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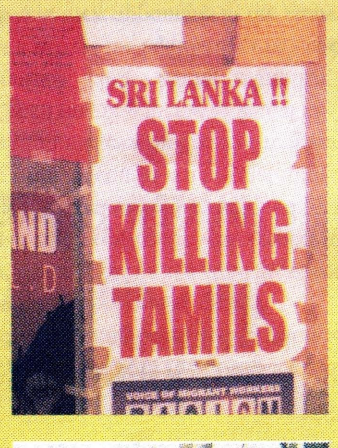


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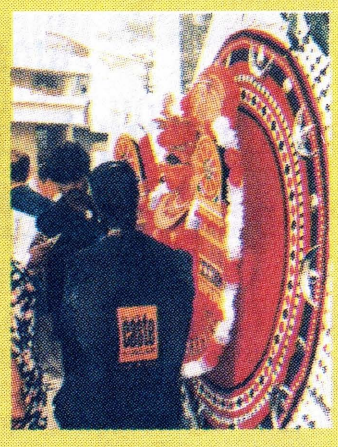
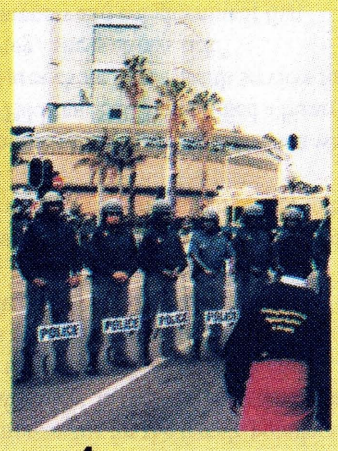




# WHY IS THERE NO EXTREME

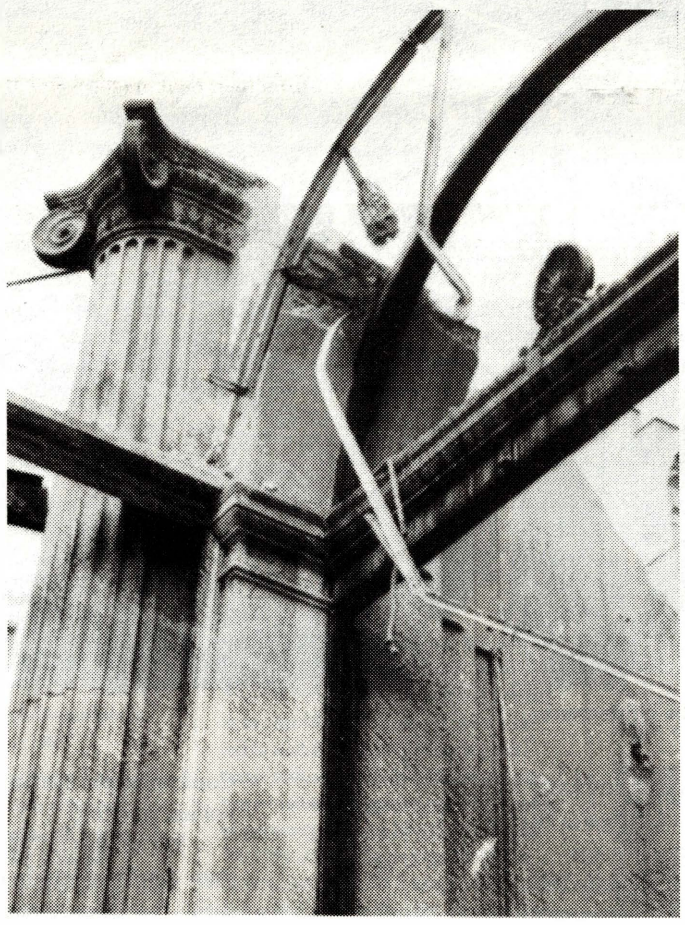
Vassilis Lambropoulos is the C. P. Cavafy Professor of Modern Greek in the Dept. of Classical Studies and the Program in Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan. His publications include the books *Literature as National Institution* (1988) and *The Rise of Eurocentrism* (1993) and a guest-edited issue on "Ethical Politics" (1996). He is currently working on a genealogy of the idea of the tragic.

VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS

The last few years have witnessed the dramatic rise of extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe. Even though these political formations differ in organization, ideology and goals, it is generally agreed that they span the map of the continent and together represent a significant new development that should give pause for thought, and often alarm. From Austria to France and from Italy to Norway, the extreme right has scored impressive, and often surprising, electoral victories in at least 11 European countries during the turn of this century.

Scholars and journalists, politicians and analysts have offered detailed explanations of this phenomenon. In order to trace its origins and issue early warnings, they have pointed to geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions such as the influx of non-European refugees and immigrants, unemployment, globalization, the postmodern ideological vacuum, the new inequality, crime rates, the bankruptcy of the welfare state and many others. There is no doubt that all these factors have influenced heavily the political map and voting patterns.

For reasons of comparison, it may be equally useful to look at the fascinating exception of Greece, where the extreme right does not even have a party. All the factors that have been identified in other European countries can be easily found in Greece too, some in greater proportion, such as immigration or poverty. Furthermore, the Greek far right makes its positions known daily through its newspapers, TV and radio stations, magazines, publishing houses and political gatherings. Why, then, don't we encounter voting trends that have evolved in other small countries such as Holland and Denmark, or parties like Slovakia's HZDS and Belgium's Vlaams Blok? This is yet another of those puzzles that make the study of modern Greece so consistently interesting and challenging.



Commentators from various fields and approaches have explored several reasons for the Greek exception. A historical account points to the 1967-74 military dictatorship whose memory is still too fresh to allow for far-right appeal. An institutional account argues that the Orthodox Church offers an adequate outlet, away from the political arena, for extreme conservative beliefs. A political account suggests that all Greek parties allow room for a nationalist/populist fringe and therefore there is no need for a separate extreme party. An ideological account proposes that the convergence of the traditional Right and Left toward the post-communist center has not had the same diluting, compromising effect as elsewhere, and consequently continues to make sharp political distinctions and debates possible. A sociological approach cites the special formation of the middle class, while a geographical one points to the country's border position among several civilizations which makes it more aware of cultural difference.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, we might add some considerations from the standpoint of cultural studies and intellectual history. For example, the remarkable post-colonial character of modern Greece needs to be taken into account. It is often forgotten that the imperial and colonial legacy of Greece is as rich as that of any other country since it includes Roman, Venetian, Italian, French, English and of course Ottoman traditions. When we remember that Macedonia remained under Ottoman rule until the 1910s, the Dodecanese under Italian rule until the 1940s and Cyprus under British rule until the 1960s, we realize that imperial domination is still a living memory in large parts of Greece as well as for Greeks elsewhere.

This legacy is amply represented in literature, beginning with the writer whose poetry is heard in the national anthem. The founding father of modern Greek literature was Conte Dionisio Salamon (1798-1857), a Greek Orthodox poet of Jewish descent from his father's side who possessed a Venetian aristocratic title, was born a French subject in the Ionian island of Zakynthos, spent most of his homosocial life as the British subject of a protectorate, was a native speaker of Italian, which he used in most of his oral and written communications, and during the middle period of his career changed his name to the more Greek "Solomos" and composed works that remain mostly unfinished in the Greek language, which he struggled to master. Solomos's masterpiece is the unfinished poem *The Free Besieged* (1829-49), whose three surviving drafts of sublime Romantic vision glorify the famous siege of Missolonghi by the Turks and the Egyptians (1825-26). The poet turns the Greek resistance into a manifestation of the cosmic struggle between freedom and necessity, capturing the dialectic of justice in the work's title. Thus the national poet who was half non-Greek, never set foot in Greece and used Greek with frustrating difficulty founded the modern nation on freedom and justice, not blood and soil.

In general, the idea of resistance to colonialism and all forms of oppression and exploitation has been such an integral part of Greek identity since the eighteenth century that no large-scale political mobilization of the far right has been possible. Even extreme feelings of nationalism are tempered by deep-seated suspicions against the political ambitions of the military. From the 1821-29 War of Liberation to the 1940-41 defiance of the Italian and German invasions, the idea of resistance (rather than notions of conquest or rule) has prevailed in national life and political discourse. It is not an accident that, at least since the 1950s, Greece has hosted an endless stream of leaders of anti-colonial and independence movements from all over the world. Every underdog in the international scene knows that some of its best friends are Greek!

The same sympathies are reflected in the widespread familiarity with ancient texts: newspaper articles discuss world politics in terms of Thucydides's originary critique of empire, high school students read Demosthenes's fiery speeches against Macedonian expansionism and there are always performances of the *Antigone* and *Lysistrata* traveling from towns to neighboring amphitheaters.

The idea of resistance as a political and moral principle helps explain in part the intense politicization of Greek life. Greek and non-Greek visitors are often astonished by the number of dailies, demonstrations and political parties that the country proudly exhibits. What drives this noisy and contentious activity is a firm belief in liberty—not the pursuit of happiness by bourgeois individualism but the collective practice of self-determination. Even stereotypes from *Zorba the Greek* to *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and from *Never on Sunday* to everyone's *Big Fat Greek Wedding* present Greeks everywhere as fiercely independent; even when they fall prey to insolence and become self-defeating, they cannot tolerate far-right ideals of discipline, force and purity.

Furthermore, self-determination is the ancient ideal that modern Greeks have embraced more passionately than any other. Whether democratic or revolutionary, republican or patriotic, the Greek quest for self-governance constantly draws on myth and quotes ancient authors. From the revolutionary proclamations of Rhigas Pheraios in the 1790s to the autonomist pamphlets of Cornelius Castoriadis in the 1960s, Greeks have engaged in a rich dialogue with the ancients about the meaning of politics, civic life and the common good, a dialogue that has never veered in the direction of tyranny. Like the ancient enthusiasms, modern ones too can be fraught with fanaticism, factionalism and localism. In addition, medieval concepts of power and faith have not lost entirely their appeal. In the end, though, a sense of balance prevails that gives passions their due without allowing them to take over.

This helps us take our observations to the next level: not only has there been no recent rise of the extreme right, but throughout modern history Greeks never gave to this trend mass allegiance or cultural credibility. In Greece there has never been a fascist/racist party or move-

# RIGHT IN GREECE?

**Even stereotypes from *Zorba the Greek to Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and from *Never on Sunday* to everyone's *Big Fat Greek Wedding* present Greeks everywhere as fiercely independent....**

ment of any significant size and impact. Except for small groups with a few hundreds of supporters, these movements never attracted any segment of the population, not even during the turbulent first half of the twentieth century. Neither were these groups ever led by charismatic personalities (such as Mussolini, Franco, Mosley, Le Pen, Heider, Blocher or Fortuyn) with strong leadership qualities.

Of equal importance is the total absence of support for extreme right-wing positions among artists, writers, intellectuals, scholars and academics. Greek intelligentsia has not lacked fanatics of several persuasions (communist, Trotskyite, anarchist, Christian, Byzantine, classical, etc.), but not the far right. Over the last two centuries, among the lines of philosophers, authors, journalists, teachers, directors or musicians, there has been no one, not a single figure of distinction, who advocated consistently far-right positions—no Gentile, Pound, Benn, Lewis or Brassilach. This is an astonishing record by any standard. In fact, Greeks have considered a thoroughly right-wing position incompatible with cultural engagement, artistic creativity and free inquiry.

In this context, it is worth remembering that Greek thought never developed the kind of counter-revolutionary theory associated with Burke, de Maistre, Cortés and Maurras (or Schmitt). Greeks did not oppose the break with tradition or associate revolution with sin because revolt actualized their concrete emergence into modernity, and the only king they remembered was the Ottoman sultan. Religious zeal may occasionally fill public squares or hark back to the Byzantine court but it never developed a philosophical assessment of modernity or esteem for monarchy.

Greek culture has always been an uncompromising practice of critique that serves the supreme ideal of justice. This is especially evident in the literary tradition. In discussing Nikos Kazantzakis, C. P. Cavafy, George Seferis or Yannis Ritsos, critics have often overemphasized historical and intertextual elements, important as they undoubtedly are, at the expense of more philosophical ones, such as the quest for adequate, humane, viable notions of justice. Perhaps this dimension can be explored more easily in recent books by living authors, such as the anthology *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding*, edited by Karen Van Dyck; the poetry collections *Adieu* by Haris Vlavianos and *Foreign Territory* by Dino Siotis; the short story collection *Deep Blue Almost Black* by Thanassis Valtinos; and the novels *The History of a Vendetta* by Yorgi Yatromanolakis, *The Cicadas* by Vangelis Raptopoulos, *I Shall Sign as Loui* by Rhea Galanaki and *May Your Name be Blessed* by Sotiris Dimitriou. The same postcolonial dialectic between cultures, traditions, faiths and languages, together with the pursuit of memory and justice, leave their mark on the work of every major author in both poetry and fiction.

Critique is also a practice of agonism, which is another reason why Greek communication presupposes the foundations of open exchange and debate among equals. Every form of public expression (together with many non-public ones) participates in an agonistic situation where competition is of paramount importance. Sometimes its ideals are closer to brigandism than excellence, and its means closer to antagonism than contest. Yet this situation confirms the independence of the collectivity, celebrates its uniqueness and safeguards against the imposition of outside regulations. At the same time, it guarantees that, thanks to the pursuit of individual distinction, citizens' rights will not be violated in the name of collective interest, order or glory.

**In the final analysis, Greeks are as prone to excess and vanity, blinded by interest and ignorance or influenced by populism and xenophobia as any human community.... Since they invented hubris, they have known its perils from their own practice.**

In the final analysis, Greeks are as prone to excess and vanity, blinded by interest and ignorance or influenced by populism and xenophobia as any human community. Their strident rhetoric and overzealous reactions can invite justified domestic and international criticism. Since they invented hubris, they have known its perils from their own practice. Still, they remain stubbornly unruly and unsubmissive, with a serious commitment to public engagement and aversion to authoritarianism, militarism and racism. It is not an innate sense of reason or a noble conduct of character that protects them from self-destruction. It is rather their interest in keeping extremes available though balanced, keeping excess alive under the watch of measure, keeping conflict open within the arbitration of justice. Driven by an anti-consensualism that can lead to enlightened dissent as much as civil division, Greeks openly acknowledge the polemic character of politics. Even the nationalists who speak the language of exceptionalism believe in a destiny that is more democratic than autocratic, more agonistic than despotic, more pluralistic than absolutist, more syncretic than organic. In these uncertain, insecure times, the Hydra of the extreme right may raise its heads any time as it has done recently in so many European counties. So long as Greeks remain focused on consciously instituting their society and openly debating its strengths and weaknesses, it is not very likely that the monster will soon establish a stronghold in their midst. ■

*The author gladly acknowledges the camaraderie of Andreas Kalyvas, his colleague in political science at Michigan.*