

ON THE DECEMBER EVENTS

NICOS MOUZELIS
EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY LSE

e-mail: mouzelis@hol.gr
website: <http://www.mouzelis.gr>

Nicos Mouzelis. "On the December Events" in S. Economides and Vassilis Monastiriotis (eds), *The Return of Street Politics?: Essays on the December Riots in Greece*. London, The Hellenic Observatory LSE, 2009.

One cannot fully explain the massive mobilisation and the extent of violent/destructive acts during last December by mere reference to direct, obvious factors such as the fascist mentality of the policeman who killed Alexis Grigoropoulos, the brutality of some members of the security forces or the mismanagement of the crisis by the government. For a fuller explanation one will have to focus on a number of factors which are visible when one broadens the analytical framework; one will also have to show the way in which such factors are linked to each other and to the overall development of the crisis.

The political and socioeconomic dimension

Very briefly, starting from the political sphere, an important cause of the phenomena under investigation is the large-scale disorganisation of the police that the New Democracy government created (from 2004 onwards) by placing its own people in key administrative positions. In addition to this type of clientelism, all post-1974 Greek governments are responsible for tolerating the continuous violent practices of a small number of anti-state, anarchically oriented groups. They are also responsible for failing to reshape the 'asylon' institution - an institution which was meant to protect academic freedom by preventing the police from entering university premises. Instead, by the misuse of the relevant regulations, the asylon was used (and is still used) by a small number of activists cum hooligans who periodically disrupt lectures, loot/destroy university property and promote criminal activities such as drug dealing. Finally within the political sphere one should take into account the large scale corruption and the uninterrupted series of scandals which led to the delegitimation of political elites and parties.

As to the socio-economic dimension, the dominance of neo-liberal ideologies and policies from the 1980's until the present economic crisis created huge inequalities and marginalised an important section of the population. This situation is felt more acutely by the young who experience high rates of unemployment or have to accept badly paid jobs and exploitative work conditions.

The educational/psychocultural dimension

The underfunding of education and research, the lamentable state of higher education, the failure of educational reforms, the government's upgrading of non-state colleges, which devalues the standing of state universities, and the exorbitant amounts of money that parents have to spend if they want their children to undertake university studies - have all created an explosive state of resentment and indignation.

One should add that the new generation also faces severe problems in a late modern/postmodern context - a context within which traditional codes, or early modern certainties/ideologies, have weakened creating a void that young people are called to fill up. As Anthony Giddens has pointed out, today the young, who face a multitude of choices in all social spheres, not only have to choose within a given framework, they have to create that very framework. In other words they have to 'create their own biography'. Unavoidably, this situation creates anxieties and existential dilemmas which are much more acute than those that previous generations had to face.

Civil Society

Needless to say one could lengthen the 'list of causes'. The interesting problem however is to show how the factors mentioned above are linked to each other; in what ways do they constitute an integrated whole having its own logic and dynamic? I think that the civil society concept is very relevant here. It helps us to understand how the constellation of factors relates to the forms that social mobilisation took. More concretely, in societies with well functioning democratic institutions one always finds strong organisations (e.g., NGO's or authorities really independent from the government) which operate between the state and citizens. We find, in other terms, a strong civil society which follows neither a party nor a market logic. Such a 'third sector' creates alternative ways of linking the social with the political.

In Greece civil society is extremely weak. This is mainly due to the fact that the political system operates less as a party democracy and more as a 'partocratic democracy'. By partocracy I mean a system of rule within which the party logic penetrates all institutional spheres undermining their autonomy and their specific values. From the sphere of sports and the professions to that of art and the university, party considerations prevail. They weaken all non-party, non-clientelistic, civil society linkages between the citizen and the state. Within this context social discontent generates protests and mobilisations which have an unfocused, diffuse character. They do not produce strategies with positive outcomes for the social whole.

I think that the above helps us to better understand how the various causal factors that we have discussed are linked to the form that the protests have taken. For if the death of Alexis operated as a catalyst, the partocratic undermining of civil society explains the dead-end character of the ensuing mobilisations/riots. These led, on the one hand, to the familiar blind violence of anti-state groups, and on the other to more peaceful pupil/student demonstrations. In the former case we observe brainless, nihilistic practices which have been wrongly compared with May '68. (The May '68 events may not have changed the political system, but they have shaped to a great extent the social imagery of western societies). In the latter case, the relatively unformed, protean energies of a protesting youth were not channelled in a transformative manner. For neither the weak civil society nor the discredited parties could play such a constructive, channelling role.

To conclude, as far as future developments are concerned, one cannot but be pessimistic. The anarchist violence will not disappear - on the contrary it will probably take more extreme, terrorist forms. As to the more peaceful and fully justified protests of the younger generation, these will continue; but they will lead neither to political nor to cultural changes. As long as the combination of a weak civil society and a strong partocracy prevails, there is very little room for hope.