

Greece: The Curse of Three Generations of Papandreous

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Global Research, March 22, 2010

22 March 2010

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

In each of the three decisive moments of recent history, Greece has been pulled backwards from a chance for social transformation, political independence and freedom from external tutelage by one and another of the Papandreou family.

The three periods promising new vistas for the Greek popular movements include:

The period following the defeat of the Nazi occupation army and its collaborator puppet regime by the Greek partisan resistance, backed by its liberation army (ELAS-EAM) and its civilian allies. (1944-1945)

The decisive electoral defeat of the rightwing New Democratic Party in 1981. The majoritarian vote for the Panhellenic Socialist Party (PASOK) together with the Communist Party controlled nearly two-thirds of Parliament. Inheriting a “broken and bankrupt and non-viable” capitalist economy from a discredited and crushed Right, PASOK received a popular mandate to socialize the economy.

The world capitalist crises of 2007 –2010 and in particular, the bankrupt and highly indebted Greek capitalist state-led to the election of George Papandreou (Junior) in 2010 on a platform of “social change” and increased social welfare. He attracted working class and trade union support on the bases of creating a new modern and more just society.

Between Revolution and Reaction: The Role of George Papandreou (Senior)

In the wake of one of Europe’s greatest anti-fascist partisan led victory, the Greek resistance movement, backed by over 2 million partisans advanced toward the liberation of the capital city of Athens in October 1944. With scant support inside the country, George Papandreou was propped up by imperial British warplanes and tanks and the rightwing monarchy in exile. Acting as Prime Minister he ordered the disarmament of the Resistance and backed the British military assault on tens of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in Constitution Square in Athens killing and wounding hundreds of Greek freedom fighters. Papandreou presided over the military recruitment of numerous ex-Nazi collaborators and Monarchists, financed and armed and commanded by British and later US generals. He later served as a cabinet minister in regimes which launched a vicious assault on the mass leftist popular movements. They turned what was a joyful moment of liberation into the beginning of a squalid period of savage repression and the restoration of all the upper class scum from pre-war Greece, along with their pro-Nazi collaborator colleagues. Greece was turned into a client state of the US, ruled by a series of externally subsidized kleptocratic police states, which retained their rule by inflating a patronage based bureaucracy, divorced from modern industry.

Andreas Papandreou and the Demise of the Right (1981)

Subsequent to the demise of the military junta (1967 – 1974) the Greek Right came to power, retaining much of the old state apparatus and propping up a wealthy but dysfunctional ruling class living off monetary transfers from the EEC. The pillage of state resources, the bankruptcy of most of the private sector firms, the backwardness of the agricultural sector, the closed and authoritarian nature of public and private institutions, led the vast majority of the working class, students, farmers and unemployed to provide a massive electoral victory for Andreas Papandreou. The combined vote of the Socialist and Communist Parties was over 60% and provided a clear majority to legally transform the society and economy. Moreover, Andreas Papandreou's program promised to "socialize the economy", modernize the countryside and break from imperial domination. In particular he promised to terminate membership in NATO, and US military base agreement.

Given the fragmentation, demoralization, dispersion and decadence of the Right, political opposition to a socialist advance was at a minimum. Given the private sectors' high indebtedness to the state banks, the Papandreou government did not even require legislation to expropriate the firms: it could ask for loan repayments or the keys of the firm.

Papandreou rejected the option of transforming the moribund capitalist system: he offered new loans, forgave debts and intervened to restore private ownership by auctioning the firms to new private (foreign) owners. At the time I was an adviser to Papandreou. When I asked him why he didn't socialize the indebted firms, he answered that "because of the crises, it is not the time to transform the economy; it would have to wait till the economy got on its feet". When I replied that he was elected to change the system precisely because of the crises and that once capitalism was restored the political and economic opposition would be more formidable he replied "that the 'economy' is too weak to sustain a socialist regime"; he added that "the working class is only interested in consumption not investing to modernize the economy".

In practical terms Papandreou restored capitalism despite its moribund condition, increasing the public debt in the process. During his first term in office over eighty percent of Greek public opinion was in favor of closing the US military bases and their intelligence operations in Greece. Through balcony demagoguery and false promises to act "in the future", Papandreou maintained the bases. Similarly, Papandreou repudiated the vast majority of voters who elected him to withdraw from NATO by engaging in inconsequential "criticism" ... from within. Worse still Papandreou stayed in the European Economic Community, accepting transfers and loans in exchange for lowering trade barriers. This began the process of windfall short term gains in consumption and state spending on a patronage based bloated bureaucracy in exchange for the decimation of the backward industrial and agricultural sector. Papandreou used EEC transfers to buy votes via subsidies to farmers, short term wage gains to workers and huge tax write offs and loans to business elites. Deficits and debts grew, while the productive apparatus to sustain consumption withered. Patronage was Papandreou's "alternative" to social transformation. The EEC was willing to finance Papandreou and put up with his dysfunctional economic policies because he was destroying and undermining the social movements for change which originally brought him to power.

While Andreas Papandreou was denouncing NATO in front of mass meetings he was holding weekly consultations with the US Ambassador confirming his loyalty to the military

alliance....During the first year of his government (1982 – 1984) when I directed the Center for Mediterranean Studies and was an unofficial advisor to Papandreou I would be leaving by the backdoor of his house in Kastri while the US Ambassador was entering through the front door. After awhile, I realized that he borrowed leftwing critiques to justify rightwing policies. A practice for which he became a virtuoso ... of deception. More recently a State Department official once commented to me that he preferred George Papandreou the younger over his father: “the same conformist policies”, he commented “without the demagoguery”. Over the years, Andreas empty rhetoric and pro NATO practice converted an entire generation of militant socialists into cynical opportunists and social climbers, who sacrificed class solidarity for patronage, lucrative posts in the EEC bureaucracy for social transformation. The post-junta generation, the student idealists from the Polytechnical struggle became the corpulent functionaries of the NATO state.

George Papandreou (Junior): History as Farce (Three Times Over)

Like his family predecessors George Papandreou was elected in October 2009 in the midst of the most profound world capitalist crises since the 1930's. Greek finances were 'under water'; the economy was in a free fall; the public treasury was empty; capitalism was literally bankrupt and the rightlist parties were disgraced and discredited.

During his electoral campaign Papandreou promised a modern social welfare state with a priority for social investments in public health, education and ameliorating poverty. Once in office, true to the Papandreou tradition, he did an about face. Striking an indignant posture he claimed to “discover” that the Greek treasury was empty and the country was over indebted and that the only solution was to slash living standards by reducing salaries, and savaging wages, social programs and pensions in order to pay the foreign bankers. Like his familial predecessors no effort was made to collect back taxes from the rich or embargo the secret foreign accounts of the bankers, corporate executives, ship owners, stock speculators, consultants, investment brokers who swindled Greek taxpayers and pensioners of billions of Euros. No effort was made to recover the debts owned by the private sector to the state financial institutions. On the contrary Papandreou turned to the Wall Street swindlers – Goldman Sachs (who, in 2001, facilitated the pillage of public loans for private gain) – for advice and support.

Like his grandfather, faced with mass unrest, he turned to the imperial powers for guidance and direction. In effect Papandreou surrendered Greek sovereignty and economic policy making to Merkle, Sarkozy, Obama and the IMF. They formulated the most draconian class based austerity program in recent European history. The EU and US policymakers, finding a most docile and submissive client in Papandreou, insisted on one, two three many rounds of cuts in living standards, over a 4 month period (December 2009 – March 2010), reducing Greek living standards below the levels of the early 1980's. The socialist trade union leaders' initial weak, token protests encouraged Papandreou and his economic and finance ministers to push harder for greater concessions, hoping to satisfy “the market” – a euphemism for the financiers and speculators.

After thirty years of rightwing and PASOK patronage politics, tax free rides for their business clients and lending to kleptocratic dysfunctional 'investors', Papandreou, ever responsive to the foreign bankers and their imperial political mentors, escalated the repression of the social movements and trade unions. In contrast he flew to Paris, Berlin and Washington promising more cuts in social budgets, begging for financing to bail out the corrupt state and Greece's decadent ruling class.

October 2009 appeared as another historic opportunity to launch a new post-capitalist state, putting an end to the bankruptcy of the klepto-speculator economic system and its discredited rightist supporters. Instead October turned into a political nightmare. The Papandreou regime and its parliamentary robots went far beyond even the previous rightist regimes – in eroding living standards, it handed over the design, direction and enforcement of the retrograde socio-economic policy to the EU and Washington, who in defense of their financial elites are determined to extract the last pound of flesh from the public and private, working class.

Papandreou's policy is to "save the economy" ... by destroying it. In the midst of a deepening recession his regime is reducing spending and incomes and increasing regressive consumption taxes; a sure formula to turn a recession into a chronic depression. The historic mission of the Papandreou regimes is to embrace the empire to save the rich, no matter how many dead anti-fascists, how many disenchanted workers, how many immiserated pensioners have to pay the price.

Conclusion

The political history of the Papandreou family is a Greek tragic-farce; the tragedy of a people who fought the good fight against the Nazis and their collaborators only to be savaged by the rising new Anglo-American rulers. The heroic Polytechnical University student struggle (1973) against the US backed military dictatorship ended up witnessing the rise of a pseudo-populist demagogue (Andreas Papandreou) who promised democratic socialism and ended up socializing the private debts of capitalist keltocrats. And now the last (hopefully) in the line of imperial sycophants (George Papandreou) who promised progressive changes and imposed regressive policies, while handing over the keys to power to his overseas imperial overseers. Beyond the political idiosyncrasies of Greece, the history of Greek Social Democratic regimes illustrate their historical role as the saviors of capitalism in crises. They are allowed, by the foreign and domestic elites, to come to power because they have the popular backing to implement the harsh reactionary policies which the established discredited rightists are too weak to impose. In embracing and enforcing their unpopular and retrograde policies, the Social Democrats, profoundly alienate their working class and lower middle class supporters – they commit political suicide. But for Social Democrats, the Papandreou's of Europe, they served their purpose: they turned back the tide of radical or revolutionary change. They sacrificed their regimes but saved the capitalist state.

The most hopeful and promising change today is that the Papandreou –PASOK mystique has evaporated; even the most loyal socialist trade union official dares not raise their hand to stay the movement ... nor do they dare point a revolutionary way out ... So the general strikes will continue ... the anarchists will launch their missiles ... the levels of popular anger is rising ... and the struggles will continue.

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