Title: “On Racism in Greek Immigration Services”

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Introduction

One of the main walls blocking the socioeconomic and political integration of post-1990 immigrants in the Greek host context is the existing immigration regularization regime. The general depiction in the Greek media of the interface between immigrants and the immigration services is of long queues of immigrants and racist attitudes from civil servants. This picture, verified by different surveys, is one area I consider in my PhD research on the integration of Albanian immigrants in the Greek labour market and society. However, the notorious unfriendly immigration services are just the icing on the cake. In the background lay the structures of the Greek State upholding this behavior. The worst Greek bureaucracy for the lowest importance ‘citizens’ (in votes). To gain a more complete understanding of the situation, alongside my interviews with immigrants, I decided to conduct fieldwork on the involved immigration state services via interviews with civil servants in the Labour Prefectures of Athens, where applications for work permits are submitted and processed. The fieldwork was carried out between November 2003 and February 2004, roughly at the same time as the fieldwork I conducted on the other target groups of my research (immigrant households and immigrant associations).

Why did I choose this area of investigation? The immigration services constitute one of the most significant meeting points of the immigrants with the host society. These services of the Greek state are the sole regular contact (apart from work) that many immigrants maintain with the host society. Furthermore, the State is the mirror that reflects the rules of the new country. Rendering legitimate those rules before the immigrants’ eyes is dependent on that reflection. In other words, difficulties involved in the regularization programs have adverse implications both for immigrants and also for the host economy. Undocumented immigrants are likely to be barred from the visible social and economic web and cast into the grey zones of the society. Losses in social security fees, criminality, policing expenses, rehabilitation costs with uncertain return, and a fragile social trust and cohesion are some of the consequences of socio-economic exclusion on the part of the host country. Marginalized participation in the host civil society would also bear important implications for their repatriation orientations and the dead ends of the host country’s political system. The institutional position of the immigrants is central to their socioeconomic integration in the host society: The immigration regularization policies constitute the decisive determinant that controls the access of immigrants to all the magnitudes of the labour market and other areas and services (e.g. housing, health care, education) and renders them a visible social policy target-group.

Conducting research on the target group of civil servants both at their work place, and outside it, brings the researcher before several methodological challenges. My paper aims to discuss these challenges, and through this discussion to ‘develop’ a deeper understanding of the reported problems in the immigration services. This will lead me to offer some theoretically informed outlines towards addressing these problems. The first methodological issue I will discuss is one of access, and the questions and answers it both raises and provides. Secondly, the methods the researcher uses ‘on the spot’; for example, adhering strictly to structured questionnaires decreases significantly his/her chances of getting something more than the prefecture’s statutes. Finally, as an object of investigation, the immigration service is a complex one. Since it needs to be examined both at a structural, organizational level, whilst also encompassing the perspectives of those who make it
work on the production level. This constitutes an even stronger incentive for the sociologist to conduct qualitative research. On top of that, the partisan character of the ‘scepticism’ of some social scientists against quantitative data analysis, and the placing of the latter in the ‘positivist’ camp might strengthen an ideological disregard for the quantitative methods to be used in the research. My approach distinguishes its position out of the polemic dichotomization of academic debate on the methodology of social science. In particular, the discourse of racism is explored by both quantitative and qualitative aspects of labour relations in the relevant services. In doing so, I further bring a specific conceptualization of racism to the fore.

Through the analysis it becomes evident which areas and issues need to be addressed if effectiveness is going to be pursued and racism dealt with. These constitute the body of my considerations for the problems of the Greek regularization process.

**Getting to the fieldwork**

The researcher does not retrieve his data only from his/her interviews. Indicative of the problems of the immigration services in question here, is the data he/she already collects from the sample access stage. Along these lines, gaining access to the fieldwork opens a discussion that explains part of the problematic landscape of the immigration services; that is, the discussion about the particularities of the modern Greek State.

In particular, the first attempt to interview the civil servants of the Labour Prefectures of Athens failed. Without any permission from the top ranks I was denied access. Blocking any attempt to explore this problematic field corroborates the traditionally uneasy relationship of the Greek Public Administration (PA) with the society it supposedly serves. The PA (and the State in general) has always been experienced as a foreign body superimposed on the social web, literally in the first decades of the modern Greek State and in accordance with the political rhetoric of the times, in the metaphorical (but very real) sense as it has been brewed thereafter. Instead of serving the public indiscriminately, the Public Administration used its channels of communication with the public as a market where different political factions traded public seats for political influence. In brief, as a result public administration seats turned into long-lived social aspirations since. A culture of protectionism/clientelism was developed where the strata of civil servants were

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1 The centrality of the autochthonous and foreign lines along which public seats were distributed after the revolution of the 3rd September 1843 is characteristic of the selective towards certain social groups (and not uniform and consistent) spirit of the Greek political cosmos. This period is very important for it solidified the foundations for the clientelist state structures and the populism that the Greek political system has not disentangled from up to date (Mylonopoulou, 1998: 52-59).

2 See in particular Tsoukalas 1986, Makridimitris 1999.

3 The causes for this range from the economic underdevelopment of the newly born Greek State combined with the slow enlargement of Greece through wars that devastated the economy, the consequent regional disparities, to certain strata (coizampasides, - a Greek elite of village elders that was delegated with administrative powers under the ottoman millet system - lodgers involved in tax collection, chiefants from the war of Indipendence) that ‘replaced’ the Ottoman administration and lingered over the Greek State and in particular Public Administration (Mylonopoulou 1998). The perseverance of features of the Ottoman landowning system together with the right above social strata benefitting from it have developed throughout the decades into a power configuration within the Greek State, and their powerful interests pulled the threads in Greek politics and hindered any industrialization and modernization efforts (Sakellaropoulos, 1991, p.76-7).
dependent on politicians and vice versa. The permanence in public seats, a social
demand once (19th century and at least up to 2nd World War) destined to fight
corruption and the placing of party delegates to the state mechanism, turned into a
boomerang during the 1980s and 1990s. The call for ‘democratization’ and
‘modernization’ of the Greek polity in the 1980s and 1990s meant to democratize the
structure, manning and function of public administration (e.g. abolishing top clerical
ranks and establishing a flat class record and rate of pay), but actually ‘socialized’ the
clientelistic structures of the state mechanism at the expense of meritocratic criteria,
qualifications for the servants and, therefore, efficiently managed public services
(Makridimitris, 1999, p.124-139). This in brief modern history of the Greek State is
reflected in certain features of the civil servants I confronted in this stage of the
research: lack of accountability to the public, faceless transfer of responsibility and/or
the other side of the coin: the extended responsibility-phobia recently.

The grounds on which I eventually managed to get the permission to conduct
interviews indicate, however, even more eloquently the principle under which ‘things
work’ within the state structures: clientelism (Mouzelis 1986). My ‘networking’
brought me before the official in charge. On top of that, I did not have to refer to
anything more than my family connection in order to get what I needed. It still
astonishes me that the prefecture’s official signed a free pass to all Foreigners’
Services on my behalf without even asking about the goals of the research.
Clientelism, the most common toolbox with which the communication to (and control
of) the wider society is mediated, is evident on the threshold of the fieldwork.

The clerical culture and the clientelist networks that I met on the outset of
my research switching selectively on and off the valves of social accountability and
consequently legitimacy of the state, are two familiar themes regarding all
administrative sectors of the Greek State. These two revisit the discussion of the
history of modernization of the Greek society, economy and State; a discussion one
has to consider in any answer to the problems of the legalization process, and the
forthcoming convergence with some common EU principles or even policy-standards
on migration.

Towards the fieldwork findings

Discussing the methodology the researcher uses during the fieldwork further
verifies the scepticism and closure of most civil servants towards transparent
processes of communication with and answerability to the public. In addition, this
discussion paves the way for the methodological question at the centre of the paper:
the significance of combining quantitative and qualitative methods in this particular
case study.

In particular, when exploring a certain process one has to take into account the
different dimensions of space in play. Firstly, the physical space that the process takes
place matters. The conduct of the legalization process is affected not only by what
occurs within the prefecture’s boundaries but also by what happens right outside
them. Participant observation is a significant method in this respect: waiting alongside
immigrants for my turn reveals parallel informal practices in play, usually with or
sometimes contrary to the tolerance of the prefectures. Disrespectful and hostile
behaviour to immigrants from the police in the entrance of the prefectures and entry
tariffs (!) constitute part of the picture predisposing negatively any immigrant towards
the process. Secondly the space in question has certain functionality. It is a workplace.
And as such it has specific hierarchies. These attributes of the explored fieldwork produce different research findings according to the interviewing patterns used. Conducting interviews with one person at a time, and when possible outside the employees’ work place, creates boundaries necessary to protect the sample against the influence of colleagues or superiors. Furthermore, interviewing both the director of every prefecture as well as at least one member of staff in contact with the clients discloses the perspectives deriving from different positions. The latter method also reveals several aspects of the production relations within the immigration services (cooperation, organisation patterns, and cross-checking of each other’s sayings).

Then it is the intersecting social dimension. The space in question is situated in a society with certain institutional, economic and cultural characteristics. In particular, the legislative framework that underpins the legalization process is incomplete and does not take on board in a clear-cut fashion that Greece is an immigration country. When all's said and done, it is more concerned with the strict control of the foreign labour inflows and the penalisation and deportation of those that illegally enter and stay in Greece, than integration policy initiatives (facilitating the regularization process is one such initiative). Viewing this fact in tandem with the shortages in equipment, funds, specialized personnel, the lack of coordination between the administration services involved (municipality, periphery, prefecture, all with vaguely defined domains) creates a negative implementation scenario for the regularization process. A scenario where, all the more, informal activities would operate easily, given the a) stake of the ‘grey’ economy in Greece’s GNP, b) the experience of making profit out of uninsured immigrants throughout the 1990s and even up to date, c) the loose accountability procedures in place. Making (illegitimate) profit in legalising immigrants is a practice that has been verified during the fieldwork. In addition, the xenophobic and racist reaction of non-negligible factions of the Greek society towards recent immigration constitutes a variable that would definitely not facilitate the process. After all, the employees making the process work do not operate in a social vacuum, and their work is likely to be influenced by the above social framework.

This last remark unfolds the complexity of the immigration service as a space of investigation. Since it needs to be examined both at a structural, organizational level, whilst also encompassing the perspectives of those who make it work on the production level. However, it is not only the social dimension of the immigration service as a workplace but also the object of the enquiry that constitutes a strong incentive for the social scientist to conduct qualitative research. Racism, the discourse in question here, is often taken for a discourse that concerns the qualitative section of a research indeed. Racism is a phenomenon that has preoccupied social theory greatly and has been studied by philosophers, historians, anthropologists and sociologists long before quantitative data analysis came in assistance. We should note further that the proliferation in analyses of racism occurred from 1980s onwards, in the aftermath of the advent of (illegal) immigrants in the 1990s brought to the political discussion in Southern-European countries, has been the consequent strengthening of the informal economy. The size of the Greek informal economy is allegedly equivalent to one third of the GDP of Greece (Labrianidis & Lyberaki, 2001, p.98). Cases of civil servants taking some more money from immigrants and the existence of a phony-documents industry outside the prefectures have been reported in my interviews. As Goldthorpe (mostly chp.5, 2000) would characteristically argue with regard to the value of quantitative data analysis for social sciences.
of post-structuralism; when the concepts of culture, difference (Hall 1990) and gender (Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1992) intersected class and (neo-)Marxist (Rex 1983, Miles 1989) perspectives of interpreting racism in the context of social theory. This could not but marginalize the scientific status of the so-called ‘positivists’ (see right below) in this field. Indeed, the grand (in explanatory range) structural analyses were, in general, on the defense after the 1980s’ concern of social sciences with agency. The theoretical wave of ‘contextualizing’ social phenomena, however, rebalanced crucially the dialectic of structure and agency in social theory. Shifting from explanations of racism according to structures of the capitalist mode of production and historical particularities of the international division of labour (colonialism) to its study within labour and gender relations of a certain industry or community in a certain urban setting was central in this respect.

We have seen that both the social dimension of the particular workplace and the object of the enquiry are likely to encourage qualitative data analysis. On top of that, the partisan character of the ‘scepticism’ of some social scientists against quantitative data analysis, and the placing of the latter in the ‘positivist’ camp—a fetishized discourse in academic debate—might strengthen an ideological disregard for the quantitative methods to be used in the research (Goldthorpe 2000, Hammersley 2000). My approach distinguishes its position out of the polemic dichotomization of academic debate on the methodology of social science. I shall demonstrate the validity of both types of data analysis when exploring the hypothesis of racism in the context of the particular administration services. In particular, my research was designed, on the one hand, in order to collect quantitative data that concern structural and organizational issues of the particular immigration services as a workplace. The way the services were spatially organized and the work administered and appointed, their technical configurations (in collecting, processing and delivering data), their communication channels with collaborating and external institutions, and the quantity and qualifications of the staff employed have been such issues. Discussing the problems the civil servants come up with in serving their immigrant clients unfolded the qualitative section of the research whilst it verified the significance of the quantitative findings.

The findings from upper ranks are not positive: the directors are unsatisfied with their superiors, their counterparts in other departments and their inferiors (staff). As mentioned above, there is no clear-cut legislation and insufficient communication with the ministries and other prefecture departments. There is scarce staff, mostly with short-term contracts, no meritocratic criteria in hiring it and hardly any educational seminars. The staff majority has never read the laws with which they process cases. Findings are nor good from below: the staff, the main communication channel of the state with the immigrant that collects and processes cases, is unsatisfied with the existing working conditions and relations. Everyone does everything and nothing; there is no prefigured position with specific delegated duties. There is no technical equipment and in some departments not even spatial organization of work duties. Overtime is unpaid. Under these managerial and working...

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7 The legacy of postmodernism to sociology is evident in the discourse of ‘essentialism’ with which sociologists have been occupied from the early 1980s onwards. In the ‘aftermath’ of postmodernism, writers like Gellner, Hobsbawm and Anderson with their racism concern and their focus on the ‘fixed-essential’ narratives of nation and culture under the modern ‘nation-state’ have paved the way for a blossoming literature concerned with disclosing ‘essentialisms’ in the social, political, cultural and religious spheres of our cosmos.

8 See a review on theories of migration and labour in N.L.Green 2004.
conditions the civil servants’ views are no surprise. References to phenotypical, physical characteristics (dirty, smelly, dark, with a strong accent are indicative descriptions) and to ethnical (‘Albanians9) and cultural (low intelligence) markers of certain immigrant groups are common when asking civil servants (mostly those in direct contact) about problems with immigrants. After all, there are no penalties for racist behaviour of civil servants included in the Code of the Civil Servants10. In brief, the enquiry has disclosed an ineffective working process that faces significant legitimacy challenges both from above (inefficient legislation that requires undeliverable tasks from the particular state services since it does not address the chronic problems of Greek bureaucracy, and problematic connections with other bodies and ministries) and below (demoralized employees with hardly any incentives or control to do their work)11. Under these conditions, racism is just the icing on the cake. It is the structural, organizational aspects of the immigration services that reproduce and/or mediate the varying perspectives of those who run the regularization process.

I use the words varying perspectives on purpose here. Because from ‘holing racism up’ follows what I regard racism and what I do not. What constitutes discriminative practice against immigrants does not concern views but rather how certain perspectives are translated into attitudes on the production level. As this case study aims to argue, racism is not about opinions and likes/dislikes; rather it is evident when these socially constructed stereotypes weave through certain structures-conduits to influence one’s work. This conceptualization of racism draws from the political philosophy of Brian Barry (2000). As recognizing collective claims should not be the goal of multicultural politics (this would constitute «positive discrimination»), changing people’s views should not be the frontline target of policies tackling with racism. What we can do is create structures that would prevent personal perspectives from coming into action. Defining as racist a practice that categorizes and treats individuals according to their ethnocultural markers and not their other qualities does not lead anywhere. Nor treating racism with bans on people committing the above will do much. For they define racism on pure ideological grounds, disentangled from the dimensions of any social context. This ‘ahistorical’, de-contextualized definition of racism maintains an ideological arsenal to fight racism. Should one attempt to address efficiently the perpetuation of discrimination and racism, he/she should not equate the cause with the means. I do not regard the mainly negative views of civil servants about immigrants as racism. Had I done this I would have treated their views and the application of their views at work as the same thing. Indicative of what I regard racist practice is the following sayings of a civil servant:

«with the Greeks we [civil servants] argue even more [than the immigrants]…the Greeks that come to help immigrants [friends, employers]…they ask [about] everything and they insist».

9 The ethnicity of the Albanian has become a negative symbol - a fixed, uncontested narrative - of the contemporary Greek societal/cultural vocabulary. It is a common pattern for «many Greeks to call one another “Albanian” when they want to characterize the other thief or murderer. They also say “you look like an Albanian” implying that the other is ugly, poorly dressed, dirty and tired» (Marvakis, Parsanoglou & Pavlou eds, 2001, p.359).

10 It should be noted that this Code is under renewal at the time that this paper is written, 15 years after the advent of immigrants and 7 years after the first regularization attempt.

Of course the case is not that Greeks ask more things than immigrants. Civil servants are annoyed with the Greeks because they are forced to come with a proper answer. In the case of immigrants this does not occur. On the contrary, the majority of civil servants turn their obligation to reply efficiently into the immigrants’ obligation to «know from beforehand their rights and obligations [to know what they want to find out!] in order to be served». Immigrant clients do not have the right to be demanding while Greeks do. Accountability to the public is switched on and off along ethnic lines. The racism here is also expressed in a politically correct manner. The civil servants are very aware of demonstrating their progressive thinking by talking about the rights and obligations of immigrants. However, they end their sentence by saying that the immigrants «have too many rights» for the ‘hospitality’ that Greece offers.

Revisiting racism

This paper attempted to demonstrate how the methodology of a certain research revisits the discourse of racism. In particular, the design of the research that led me to categorize and thus interpret certain findings in a certain way has been informed by the above definition of racism. Categorizing the data in quantitative and qualitative, prepared the ground for interpretations that highlighted the historical structural problem behind phenomena of racism in immigration services. Even the early access stage disclosed data bringing the researcher close to the identification of the problem. Similarly my conceptualization of racism is inextricably connected with the suggestions for the problems of the Greek regularization process. A piece of legislation involving penalties for racist attitudes, although important, would not solve much or even touch the core of the problem in question. But for measures that would address the structural problems of Greek bureaucracy, nothing could assure its implementation.

We have seen that the integration of the variable of immigration and the ‘Other’ in a low efficiency, morale and control workplace is likely to accentuate the common negative characteristics of civil servants. These working conditions and relations leaving ground for discriminative practices are interwoven with the history of the modern Greek state and Public Administration. Policy recommendations along this line, would, therefore, be interconnected with the causes of inadequacy of the Greek State. An inadequacy that is cynically evident in the particular sector of Public Administration for the same reason that it is evident or disguised in the other sectors: lack of political will. The sole (but significant) difference in this case is that political will is not answerable to any numerically significant electoral body (immigrants do not vote), and thus does not have to be disguised under the usual ideological cloaks that politics is performed.

Therefore some fundamental questions need to be addressed. The disentanglement of state structures from a lingering political system is the principal target. Towards this direction, the answer could lie near civil society; a variable far from claimed, and manipulated by the political system, that could exercise pressure on political will. Legislation, inter-departmental communication, hiring procedures, funds are all questions related to this variable.

On the actual production level, establishing transparent processes of interactive communication with the public would be a big step forward. In this respect, the involvement of media, syndicates, the Citizen’s Advocate, immigrants’
unions and associations not only in monitoring (controlling) but also in consulting roles should be considered.

References

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