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The Reform of the Greek University

A desideratum in abeyance

Introduction

To be classified as reform educational change should, in the Greek context, bear certain fundamental characteristics. It should be state driven, ratified by law, all-embracing in terms of its implications for those concerned, likely to have aroused extensive public discourse, yet not necessarily full commitment or compliance. Almost all accounts of reform activities in the Greek system of education tend to focus on and to emphasize these characteristics. On the contrary, changes of perhaps equal significance that have however taken place gradually, tacitly and on other political actors' initiative usually fail to attract the attention of academic analysts. The overall result is that Greek education has been repeatedly described as an immobilist or a sisyphian system (Kazamias, 2001) in which "reform has never [actually] happened" (Dimaras, 1973).

There are of course a number of reasons which explain this phenomenon. The most frequently cited concerns the highly centralized character of the Greek education system and the nature of the Greek society and economy. To be valid and legitimate every educational decision and activity, even the least important among them, should *de jure* have the approval of state authorities. Linked with state supremacy and reinforcing it is the absence of a strong civil

society. A long history of wars for national integration and of political turmoil, that time and again had ended up in civil war and military dictatorships could hardly allow its development ; as a matter of fact it was only recently , in the mid 70s, that civil society building has started to bear some fruit. Socio-economic conditions have also contributed to state supremacy. In a mainly agrarian (up to mid 50s) society with a limited industrial infrastructure and with a middle class of merchants and retailers, a society which later on in the 50s and the 60s had witnessed a huge influx of population into the cities, the state had been traditionally seen as the locomotive of economic development and as the patron for those in need (Meynaud, 1965, Tsoukalas, 1977).

In this context the state inevitably assumed a protectionist and paternalistic role; policy making and policy implementation became the responsibility and the prerogative of the state. On their part other political actors and organizations had to address their demands to the state while they could always use its inaction as an alibi for their own misfortunes and as a good excuse for vociferous complaints or, alternatively, as a pretext for the development of a relationship with the state based on favoritism.

Thus, while state supremacy in education reform has rightly been the focal point of analysis it has also been misleading. By attracting attention to the deeds of the protagonist in the political scene it has frequently failed to fully appreciate the significance of other actors' reform activities. Some of these activities, gradual and inconspicuous as they may be, deserve the name of reform, not least for paving the way to the more celebrated ones.

Our study of the Greek university is therefore an attempt to take both kinds of reform into account. It starts with a brief analysis of the inherited

context, both in ideological and institutional terms ; of the Greek University tradition. It then goes on to describe and illuminate present day reform issues and discourse in the light of tradition and contemporary contextual changes. Its final section is an attempt to evaluate reform activities that have taken place overtly as well as covertly and to explore reform projects in the making.

The inherited context

The Greek University was established in 1837, a few years after the country's war of independence, at a time when nationalism swept across Europe. The new nation state was small embracing only a minority of the Greek population. Moreover the country was devastated by the war, its human resources were exhausted and its institutional infrastructure was embryonic. It is not therefore strange that the university's mission was from the very beginning primarily national. It should, first, contribute to the reconstruction of the national identity ; to transform cultural heritage into a new national ideology (Kitromelidis, 1983). Yet, should this ideology be based on the glorious heritage of ancient Greece, as the intellectuals of the Greek Enlightenment and those recapturing the past were advocating ? (Dimaras, 1977, Mavroskoufis, 2000) Or should it rely on Greek Orthodox traditions and the vision of Byzantine restoration ? (Moshonas, 1981) The choice was not easy and it actually took a long time before ideological and political tensions were finally defused.

Secondly, the University should also cater for the education of the Greeks that still lived under Ottoman occupation. As a matter of fact a great proportion of its early students came from and would work as graduates in

these areas. Hence from the very beginning the University was committed to the cause of national integration (Mattheou, 2001), a commitment that was more evident in the politicization –with the blessings of the State at the time (Dimaras, 1989)– of students ; a politicization that would gradually, over the years, bring students to the vanguard of struggles for national, political and social liberation. (Mattheou, op.cit.) The university's commitment to the national cause made it very popular and legitimized state surveillance over higher education (Mattheou, *ibid*).

Another equally urgent and important task was the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge. It was certainly a difficult task, given the lack of university tradition, the limited number of well qualified professors and the low academic standards of the student intake. As a matter of fact academic standards would be the constant concern of university authorities for decades to come (Mattheou, *ibid*). On the other hand, this unfavorable state of affairs contributed to the consolidation of a feeling of admiration for western science which was also reinforced by the fact that most professors had studied in Europe and had learnt to consider European academic standards as the yardstick of their own work. In a sense, the university was sharing this admiration with other intellectual, cultural and political circles in the Greek society; it is characteristic that during the early years of independence, political parties were named after their affiliation with the major powers of the time (the English, the French and the Russian parties).

As the Greek university could not rely on tradition and as the supreme political authority at the time of its establishment was in the hands of a Bavarian King and its advisers, its structure and organization could not but

follow the German prototype ; academic freedom and university autonomy, the "chair", the full professor, the school, the rector, monarch's involvement in the selection of university authorities were some of the institutions introduced. Very soon the system of university governance became hierarchical and autocratic ; the power of the chair rather than scientific preoccupations came to determine the curriculum. On the other hand excessive state involvement in the appointment and dismissal –usually on political grounds– of professors gradually led them, in search for protection, to develop a "clientelist political behaviour" *vis-à-vis* the state, which over the years became a permanent feature of the university's institutional culture.

For over a century the Greek university was giving the impression of stagnation. The state was preoccupied to fight the two Balkan wars of liberation (1912-1913) and the two world wars as well as to cope with the major influx of Greek refugees after the national calamity in Asia Minor (1922) and with the grave consequences of consecutive military coups, of dictatorships and mainly of a catastrophic civil war (1944-1949). Apart from the establishment of a second university in Thessaloniki (1926) no other major reform was enacted by the state ; a fact that have led some commentators to present the case of an immobilist university (Fasoulis, 2001).

Yet, gradually and grudgingly, following the vicissitudes of history, the Greek university was coming of age (Mattheou, op.cit.) Nation building and national integration priorities gave way to more socio-political considerations. The exigencies of the state bureaucracy and of the learned professions were not anymore the sole driving force of students' occupational interests ; physical science and engineering departments grew in importance. Although admiration

for European higher education institutions remained strong, scientific research had improved and parity of esteem and co-operation rather than dependence could better describe the new relationship with them. The university continued to enjoy an increasingly high prestige in the Greek society while rising public demand for higher education led to the introduction of "entrance examinations", which at the same time were expected to guarantee the academic quality of the student intake. Finally, although the state retained its firm grip over the university and the professorate –conservative after successive purges from autocratic regimes– had reinforced its position within it, assertive voices, coming mainly from student unions and the liberal parties of the opposition, were making their presence felt.

Reform and reform episodes after the war

By early 60s these voices had become strong. The twin priorities of economic development and democratization, already prevailing in Europe since the second world war, and the quest for restoring the constitutional order that had been *de facto* partially suspended after the civil war were both converging with the dissatisfaction of assertive forces within the university to develop a strong momentum for reform. A new government in 1964, of a liberal persuasion, declared its intention to reform university education in order to «educate not only the future enlightened scientist, but also the citizen of democracy..» ; to make the national economy «competitive and therefore viable» by developing the «noblest asset of the country [which] had always been man» and finally to satisfy public demand and the «young Greeks' aptitude for higher education» (Papandreou, 1965, p. 371). To that end a third university was

established and a fourth one was in the making. Yet, the law plan on higher education was never enacted. This reform episode came to an abrupt end after the military coup of 1967. The new autocratic regime went on with the expansion of higher education; new universities were established and KATE, a new institution of higher technological education was introduced –later (1983) to take the form of TEI, the equivalent of the English polytechnic. Yet the university was seething with anger and unrest. Suppression, humiliations and student purges finally led to a cathartic political explosion. After that the university could no longer remain the same.

From the restoration of democratic order in 1974 up to 1982 the university experienced an endless and acute agitation. Students, teaching and administrative staff vociferously demanded democratization, which in real terms meant not only the dismissal of all those within the academic community that had collaborated with the military junta, but also the introduction of a participatory and representative system of governance; this presupposed the abolishment of "chair" monopoly in decision making and of all other academic and administrative prerogatives it enjoyed. Consistent with the long standing tradition of state surveillance in higher education the government of the day (of a conservative- liberal persuasion) was called upon –by political parties of the opposition as well– to take action. Willy-nilly and with great hesitation the government finally turned to deficient legislation which satisfied neither the assertive forces nor the professorial establishment which actually refused to implement major provisions of the law.

The Gordian knot was finally cut in 1982 by the socialist government of PASOK, which came in power with the socialist reconstruction of the Greek

society in its agenda and with the active support of all those forces that had been politically marginalized since the end of the civil war. In a very short time a new comprehensive law (1268/82) was approved which in practice satisfied the majority of university trade union demands. All members of the academic community (including students and administrative staff) would participate in a democratically representative manner in the governance of the university and in the election of university authorities. To the obvious dissatisfaction (and reaction) of the academic establishment (Asprogerakas, 1984), the institution of the chair was abolished and all teaching staff acquired autonomy in research and teaching. Finally, power was devolved to departments and measures were taken to reduce bureaucracy in decision making and to reorganize undergraduate studies through the introduction of semester (instead of yearly) courses, of electives and of credits and through the abolition of graduation exams.

In retrospect, this major reform was revealing in many respects. First it had been the outcome of a certain historical conjecture. It expressed a certain ideological point of view and its dynamics emanated from the strong determination of the forces that had long been suppressed to gain the upper hand in the political scene (Kladis & Panousis, 1989). As soon as this main goal had been achieved the reform lost momentum (Mattheou, 2001). Second, it verified the hypothesis that change in the Greek university is a difficult and a very complicated matter. It was shown once more that reform was linked with the internal struggle to maintain power and to hold back assertive forces ; with the university's dependence on the state both in fiscal and in legal terms ; with the phenomenon of institutional inertia which, if left uncontrolled, allows

tradition to repel modernization ; with attitudes that detest social control and value the «self contained university». It also provided evidence that under certain circumstances informal relations between the state and certain influential groups within the university –as was the case with university trade unions’ preferential access to the government officials of the day– can act as a catalyst for reform. Finally, the content of the reform in question indicated that political discourse and policies concerning the Greek university were not in phase with relevant European trends. For reasons related to the peculiarities of modern Greek history the Greek university had still to cope with the resolution of internal problems that had been created over the years by a turbulent and reactionary political system. Not least among these problem solving priorities was the redistribution of political power within the university itself that would bring it in line with the major changes which were already taking place in the Greek society (Mattheou *ibid*).

Another ten years had to pass before a new liberal government tackled the issues that were already prevalent in European discourse on universities for over a decade. Modernization, efficiency, rationalization, flexibility, accountability were this time the featuring concepts of governmental policies. These policies were aiming to secure the country’s effectiveness in a «highly competitive Europe» and included managerial re-organization both in academic and administrative terms ; measures to enhance quality standards at the undergraduate level (the four year course would be divided in two distinct and consecutive two year courses, only part-time teaching staff would be allowed a second job outside the university etc) ; retrenchment of all student subsidies for those who would exceed by fifty percent their graduation time

while the free provision of books would be restricted only to those that could not afford buying them ; incentives for the co-operation of universities with the private sector. Finally post-graduate studies would be formally organized and university evaluation would be introduced on the grounds of accountability and of enhancing «creative competition» among universities (Introductory Report, 1992).

Reform received a mixed reception. Those who believed that the participatory system of governance had undermined meritocracy and academic quality and had made university authorities hostage to partisanship welcomed reform (cf. Tsatsos, 1992). The rest were either sceptic (cf. Mavrogordatos, 1992, Efthimiou, 1992) or opposed it on ideological and political grounds (cf. Markatos, 1992, Kremmidas, 1992). The cynics would say that many within the academic community had only started to enjoy the prerogatives the 1982 reform had bestowed upon them and they were not ready –even if they agreed with some of its provisions– to embark in a reform that was likely to jeopardize them.

Facing the challenge of late modernity

The change of government in 1993 led to the abolition of many of these reforms. Yet it could not defer speculation on the future of the Greek university and of the Greek society as a whole. The country's economic competitiveness in a globalized world, its accession to Economic and Monetary Union, its technological and organizational modernization did not simply mean greater effort and

adaptability on their part to a more challenging international environment. It also meant that traditionally «undiscussable» issues could thereafter be legitimately put on the reform agenda, without arousing militant reactions and without being *ab initio* excluded from consideration. For those who understand the confrontational character of Greek politics this was perhaps a major breakthrough in itself and certainly a significant development concerning the university reform prospects. In this sense the reform agenda has been enlarged and re-rated and discourse has become more revealing of the different points of view and priorities held by the various political actors. The case is well illustrated in university funding, one of the long standing issues in the reform agenda. All within the academic community and most outside it would agree that higher education is underfunded by the state. Fewer however within it are ready to accept that spending should be rationalized on a cost-effectiveness basis (Mattheou, 2001). On the other hand the establishment of private universities –a policy proposed by the right wing party ((Nea Dimokratia, 1997) and industry (SEV, 2001)– that could ease the burden of the state budget is not only faced with constitutional prohibition (Alamanis, 1989, Skouris, 1988) but also with ideological and political negation, not least on the part of the wider public, which over the years has learnt to appreciate education as a public service and state universities as the only undisputable centers of academic knowledge (OECD, 1997).

Relevant to its funding is the issue of the university's relations with the market. Many, especially among industrialists, complain that some departments – many among which have only recently been developed to satisfy the needs of prospective professors rather than of the labor market, as the cynics are saying–

bear no relevance to the needs of the economy. To their way of thinking , even the professionally oriented departments –at least some of them– do not equip their graduates with knowledge and skills really needed by the labor market (SEV, 2000, Analytis, 2001). The courses they offer, so they say, are too theoretical, encyclopedic and old fashioned (SEV, 2000), a situation that only competition with private universities could change. Political discourse apart, the real issue at stake here is the character of university education (Mattheou, op.cit). Should it remain a liberating enterprise in intellectual and political terms or should it be attached to the economy? Extensive graduate unemployment tends to press the university to adopt a more vocationally pragmatic orientation, although rhetoric insists that the university's role remains the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge on which after all real professional expertise can only be based (Xanthopoulos, 2001).

Inadequate funding, especially at a time when the university system is expanding –governmental policies in late 90s aspired to fully satisfy demand for higher education by 2000 (YPEPTH, 1997)– undue emphasis on theory, together with inefficient management attributed to the participatory system of governance in Greek universities have all raised the issue of quality and standards in higher education. Some, especially among the proponents of private university policies, are only too prompt to lament over the quality of university courses (Fountoukakos, 1997, Xynis, 1999). In this context evaluation becomes a touchstone for quality and a central issue among reform proposals. Yet, universities have thus far rejected evaluation on the grounds that it constitutes a potential violation of their academic autonomy and that it is yet

another form of state control inspired this time by relevant policies in the anglosaxon world (Xanthopoulos, op. cit.).

Thus, whenever faced with its new reform agenda, the Greek university remains sceptical, pondering over its proper course in the future. The Bologna Declaration has only been yet another opportunity to demonstrate its scepticism and ambivalence (Xanthopoulos, *ibid*, Babiniotis, 2001) The numerous "yes-but" views that had been put forward are undoubtedly indicative of the widely held feeling that something should be done with the Greek University, yet with great cautiousness and moderation.

And indeed, despite the general impression to the contrary, something is really happening in the Greek University. It does not come from the state in the form of a major reform. After all the government, having experienced strong public reaction against its educational policies only recently in late 90s, does not seem eager to open a new political front, especially when other issues –of a more urgent "national" character– are at stake. Thus, as in the past, state indecisiveness allows other forces and factors to fill the gap; tacitly and gradually they have been working behind the scenes to bring about the necessary changes. Reference has already been made to some of them. Changes in the country's political culture have promoted dialogue on burning questions and have opened up prospects for reform. Similarly, graduate unemployment is gradually making an impact on the curriculum which increasingly becomes more responsive to the needs of the labor market, although there are still numerous exceptions to this trend. Yet, in addition to these, other forces are also in action. European Union funding of programs and projects of a vocational-cum-enterprising character have succeeded in the *de facto* introduction of an entrepreneurial spirit in higher education, despite solemn declarations to the contrary

(Mattheou, 1998). Finally, European Union directives, reports of international organizations like OECD, official statements like the Bologna Declaration and information on relevant reform activities in other European countries are all working in the direction of taking the edge off confrontation to a reform that would align the Greek university with relevant major developments in Europe and that would, at the same time, respect tradition and the country's socio-economic and cultural peculiarities.

Obviously the future is not for man to foresee, but it is certainly for him to develop. Ultimately the Greek university's future depends on the readiness, the willingness and the capability of all interested parties to assume responsibility and act wisely.

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