STUDENT ACTIVISM IN GREECE: A HISTORICAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the historical origins of student activism in Greece and an analysis of present activism in nine institutions of post-secondary education. The empirical analysis was based on a sample of nearly 1500 students and revealed that activism mainly relates to the regional origin of the student. The findings are used to make some speculations on the likely future course of student activity.

It is a widely held belief that student activism was one of the sparks that led to the downfall of a seven year military dictatorship in Greece. The Polytechnio students' uprising of November 1973 was the major open opposition to the regime that ruled the country since 1967 and might have contributed to the collapse of the junta a few months later. In this paper we give a historical background of student politics in Greece and present the results of a quantitative model attempting to explain present student activism. We also speculate on the future direction of student activism given the extension of educational opportunities to rural students.

Historical Background

In the Western societies, the years 1967–1969 are often taken to be an important landmark in the history of student activism [1]. In those same years Greece was under the iron grip of a military dictatorship (1967–1974) and the erstwhile volatile Greek students seemed to be totally unaffected by the ferment that shook Paris in May 1968, or caused the killings at Kent State University. Yet a few years later, in November 1973, a delayed reaction, as it were, struck with bloody vengeance at the regime of the colonels,

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causing a shake-up in its leadership and ominously heralding a new era in Greek student politics. A group of angry youths barricaded themselves behind the doors of the National Technical University (the Polytechnieio) protesting against the oppressive rule of the junta and clamouring for “freedom, bread, and education”. After their refusal to withdraw, army tanks smashed through the iron gates of the University and armed soldiers soon crushed the rebels, leaving behind several dead and wounded.

The events at the Polytechnieio soon assumed symbolic significance as the expression of a popular stand against the curtailment of civil liberties, and more pertinently here, participation in and the rights to education.

It was not surprising therefore that when civilian government was restored in the summer of 1974 the students were among the first to demand the purging of the universities of junta or pro-junta professors, the abrogation of legislation that restricted their academic freedom, student participation in university governance, and generally the democratization and modernization of the educational system. The new government, representing a right-of-center political alignment headed by veteran politician Constantine Karamanlès [2], embarked upon a reformist program that encompassed all levels and types of education.

One of the several outcomes of this reformist activity [3] of most relevance here, was a “law-framework” (Nomos Plaisio) proposing changes in the structure and administration of Greek universities (AEI’s). After going through several versions since the appearance of the first draft in 1975, it entered the state statutes in 1978 as Law 815, “On the Regulation of Subjects Pertaining to the Organization and Functioning of Highest Educational Institutions”.

From its inception, the Nomos Plaisio has been one of the most contentious aspects of the Greek educational reform movement of the last twenty years. The students never liked it in toto, least of all Law 815, which according to them left the much criticized and restrictive system of the professorial chair essentially unscathed, did not resolve the problem of university asylum or pupil participation in decision making, aimed at phasing out the teaching assistants, restricted the examination periods, etc. The Law was branded as “anti-pedagogical and anti-democratic”.

It was not, of course, the first time that Greek students had protested against government actions or policies affecting education or for that matter had taken part in the broader political life of the nation. The politicization of the Greek students and the universities dates back to the early years of the emergence of the Greek nation state in the nineteenth century. In 1843, only six years after the establishment of the University of Athens (The Ottonian University as the first higher educational institution was then called), professors and students participated in the political upheavals that forced King Otto to accept the first Greek constitution and expel many of his