

A LAND OF REFUGEES: GREECE IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

A lecture delivered by Renée Hirschon at the Hellenic Centre, London 4th June 2016

Two years ago Prof D Holton and the Executive Committee of the Society for Modern Greek Studies honoured me with this invitation. It turns out that the title itself was strangely prescient. I suggested it well over a year ago and since then the topic has become front-page news. But I have decided to address only the first part of the title and not the unfolding events which occupy the media –news, TV and the radio - with daily updates. As a disclaimer I must apologise for the degree of generalisation needed in this kind of talk, which obscures a more differentiated and nuanced presentation.

I am fully aware of the barrage of information and the continuing tragedy of hundreds of thousands of lives being disrupted and unnecessarily lost in dangerous sea crossings to the southern borders of Europe.



4000 were saved by the Italian navy off the Libyan coast in one day [26 May 2016]. Boats continue to arrive in Lesbos, and recently in East Crete.

The problem is not going to go away. UNHCR Filippo Grandi released the official figures for last year. By the end of 2015, over 65 million people had been forcibly displaced from their homes, 50 per cent of these were children. The total includes internally displaced people, while over 21 million are defined as refugees since they have crossed international borders. The numbers are astounding and show a marked increase over the previous year. It is a shocking fact that 34,000 people are forced to leave their homes each day as a result of conflict or persecution. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that more than 1,011,700 migrants arrived in Europe by sea in 2015, most of them on the Greek islands, though other agencies put that number much higher.

So using the Greek experience, I have decided to look for insights which might have practical significance. I have set my brief to attempt a deeper scrutiny of what has been revealed in Greece about responses to a humanitarian crisis. I am doing this as a social anthropologist with a long-time commitment to understanding the paradoxes, peculiarities, and admirable qualities of Greek society.

The small Greek island of Lesbos became the focus of world attention as the main destination of thousands of displaced people. High level official recognition came in the Pope's

visit with the Ecumenical Patriarch in mid-March 2016. He said ‘the Greek people are an example to the world of their generosity and humanity’ (16 April 2016). With a population of 85,000, by September 2015 Lesbos had received 25,000 destitute people. Even at that time the Greek Immigration Ministry claimed that the situation on the island was ‘on the verge of explosion’ as it struggled to deal with the population influx.

So the puzzle is presented: How have Lesbos and the other islands managed to sustain this pressure? What can we learn from the events over the past year or so?

The main purpose of my talk is to address the question I’ve been asked so many times. **How is it that Greeks can extend hospitality and compassion for the thousands of destitute people landing on its shores?** And I have added to this an equally intriguing one:

How have most Greeks managed to maintain an overall disposition towards optimism in the face of the severe economic crisis and the influx of refugees?

I plan to attempt to answer these questions as an anthropologist by concentrating on three elements intrinsic to an anthropological perspective. These include: 1. A holistic and all-encompassing view of the phenomenon, 2. A comparative dimension and 3. An interpretive, not simply a descriptive account.

My talk is organised into four parts. It includes 1. The wider context in which Greece is facing this massive influx of refugees 2. Reference to a comparative case 3. An interpretation of some noteworthy features of Greek responses 4. Rounding up with reference to state power.

1. SETTING THE CONTEXT

Until very recently, Greece acted as a transit country where open reception was offered as displaced people continued their journeys north and west. But at the international level in Europe from about March 2016 attitudes began to change and the barriers to refugee transit into northern European countries increased.

The border between Greece and its neighbouring state, Macedonia or FYROM, was closed, and a string of European countries (among them Austria, Hungary, Serbia) blocked their borders to further in-migration. Vast numbers of refugees were hindered from reaching their planned destinations.

Horrible conditions developed in Greece where the refugees were trapped. As people congregated in large numbers with no infrastructure or minimal official organisation for their relief, Greece became characterised as ‘a dumping ground ... a concentration camp...’. Places such as Eidomeni, Kara Tepe, Moria, have become notorious internationally.

An attempt to find a solution in a new approach was adopted in March when Germany’s Chancellor struck a deal with the now deposed Turkey’s Prime Minister Davutoglu. This was ratified in an EU accord called *Managing the Refugee Crisis* (see text 17 March 2016), a highly dubious agreement including the controversial measure in which refugees would be returned to Turkey, a so-called ‘safe country’.¹ Volatile conditions in the region, however, made a successful outlook questionable even at that time. In any case it is a far from satisfactory destination, given the ongoing terrorist threats and hostile policies towards asylum seekers.

In fact, the influx of displaced people did not cease. Two months after the agreement Maria Margaritis, a well-connected journalist, reported from the islands that ‘... 8500 women, children, and men ... have landed on the islands since the agreement was signed, 400 have been returned so far, some to be detained for weeks without legal representation. About 200 have been granted asylum in Greece.’ (*The Nation*, 29 May 2016)

Within days, reports indicated that the agreement was floundering. On 3rd June Kristy Siegfried [Migration Editor of *IRIN*] wrote: ‘According to the Greek Asylum Service, 7000 of around 8500 migrants on the Greek islands are still waiting for initial interviews. Greece can only detain people in closed detention centres for 28 days, but even

after they're released they can't leave the islands. The atmosphere is increasingly tense...' (IRIN, 3 June 2016)

Among the many agencies operating in the Mediterranean, MSF has three vessels patrolling the Mediterranean, which it says have rescued 3349 people in the course of 27 different rescue operations since April. The UNHCR records that 135,711 people reached Europe by sea since the start of 2016.

These facts clearly illustrate how the wider setting of international politics impacts on the local level and that such factors cannot be ignored. Consequently, in setting out the overall context we have to consider issues such as the nation state, nationalism, state power, as well as global issues, especially economic forces and migration.

In this respect I want to draw attention to the importance of terminology, of the need for being precise when we give people names. Immigration has become a hot political issue, one of the key points in the Brexit debate, taking on highly contestable dimensions and marked xenophobic aspects. It is important to know the correct terminology. Migrants - increasingly called economic migrants and more disturbingly in the media and populist press, commonly and incorrectly grouped together as 'illegal immigrants' - are citizens of nation states.² They are typically adult single males who leave home to improve their life chances. Their movements across borders, however, challenge the status quo and produce more complex ties of place and belonging.

Migrants break the bonds of nationhood by turning things on their head. Citizenship in a nation state entails **obligations** as well as **rights** which are exclusively applied. Taking on a radical perspective, we could see citizenship as bondage and not as privilege (views associated with some writers such as Hannah Arendt, George Agamben, Vilem Flusser.).



Merkel: 'In Europe we have rights as well as responsibilities'.³

This ironic Greek cartoon pinpoints the disparity in responses between western European countries and the inescapable burden laid on the Greek state because of its geographical position.

For refugees, however, the question is somewhat different from straight migration. Here, we have to grapple with issues of FORCED MIGRATION. Refugees require protection because they come from a dangerous place of origin. The countries which generate the most in the present time are Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan and those fleeing often include families, women, children.

Like all migrants, refugees also challenge the established idea of belonging, of **rights and obligations** in a bounded polity, viz the nation-state which is by definition exclusive. For refugees their mobility results in a peculiar situation, the conundrum of becoming in effect

state less. They are dis-enfranchised. In this respect they become non-persons, living in limbo until their case is established, since our identities in the contemporary world are defined in terms of citizenship in nation states. The refugees' only obligation is to survive, since they should be afforded rights under the international convention for asylum and protection.

Clearly articulated in international law are the protective measures endorsed by a majority of UN members.⁴

It is worth spelling out the international principle for dealing with refugees: The criteria are '**A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion** is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it...' (Article 1 of the Geneva Convention)

However, we could take another view, somewhat controversial and undoubtedly idealistic - that the right to be at home is in itself a human right. This line has been proposed by some international human rights lawyers such as de Zayas (1995) who states that '*... the right to one's homeland is a necessary prerequisite to the enjoyment of most other human rights ... the denial of the right to live in one's homeland ... entails the violation of ... the right to self-determination. Without the right to one's homeland, persons could be ... deprived of the exercise of most civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are widely recognised in international law*'. (de Zayas, 1995, 257-8, see also Katselli Proukaki, 2014).

This approach contains a more radical perspective: Instead of conceptualising home within limited geographical areas, we could expand our sense of inclusion to insist that **home is everywhere.**

So another way of putting it is: **Where is home - if not on the planet itself?**



Graffiti in Athens, May 2016.



Picture taken in Lesvos. © D. Pothas 2016

I should like to suggest in conclusion that a wider view of current world conditions and a long-term perspective indicates that we might be entering a phase of major transition. Maybe we are being challenged to redefine our notion of belonging and to move into a new period of **transnational consciousness?**

A second point to note:

We often hear that this time of huge population movement is unprecedented. However, I think that we should examine this view critically. Far from being a new phenomenon, migration is actually a constant in human history. Population displacements have been a feature of hundreds of years of European and Middle Eastern history. Nowadays, however, it is the scale that leads us to think of it as a new and unique phenomenon. Indeed, the actual numbers

are huge. We hear of millions of forcibly displaced persons: According to the UNHCR the total number of forcibly displaced persons was 59.5 million at the start of 2016. This is a truly shocking number but we should also place it in context and remember that the world population has reached a staggering 7.4 billion.⁵

Furthermore, archaeology and palaeontology provide evidence that migration of all kinds has been a constant in human history. Human beings have populated the planet through thousands of years of migration, moving from Africa, the place of origin of the human species, and settling on all continents through hundreds of thousands of years. Among them were people who were also forcibly displaced and would now constitute the category of refugees. They are people on the move who have been forced from their homes through fear and violence. Indeed, persecution and violence are also a sad constant and universal feature of movement on this planet. As others have done, I'm therefore challenging the idea that refugees in the 21st century represent a temporary moment, that it is a one-off blip in an otherwise smooth trajectory. They are actually part of a seamless trajectory of human movement through the millennia.

Maintaining a sense of the overall global context is important, therefore. It also applies to the current situation in Europe. As the political scientist and human rights expert Prof Dimitris Christopoulos (Panteion University) points out, there are two serious conceptual errors. He has stated it bluntly, 'what is happening in Europe is not a refugee crisis. It is a reception crisis, a solidarity crisis. The European problem is not that we have too many refugees, but that we do not want refugees at all. The cause of the reception crisis is the European fear of migrants and refugees.'

Although the numbers seem large, the proportion is not insurmountable. About 1 million refugees are seeking to enter countries of the European Union with a population of 500 million persons, where high living standards and affluence abound. This is proportionally a small number and thus he suggests that 'the problem lies elsewhere'. (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy 2016, Christopoulos 2016).

2. THE COMPARATIVE DIMENSION

After these remarks which frame the topic, I come briefly to the second dimension of an anthropological approach namely that, through its comparative perspective, anthropology can generate an understanding of similarities and discern general patterns, even though societies may appear to be very different.

Where is this happening? When?



It is in 1946 when 12-13 million ethnic Germans were expelled from their homeland as a result of the Potsdam Conference (1946).

The Potsdam Accord is one of the least known events of the last century. It has undoubted parallels with the Lausanne Treaty, and consequently it deserves our attention since it entailed the forced removal from their homes of German speakers from various eastern European countries after WWII.⁶ About 30 million people were ‘ethnically cleansed’ and 12-14 million returned to a devastated land which they didn’t know. Notably, as in the case of the victims of the Lausanne Convention, this was not ‘repatriation’ but an uprooting and expulsion from their homeland. In a remarkable effort they were settled and became absorbed into a shattered society. With much foreign aid and the political will Germany achieved a difficult transition; it rebuilt and reordered its society within a decade.

The significance of this historical event was highlighted by Neil MacGregor, former British Museum director, whose newspaper interview in March 2016 addressed the question:

‘If you try to explain why Germany has taken its unique stance on Syrian refugees in Europe you can’t ignore this (historical experience). Some argue that the policy is another way of atoning for the Nazi era. But another central motivation, rarely mentioned, is that **many Germans in their 20s or 30s have a grandparent or great-grandparent who has been a refugee. Most Germans have direct family experience of knowing what it means to be welcomed**’ [my emphasis] (article in *The Observer* by Tim Adams, 14 April 2016).

So this shared historical experience provides the common ground between both Greece and Germany. Significantly, both countries have reacted in a compassionate and humanitarian way, which is explicable through the common factor of a similar historical experience: that of mass displacement under extreme conditions and the integration of displaced peoples. I would argue that the positive response in parts of Greece to the plight of the refugees fleeing from the neighbouring war-torn region derives from a collective memory of a previous historical condition.

3. MAKING SENSE OF THE PATTERN: INTERPRETATIONS

I’ll now evoke the third element of an anthropological analysis, the interpretive dimension, to address the two questions posed at the beginning. In this section I consider the interpretation and explanation of social behaviour, focusing on Greek social patterns, through the interplay of history, economics, culture, politics, religion, education.

HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

In Greece an undoubted element influencing the response to destitute refugees is the memory of displacement, both collective and individual, which affected well over ¼ of the Greek population in the 1920s.

The Treaty of Lausanne was a most significant watershed in 20th century signed by nine countries in July 1923 and, like the Potsdam Accord, is not widely known. It ratified a unique compulsory exchange of populations and in essence was the first internationally sanctioned ‘ethnic cleansing’ or, to be more precise, **religious cleansing**. Notably the criterion for expulsion was religion and not language or ethnicity, which might have been viable options.

At the time Greece’s population increased by 25 per cent in two years. This small and weak country, exhausted by continual wars since 1912 had to accept at least 1.2 million refugees. At the time Greece’s total population was only about 4.5 million! In the case of the UK today it would entail receiving 13 million destitute refugees in only two years. Through petitions and people’s protests the government raised the number who will be allowed into this country to 20,000 over 5 years!



Pro-Refugee march in London, 12 September 2015.

It is of little comfort that we have been slightly less mean spirited about receiving asylum seekers than the over-affluent Swiss village which has decided to pay a £200,000 fine for not accepting to settle 10 refugees. The reason? They would not fit in! (*The Daily Telegraph*, 30 May 2016).

In the Greek case it is clear that the memories transmitted from grandparents have deeply penetrated the culture. Having one eloquent grandparent is enough for the heritage to be shared. I've been told very often by third generation Greeks of Asia Minor descent, the ways in which A/M culture was part of their everyday family experience, even when only one grandparent was of refugee origin. For many of the Greek population the narrative of displacement and resettlement is part of their collective social history. This was particularly true in the Greek islands of the northeastern Mediterranean where those fleeing from the victorious Turkish army first took refuge in 1922.



Three grannies from Lesbos feeding a refugee baby.

Another way of interpreting this capacity to cope with adversity is that Greece has been subject to so many upheavals during the past centuries, but has always survived. In the past 100 years there have been several Military dictatorships, the German occupation in WWII,

widespread famine and the Civil war (Clogg, 1987). People are proud of having endured so many national tribulations and possibly this provides them with the confidence that they will survive whatever is thrown at them! As the well-known phrase has it: *I Ellada pote then tha pethanei*. Greece will never die.

Confidence and optimism are striking themes which I maintain are worth noting and I'll return to them later.

This background of first-hand experience of hardship might also explain why in certain *Demos* (local authorities) around the country voluntary support groups have been offering aid to the needy and the displaced.

In the *Demos* of Neo Heraklio, north of Athens, for example, a group of 50 people organised a voluntary movement some years ago to provide philanthropic and social support for poor families in the municipality. A regular food bank offers provisions for 1500 local people including 500 children. The donations come from 20 local businesses dealing in food, including bakers, grocers, patisseries, butchers. Other sponsors provide food vouchers and the group organises events to support the food bank in various ways (concerts, art shows). They also have a weekly slot on the local radio station where they publicise their activities. Plans are now being discussed to expand their activities specifically for the needs of refugees.

Here is another but rather different case.

CITY PLAZA TAKEOVER, A SIT-IN

In mid-April 2016 a Greek activist group mobilised the takeover of an abandoned hotel in Patisision avenue (central Athens) to house about 400 refugees (from Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Kurds and Palestinians). Nearly half are children (196) and one quarter women (105). Rotas are organised, they have their own council and they all contribute to cleaning and cooking. Activities for the children, and language lessons in Greek and English are offered. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 will attend summer activities provided by the *Demos* of Chalandri.

This admirable initiative treats the refugees with dignity and agency, and gives them the opportunity to look after their own affairs. This is an important approach which counteracts the dependency model of refugee settlement where individual initiative is prohibited by country-based protection laws.

I think that these two examples are worth our attention. The way in which grassroots mobilisation is so contrary to the desultory and ineffective responses of the official state is not lost on the people themselves. I was told many times that people are acting properly in the humanitarian crisis, but the state is ineffective, if not downright obstructive in finding ways to respond. The contrast between the 'State' and the 'People' (*to episimo kratos* and *o laos*) is another theme manifested in these discussions.

CYCLES OF RECIPROCITY

To turn to the different aspects of social life which impinge on the experience of displaced people from an anthropological perspective, 'economics' is seen to accommodate a range of behaviours related to the production and distribution of goods and services (Polanyi 1944, Sahlins 1972). This approach rests on the notion of **reciprocity** and on varying cycles of exchange.

In many non-industrial societies there exists a recognition of a delayed or indirect cycle of reciprocity which contrasts with the direct exchange prevalent in market-oriented societies. Delayed reciprocity is founded on the idea that one gains a reward, but not immediately but in

the long term. This is expressed in the Greek phrase *Kane kalo kai rixte sto gialo*, the English equivalent being *Cast your bread upon the waters*.

I often heard this phrase in Kokkinia, the poor urban locality, originally a refugee settlement, where I conducted intensive fieldwork in the early 1970s. This phrase frequently accompanied the ways in which good turns were done without the expectation of reward or reimbursement. It implied that the corresponding reward would come at some unspecified time. It could be in the afterlife - but equally in this one.

In many parts of Greece, the hardships and acute deprivation experienced during WWII resulted in an expectation of neighbourly support especially in poorer urban suburbs. While living in Kokkinia, I was impressed by the emphasis on neighbourhood values of sharing and collaborating among women which were deeply integrated into daily life. A good reputation and prestige were accorded to a woman known for her willingness to help others (*kali syntrechtra*). Even if motives of self-interest were implicated, the result is a socially supportive set of norms which extend beyond the individual self and the family.

We could characterise this practice of offering aid and support as a ‘culture of hospitality’. In the societies of the ancient Middle East hospitality was openly and freely offered to a stranger in case that person might be an angel or even a god himself in disguise. In pre-Christian Greece, the invocation was to *Xenios* Zeus, an aspect of the king of the Olympian gods who took care of strangers and wayfarers.

The establishment, if not continuity, of the cultural value of hospitality is of fundamental significance for our understanding of the remarkable response to the influx of displaced persons in Greece over many months.



THE HOSPITALITY OF ABRAHAM

This icon prefigures the revelation of the Holy Trinity who is represented by three Angels (unknown sojourners) being served by Abraham and Sarah. It (or else that of the Last Supper) was usually placed near the dining table in all the houses I visited in Kokkinia as well as in many other parts of the city. Its significance lies in the sacred quality of extending hospitality and of offering food. My hosts would gesture to this icon when I thanked them for their hospitality, indicating that it provided the prototype and reference point for their action. My suggestion is that this set of actions become an assimilated value, present at the subliminal level and not necessarily explicit.

My conclusion is that a combination of these factors help to account for the strong humanitarian responses to refugees in the past as well as in the current crisis. Much is due to cultural values and through the historical experience but it is also important to recognise the close, indeed indissoluble bond between religion and politics.

THE INTERPENETRATION OF RELIGION

At the political level, I have long noticed that almost all high-profile Greek speakers, academic and political alike, during the crisis and until very recently, would discuss the country’s plight and its economy in robust terms. Laying aside the truism that politicians dissimulate, the continual upbeat message of Greek politicians in the face of a catastrophic economic crunch is noteworthy. Our UK politicians embarking on their own programme of austerity do not exude confidence or optimism. Their gloomy pronouncements do not inspire

hope. Is this just a question of style, or is it an expression of a different cultural disposition? (A comparative remark).

In trying to interpret this feature, the disposition towards optimism, we can turn to the Greek Prime Minister himself. While campaigning during 2015, Alexis Tsipras' left wing radical programme included his party's commitment to separate Church from State. Indeed, he started in office by breaking with tradition by not taking the oath on the bible. Instead, he took a civil oath in the presence of the President of the Republic dedicating himself to the welfare of the *politevma* polity but not to the service of God as expressed in the religious installation. However, the paradoxes are acute and reveal the powerful substratum of religious beliefs and their salience in the political arena.



The party's campaign poster was in itself extraordinarily suggestive.

The campaign slogan sums it up: Hope is coming!

Once in power, the force of the word Resurrection *Anastasis* was emphasised in speeches by Prime Minister Tsipras as well as by many of his ministers. It is worth quoting some key phrases from his speech in the lead up to Easter (2016). In one paragraph Tsipras uses the word resurrection 3 times and exudes a message of hope:

'This year the *Anastasis* Resurrection is exceptional (stands out *ksechorizei*). It brings with it the renaissance of hope for our people ... this is our own Resurrection. It is the resurrection of all of us who have decided to stand upright.... The message of today's

festival is a message [*mynyma*] of life and justice ... the spring of hope will bring to an end the winter of resignation' [*paraitisis*] (*To Vima Online*, 12 April 2016).

Among the cynical and sarcastic responses was one reader's comment: 'If you want to get us to the *Anastasis* you'll have to crucify us first!'

What I want to demonstrate here is that it is not possible to comprehend Greek society fully without serious consideration of religion. Notably, even today at the official level, Church and State are deeply intertwined institutions. The Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs deals with all these matters, and consequently the Church exercises great influence over educational policy. As I will show, the educational thrust reinforces cultural values of resilience, superiority, and optimism.

According to a 2011 poll, an overwhelming proportion of over 95 per cent of the Greek population declared themselves to be Orthodox Christians (*Metron Forum*, 2011). Numerous attempts to separate Church and State have had to be abandoned by successive governments whose manifesto proposed a secular programme. Attempts to secularise have always failed, the reason being that the 'political cost' is too great.

Furthermore, my point here is that religion manifests itself also in varied and informal aspects of social life which can be seen as providing the underlying matrix of Greek social life. In my earlier work on Greek culture, I realised that the puzzling aspects of everyday objects could only be fully understood by reference to their symbolic connotations. Beds, chairs, tables all had sacramental qualities and understanding these allowed us to make sense of their apparently irrational form.⁷

Anyone who knows Greek society recognises that Easter, *Pascha*, is the highlight of the festive year. At the social level, it is striking that non-practising and atheist Greeks will attend the Easter service, explaining that 'It's part of my culture'.⁸ In the past, Christmas was not nearly as important, and was barely celebrated. Nowadays, however, Christmas has been adopted with all the trappings of western material insignia and consumerist zeal!

It is worth noting that the Orthodox Church's emphasis is not on Christ's suffering, crucifixion and death but rather on His triumphal resurrection. In the Orthodox Christian worldview there is a strong emphasis on the resurrection of Christ, the ultimate triumph of life over death and decay. Christ's sacrifice guarantees human salvation and the triumph of good over evil.

My suggestion is that this conviction, however subliminal, is an endowment which gives someone brought up in an Orthodox Christian environment a positive and hopeful approach to whatever problems may arise in life.

Associated with this matrix of a religious substructure or world view is the notion of our common humanity. When I was living in Kokkinia people frequently urged me not to hesitate to call on them for help. 'We're all human' (*anthropoi eimaste oloi*) they would say, expressing the recognition of our interdependence and the frailty of lives which are beset with problems. Similarly, Eliso would say, 'We are all God's creatures' (*tou Theou plasmata eimaste oloi*) when she recalled life in the late Ottoman period in the mixed communities of Brusa/ now Bursa in Turkey, her home town. She and others like her did not express rancour or hatred for the Turks, despite the horrors of their flight and violent displacement from their homeland.

Associated with these positive values is what I call Greek optimism, well summed up in a conversation with a young taxi driver in Athens:

- I'm hopeful because I'm a Greek. Greece has never fallen – 400 years of slavery/bondage but finally we were victorious.

- Is there a way out?

- Maybe there isn't but so what? I have hope because I'm Greek.

- Έχω ελπίδα διότι είμαι Έλληνας. Η Ελλάδα δεν έπεσε ποτέ – 400 χρόνια σκλαβιά αλλά τελικά νικήσαμε.

- Υπάρχει διέξοδος?

- Μπορεί να μην υπάρχει - αλλά τι πειράζει? Εγώ ελπίζω γιατί είμαι Έλληνας.

Discussion, 10 May 2016.

His unreflective and self-confident optimism is far from being unique and it reveals another characteristic worthy of our attention.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

As I've already noted, many Greeks who agree with my view that the substratum of Orthodoxy provides an inbuilt source of optimism then go on to volunteer the view that the teaching of history is equally important in building up their sense of self confidence. This comes from a conviction that they are special, that Greeks always overcome foreign occupations (Ottomans, Nazis), and that they are indeed the chosen people [Greek exceptionalism]. Furthermore, Greek colleagues as well as more reflective and critical friends note the attitude of ethnocentrism and chauvinism which pervades the educational system. Here the role of school text books is most important. I would argue therefore that being taught from an early age that Greece has always overcome its oppressors produces a collective self-confidence and an enviable resilience in the face of hardship.

By way of joining up the dots, I can conclude this interpretive section of my talk. I have tried to address two questions regarding Greek responses. In conclusion I maintain that the outstanding hospitality to strangers, the remarkable optimism and resilience over the past few

years derives from several sources of inspiration. It comes from an underlying world view - the matrix of religious precepts - which guide and steer the political trajectory at the practical level, and which in turn is reinforced by the content of the educational system.

4. STATE POWER AND THE WAY FORWARD

I have already referred to the lack of a responsible co-ordinated policy in the management of the refugee influx. At the European level it demonstrates the undermining of the international conventions which enshrine fundamental legal obligations regarding protection and asylum for refugees. The UNHCR Convention clearly outlines these responsibilities but it is a shocking fact that all of these principles have been violated in the treatment of refugees over the past few years. Serious and concerned persons are suggesting that these international obligations should be reviewed. In the face of all the political rhetoric and media distortions, however, we should remember that what is happening is above all a reception crisis.

At the grassroots level up to now the Greek response has been exceptional and noteworthy. People have reacted with generosity, in many cases surpassing their own meagre resources. Many people believe that the individual's aspirations are hampered by the state, which is seen as a source of problems and not as a provider of solutions. For long-term historical reasons, the Greek people do not identify their interests with the State (Just, 1989).

State power is resisted since the mechanisms of government are seen as exploitation by an indifferent if not hostile body. In turn the State perceives grass roots movements as a threat to state control. The spontaneous responses of the people witness an uprising of solidarity against the exercise of coercive action against vulnerable people and those who support them.

As time passed, the refugee encampments on the Aegean islands and those on the borders in the north became the material and visible evidence of the inability - as well as the reluctance - of the Greek state to take on responsibility for a human problem. The removal of people from informal community settlements, 'the Jungle' in Calais, Eidomeni, PIKPA in Lesbos, is the resulting assertion of state power.

Through the lacunae produced by the state it is nonetheless possible for ordinary people to participate in reception and settlement activities. I referred to two initiatives of the Greek people and many more exemplars exist. The self-help group in City Plaza hotel and the grassroots voluntary charitable activities in local authorities demonstrate possible alternatives and a positive way forward.

My final point is that People do not need to accede to the policies of the States which do not represent their vision of society.

NOTES

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/priorities/sites/beta-political/files/migration-state-play-17-march-final-presentation_en.pdf, last accessed 13 June 2016.

² Interestingly, the BBC has posted a note on terminology: ‘The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people who are seeking jobs and better lives, who governments are likely to rule are economic migrants’. Unfortunately this usage conflates the two very different categories resulting in serious policy confusion.

³ In this Greek cartoon, the rights are granted to western European countries while Greece takes on all the responsibilities.

⁴ For the full text of the Convention see:

<http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>, last accessed 13 June 2016.

1951 GENEVA CONVENTION ‘**A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion**

- is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country;
- or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.’ (Article 1 of the Geneva Convention)

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html>, last accessed 13 June 2016.

⁶ The Potsdam Conference in 1945 determined the terms of peace and involved the wartime allies GB, USA, Soviet Russia. Germany’s borders were shifted eastwards reducing it by 25 per cent from its 1937 extent, and annexed lands were to be redrawn. It involved forced expulsions of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary.

⁷ See Hirschon, 1983.

⁸ See Hirschon, 2010.

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