



Possible Education System Reform Measures for Restoring the Socio-Political Equilibrium in Greek Society after the Crisis (2008)

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ABSTRACT

The article centres on the socio-political dilemma that Greece has been experiencing due to the 2008 economic crisis and the subsequent economic reforms. These reforms, despite being widely unpopular, have had an impact on all aspects of life, including education and the education system. Although educationists and educators as such cannot do much in terms of restoring the economic and socio-political equilibrium in the country, they are able to raise a prophetic voice about what should be done. As one such voice, this article discusses, based on analysis of the situation in Greece through the lens of the social space and ethical / moral action theory, how economic and socio-political equilibrium could be restored in Greece (and in other countries similarly afflicted by emerging economic reforms). Steps such as the following are suggested and discussed: the concept of education to be revisited; a new approach to education in the form of schooling to be considered; education policy to be revised; the education system to be restructured; the curriculum to be reshaped and concrete steps to be taken to put all of the theory outlined in this article into practice.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Although this article is about the restoration of social equilibrium in a single European country, Greece, the solution that is mooted for the problem could be universally applicable in all societies where socio-political imbalances prevail due to a variety of causes. Socio-political and economic instability and loss of equilibrium manifest in many forms as the result of a plethora of factors and tend to have a deleterious effect on education in a country, including its education system, as will be outlined in the problem statement below. It could be argued that part of the solution lies in the reformation of education, particularly in the restructuring of the education system.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

2.1 The Current Cultural-historical and Economic Situation in Greece

The period between 2008 and 2018 has put at the forefront a number of economic, cultural-historical and political conditions in Greece that have been conducive to the rise of a set of previously unfamiliar educational conditions. The changes in society were sparked by an economic crisis following a financial settlement based on terms prescribed by foreign institutions, thereby creating a set of "new" socio-political conditions for the country. Germany, in particular, as a dominant power in the European Union, has been blamed for the fact that as a result of the Union's monitoring and surveillance, the Greek state does not anymore enjoy the freedom to formulate its own policies [1]. To add insult to injury, Greeks suspect their own politicians of having contributed to the economic crisis [2].

As a result of the economic settlement, Greece has been subjected to unprecedented economic degradation. Vradis and Dalakoglou [3], Liargovas, [4], Lynn [5], Manopoulos [6] and Mazower [7] provide vivid descriptions of the economic, cultural and political dimensions of the crisis by comparing the situation prior to the economic crisis with that after the advent of the crisis. They emphasize embarrassment, uncertainty and insecurity as results of the crisis. Concomitant with the economic degradation, Greek citizens are experiencing a feeling of

national denigration, a feeling that has filtered through to institutional life. They feel their rights as citizens to have been violated [8]. They no longer enjoy the protection of the welfare state laws [9,10] that had been promulgated after lengthy social and political struggles for equality and justice and for providing those in the lower social strata with opportunities to improve their lives within a political system that upheld their freedom as citizens, and also their right to education and the possibility of future social upward mobility [11,12].

A significant percentage of the population, estimated at around 30 per cent of the total population, and at around 40 per cent of the young people, has become marginalized as a result of not being able to enter the labour market. Many of these people feel that their personal ideals cannot be fulfilled anymore, in stark contrast with the prosperity experienced by Greeks in the period 1982 to 2008. Many are convinced that their lives have taken a turn for the worse: although they have a right to work, they cannot find jobs and hence do not have possibilities for self-realisation, optimal co-existence and for the pursuit of progress and prosperity. In brief, they have no optimistic prospects for the future. Many feel psychologically, socially and politically disempowered; they are unable to make plans for the future, feel inundated in uncertainty about the future and experience a sense of hopelessness and insecurity [13].

The fall-out of the crisis is mainly of a political nature, characterized by strained relations between the citizenry and the national policy-makers. The new policies have been affecting the views of the citizenry about democracy in general and about policy-making in particular. As a result, some of the socially marginalized tend to resort to extreme right policy positions and practices, including racism. Other responses to the current socio-political situation are non-participation in national elections and migration to (right-wing) parties without clear policy programs. Generally speaking, citizens have become so apathetic that they withhold participation in the national instruments of democracy.

Research has shown that particularly young citizens between the ages of 18 and 35 years

tend to avoid participation in politics, and when they do participate, they opt for cooperating with extreme right-wing parties whose policies promote racism against immigrants and migrants, and promote inequality at the expense of women and other vulnerable groups [14-16].

In brief, then, the economic crisis has brought two challenges for democracy in Greece: the subversion of the citizens' economic and political possibility to define for themselves their own present and future, and their abdication from political participation in the national institutions. Political inequality has increased [17,18]; increasingly economically inactive citizens have lost the possibility of controlling the national institutions and other political instruments. Through their withdrawal from democratic functions they have been contributing to the political and social inequality in the country and hence to the intensification of insecurity and uncertainty [19,20].

A variety of ideological differences has risen as a result of the situation described above. The political right wing, for instance, has been exerting pressure on the political system and democracy through violent reactions, totalitarian formations and negations of democracy. Both native citizens and migrants display negative attitudes such as political indifference towards the economic and political situation [21]. As a result, in Greece and other European countries such as Germany, Austria, Denmark and Italy extreme right-wing political parties are promoting nationalist-populism, a rejection of democracy and even violence against the current political dispensation [22-25].

2.2 Education also affected by the Crisis

Education also has been detrimentally affected by the economic situation, particularly in terms of limits on expenditure. The new underclass that has been created by the economic-political crisis [26] [27] suffers most from the adverse conditions in that they do not see a future for themselves or their children in the prevailing economic conditions. For many the obstacles appear to be insurmountable. The rise of the underclass can be observed in the recent composition of public schools. A considerable percentage of students are experiencing marginalization, a denigration of their individuality and a limitation of their prospects for the future. The rise of this underclass of students is an indictment of the current economic and political

environment. They see their situation as in stark contrast with the period before 2008, when their social status was defined by the values of a more prosperous consumption society. Social, economic and political success or failure in that period of prosperity was defined in terms of the economic-materialistic values of a society characterized by obtaining goods within a system of expanded needs [28,29]. It could be said, in Freudian terms, that a new educational truth is being imposed on the citizenry by the legalization of power concurrent with a negation of democratic processes and a limitation on future prospects, particularly for the new underclass.

The economic, socio-political and educational problems and obstacles that Greek education planners, educationists and educators on the ground (in the schools) have to contend with have led the authors of this paper to the formulation of the following research question: What education system reform measures could be considered for restoring the social, economic and economic equilibrium in Greece after the crisis (2008 and afterwards)? Are there ways for education planners, educationists and educators in Greece to contribute to the return of the social equilibrium in that country both at present, during the crisis, and also after the end of the crisis, whenever that occurs? What could be done from an educational perspective?

The purpose of this article is firstly, as has been done above, to outline the dimensions of the economic, social and political crisis in Greece since 2008, particularly its impact on the situation in schools and in education in general. The second and arguably central aim of the paper is to outline ways and means that education system planners, educationists and educators (both informal such as parents, and formal such as teachers) could actively pursue towards the restoration of the economic, social and political equilibrium in Greek society, given the adverse conditions in which this has to be achieved. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows in an effort to realise these two aims. The next section briefly describes the method of investigation that was followed and the section thereafter contains outlines and discussions of the various ways and means that could be considered by the parties mentioned above in their effort to contribute to the restoration of the economic, social and political equilibrium that has been so negatively affected by the current conditions in Greece.

3. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We examined the current situation in Greece critically-interpretively, and constructed a possible solution to the problem. This approach involved examining how economics and politics in Greece evolved and what they implied for education, particularly for the education system. The examination included general observation of the situation as it has unfolded and also analyses of political texts in the Greek daily press. These analyses yielded a series of themes which were categorised and further explored. The investigation also included exploring procedures of counteracting the impact of far-right politics on education [30,31,32].

We furthermore considered several theories as possible theoretical lenses through which to examine the situation in the hope that they would guide us towards a possible solution to the problem of a loss of social and political equilibrium in Greek society since 2008. Among these count the social action theory, the historical-cultural activity theory, transitiology, ecological systems theory and critical theory (see [33] for a detailed outline of theories and their possible application). While these all showed promise, we decided on using the *social space and ethical / moral function and action theory* as theoretical lens. Our choice fell on this theory since it covers the two key dimensions of the problem under investigation, namely the *social space* in which an event or a set of conditions (such as currently in Greece) occurs, and the *ethical and moral dimensions* of the problem, such as the undesirable creation of a new underclass and the marginalization of a large part of the Greek population. Much of the fall-out of the Greek crisis has to do with both the ethical dimension (recognition of and obedience to values imposed from "outside") and the moral dimension (obedience to values from within the person in question) of human existence in a particular social space. The following paragraphs contain a brief outline of the theory.

According to the *social space, and ethical / moral function or action theory* [34-39], actions, deeds and behaviour always occur within some or other social space, and are expected to conform to certain norms and values, either imposed from outside (ethics) or lived out on the basis of personal conviction (inspired from inside the person). Space can be defined as the dimensions of the place where people and their

relationships orientate themselves in the real world [40]; this is also where social interaction occurs. In this particular space, each person or relationship is entrusted or called to fulfil a particular function; this functioning, action, deed or behaviour should conform to the ontological or universal principles applicable to that particular agency or societal relationship. A government, for instance, should govern the country and its populace in accordance with the universally acceptable rules and standards of good governance, justice and the maintenance of order, in the knowledge that it remains accountable to the populace for how it governs. If, as described above, a government allows parts of the populace to develop into an underclass of citizens while turning a blind eye to the rise of political extremism in whatever form, the government is clearly neglecting its universal calling. Every citizen furthermore should be allowed to fully express him- or herself in their particular social spaces [41]. The national social space (that is, the nation-state) should also provide space for all forms of diversity [42].

The social space in a country / nation-state such as Greece as well as in other countries afflicted by economic, social and political crises should provide room for different societal relationships to respectfully live alongside each other and practise a form of healthy *modus vivendi*. According to the theory, all societal relationships (school, family, business, the state and government, the church, the sports club and so on) are intimately interwoven because they all share the same members [39]. This tenet of the theory implies that all societal relationships should coexist in a spirit of respect for one another's social space. Each societal relationship has a special mandate within the *territorium* of a country such as Greece; each one should discharge its task responsibly. This implies that families have to lovingly care for their children and should show concern about them not having an acceptable future in their country; they should be concerned about the rise of an underclass and of political opportunism and extremism, and about the marginalization of significant parts of the population. The church / churches should raise their voices against such developments in the country. As will be argued below, education system planners, educationists and educators should likewise suggest ways and means to ameliorate the current situation in the country. (As explained above, this is one of the purposes of this article).

As mentioned, the theory also has an ethical / moral dimension in that it emphasises the importance of every agent, stakeholder and role-player in society, including the education system and its planners, to display ethically and morally justifiable and acceptable behaviour. Each role-player, agent or stakeholder should behave responsibly and accountably to all others and has to display a caring attitude towards all others [43]. Each has to do to others as they would prefer others to do to them [44]. By doing this, space is provided for all to live together peacefully, in a space characterised by justice, fairness, respect for others and a spirit of caring [45,46].

Application of the *social space and ethical / moral function or action theory* raises concern about the current situation in Greece and in other countries afflicted by similar problems. The situation in Greece does not seem to conform to the principles on which the theory hinges, and something needs to be done urgently to address the situation. Educationists such as the authors of this article are not in a position (such as a government) to bring about the required changes in society so that society can conform to the tenets of the theory but they can fulfil a “prophetic role” in that they can witness, in this article, about what they are professionally convinced needs to be done as far as the reform of the education system in Greece is concerned.

4. RESULTS: SUGGESTIONS REGARDING THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE GREEK EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR THE PURPOSE OF RESTORING ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL EQUILIBRIUM

The first step in addressing the situation in Greece is to hold on to the conviction that education remains the key to the resolution of the problem; education remains the key instrument for equipping learners / students with the required knowledge and skills that will allow them to integrate successfully into society [47,48]. Without education, their efforts to find a place (a social space) in their society will be greatly compromised.

The second step in addressing the problem is to realize that while education is a constant or universal phenomenon that could be defined as the guiding, leading, equipping and teaching of less mature individuals in order for the latter to

become more mature and able to fulfil their calling in life and in society, that is, in their particular social space, it also takes a particular form and shape in a particular society, time and place (the universal finds particular expression that chimes with a specific social space, with a specific set of circumstances and conditions). What this means for the current conditions in Greece is that it would probably be futile to define education in classical-humanistic (paideia) terms, in neo-liberal terms or even post-modern terms such as efficacy, the commercialization of knowledge with a focus on a euphoric present [26,27]. The current situation (social space) in Greece is such that these approaches to education would be inappropriate. The new approach to education for purposes of restoring the social, economic and political equilibrium in Greece should be accompanied by a redefinition of core concepts such as what prosperity would entail, and what personal and social success and prosperity might mean in the current social space. In brief, then, while education will always remain education, that is, the forming of less immature persons to fulfil their calling later in life and society, this forming has to be customized for the social space prevailing in Greece late in the second decade of the 21st century.

The third step is now to “unpack” the notion of a form of education suitable for the prevalent social space in Greece. This will be done under the following sub-headings: the concept of education revisited; the purpose of the “new” approach to education; possible changes to education policy in Greece; the implications for the current education system in Greece, and implications for the curriculum.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Concept of Education Revisited

In the present situation, despite the fact that reference is occasionally made to a “liberal form of education” [49,50], schools are one-dimensional in that they are expected to function within the strictures of a legal framework that is intent on forming formal or informal leaderships characterized by absolute uncontrolled and uncontrollable power. Both teachers and students are trapped within this operational model in which their social rights are being informally infringed upon and in which they have been transformed into performers in accordance with prescribed responsibilities and norms. Students are seen as “consumers” of knowledge

[51-53], useful only for examination purposes. Teachers have been disempowered by the current education system in that they are expected to act as marginalized and powerless entities in a situation characterized by a fluidity of values, replete with vague aims and objectives. At the same time, the education process moves on randomly, ultimately chiming with the disorganization of the political system. According to the theory employed as theoretical lens in this research, this means that teachers find themselves confronted with a fluidity of ethical values (values imposed from outside, among others by the education authorities), a condition which compels them to fall back on their own sense of morality in their interactions with the students in school.

It is suggested that education in Greece should confront and attempt to eradicate the current political indifference as well as the acquiescence with extreme right-wing parties' standpoints. Based on a critical reading of the social and political situation (the social space) in the country, learners should be equipped and formed, both ethically (values given from "outside") and morally (values inspiring from "inside") to understand the need for reviving democracy and to participate in a "new" discourse about the restoration of democratic principles. The educational community should be guided and equipped to re-invest in democratic ideals and institutions and to re-orientate towards democratic functioning and structures [54,55]. School education should be seen and employed as a vehicle for forming a "new" value (both ethical and moral) system and for the reinstatement of democratic values, among others by envisaging the desired (ethically and morally justifiable) kind of society [56]. This can be achieved by forming the students' experiences in a democratic school environment [57]. This will help them gain practical insight into the notion of citizenship in a democracy. Put differently, education should be employed as a means to form a citizenry that would insist on the restoration of a fully democratic economic, political and social order and on monitoring the morality of the actions of people in power. The entire pedagogical discourse has to change, among others in the form of a redefinition of pedagogical objectives and functions.

5.2 The Purpose of the "new" Greek Education

While students have to be prepared for the entire spectrum of future challenges regarding the

return of full democracy in Greece, special emphasis should be placed in the education process on bringing home to students the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, human dignity, human rights, human diversity and the valuing thereof together with a deeper understanding of the world of the twenty-first century, among others the phenomena of inter- and trans-culturalism, inter- and transnationalism and sustainable development [58] and in particular the need to attend to these ideals in the prevailing social space. Attention should also be paid to the role of individuals and institutions in a fully democratic society, to the eradication of the ideological and political content of extreme right-wing political parties that up to now have projected their agendas as "natural" and politically correct. The forming of the future citizens should be such that they would learn to have respect for democratic institutions, participate in politics, and disapprove of political marginalization and totalitarian fascism.

5.3 Implications for Education Policy in Greece

The revisited meaning and purpose of education as outlined in the previous two sub-sections imply that new education policy has become necessary. The focal point of the current education system is on information and knowledge transfer with emphasis on testing. This approach arguably has weakened the potential of young people to survive in the current political and social conditions, and hence has resulted in existential insecurity, social uncertainty and indifference to politics. Education policy is required that promotes knowledge and insight into democracy, and this can be achieved by following a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach in which History and Political Culture are implemented as cognitive fields. These subjects should be presented in such a manner that democracy can be restored based on recognition of the equality and the unfolding of learners' individualities and personalities.

The revised policy should also focus on the issue of participation in society and government. Participation presupposes involvement in the public social space — in citizenship processes, among others, joint responsibility — and also the avoidance of co-optation and the resultant loss of individuality. The education policy should encapsulate the notion of common experience so that fear of participation can be avoided and

greater integration into society be enabled, despite the possible danger, pain and challenges that might accompany such participation [20]. At this point, reference should be made to the need for enhanced forms of deliberation [59] at all levels of educational processes so as to construct a support system for citizens and society, among others through the revival of a debate about justice and humanism.

5.4 Implications for the Education System in Greece

The discussion in the previous three subsections attests to the fact that the Greek education system as such has to be restructured as well. Emphasis should, for instance, be placed on institutions, attitudes and behaviours that would promote the restoration of the democratic operation of schools. Institutional structures, whether they have fallen into disuse or been scrapped through legislation, such as Teachers' Associations [60], Student Communities, and School Governing Bodies and Out-of-school Representatives, have to be reinstated. Attention should also be given to the promotion of co-operation among teachers, students and broader groups in the population so that the value of participatory action, of freedom and of structured political discourse can be felt and understood by all the participants. In doing so, the students, in particular, will gain a deeper understanding of the fact that individuals tend to gain from an investment in freedom and equality and by democratic functioning in the broader society [61,62].

Even though the education system has to face the effects of the economic crisis in the form of falling expenditure on education, the merging or closing down of schools, the neglect of physical infrastructure and the reduction in the numbers of the teaching corps, it can still play a role in assisting the country to recover socio-political equilibrium through the provision of knowledge required for innovation and development. Education could also reinforce democracy by assisting citizens – both natives and migrants – to co-operate towards improvement of the financial situation and preventing immoral attitudes such as racism and political intimidation that would lead to the refutation of democratic principles and that ultimately might result in the denigration of human dignity, equality and opportunities, structures, and policies that could have led to the advancement of individuals and societies.

5.5 Implications for the Curriculum

Carefully selected *capita selecta* from the country's history [63] will reinforce students' understanding of political participation in the school boards and the action committees because the principles of democracy will be projected comparatively against the backdrop of the functioning of totalitarian regimes. The principles and standpoints of fascism during the Second World War, for instance, could be presented along with their consequences for citizens and societies. Providing such information, utilizing the store of knowledge regarding such phenomena, and the use of new technologies could all play a role in a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary understanding of fascism as a form of political totalitarianism characterized by immoral acts such as violence, inequality, counter-freedom, denigration of human dignity, and racism [64] that tend to develop when the extreme right-wing parties become politically strong and begin trampling on democratic principles and institutions [65,22]. By following a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary approach, educators could shape historic-political information into a cognitive field that can be employed to help the students not to succumb to extreme right-wing political choices after leaving school. The very threat of political extremism could even be used as an instrument in the defence of democratic principles and standpoints, thereby paving the way towards the unfolding of welfare policies for the benefit of those belonging to the lower social strata.

5.6 From Theory to Practice

Education system planners are well aware of the fact that the reform of a system should occur on at least the following system levels: a) the reformation of the theoretical discourse, in this particular case, regarding the defence of society's democratic functioning, b) development of a discourse pitched against what is deemed to be undesirable (ethically and morally questionable) in the current social space, in this particular case, the totalitarian and extremist models of organizing societies and managing citizens, c) the utilization of History and other school subjects in a comparison between past and present (as part of the curriculum), d) the systematic teaching of ethically and morally justifiable social principles through the subject of Citizenship Education, in this particular case the principles of a democracy (as part of classroom pedagogy, didactics) [66,62], and (f) the

restoration of institutions and physical infrastructure that have been neglected due to the crisis. Reforms on these and other levels of the system will arguably lead to the restoration of the economic, social, political and educational equilibrium that the Greek citizenry is at this moment hoping for and striving at.

Regarding the restructuring of the system as such, it is suggested that the current bureaucratic model of education which emphasizes rational behaviour while at the same time depreciating the status of education in schools, be replaced by a more flexible model. The latter should allow greater latitude for individual independence and behaviour, for greater political participation and social integration, and for various micro-social factors to impact on action and behaviour. Put differently, the concept of power has to be revisited so that the educational community is afforded space – through repetitive, participatory and planned actions – to invent and reinforce a “democracy of experiences”. This will arguably result in the desired “new” political culture in which individuals, groups and collectives will be able to expand their possibilities, redefine the educational process, and the structures and operational relations so that they can provide for democratic patterns in an internal settlement of procedural democratic structures.

The education system model suggested above should furthermore be free from introversion; it should remain in contact with society and benefit from proposals made by carriers outside the educational environment. The democratic principle of affirming individuals’ equality should be made practical by making the system confront social issues and by participating in the discourse with others, by getting involved with other institutions, by bridging the gaps between individuals and groups, and by helping them overcome the social biases that prevent participation in society. In other words, a “new” political discourse has to commence in which the political is defined in terms of people’s everyday lives, in contrast to the current dominant political system which conceptualizes democracy largely in terms of voting during elections and of indirect representation. From a renewed democratic point of view, people will have the possibility of redefining themselves in terms of a policy of basic human rights.

All these suggestions about education system reform in Greece could arguably lead to a system of structures, operations and relations that jibes

with a theoretical model that regards democracy as a core notion in the curriculum (in the various school subjects), also informally in students’ everyday lives and in classrooms, that enables the students to overcome fear of diversity, insecurity, violence and opposes the denigration of citizens as political subjects. Education about democracy aims to bring back to the curriculum education about coexistence, especially in a time and social space characterized by fragile economic, political and social conditions and a fluid value (ethical and moral) framework. The democratic approach aims at deconstructing authoritative attitudes and the enforcement of top-down disciplinary models, at promoting the concept of “us” in which social equality is appreciated and inequality is deemed unacceptable. With the suggested reforms, benefits should accrue for the lower social strata in that they will be offered access to the new social opportunities, to structures generated as a result of the regular operation of democracy, and not as a form of philanthropy. They will have rightful access to such opportunities since they are entitled to them as citizens.

Education about democracy generates experience for members of all social strata within a frame of political morality based on equality, interaction, and security, and this makes coexistence feasible while reducing conflict, especially during times of economic deregulation and value insecurity and fluidity.

6. CONCLUDING REMARK

The Greek education system should not align itself with and serve the current unstable and disorganized political system that tends towards deregulation and anomie. An education system that serves and operates within a social space of non-democratic and self-serving economic and political values can only produce a form of “negative” education that is ethically and morally unjustifiable in that it leads to a de facto collapse of institutions, promotes the maximization of deregulation through overemphasis of privacy [67] and to the disappearance of respect for equality and human rights. The education of future generations as such will suffer in such a social space.

Greek education system planners instead should ask themselves whether they wish the education system to continue producing disempowered and powerless future citizens, young people overwhelmed by feelings of uncertainty about the

future and particularly about democracy in their nation-state, who tend to act privately and covertly, thereby reinforcing the grip of the status quo through their passivity, silence and ignorance, or whether they need to attend to the restructuring of the education system so that the current situation in the country can be turned around and the education system can produce new generations of people who can act decisively in the interest of the common good.

Questions such as these should be asked by all education system planners, educationists and educators faced with the challenge of providing education if the social space in which they currently find themselves is marked by ethically and morally unjustifiable actions and behaviours.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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