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Analysis Brief

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Rioting in Athens A Brief Analysis

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Rioting in Athens became headlines around the world as the “holy babies” of the ancient cradle of democracy came to signal a long awaited death of a societal paradigm. To become clearer there are three types of problems behind the phenomenon of youth rioting in Greece: structural, strategic and tactical. The first, which I call it structural, has to do with the system of values, moral codes, social norms that glue together the state, civil and social institutions, create certain collective expectations and set generally approved limitations in political and social action.

In Greece, immediately after the Civil War in 1949 there were three tenets in perceiving a system of collective values. The first was that of the state apparatus, founded on anti-communism, oppression and the conservative ideology of battling for homeland-religion-family. The second one was that of liberal modernisation founded on democratic rights, egalitarianism and social justice and the third was that of left wing, communist ideology preaching resistance, though never violent, to the anticommunist state-apparatus. In that period many people, especially of the left but not only, sacrificed their lives, careers and wealth for promoting the values of any of the three tenets.

The dictatorship of 1967-1974 shattered all sets of collective values by defaming the anti-communist tenet, derailing the liberal one and smashing under immense brutality the left wing ‘printemps culturel’. What remained was an ailing body politique, who, unable to build new sets of collective values, tried to root itself in various pseudo-values from a rather obscure European destiny to different forms of populism, handicapped modernisation, chauvinism and religious fanaticism. What is more the only set of values that really filled the vacuum was a vulgar, thuggish individualism.

The state became a field of top-to-bottom looting and the Greek society has been gradually but steadily lacking any sense of collective responsibility, volunteering or sacrifice. Despite the progress in many aspects of the Greek state and society, the absence of any collective values is becoming all the more apparent. There is no limitation in resisting the state as far as you are not in a position to benefit from state property, budget, jobs etc. The moment you are able to do so, your only aim is to defend your privileged position against all others and there is no limit, law, norm, moral code or collective values to hinder this attitude. This is a lesson everyone ought to learn, no matter if he/she is a Minister, an MP, a businessperson, a Bishop, a public servant or a blue collar worker.

Up until the mid-1990s state elites had managed to distribute state spoils in a manner that maintained a system of clientelism and satisfied the individualistic values of large segments of the society. State ‘spoils’ can take many forms: one can get a job in the state, but also in the public sector, irrespectively of qualifications, can park illegally without paying his/her tickets, can build illegally without being afraid of any severe penalties, can evade tax without fearing of ruining his/her business, if caught. The more powerful can of course grab the biggest share of the ‘spoils’.

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From mid-1990s onwards social and economic transformation relevant to Greece's integration into the euro zone and the global economy narrowed the room for such manoeuvring. State elites could not any longer use the state 'spoils' in that manner. Speculatory economy, based on either an inflated stock and real estate market or selling-off of lucrative state assets made certain elites immensely richer. In contrast, patterns of patron-client relationship and heavy involvement of the state in the economy were now difficult to be sustained and thus could not offer shelter to a heavily indebted middle class. Large segments of the society are now feeling permanently and hopelessly excluded of the state 'spoils' and the younger generation is responding violently.

The alternating state elites thought they should advance techniques or tools of calming down social unrest, in circumstances that state 'spoils' sharing was not enough to integrate large middle class urban strata in their strategies. One of the main tools was to preserve certain pockets of complete unlawfulness at the very centre of Athens (the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, fifteen minutes walk from the Parliament). The complete absence of state there is indicated not only by the presence and domination of anarchist or pseudo-anarchist groups but also of unhindered drug dealers and drug trafficking. Whenever state elites feel that large social strata are becoming exceedingly restive they employ a 'strategy of tension' by allowing the lawlessness of Exarcheia to 'invade' the every-day life of the middle class centre of Athens for a couple of hours or more. Such a temporary 'invasion' can terrorise the middle class and, most importantly, uphold the useful role of the state coercion in restoring law and order in a law-disrespecting society. The state coercive and ideological mechanisms have used this 'strategy of tension' in various circumstances in the past two decades with successful results.

The Exarcheia factor has never, until today, connected itself with the large hopelessly alienated strata of the Greek society. What the Greek state elites did not realise was that the absence of any real collective values and the triumph of a thuggish individualism could perfectly someday mend fences with the state-preserved lawlessness of Exarcheia creating an explosive mixture. This is what happened, when the youth of 15-16 years old became disillusioned and depressed about their future and, what is more, they felt, through the murder of a 15-year-old boy by the police, the coercive brutality of a state that can no longer accommodate them, as it has been to a great extent and in various forms the case with their parents. Violence was the only language available, more so since rampant individualism has rendered all other political and ideological vocabularies useless. The reaction is becoming politically and ideologically blind and destructive, because there is no alternative set of collective values to turn to. The government let the Exarcheia lawlessness to enter the centre of Athens, expecting that the 'strategy of tension' could work again. This was a major tactical mistake that unleashed the power of hopelessness and the blind violence burning Athens and other Greek cities for days. The state could easily manage the few hundreds of its Exarcheia lawless fish-bowl but lost control of the new explosive mixture.

Usually Flash Points of our Study Group present some views about the future. Unfortunately there is no sign that this rebellion would go beyond individualism. It is striking that one of the answers uttered was to give voting rights for the sixteen-years olds, in other words, one more individual leverage for pressing into the state 'spoils'. After all, youth of 15-16 years old cannot articulate new set of collective values. The youth rebellion is a kind of convulsion of a society that, including the youth, realises the urgency of building new collective values no matter supportive or resistant to the state, but, alas, is not wishing to abandon its individualistic norms.