NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE STUDY OF GREEK POLITICS

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1. Introduction: The co-existence of traditional and new research topics in the study of Greek politics

Some of the trends in current Greek politics are not Greek anymore. A typical example is the anti-globalization movement, a manifestation of which is unfolding right now, as we speak, in Thessaloniki, on the occasion of the European Union (EU) summit. Another example has to do with the effects of European integration on Greece, which again, despite any particular Greek aspects, is not a “Greek research

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topic”, even though one may choose to study the case of Greece. A third example is the strenuous co-habitation of Greek and European identities. For generations of Greeks who have been socialized to believe of themselves either as “not European enough” or as superior to Europeans (in the capacity of alleged direct descendents of Ancient Greek), becoming European today is quite an overhaul of identity. However, since the accession of Greece to the European Communities (EC) in 1981, Greeks as many other European nationals, have embarked on a process of redefining of what is to be a Greek in the context of being a European.

None of the above issues is exclusively Greek, and this has an impact on research on Greek politics. The evolution of Greek politics towards a set of issues which are not exclusively Greek, has been accompanied by a diversification of research topics in the study of Greek politics.

There was a time when one could choose from among a handful of very “Greek topics” and build an academic career publishing on one or two of those. Let me remind you of these traditionally Greek topics: political patronage; the role of military in politics; the breakdown of democracy and transition from authoritarian rule; personalistic and/or charismatic political parties; controlled interest representation and labour unions monitored from above; and a divisive and conflictual political culture. These used to be the most common research questions in the study of Greek politics in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

We have not obtained all the answers to the above questions, but, nevertheless, it is time to move on, without abandoning our more traditional intellectual concerns. In fact, many people, including many of you present today, have indeed moved on. New research questions have included aspects of the Greek Civil War; post-war political history; contemporary public policy such as, for instance, regional,
environmental, educational, labour, social and migration policies; social movements; mass media and politics; the Greek Orthodox church and the state; modern Greek nationalism; political identities of minorities living in Greece; women in politics and gender politics; and the Europeanization of political and administrative structures and processes.

I suggest, then, that there is a split under way in the study of Greek politics. Some people continue working on the traditional topics mentioned above, while others have taken up new topics in tune with the changing focus of political research in other European countries. The split, which is under way, is not a negative, but a welcome development. It has multiple ramifications and causes some of which I will try to present in this paper.

If topics in the study of Greek politics have multiplied, methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks have multiplied too. General macro-historical, Marxist approaches and structural –functionalist approaches have been complemented, but not supplanted, by theories of identity; mass media and cultural theory; feminist theory; and “soft” rational-choice approaches. Shifts in analytical frameworks and methodological approaches have affected research techniques as well. Large scale, macro-historical, comparative and organizational indicators, which were suitable to the study of older topics, seem to be less popular. This, I hasten to add, may have a cost to the extent that some people may work on narrow topics whithout an eye to the larger picture of theories of modern politics in general and to developments in European politics in particular. On the other hand, while selective interviews with informants and members of the elites are still used in field research in Greece, the use of secondary data, such as macro-economic and statistical indicators,
as well as discourse analysis and content analysis may be more suitable to the new topics of political research.

In the remaining sections of this paper, I will briefly discuss the causes of the persistence of traditional research topics in the study of Greek politics, a persistence which occurs despite the rapid changes taking place in Greece, in Europe and in global capitalism. I will then discuss changes and challenges in the study of traditional topics. Following that, I will try to explain the causes of the co-existence old and new research in the study of Greek politics today. I will then divide my remarks between challenges faced by those who study traditional topics and those who study new topics or employ new approaches. And I will finish with a glaring gap in the study of current Greek politics and the corresponding challenge to the academic community.

2. Causes of the persistence of traditional research topics

The older topics persist and for a reason. Many dissertations, monographs and articles are still being written on the traditional research questions which used to dominate the study of Greek politics in the late twentieth century. How can we account for this? Ours is a historical period of tremendous change in Europe and the world. Paradoxically, even though issues in Greek politics have acquired a non-Greek, international dimension, a few major aspects of the Greek political system have not changed as much between, let us say, the mid-1980s and today. That lack of change may be one of the reasons explaining the noted persistence. Let me offer some evidence for this claim.
The Greek party system has become one of the strongest two-party systems in the world, if one counts the share of votes for the two largest parties in contemporary West European democracies in comparative perspective. PASOK and New Democracy are still the prime contenders for power.

The percentage share of the total vote for parties of the Left (currently KKE, SYN and DIKKI) has declined over time. However, in contrast with other parties of the West European Left, two parties of the Greek Left still show political endurance. KKE have always been represented in parliament, since the transition to democracy. “KKE Interior” was not represented in the parliament of 1981-1985, was transformed into EAR in the mid-1980s and, after a short coalition with KKE, formed a new party, “Synaspismos” (abbreviated as SYN), consisting of factions of both the old Euro-communist Left and the former orthodox communist party.

Also in contrast to the West European experience, no party of the Extreme Right has emerged. Moreover other new parties, such as DIANA of Costis Stefanopoulos, “Politiki Anoixi” of Antonis Samaras, “Hoi Tavroi” of Stefanos Manos and the party of Dimitris Avramopoulos, have had a short, precarious life and have not survived.

Nor have there been tremendous changes in political personnel. Despite the renewal of parliamentary and ministerial political elites in 1981, 1989 and 1996, a number of key political personalities seem to dominate Greek politics. This is usually attributed to the long stay of PASOK in power. However, in the New Democracy Cabinets of 1990-1993 several of the older conservative politicians held ministerial posts, even though the leader of New Democracy in the early 1990s (Costas Mitsotakis) was different from the party’s founder (Constantine Karamanlis).
Even though one may not deny obvious changes in individual parties (e.g., the leadership change in PASOK and the transformation of its political rhetoric from anti-Western populism to pro-European modernization; the growth of the Euro-communist Left and part of the KKE into “Synaspismos”), the Greek party system and political elites have changed less than one may have expected. This persistence of systemic aspects of Greek politics since the 1980s is not the only reason why political research also continues to concentrate on some of the traditional topics mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Another and perhaps more important reason is that there is a profound dissatisfaction with the way typical democratic institutions continue to function in Greece. (Of course, this means dissatisfaction with the performance and quality of democracy, not with the democratic regime per se.)

What are the sources of this dissatisfaction which may be at the base of continuing research on traditional topics? Let me mention a few of them. Political parties, labour unions and professional associations have lost their appeal. Some of these organizations are understood by many Greeks as narrow-minded defenders of vested interests, if not privileges. The Greek parliament shows a familiar inability to effectively control the executive and to engage in meaningful political debate. The public administration is rarely brought to the point of actually implementing the decisions of administrative courts and of effectively carrying out the government’s policies. Also, despite some improvements, most contacts of Greek citizens with the authorities are accompanied by frustration on the part of the petitioning individual. Typically, citizens and businesses alike entertain second thoughts about using suitable “connections” (or even money offered “under the table”) in order to accomplish the simplest legitimate endeavour that may involve any action by public employees at any administrative level.
In the same vein, it is pretty obvious, from the press coverage and the composition of the Greek parliament, that the interests of the poorer strata of society are not properly voiced and that the needs of the relatively powerless categories of the population, including women, foreign migrants, the young, the unemployed, and various minorities, are not adequately addressed by the political system. Finally, in order to show the diffuse dissatisfaction with the quality of Greek democracy, I do not need to comment on the quality of political commentary offered, for many years now, by some Greek journalists.

3. Changes in study of traditional research topics

Even though roughly the party system and the composition of political elites have not changed a lot since 1981, one can not argue that overall Greek politics has remained stagnant. Two other aspects of the political system, namely political participation and the central state apparatus, have undergone or are currently now undergoing significant changes, even though, in the case of the state, changes are far from complete. This is a reminder of the historicity of both political processes and institutions and the concepts which we employ to study them.

To start with, the aforementioned dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy has had consequences for political participation. Since the late-1980s, repeated opinion polls have shown the tendency of Greeks to loose interest in politics and to gradually adopt cynical political attitudes. The numbers of volunteers who used to contribute to the electoral campaigns of political parties have dwindled, as have the numbers of people who participate in party-led demonstrations in pre-electoral
periods. The share of workers and employees who are registered members of their respective labour unions has fallen (with the possible exception of unions of the public sector). The circulation of daily political newspapers has also declined. Some of these patterns are not particularly Greek. Similar phenomena are witnessed in many modern democracies. Traditional political participation, understood as commitment to and personal involvement in a demanding political cause, has given way to detached assessment of alternative options within a rather limited ideological range. This is owed, among other causes, to the personalization of democratic political struggle, namely to the replacement of conflict over diverging political programmes by a sort of “beauty contest” among converging political personalities. In Greece, this was pretty evident in the last municipal elections, in the autumn of 2002.

This is noteworthy given that since the early 1990s, in Greece, there has been increasing decentralization of administrative structures. The importance of this development is evident, among other instances, in the willingness of parliamentarians and even former ministers to leave the central political scene and become candidates in prefectural and municipal elections. An interesting question is to what extent the development of local and regional government has been accompanied by the reproduction, at the local level, of patterns which have been for a long time associated with central government. An example is the transformation of patronage, from a resource in the hands of party leaders, parliamentarians and the central organs of political parties to a - larger than ever - resource of local political elites, now that additional funds and competences have been channelled from the centre to the periphery of Greece. Another example is the decentralization of corruption which may have flourished exactly because of the new opportunities for resource allocation at the local and the regional level. For one thing, the Greek state is slowly changing. It looks
as if it adopts a more decentralized structure. Let us see three additional directions in which this change is slowly happening.

The second direction of change is towards some privatization of parts of the public sector. Privatizations in Greece have progressed in fits and starts since the early 1990s. While large public companies, such as Olympic Airways, Greek Railways and the Post Office, still remain among the possessions of the state, a number of other public enterprises have changed hands. Although this on-going change has obvious effects on a number of public policies, including industrial policy and labour policy, political research on privatizations has not progressed a lot. This is not a topic only for economists, but also for political scientists who are interested in the shifting balance of power among the state and private businesses and the corresponding influence of the latter on the former.

A third direction of change is the convergence of the Greek state with other states in the EU. Such convergence should be not taken for granted. Europeanization has had an impact on Greek administrative structures and processes. To what extent this has meant a formal rather than a substantive change is a matter that will require further research. Since there is no single model of a European state, the question here is the particular ways in which the Greek state has adapted to pressures from the EU. How has the path of organizational development, which the Greek state has traditionally followed, changed since 1981, when Greece joined the EC? This is a topic that may interest not only experts of Greek politics, but also researchers in the field of European studies.

As it is well known, Europeanization is not a straitjacket. Rather, it is a two-way street. How are changes stemming from European integration received in each member-state? This is probably a matter of domestic configuration of material and
ideal interests, which differ from one country to the other. Conversely, obviously in
the future, European integration will be shaped not only by the largest among the
founding member-states of what once were the EC, but also by the more numerous
latecomers, i.e., countries which joined in the 1980s, the 1990s and the beginning of
the twenty-first century. Once again we witness the rise of an issue of Greek politics
which is typically non-Greek. The case of a Greece, which has been able over the last
thirty years to both make a successful transition to democracy and improve on its
economic performance, is particularly interesting precisely because its political and
economic transformation has not been smooth. This may hold true for other small
countries and particularly for some of the East European and Mediterranean countries
which joined the EU only two months ago (in the spring of 2003).

The fourth and final direction of change is related to the development of new
public policies, in an effort to grapple with new problems brought about by relatively
recent, large scale transformations in European societies and in globally available new
technologies and communications. The Greek state has belatedly tried to devise
specific policies in order to address new problems. Two examples are, first, migration
policy, which is aimed at stemming the tide of foreign migrants and asylum-seekers
coming from (or through) the Balkans and Asia Minor and less so at integrating the
newcomers into Greek society; and, second, policies related to new technologies,
aimed to promote computer literacy and the use of computers specifically in
education, in public administration and in small and medium business enterprises.
Who shapes public policy and in whose interests the state functions are old topics in
political science. However, owing to the changes sketched above, in Greece and in
other countries these topics have acquired a new twist.
This twist consists of the constraints by membership in the EU. Another twist may be owed to the emergence of new, non-transparent linkages between politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and private media owners. Such inter-linked interests have influenced the formulation of public policies, the allocation of public contracts, and, increasingly so, the focus of public debate. This, I think, has been made clear, first, by the sudden attacks by parts of the Greek press against particular politicians of the both major political parties and, second, by the use of press campaigns by politicians who side with certain journalists in specific intra-party fights, taking place within New Democracy and PASOK. The need to study such developments is underlined by the periodic internecine fights among big businessmen, controlling both parts of the Greek mass media, on the one hand, and construction companies and other business enterprises which participate in public tenders, on the other.

In short, the Greek state is gradually changing, as is the constellation of private interests which, at least in the post-war period, have been able to get hold of it. As it is well-known, politics is primarily about power and, even in an era when so much is written and much more is speculated about globalization, the national state remains the single most powerful institution. No wonder that, in current research on Greece, the state remains a popular topic of study, be it from the perspective of public policy, political economy, political history, welfare state reform or public administration. The challenge is to describe and explain the various ways in which the state is undergoing change.

Similar arguments can be made about other traditional topics. Changes in the subject matter of traditional political research may lead us to question received wisdom about contemporary Greek society and politics. What I mean by “received wisdom” is a number of well-known theses, which at the time of their first
pronouncement, in the 1970s and the early 1980s, revolutionized the study of Greek politics that used to be under the tutelage of constitutional law, technocratic administrative science, and old-fashioned sociology. Let me offer a few examples of such theses which may nowadays need to be qualified.

First, it is commonly believed that the voting preferences of the Greek electorate can be better explained by the personal ideological persuasion and/or traditions in the voter’s family history than by his or her social class position. This was probably true in the past, but does this thesis explain voting behaviour today, when the ideological distance among parties has decreased? Also, while there has been a lot of reference to the social class nature of politics, in Greece there has been comparatively little empirical research on the social class bases of electoral behaviour (in addition to the presentation of exit-polls after each general election). Finally, although I am not sure about the explanatory potential of “economic voting” in the Greece case, it is certainly worth looking into.

Second, it has been persuasively argued that Greek politics has been influenced by a peculiar characteristic of contemporary Greek social structure, namely “polyvalent” employment. This means that Greek capitalism is structured in such a way as to allow individuals to hold simultaneously more than one social class locations. Individuals participate in more than one, simultaneously co-existing, modes of production. Typical examples, in the urban centres, are civil servants of the Greek Inland Revenue (tax authorities) who also work free-lance as accountants in the evenings; and in the country side, small shop keepers who are also farmers and receive an income both from their small business and from agricultural production, including the appropriate EU subsidies. However, how true is this thesis today in the Greek labour market, where the size of salaried (paid) employment has gradually
become larger than self-employment; where unemployment persists in comparatively high levels (hovering around 9-10 per cent of the labour force in the late 1980s and again in the early years of the twenty-first century); and where women have decisively entered the labour market?

Third, a popular thesis claims that in modern Greece there has been an evolving tension between two different cultures. The first is a pro-Western modernizing culture, while the second is a traditional, “underdog” culture. No one social class and no particular political party have become the foremost representatives of either culture. Different fragments of classes, even within one and the same social class, and different factions of political parties, often co-habitating in the same political party, have taken turns in promoting the two cultures. Even though this perceptive thesis is probably true at the most abstract level of analysis, it may be less useful when ones brings the analysis down to family strategies of political participation and economic survival and to the contradictory mixes of beliefs and attitudes of individuals.

A fourth and final widely used hypothesis is that patronage is a particular mode of political participation, and that in Greece there has traditionally been a “vertical” incorporation/integration of the masses into politics. This is contrasted to the “horizontal” integration of the masses into politics in Western Europe, by which we mean that individuals of similar social standing, instead of looking for a patron, forge links amongst themselves as members of labour unions and voluntary associations. Historians have already questioned the validity of this schema, namely patronage-ridden politics, for the case of Greece. For instance, they have challenged the ubiquitous use of patronage as a key to interpretation of nineteenth century Greek politics. I should think that the above thesis about vertical integration/incorporation is
still valuable, but the precise extent to which the thesis holds today, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, is another challenge for political research.

Let me add to this section that it is also high time to question the validity of the claim that the Greek state is still quite large and that public employment is huge. Compared to other West European cases, and even to other South European cases, this claim is probably not true any more. This point may be easily grasped if one looks at comparative figures on public employment as a share of total employment and to comparative figures of public spending on education, health and social assistance (excluding pensions). Comparatively speaking, neither public employment nor welfare spending are colossal in Greece today. Given the quality of public services, the current Greek state may still have “feet of clay” but it does not look to me as a “colossus”.

4. Causes of the co-existence of old and new research topics in Greek politics

For the reasons stated above, revisiting old topics is worth it. In the meantime, new research topics have flourished. How can we explain that research on Greek politics has expanded to include a wide range of traditional, but also brand new research topics?

The rise of new research topics must be attributed to the emergence of new political problems and policy issues. This is connected to two developments, namely first, to the fact that Greek democracy now shares some of the dysfunctions of other contemporary capitalist democracies; and, secondly, to the fact Greek society has come to face two challenges: first, to recognize that the ethnic and religious
homogeneity of the Greek population has probably always been a myth; and second to understand on-going changes in society’s ethnic and class composition. This enrichment of political research on Greece with new topics may be a sign of maturity of the academic community of Greek political and social science, which thirty years ago was almost non-existent.

The appearance of new research topics has not limited academic interest in the old, familiar topics of research on Greek politics. The blending of new and old topics may accounted for by the coexistence of older and younger generations of political scientists and by the heterogeneity of foreign intellectual influences on the Greek academic community. Above all, I think, the co-existence of new and old topics may be explained by the multiple processes of change which have been taking place simultaneously in Greek politics and society for a few decades now.

In short, in Greece we witness a simultaneous passage from traditional to modern society and, at the same time, from modern to post-modern society. While this idea plays runs against evolutionary conceptions of modernization, it seems to me that it is not possible to account for the coexistence of very old and brand new issues in current Greek politics and the corresponding traditional and new topics in research on Greek politics, without reference to the parallel and simultaneous changes currently faced by Greek society.

Let me give four examples of this strange coexistence of parallel processes, reflecting very different stages of economic and social development. First, in Greece, tensions between Church and State, an issue dealt with in other European societies in the remote past, co-exist with tensions between native citizens and foreign migrants, a very recent issue which is right now heavily debated in EU member-states. Obviously, these two issues are inter-connected, i.e., the plight of migrants is related
to the views the official Greek Orthodox Church holds about Greekness and the ability of the Church to shape the political agenda. Secondly, a large and still growing share of high school graduates register in an increasing number of university and polytechnic departments, while, in parallel, there is a lingering illiteracy rate, which is probably the highest in the EU. While common illiteracy may be a passing phenomenon (as it is concentrated among old-age women in rural areas), functional illiteracy and computer illiteracy may be of a more lasting nature. Thirdly, Greece has entered the Information Age, while comparatively speaking, that country still has the largest share of agricultural employment in total employment among all countries of Western Europe. A persisting high number of small farmers, who still concentrate mostly on traditional agricultural products, co-exists with a few large and many small up-to-date communications and information technology (IT) businesses. Finally, public administration reform in Greece involves a desire to build - at last - a functioning Weberian bureaucracy, which would not tolerate either an erratic application of rules or the continuation of patronage-ridden practices of hiring and promotion in the civil service; the reform simultaneously involves a desire to apply modern management methods, including management by objectives and “e-government”.

The co-existence of such very different social and political issues, which theoretically belong to different phases of development, may account for the wide range of new and old topics of research in Greek politics. To account for this symbiosis of new and old substantive issues would require a historical analysis of the pathways which Greek political and economic development has followed since the inception of the modern Greek state. This is not a possible exercise in the context of
this paper. It is only a reminder of the obvious significance of the historical context of contemporary issues.

For the time being, the conclusion is that there is a multitude of new and old topics in the study of Greek politics. Books on traditional political institutions, on social movements, on political identities, and on public policies stand side by side on the shelves of Greek bookshops. Old-style positivist approaches and approaches reflecting the linguistic turn in the social sciences are equally employed. The challenges in the study of Greek politics differ, depending on the kind of research approach.

5. Challenges for those who study traditional topics or use traditional approaches

The study of traditional topics will continue to be useful to the extent that Greece is not studied in isolation, but in comparative perspective and in the context of European integration. In the past, this focus was not always present, and Greece was studied as a very idiosyncratic case. As it is well-known, one may not acquire a precise idea of what is peculiar about Greek politics or, for that matter, about any other single case, until one registers differences and similarities with comparable cases. The challenge is to put Greek politics in a comparative and particularly European perspective.

A second problem has been the tendency to write about Greek politics in an empiricist manner, i.e., without enough care to see the study of Greek politics as part of a wider theoretical debate about politics in the modern world. In other words, a lot of research on Greek politics has often paid lip service to theory. Even today, it is not uncommon to read research reports not linked to any larger theoretical questions.
whatsoever. Even today, people, without reference to a theoretical debate, aspire to “fill gaps” in the existing literature on Greek politics. It seems to me that it is fruitless to work on a “Greek topic” just because no one else has written about it. Of course, I realize that there are some Greek topics on which research is overdue. For instance, believe it or not, there is no comprehensive political biography of Eleftherios Venizelos. Such exceptions notwithstanding, I should think that it is fruitful to work on a topic which is of wider significance for modern politics, taking the Greek case as an example. The cost of not doing this, is to render research on Greece irrelevant to the wider academic community and probably to the policy-making community in Greece as well.

A third common deficiency has been that until recently the quality of data was very uneven and the rigour with which statistical techniques were employed left much to be desired. We have all come across published surveys based on representative samples which are far from that and which cite and use numbers in a sloppy manner. We have all read academic pieces about the pitfalls of Greek democracy, the Greek nation and Greece’s foreign policy, to mention only three examples of fashionable topics, with no clear research question and no new data, let alone a discernible line of argument.

A final problem has been the tendency to study Greek politics in isolation from the sociology, history and anthropology of Modern Greece. In the past, political institutions and processes were analysed in a social vacuum. This must have been a result of the dependence of Greek political science on legal studies (a pattern common in other continental academic communities); of the need of relatively young academic field, such as Greek political science, to carve a “niche” for itself in the wider field of the social sciences; and of the influence of a-historical models of political science
which were popular also in the Europe and the US in the immediate post-war period and were imported into Greece with some delay. It is obvious that political analysis cannot go very far in offering explanations without putting politics in a specific social context and without resorting to the help of history and anthropology.

In short, it pays to speak to important analytical frameworks, to be very cautious about data and research techniques and to seek inter-disciplinarity. By contrast, it costs to conceive of Greek politics as a very idiosyncratic case, not meriting internationally used analytical frameworks or at least a comparative perspective. The cost has a name. It is called parochialism.

6. Challenges for those who study new topics or use novel approaches

Some of the above challenges are relevant also to those who study Greek politics from a linguistic and/or post-modern perspective. These perspectives emphasize that politics is not equated to parties, unions, elections and the state. Rather, there is an innovation as to what politics means. Here is an example: the concept of citizenship has been enlarged to include, not only civil, political and social rights, but also cultural rights. Consequently, there follows a political struggle for the recognition of such rights, for instance, of certain minorities. This is a struggle that is not limited to the legal and administrative domain, but expands to the domain of education and language.

Widening the concept of politics and particularly conceiving of political identities as a multi-faceted phenomenon are two very interesting advances in current research on Greek politics. However, innovation of this kind carries an additional
cost, as new theories are still in the making, and application of the theories can vary a lot. For instance, the study of power at the level of discourse and the construction and re-construction of identities call for the application of research techniques borrowed mainly from social history and cultural anthropology. Without such techniques, the study of power and identities can easily lapse into psychologism. This means that political analysis turns into a non-differentiating discussion of the “subject” in general.

If psychologism is avoided (with the help of history and anthropology), another possible risk is an inability to account for change. It is one thing to show, for instance, how a certain political identity has been formed. It is another thing to explain why and how it has changed. Again, the study of change calls for being sensitive to the historicity of social constructs, such as identities. This again is a plea for inter-disciplinarity in the study of Greek politics.

The new approaches to the study of Greek politics and society also call for another kind of rigour. This time, it is not rigour in using quantitative methods, but in setting a clearly defined research problem, a research design and, of course, an argument linked to one of the relevant theories. Often, in essays and books about Greek politics and society written from the perspective of one of the post-modern theories, we see nothing more than a kind of commentary, with no theoretical pretensions and, even more often, no care for any grounding of the argument. This has been, for instance, common with some articles on Greek politics published in the Greek press and even with papers presented in academic conferences. Clearly, the systematic study of Greek politics is not promoted by such off-hand commentary.
7. Conclusions: A glaring gap and the corresponding challenge in the study of Greek politics

The main argument of this paper has been that in the study of Greek politics, new research topics have arisen on the side of old ones. The study of traditional topics, such as political patronage, parties, unions, political culture and the state, persists. The reasons why have to do with new twists and evolving changes in the corresponding subject matter of such topics as well as with a profound dissatisfaction with the way democratic political institutions function in Greece today. Traditional topics may not be abandoned of course. Rather they may be addressed with an eye to questioning received wisdom about Greek politics. This involves questioning the extent to which common theses or research hypotheses about Greek politics and society still hold today.

In the meantime, owing to large-scale changes in the Greek and European societies and political systems, to the introduction of new ideas and technologies from abroad and to the sway, which new substantive and methodological approaches hold in the academic community, new topics of research have arisen. The new topics coexist with old ones in political research on Greece as that country faces simultaneously new and old issues and problems stemming from different phases of political and economic development.

The challenges faced by political research depend on the kind of topics under study and the approach used. In the past, research on traditional topics has often been parochial, particularly if conducted inside Greece, without links to theories, comparative research or other disciplines. This was manifested in the lack of modern analytical frameworks and historical perspectives as well as in the sloppy use of
research techniques. The challenges faced by political research influenced by the linguistic turn in the social sciences and by post-modern theories may be different. They involve the risk of psychologism and the risk of inability to interpret change over time. History and anthropology can work as correctives in this instance, as in the study of traditional topics.

Regardless of the research approach, our knowledge about Greek politics is not going to be expanded through a-theoretical, non-comparative studies. Old and new topics, positivist and post-modern approaches need to put the case of Greece in wider analytical frameworks and in comparative perspective.

A glaring gap in the above discussion is the lack of reference to the political aspects of oppression and inequalities, both of which are alive and well in contemporary Greek society and politics. Despite some dissertations and monographs which refer to such aspects, generally, oppression and inequalities have escaped the attention of some, old and new, current political research on Greek politics. The specific ways in which the Greek political system one the one hand, reflects, and on the other, reproduces social class, gender, ethnic, regional and income inequalities should probably become the key challenge for the study of Greek politics today.

It is true that individual studies (be they case studies of the politics of education of the nineteenth century, of labour and the state in the inter-war period and in the post-war period, of populist politics in the late twentieth century or of cultural dualism in post-authoritarian Greece) have touched upon crucial aspects of power relations and their effect at the level of inequalities. However, recently the Greek academic community as a whole seems to have abandoned the challenge of answering the question of who really holds power today.
Why has this challenge not been met yet? It may be that power relations, through which social inequalities are structured, have become much less transparent than they used to be. Gone are the times during which it was pretty clear to everybody that power in Greece rested with the colonels; or with charismatic leaders; or with old-fashioned political elites exchanging favours with traditional industrialists, bankers and ship owners. The question about who holds power is closely related to the re-distributive aspects of politics. To conclude, this is the biggest old and simultaneously new challenge for the study of politics: in Greece, as everywhere else, the question remains who gets what, when and how.