

Symbols of corruption and their role in the Greek economic crisis

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Abstract

The symbolic interaction perspective, one of the three major sociological perspectives, emphasizes the symbolic meaning that people attach to objects, activities and ideas while they construct their social reality. The economic crisis in Greece has been fuelled primarily through a construction of social reality that defined behavioral traits allowing corruption in terms of smartness, whereas the culture of partiality took precedence in daily activities and social interactions. Inflexible bureaucracies, a clientele relationship between governments and voters, an infinite perception of time, the prevalence of populism, the lack of intellectual elites, the culture of mistrust and the identification of “logical” with what is “desirable” have encouraged definitions of situations that lack pragmatism and reflection. However, according to the Thomas theorem, when situations are defined as real, the consequences become real. The economic and cultural crisis in Greece is a real consequence of a false social definition.

Key words: symbols, corruption, Greek, economy, culture

Introduction

Various commentators and analysts have assessed the crisis in Greece from a strictly economic perspective that ignores the vast cultural depth hidden under the financial surface. Although Greece adopted western values on paper, in reality it failed to integrate the western values of communal thinking, of group orientation, meritocracy,

public honesty, high level education, critical thinking and time perception as a finite resource. Thus the people are inclined towards lower levels of productivity, enhanced by an inflexible bureaucracy. In order to get things done, corruption offers the only way out. For through corruption the inflexible bureaucracy becomes flexible, families' narrowly defined personal benefits supersedes the public good,

governments adopt a clientele behavior towards voters, the culture of partiality is spreading through its legitimization, and despair for those left out of the pool of beneficiaries is deepening. However corrupt cultural traits are not being produced and reproduced in a vacuum but through symbols that encourage situations to be defined as real and block the rational thought process by identifying national success in terms of personal gains.

Corruption as seen through symbolic interactionsim

Professor Duynes defined corruption is an improbity or decay in the decision-making process in which a decision-maker consents to deviate or demands deviation from the criterion which should rule his or her decision-making, in exchange for a reward or for the promise or expectation of a reward, while these motives influencing his or her decision-making cannot be part of the justification of the decision (Shah, 2014).

Although the examples are abundant in the public and private sphere, studies on the causes of corruption have mainly emphasized economic factors without assessing the symbols employed in perpetuating it. In this paper one will assess the power of public and private corruption on shaping social interactions in Greece and how these interactions contributed to the demise of the country.

The symbolic interaction perspective, one of the three major sociological perspectives, emphasizes the symbolic meaning that people attach to objects, activities and ideas while they construct their social reality. Its origins are traced to Max Weber's theory that individuals behave on the basis of their interpretation of the meaning of the society they observe, a meaning shaped and formulated through human interaction (Bendix, 1946). In the 1920s symbolic interactionism gained its most forceful traction through the works of the American philosopher George Herbert Mead, who

evaluated society and social processes by addressing the subjective meaning that people assign to objects, events and behaviors. The importance of this approach lies in the implication that reality is socially defined on the basis of the individual interpretation of the meanings that objects, processes and people around us emit, and thus objective assessment is an impossibility. Human interpretation constructs reality and society, creates or destroys bonds, improves or deteriorates settings, sets forth social change or fuels stagnation or even regression. The symbolic interactionist approach has been culminated through the Thomas theorem, according to which, when people define situations as real, they will be real in their consequences (Merton, 1995). Interpretations of situations are subjective. Consequences are real.

These interpretations are called the "definition of the situation." A situation that can be objectively characterized as "corrupt", such as bribing officials to get something done, by some has been classified as cool, risk-free or risk-worthy, and a cause of admiration by others. So the symbolic meaning of bribery overrides the real risks of undermining the social fiber of society. Similarly, a practice like tax evasion that is objectively detrimental to society, may have been redefined by members of a group as smart, or innovative, or necessary to survival, thus overlooking the long term negative consequences on the group as a whole. The negative consequences of tax evasion however, will be real.

To complement the Thomas theorem, the theory of "the broken window syndrome" adds more light to the causes of social behavior. In 1969 a famous experiment was conducted by researchers of Stanford University (Kelling and Wilson, 1982). They left two identical cars on different areas. One in a poverty stricken neighborhood in the Bronx, and the other in a wealthy one in California. The former was stripped of tyres, mirrors, radios and all other useful

contents within a few hours of being left. The car abandoned in California remained intact for a week until the researchers smashed the window. Then the same type of vandalism that had occurred in the Bronx, repeated itself in California. Why would a smashed glass in a wealthy neighborhood trigger such a behavior? The answer is that people react to symbols of order and disorder. Any object and any behavior is symbolic of something greater. A broken window may symbolize disarray. Garbage on the street may symbolize collective indifference. Street crime may symbolize state lethargy. Domestic crime may symbolize a break down in family. Drop out students may symbolize failing schools or failing parents. The list is endless, and the power of symbols is immense. The more corrupt practices one observes around, the more inclined he is to get involved as well. The more honesty one observes, the more inclined he is to behave accordingly.

Corruption in Greek History

Corruption is not an accidental phenomenon, but a long term one that is related to well rooted mentalities of the Greek society. And because it is so well rooted it has led many Greeks to feel despair (Ramfos, 2013).

Corruption in the Greek society can be traced to ancient times. Solon, an honorable law maker, adopted in the 5th century 'seisachtheia' that eradicated all debts, mainly carried by slaves. According to Aristotle, he had informed his friends before the enactment of the law, who hurried to take large loans and enriching themselves after the debt forgiveness. Themistocles also believed that it is pointless to be a leader if you cannot enrich your friends, whereas Agesilaus, Sparta's King, shared the same opinion. Finally Demosthenes had been imprisoned and exiled twice for bribery (Corruption..., 2008). Later, during the Byzantine Empire era, a state mechanism was created that enhanced corrupting tactics. During the reign of Justinian the

Great, one was able to buy positions and titles for cash, a venue that enabled the rich to enhance their advantages (Atwater, 1927). However the corruptive practices that had the greatest influence on modern Greeks were those practiced on a wide scale during the 368-years long Ottoman occupation.

Corruptive practices in the Ottoman Empire centered along the dimensions of favoritism and bribery. It was common to see incompetent people rise to the top. Lee discusses 17 sultans after Suleyman (from 1566 to 1789) who were, with few exceptions, incompetent, inexperienced, and some even mentally defective (Lee, 1984). During the Ottoman occupation of Greece, the Greek society was protected and at the same time abused. Despite certain liberties, the Greeks were heavily taxed and subjugated to the administrative asphyxiating labyrinths of the Empire. Thus they were called "rayahs", a term denoting an underprivileged, tax-ridden and socially inferior population (Dakin, 1973). During the Ottoman occupation, the non-Muslim populations were forced to pay for having their different religion accepted, a particular tax called 'cizye' or 'harac' (Pontosworld.com). This tax did not vary greatly among Greek families, whereas special accommodations had been made for households headed by a widow, the disabled and the priests. The tax was heavy for the majority of the households and the word 'harac' has remained in the Greek language as denoting an unbearable economic and psychological burden. The Ottomans governed through a combination of neglect and stifling bureaucracy, which encouraged a system of institutionalized bribes. The sultan milked his provincial governors, who in turn squeezed the citizenry. Taxes were just another negotiable kickback (Cambanis, 2014). Tax resistance became a form of patriotic duty and schemes to avoid paying the dues were abundant.

Learning the symbols of corruption and defining realities

This Ottoman legacy is still alive, nearly two centuries after the first parts of Greece won independence. The Greek elites mirror the predatory habits of the sultanate, while the citizens act as if evading taxes is a symbol of heroism and revolt against the occupier. The symbols have acquired their meaning, situations have been defined as real, and the dire consequences became real.

During the Ottoman occupation Greeks were exposed to and learned the Turkish bazaar ethic of life, in which earning as much money as possible by cheating customers and bragging about it later in public, became the typical way of life for tradesmen and business people. In modern Greece a popular proverb dictates this mode of business: "Grab to eat, and steal to possess!" This street-smarts mentality has been symbolically perceived as "success" and has governed business ethics and political involvement to a great extent (Retsos, 2011). During elections, voters decide on the basis of who is going to offer the most benefits to the particular voter and not to society in general. Retsos mentions that although this is common in every election around the globe, in Greece it is the "only thing" that matters. This culture of "personal benefit" and "street smarts" spreads like virus as people like to go to the coffee shop and brag about the benefits they expect from their vote with little concern as to who pays for these benefits. The main problem is the collision between partiality and public interest. The old Greek culture transferred privileges on the basis of blood relatives, common native land and friendships. Thus the political system created clients and not voters (Eviaportal, 2014). The situation has been defined as "satisfying the clients" instead of "satisfying the public interest". Accordingly, the consequences are real. Transparency International published in its 2014 report, that Greece has the most corrupt public sector in the European Union whereas its

overall corruption index places the country in the 80th position, between Senegal and Swaziland (Transparency International, 2014).

To be more precise during the period 1975-2005, 3,430 laws were submitted to the parliament, 17,500 regulations were adopted, 20,850 presidential decrees and 111,905 ministerial decisions were issued (To Vima, 2012). In the same article it is stated that the cost of the combined bureaucracy and corruption reaches 14 billion euros a year. Moreover, even today there are in reality 78 ministerial positions when one co assesses the general and special secretaries, despite the fact that they have been merged in 15 ministries. Concurrently the ministers have appointed more than 12,000 advisors.

What is the symbolism of such a heavy law-enactment and excessive hiring? The heavy law-enactment symbolizes the overly protective attitude of the government towards its voters, which perpetuates the clientele mentality. Laws that are called photographic as they have been designed to accommodate special groups only remind voters of the benefits they may accrue if they vote for the particular party. The newspaper *SosHalkidiki* (2014) reports that the Canadian company Eldorado Gold has built a factory in Halkidiki violating the regulations for such a construction prescribing that the building face a road. Very soon a governmental regulation was passed that annulled the condition of facing the road for certain factories. Furthermore, the general inspector of Public Management, Leandros Rakintzis, delivered a report to the Parliament concerning 14 photographic directives that included termination of open criminal cases, immunity to bank managers from criminal charges, as well as to those public officials who will administer the transfer of public property to private entities, and the legalization of taverns, illegally constructed in protected areas (Ioannou, 2014).

As for the excessive hiring of advisors, it symbolizes the reward system that compensates local elites for their efforts to mobilize popular support for the candidate. Upon examining the design of the general secretariat of the government, one sees that there are a private secretary, a legal office, office of good legislation, office of international and community affairs, office of coordination and institutional topics, office of administrative and economic support, committee of education and civilization, library committee, and a human rights committee. In the same general secretariat one sees the independent office of the legal advisor to the state, central law making committee, and a central coding committee. If the appropriate ministries exist for all the aforementioned services, one wonders why such a large number of offices and committees also coexist. Similar offices and committees are found in the offices of ministers, deputy ministers, and general secretaries who are surrounded by experts, advisors, call-makers, receptionists etc. The purpose of this redundancy is to give the government the power to control public administration and to offer employment protection to public servants. Once again the culture of favoritism has defeated the culture of efficiency, impartiality and meritocracy. The massive employment of unproductive officials has become a powerful symbol of security, to which thousands of voters adhere to, without assessing the cost to society or the inevitable bill that will come due (Kiaos, 2013).

Plato and the culture of partiality

Plato had discussed the dangers of partiality and self interest in his Republic. He wrote that although a democratic government holds out the promise of equality for all of its citizens, it usually delivers only the anarchy of an unruly mob, each of whose members is interested only in the pursuit of private interests. The parallel case of a democratic person is someone who is utterly controlled

by desires, acknowledging no bounds of taste or virtue in the perpetual effort to achieve the momentary satisfaction that pleasure provides (Kemmerling, 2011). Thus this unruliness has kept perpetuating a state of inner competitiveness, not for the common good but for the destruction of the other.

This selfish competitiveness is the result of the Greek stagnation to the stage of emotion whereas western countries have advanced to the stage of intellect. In Greece ideology has approximated the desirable with the logical. Ideologies are not perceived as distinct patterns of thought but have deteriorated to symbols of indisputable logic. This deterioration on the one hand elevates the person to the symbolic status of superiority and righteousness whereas the person of opposing ideology, and symbolically of the 'wrong' logic, has been subjected to a status of inferior or enemy mentality. Thus partiality prevails. The imbalance between reason and sentiment, culture, behavior and mentality, leads to a weakening of judgment, which in turn fuels a violent emotional reaction. The perception of the political life is limited to what appears to be a fight for domination. The result is that people cannot form a satisfactory institutional state. Where the institutions are weak, the state suffers. Greece, as a political entity is a dysfunctional state because it is being hemorrhaged by the political parties (Ramfos, 2014).

Along the same lines of symbolic interaction, populism has been erected as another obstacle to the potential development of the country. Populism emits symbols that can be both judgmental and dismissive, contrasting good with bad in a simplistic way. Oversimplifications are used systematically to generalize (Fragoudaki, 2014). Populism appeals to emotion and not to logic, and emotion is a stage where the Greek society stagnated upon, having failed to transcend to the stage of intellect. Pragmatism thus is not attainable, and public matters are discussed under the

prism of morality and righteousness and not through a realistic approach. Populism through its symbols replaces political judgment with a moral accusation that cultivates homeland mongering. Thus populism imprisons the Greek society in an anti-European and nationalistic trap that has penetrated all parties. The socially defined reality becomes once again one of self-righteousness and having been wronged by history, whereas this attitude leads to unsuccessful handling of important issues. Pragmatism once again has been replaced by desire.

Populism, time and bureaucracy

Another consequence of populism is its effect on the perception of time (Ramfos, 2012). Populism freezes time as the politician delivers a promise that although unattainable, having appealed to the sentiment, equates desire with reality, making the citizen happy through a satisfaction in the present time, relieving him from any concerns about the future. The unattainable promise symbolizes reality and the situation is defined as possible instead of impossible. The promise is always that of protected employment and the freezing of time is reflected through an inflexible bureaucracy, staffed by hundreds of thousands employees, that serve their own survival instead of serving the citizen. The New York Times reported on the story of Despina Antypa (2014) who after the economic collapse created her own small business in Greece that would sell pastry online. The bureaucracy however demanded that she pay in advance 50% of the tax for the projected profits of the first two years. These taxes are collected even if the business suffers a loss. Although she needed only 20 square meters for her business, the governmental inspectors told her she needed at least 150. She would be obliged to have a toilet for customers although there would be no customers onsite. The fire department wanted a security exit on the same spot that the

municipality demanded a wall. Eventually she was forced to close the business down and emigrate. She laments that the Greek society was raised with the most powerful drug of all: That of security of belonging to a bureaucracy. Bureaucrats own control of capital and labor. The definition of reality is that the bureaucracy is the most powerful employer although it retards growth. Thus the consequent crash is dire with real consequences.

Culture of mistrust

The intense competition for personal gain at the expense of public good, having been defined as 'moral' and 'smart' gave birth to an economy of desire. Public opinion, having been shaped by the economy of desire, has led to a normlessness that blurs the lines between real and non-real. The elites have fully participated in this adaptation having separated themselves from intellectualism, as those in the upper strata of intellectualism mostly emigrated to escape the intense fruitless and exhibitionist competitiveness of the Greek society. The country immediately after the civil war, experienced the first massive emigration of intellectuals, mostly leftists, who emigrated to France to avoid persecution. A genuine despise for intellectualism emerged as the latter tried to separate passionate discourse from reasoned analysis, insignificant details from substance, condemnation from reflection. A collective conscience emerged, unconstrained through the absence of an intellectual elite, that was driven by a disconnectivity from reality and blinded by desires exhibited in a vulgar form by the economic elites. This disconnectivity contributed to a rising level of normlessness that under the crisis took the form of intense suspicion of the other, of the need to cling on to one's perceived innocence by rejecting and blaming others for the catastrophe, and by allowing people to believe whatever they want since credibility has been diminished. Thus a vast number of conspiracies emerged to explain the

catastrophe in terms of foreign interests, international jealousy of the country and global banking schemes to capitalize on the 'vast wealth' of the country (Fotiadi, 2014). Fotiadi cites a University of Macedonia research that showed that 75,25% of the Greeks believe that the crisis was pre-designed by non-institutional centers, 68,66% believe that the cure for cancer exists but is hidden, and 58% believe that the 9/11 attacks had been planned by the US government in order to give the superpower the excuse to impose its foreign policy. Such intense mutual suspicion encourages irrational thought that grasps on the right symbols to masquerade itself as rational, moral and superior.

Conclusion

Corruption in Greece has been one of the prime causes of the financial collapse. However corruption does not appear in a vacuum, but is perpetuated through a number of symbols that convince the citizens into adopting unquestionably corruptive practices for personal gain at the expense of public good. Customs and attitudes passed down from past history, have enabled the glorification of corruption instead its vilification. The partiality that is cultivated in the Greek culture accentuates the problem whereas the strong cultural trait of equating time as an infinite resource has the real consequence of tolerating a huge bureaucracy that is retarding growth in order to ensure its own survival and control. Finally the collective culture of mistrust has encouraged and legitimized irrational thought that prevents the adoption of realistic measures.

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