, path of legitimacy, internal distribution of power and participation. Therefore, there are two dimensions of Europeanization to be explored: the effects and the interactions on the state (Europeanization as a process of polity-building) and the effects and interactions on the nation (Europeanization as a process of identity building). Coming to Greece, a rich literature and comparative analysis in the first dimension indicate how a southern European group of countries show similar patterns concerning democratization, economic development, the relationship between state and (civil) society. However, approaching the Greek national identity and its discourse over Europe better fit the historical and cultural legacies of South-eastern Europe. The invention and the construction of modern Greece as a nation trace their roots in the Ottoman period, as well as the ambivalent relationship with western Europe, at the same time (self-proclaimed) heir of the classical Greece and the “significant other” to emulate or to reject.

**Greece and Europe: cultural dualism and modernisation**

In his typology of the social situations producing or counteracting nationalism, Gellner lists the Greek nationalism in the category of the diaspora nationalisms. Similarly to Jews, the Greek-speaking communities were dispersed throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, notably in the coastal cities. The Greek high culture was the high culture of reference for all the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, were they Slavs, Albanians or Romans. The division of the population of the Empire according to religious lines, resulted in the primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople and of the Greek speaking officials as representatives of the Christian community. Beside the ruling class integrated in the Ottoman administrative machine, the Greek speaking community expressed also a large part of the commercial and cultural bourgeoisie of the Empire. While the church and the phanariots remained attached to their positions within the Empire, that implied their loyalty to the Ottoman order, the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals of the diaspora embraced the ideas of the European Enlightenment and Romanticism. They learnt of the European modernity, making of it the flag of the cultural and political revival of the nation. Nevertheless, the West provided not only an ideological basis to the national movement, but also a clear indication of what should have been the identity and the historical references of the fledgling nation. Thus, the Greek national enterprise developed into two phases. During the first phase, the urbanized and learned Greek
diaspora appropriated the ideas of the European modernity to reform and emancipate their political community. The Greek national movement did not call to the independence from a colonial power, or a state that sought to impose an ideology or a dominant identity discourse. Instead, it rebelled against an agrarian Empire, whose antiquates structures could not met the demands for major political rights and representation and the economic dynamism of the more advanced strata. The ideologues of the Greek nation sought independence in Europe. Greek intellectuals felt superior to their political rulers and in identify themselves as Europeans, they accepted the Orientalist discourse and subjected the Ottoman Empire to it, although in Europe, Greeks had been object of Orientalism too (Jousdanis, 2001).

The second phase saw the direct European involvement in building both the State, through the diplomatic and military intervention and the subsequent tutelage, and the Greek national identity. The XIX century philhellenism not only imbued opinions and actions of an entire generation of intellectuals educated through the classics, but helped in establishing an image of Greece that will be an essential part of the Greek national self representation. Thus, as vividly highlighted by Hertzfeld, the Greek-speaking Christians of the Ottoman Empire were called to become the citizens of a nation-state presumed to represent the regeneration of a Hellas essentially invented by German classical philologists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Hertzfeld, 1986).

Once Greece reached the independence, the main objective was to (re)convert the Romios, the Christian living in the European part of the Ottoman empire, in Ellinas. The latter term represents a series of virtues and qualities that the Greek citizen should embody, while the former is its antithesis, the subject of the Ottoman pre-industrial agrarian and pre-democratic culture, the sad memory of centuries of submission. The social identity of the romios / valkanios remains communitarian, parochial, minoritarian, while the Ellinas is a citizen of a country that is his own and whose identity refers to a free nation, part of a larger democratic whole, Europe (Couroucli, 2002). It is from these two representations, created during the process of nation-building, that the dualism east-west, Balkans-Europe developed. A dualism that continues to affect social and political representations and discourses of contemporary Greece.

Diamantouros translated these powerful identitarian representations in terms of political culture. In his ideal-typical model two conflicting traditions have reproduced themselves since the establishment of the Greek state, one epitomising the Byzantine-Ottoman parochial, pre-modern political culture, the other, the reformist and secular tradition, tracing its roots in the Western-Europe oriented, Illuministic origins of the national struggle. It is important to observe how these two traditions are transversal to institutions, strata, classes, or political parties and thus not being exclusively identifiable with any one such structure across time or even at any given moment (Diamandouros, 2000). This cultural dualism permeates the societal and political debate of contemporary Greek politics and interacts with the internal and international opportunities and constraints to which the Greek Third Republic established in 1975 has been subject. The Europeanization of Greek politics and the discourses developed by political and social actors over the path of integration into the European polity can be considered as the ultimate battleground where the parochial and reformist political cultures faces each others.

The Greek choice to be part of the European construction can be defined as an identitarian investment, that is, the choice of a political option that in the long run could change the nature of lifestyles and identitarian allegiances of a society through new allegiances to norms, political and social models that the participation into the European polity entails. The attended result from this investment is the definitive attainment of the Western modernity, an attainment that was at the core of the construction of the nation-state itself. In this sense, the transition to democracy after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, was a defining moment of identitarian reflection concerning the place of the new republic in the international context. Beside a specific political discourse that directly refers to the European construction, at the national level the integration of Greece into the European polity is strictly associated to a discourse referring to the country's modernisation.

The paradigm of modernity, technological achievements and material prosperity of a political community
is, as Benedict Anderson has illustrated, the reason for the success and even the affirmation of the nation-state as a form of complex social organization (Anderson, 1991). However, being an historical and ever-changing standard, the modernisation paradigm assumes the form of a unidirectional relationship between the materially more developed states setting the bar ever higher and those states who follow. For the latter, the modernisation process can result in a perpetual pursuit of the ultimate threshold of progress achieved by the former. In a historical perspective, the participation to the benefits of the European integration, the pursuit of a social and economic development similar to Western Europe, constituted for Greece the last avatar of the West European modernity pursued since the foundation of the Greek nation-state.

The PASOK eksinkronismos (1996-2004) is a paradigmatic example of how the “modernisation” discourse met the country's effort to stand at the forefront of the European integration process (Bilios, 2009). A managerial and technocratic approach to government was considered by then PASOK leader Costas Simitis as the only way to modernise, rationalise and thus Europeanise the Greek economy and society -as well as the party- and put an end to the "old" political practices that resulted in the waste of national wealth. The modernity and the economic progress were represented by Europe, that meanwhile proceeded to the completion of the Monetary Union. Though the then two major parties of the Greek political system were thus fully committed to the European path of the country, the process met many oppositions and shortcomings.

The elimination of any reference to religion from the ID cards of 2001-2001 and the history textbooks issue of 2006-2007 are emblematic. In the first case the European legislation on personal data directly affected one of the most powerful element of the Greek national identity, the orthodox confession. An important part of the public opinion was mobilised by the Greek Orthodox Church in defence of the Hellenism. The mobilisation of the Church of Athens also contributed to the withdrawal of new history textbooks accused to downplay the role of the Church in preserving the Hellenism during the Ottoman period and its contribute to the Greek revolution. Finally, the collapse of the state finances and the Memorandum / anti-Memorandum divide assumed the dimension of a historical breaking point in the country's European course. The EU-FMI financial plan became the contested symbol of the country's place in Europe, of the powerlessness of the Greek state and of the impossibility or inability for the national leaderships to provide a convincing response to the country's economic and social crisis. Failing in assure what was its main source of social legitimacy, that is economic prosperity, Europe was harshly questioned alongside the national political system.
Bibliography


