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KEDIS
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International Conference

Social Movements in Greece between Past and Present

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Roundtable discussion

“Challenges of studying social movements in Greece”

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A major challenge of this conference was to isolate the unique characteristics of social movements in postwar Greece. The role of history was fundamental in an indispensably inter-disciplinary approach.

Theoretically, Greece provided an ideal place for social movements. For almost 150 years after the formation of the modern Greek state, it continued to be a very poor country suffering from persistent social injustice and inequalities that could have encouraged robust social protest. After all, the level of political freedom and the quality of parliamentarism were not always ideal, but still, they were sufficient for the expression of protest.

However, it turns out that Greece lacked for many critical decades the conditions in which social causes and social movements could have thrived. As a matter of fact, the prolonged struggle for national integration overshadowed and undermined mobilization for other social causes. The country usually experienced with considerable delay weak versions of the social movements that were developing in other European societies. This ironic asymmetry came to the fore at least in three formative “battles”: a) the national integration wars (the “Great idea”), b) the Civil War and c) the Cold War. In all three periods, the focus on national integration and political harmonization with the

West actually proved highly divisive for Greek society thus contributing to further social polarization along ideological and political party lines.

Since the Civil War, the prioritization of national homogeneity not only defined the agendas of non-leftist political parties and governments, but it also contributed to the gradual political accommodation of social demands as a means to take the wind out of the sails of the Left. Only after the post-Civil war regime collapsed and, especially, after the military dictatorship failed, social protest became somewhat separated from political parties and the Right-Left divide of the Cold War. That was the result of “unfinished” social protests of the 1960s that were re-fertilized by post-junta radicalization as well as by the syncretism of East-West detente. Rapid socio-economic transformation fueled long-lasting social grievances that could not be put back to the bottle through filters that had worked in the past, such as family, clientelistic networks and migration. However, social mobilization never became fully emancipated from politics. In the end of the 1970s it adopted again a partisan outlook to either side of the political spectrum. After 1974 it took also the form of political violence. Terrorism became a persistent side effect.

At the same time, accession to the EU provided the nation with a new political cause that imported solutions to the most widespread social demands, notably peace, education and equal opportunity. EU-oriented modernization was specifically connected with socialist policies. They were dominant during the early post-accession years with Andreas Papandreou’s PASOK in power. But they were evident also earlier under the Konstantinos Karamanlis’ governments of Nea Demokratia which invested on protectionist social policies termed “socialmania”. This new strategy demonstrated a crucial link between the democratization of politics and the socialization of protest. It gained in relevance when the political system of the post-1974 “Metapolitefsi” was put to the test under the impact of the recent financial crisis. The regenerated social protest became a magnet for social mobilization, but also for radical groups that rejected reform and joined hands with the international rise of populist anti-establishment movements and politics.