Cycles of Protest and the “Rise of the Extremes”: Political Violence in Greece in the Era of the Economic Crisis

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Abstract
This paper will outline the political violence in Greece in the post-crisis era, in order to deconstruct the theory of the “age of extremes” that currently dominates the country’s political discourse. Indeed, following the theory’s reasoning will examine both left-wing and right wing political violence, focusing on the recent upsurge of left-wing terrorism and the racist violence of Golden Dawn, respectively. Subsequently, through the assessment of the reasons behind its dominance, this paper will argue that although there is an evident rise of extremism in Greece nowadays, the “age of extremes” is not only just a narrative, but a dangerous one.

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**Introduction**

The end of the first decade of the 21st century was marked by the global economic crisis and its devastating effects, with European Union as one of the most affected regions, and Greece, in particular, as one of the states that have been hit harder. Actually, the facts today, as the country has entered the sixth consecutive year of recession, are rather staggering; indeed, the unemployment rate is at 27 percent in total and at 61 percent among those aged under 24; the one-third of Greek citizens have been already considered below the poverty line, and with another 27, 7 percent on the brink of poverty or social exclusion; the 20 percent total shrank of GDP that has been witnessed since 2008; and the largest internal devaluation of the country since the 1930’s. Moreover, the adoption by the Greek government of the first Memorandum of Understanding in May 2010, as drafted by the “Troika” (IMF, European Commission, and European Central Bank), in order for Greece to avoid the bailout has prompted the application of some of the harshest austerity measures and policies ever implemented in the Eurozone. As a result, this exploding combination of the economic crisis and the neoliberal policies has triggered a large wave of protests, which can be seen nowadays as the most massive cycle of contention of modern Greece. Besides, it also caused the emergence and intensification of a number of different forms of political violence that currently coexist and interrelate. Thus, this paper will outline the post-crisis rise of political violence in Greece and the construction of the discourse of the “age of extremes” that it facilitated. Indeed, by the use of the above reasoning this paper will assess left-wing and right-wing violence in Greece, and then the state’s repression, in an attempt to deconstruct the current dominance of “the age of extremes” discourse in the country.

**Left-wing violence**

The last years, and especially after the December 2008 and the massive wave of protest and rioting that the murder of a teenager by a policeman caused, Greece has seen an unprecedented rise of left-wing terrorism. In fact, a number of new terrorist groups emerged from the sparks of the “revolt”. These groups are nowadays recognized as the “second generation” of Greek terrorist groups; that is, to name the most important, the Revolutionary Struggle (RS), the Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire (CCF), and the Sect of Revolutionaries (SR).

Nonetheless, left-wing terrorism has surprisingly been one of the main forms of political violence that Greece has confronted with for more than four decades. Indeed, Greece has witnessed the appearance of more than 250 terrorist groups since the first

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terrorist attack in the country in 1975, hosting among others one of the most notorious groups in Europe; namely, the Revolutionary Organization November 17 (17N). Furthermore, the number of attacks in Greece claimed by left-wing terrorist groups has been continuously escalating: from 17 attacks in the 1970s (1968-1980) to 148 attacks in the 2000s (2001-2010). Specifically, the facts from the last decade (2001-2010) reveal that only in this period 68 different groups have claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks in Greece, and that approximately the 82 per cent of the total attacks claimed by left wing terrorist organizations in Western are attributed to Greek groups.

Consequently, from 1975 to the capture of the two most important groups of the “first generation” in 2002-2003 (17N and Revolutionary Armed Struggle), a vast number of terrorist attacks took place in the country, with the Greek state powerless to proceed to any arrest for almost three decades. Nonetheless, the final arrest of those two groups caused the temporary decline of terrorist attacks; something that has utterly changed since the December of 2008. In fact, the emergence of the “second generation” of terrorist organizations, like the CCF and the SR have made it clear that terrorism in Greece has deeper roots than it was previously supposed. What is more, the latest findings of the Greek anti-terrorist agency are far from disquieting. Hence, the arrest of 20 individuals that have taken part in actions of CCF two years ago, with a number of different nuclei of radicals still escaping the arrest, and the substantial artillery that has already been seized in three towns in Greece and in 12 different hideouts have made it clear that dealing with this new generation of terrorism will be quite demanding. Likewise, the recent appearance of more groups that have assumed responsibility for attacks in places like the tube station of Aigaleo (February 2012) and a popular mall in the northern suburbs of Athens (January 2013), as well as for targeting journalists and parties’ officers (January 2013), reveals a tendency towards escalating of terrorist action.

Right-wing violence

In contrast to the continuous presence of left-wing violence in Greek political scene of the post-dictatorial era, right-wing violence can be recognized as a fairly unusual phenomenon; in reality, instances of the latter were regular in the eras during and after

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5 Ibid.
the Civil war (1943-1950) and the Military Junta (1967-1974). Nonetheless, we should highlight the case of 1979, when a nucleus of extreme right was arrested for terrorist activity.\footnote{Xenakis, S. (2012), op. cit., 440.} What is striking is that one of its prominent members was the founder and current leader (Nikolaos Michaloliakos) of a radical right-wing, frequently recognized also as neo-nazi, political party; that is, the Golden Dawn. In particular, the recent electoral success of the party in the consecutive national elections of May and June 2012, which had as a result the current presence of 18 MPs in the Greek parliament (and 7% nationally), was received as a shock by the largest part of the country. Founded in 1980, Golden Dawn has always been, along with the whole array of radical right-wing parties, a marginal political force in electoral terms. Currently, the fact that according to the most opinion polls, Golden Dawn, a party whose “violence is not merely theoretical or rhetorical, but enacted on the streets”\footnote{Mazower, M. (2013). “A New Age of Extremism? Historical Reflections on the Politics of the Present Crisis”, unpublished paper, American College of Athens.}, is recognized as the third largest party in Greece makes its case rather worrying and thought-provoking.

Furthermore, group’s clandestine and street violence have become profoundly present the last five years, and especially since 2009 and the mobilizations against immigrants in the neighborhood of Agios Panteleimonas, in central Athens. Hence, by exploiting the rising xenophobia and the security void in the Greek capital, the party won a seat in Athens City Council in 2010\footnote{Wheeler, W. (2012). “Europe’s New Fascists”, \textit{The New York Times}, November 17.}. Moreover, there are several signs of an explosion in racist violence the last years and especially since June’s national elections, as according to rights groups the number of attacks against immigrants runs into hundreds\footnote{Becatoros, E. (2012). “Greece Racist Attacks Increase Amid Financial Crisis”, \textit{Huffington Post}, December 11.}. These findings vigorously demonstrate the reasons why “Golden Dawn represents a real rupture with the country’s democratic traditions and the most serious threat to it since 1974.”\footnote{Mazower, M. (2013). \textit{op. cit.}} In fact, the group’s racialism, its paramilitary activity against the immigrants, its anti-Semitism, and its anti-communism brings more and more to mind the German Nazi ideology.\footnote{Penny, L. (2012). “It’s not Rhetoric to Draw parallels with Nazism”, \textit{The Independent}, August 30.} Indeed, attacks have been expanded in order to include also the gay and leftist communities. Besides, the group’s enmity has been also directed to what it has acknowledged as not ‘real Greeks’, as traitors of the nation.\footnote{Psarras, N. (2012). \textit{The Black Bible of Golden Dawn [Η Μαύρη Βίβλος της Χρυσής Αυγής]}. Athens: Polis.} What is more, facts such as the attempt to open a blood bank only for Greeks, the food banks only for Greeks in Syntagma square, and the inauguration of a programme of education for Greek children only, further underline the danger that Golden Dawn epitomizes for contemporary Greek society.
State repression

In this point and in order to holistically depict the political violence in Greece during the economic crisis, someone has to refer, as well, to state’s repression policies and practices. Primarily, it should be highlighted the role of state violence in the “rebellion” of December 2008, which has stigmatized the modern era, when the police officer shot and killed Alexandros Grigoropoulos. Nonetheless, the murder of the teenager “acted [more] as a catalyst for the expression of various forms of social discontent”16, than “simply as a reaction to police brutality”17. In addition, it should also be noted the historical hostility, distrust, and the feeling of civil disobedience towards the police authorities of a large part of the Greek society, as a result of the long period of state repression, especially towards the Left and its advocates, during the periods of the Civil war and the Military junta; which in fact, constituted the origin of the December events, according to a number of scholars18.

However, state repression has been evidently intensified since the aftermath of the Greek December; actually, the initial condemnation by the government of New Democracy of the police officer’s action and the passive monitoring of the riots, quickly turned into a vehement support of repression and the framing of the event as an accident, mainly as a response to calls of “law and order” from the other parliamentary parties19. Similarly, when PASOK came to power, in October 2009, encouraged the construction of a discourse of “a war-like […] financial emergency”20, that exploited the ongoing crisis to interpret every protest and contentious action against the government as opposed to an imaginary common good. This narration of the crisis has been the dominant discourse of the post-memorandum era in general, and has been further utilized to enforce state repression and the Troika’s drafted neoliberal policies.

Hence, the last years have been marked, not only by an upsurge of the level of left- and right-wing violence, but also of state’s repression policy. In particular, according to Xenakis, an important source of radicalization and resentment has been the severely disproportionate use of violence by the armed riot police (the MAT), which co-exists with the weakness of the state to prevent or punish such violence21. A characteristic instance of police violence was the torture of fifteen anti-fascist

17 Ibid, 206.
protesters in the General Police Directorate in Athens (GADA) in October 2012, after their arrest during a clash with Golden Dawn’s supporters. More recent examples of the state’s repression and the need of the current government to enforce in the society a “law and order” programme have been: the evacuation of occupied buildings associated with the anarchist movement of Athens (December 2012), the abuse and torture of four anarchists - wanted also for participating in CCF’s terrorist actions - that were arrested for a double bank robbery in the city of Kozani (February 2013) (Baboulias, 2013), and lastly, the brutal intervention of the armed riot police in the village of Ierissos after the residents’ opposition to a controversial gold mining project (March 2013).

What is more, there has been a critical concern over the accusations that suggest a deep infiltration and influence of Golden Dawn in Greek police’s apparatus. Actually, there have been instances that Golden Dawn assumed the role of law enforcement in the streets of Athens. Alas, there has also been a report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Nils Muiznieks, which argues that there have been strong evidence of police and Golden Dawn’s collaboration; indeed, in a period of eight months (January – September 2012) there were documented 15 incidents (out of 87 total attacks), where police and racist violence were interlinked. Besides, with reference to the last national elections of June 2012, Golden Dawn polled 19-24 percent in the Athens’ wards where the police voted in large numbers.

The “age of extremes”

This tremendous rise of Golden Dawn and its impact in the country’s political life, along with the augmentation of left-wing violence, have induced some to claim that Greece experiences a new “age of extremism”. The above concept was coined by Hobsbawm in his attempt to describe the interwar era of the great ideological and economic confrontations, primarily between fascism and communism, and in a second phase, between capitalism and communism. In the present day, the idea of the two extremes is also frequently employed to draw comparisons between the contemporary conditions in Greece and that in Weimar Republic in Germany.

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These attempts have been fabricated in order to present as similar as possible the two “extremes” of the political arc, especially in terms of the use of violence as their *modus operandi*. In fact, the first attempt to associate the contentious repertoires of the Left and the Right in Greece was made by the first government of Metapolitefsi in 1974, via the employment of the discourse of “anarcho-juntism”\(^{28}\). Thus, this narrative aims to juxtapose the above violent extremes with a moderate and non-violent center, which is comprehended as the best possible scenario of a country’s governance\(^{29}\); that has been the case currently in Greece too. In effect, the “age of extremes” discourse has been recurrently used by New Democracy, mainly, and PASOK, in order to delegitimize the parties of the Left, and especially SYRIZA, which is considered according to some opinion polls as the possible winner of the next national elections. In final analysis, this narration for the role of the far-left and its association with SYRIZA is an attempt of the coalition government to fortify its neoliberal policies, downgrade the widespread protest feeling and the various contentious actors, and devaluate the main opposition party through connecting it with violent phenomena, such as that of left-wing terrorism\(^ {30}\).

**Conclusions**

Through, the outline of the different forms of political violence and the actors involved in Greece in the post-crisis era, this paper attempted to review the tumultuous political scene of the country. Without a doubt, the unprecedented upsurge, on the one hand, of left-wing terrorism, and, on the other, of Golden Dawn’s racist violence, have severely stigmatized the period; in reality, the striking resemblance of the current phase of Greek politics with that of Italy’s in the 1970’s\(^ {31}\), where the vicious antagonism of the left and right extremism culminated eventually in a spiral of terrorist violence between the two opposing camps, make its future seem quite ominous. Besides, the intensification of state’s repression practices has been another worrying trajectory of the recent period that further obfuscates the already perplexed, political and economic, situation of Greece. Nonetheless, in response to theory of the “age of extremes” and its dominance in the country’s current political discourse, we should unambiguously identify it more as a narrative, which was solidified in order to legitimize the EU’s and the Greek governments’ neoliberal policies and to downplay the oppositional and protest voices, and less as an actual fact.

References


