

The Struggle Against the Privatisation of Education in Greece*

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The struggle as part of the movement against neoliberal globalisation

For three months now, higher education in Greece has been at a standstill, as a result of the fierce resistance by students and university staff against the plans of the local political and economic elites to privatise higher education. Students have been occupying most Greek universities all this time, while the vast majority of university teachers (apart from those belonging to the right, together with some from the reformist Left) have been on an indefinite strike in support of student demands. This is all part-and-parcel of a pan-European movement against neoliberal globalisation policies imposed by the European part of the transnational elite. In France, the revolt by the victims of globalization has been spreading for more than a year, as indicated by the campaign against the neoliberal Constitution of the European Union, the November 2005 riots and then the mass strikes and demonstrations last Spring against the French elite's attempt to introduce the Anglo-American kind of legislation of 'hire and fire at will' (or, 'flexible' labour relations, as neoliberals euphemistically call it)^[1] in their attempt to "solve" the huge youth unemployment problem the country faces. No wonder that some analysts already talk of a new "May 68", when a similar movement was spreading all over the advanced capitalist countries (France, Germany, Britain, the USA and elsewhere) —a movement that marked the beginning of a new era.

The Greek explosion this year was, therefore, inevitable and, in fact, slightly overdue. As early as 2001, the EU's Declaration of Bologna prescribed the creation of a European Space of Higher Education that would ensure:

- The international competitiveness of European Higher Education and
- The effective linking of higher education to the needs of society and those of the European labour market.

The latter represents a direct linking of education to market needs, in contrast to the corresponding indirect linking during the social democratic era. In this sense, it summarises the content of neoliberal globalisation as far as education and research are concerned and has defining implications with respect to their content and, of course, their financing. Thus, it is explicitly being declared now that the University is in the service of private enterprise, while at the same time the financing only of those courses and research projects which serve "society's needs" (as far as they are identified with "market needs"), is

being introduced, through various direct and indirect methods. Knowledge, like everything else in a market economy/society, is becoming instrumental in the main aim of serving the market economy and the elites controlling it, irrespective of the real needs of society, the desires of educators and the educated and, by implication, the 'pure' cognitive needs of science.

Education in neoliberal modernity

It is not, therefore, surprising that in social-liberal Britain one can observe a continuous shrinking in the number of "theoretical" courses being offered, as from the beginning of the last decade – courses whose object of study was History, Economic Theory, Philosophy, etc. – in order to make way for "practical" courses directly linked to the market (marketing, business studies, management, computing etc). This was not the result of a satanic plot by the elites, but simply the outcome of the functioning of the "internal market", which has been created in the education sector and which has already led to an indirect privatisation of study and research 'from below'. Thus:

- on the demand side, university applicants, facing today's rising unemployment and underemployment, select objects of study which are "in demand" in the job market, and therefore choose the corresponding degree courses, indirectly helping the channelling of more public funds towards them. Also,
- on the supply side, such "practical" courses easily secure sponsorship and private financing in general, both of which complement the dwindling public financing of education imposed by neoliberal globalisation policies which prescribe drastic cuts in tax rates (corporation tax, personal income tax, etc.) for the benefit of the privileged social strata—always for the sake of competitiveness—financed through corresponding cuts in public spending in general and social spending in particular.

The inevitable outcome of this process was the mass production by the education system of pure technocrats, with superficial general knowledge and, of course, without any capability of autonomous thought beyond the narrow and very specialised contours of their specific field. The fundamental aim of education in neoliberal modernity is the 'production' of similar narrow-minded 'scientists', who are called upon to solve the technical problems faced by private enterprise in a way that will maximise economic efficiency for it and, indirectly, for the entire system of the market economy.

No wonder that this kind of mass production of similar 'scientists' by no means implies that scientific rationalism has finally prevailed in thought. In the US, for instance, where this system of education has always been dominant, well-known scientists within their own disciplines (even in the natural sciences!) are religious, or adopt various irrational systems of thought, whose central ideas have been drawn not through rational methods (reason and/or empirical evidence) but through intuition, instinct, feelings, mystical experiences, revelation, etc. The outcome of this is a Jekyll-and-Hyde hybrid of a scientist who is compelled to use the rational methodology of research whilst wearing his/her scientific hat, and who becomes an irrationalist of the worse kind once this hat is removed. This was a relatively rare phenomenon in Europe before neoliberal modernity, but the present Americanisation and consequent privatisation of European universities is making it an increasingly frequent one. Needless to add that this process is further facilitated if universities are not directly controlled by society itself—which, alone, could express the

general interest— but by elites and social groups within society that express special interests, whether economic (transnational corporations), cultural (e.g. religious organisations or the Church itself) or political-military (e.g. the US Pentagon). The issue, therefore, is not simply whether universities are profit-making organisations, as the political elites argue to throw the debate off course, but rather whether their courses and research programmes are defined by society in general rather than by specific social groups within it, with vested special interests.

A democratic environment as a condition for a democratic paedeia

However, if we agree that only society itself could express the general interest, the next crucial question refers to who expresses the social will. Clearly, the answer could not be the state which, in a representative ‘democracy’, is simply the political complement of the market economy. The state is controlled by elites —the professional politicians of the mainstream political parties — and bureaucrats, who function as communicating vessels with the economic and other elites, the latter securing the politicians’ rise to power through the financing of their extravagant election campaigns and their promotion through the mass media which the same elites control.

It is, therefore, obvious that a democratic environment is a necessary condition for a democratic paedeia —in the classical sense of an all-round education. This would involve **civic schooling**, i.e., the development of citizens’ self-activity by using their very self-activity as a means of internalising the democratic institutions and the values consistent with them, and also **personal training**, involving the development of the **capacity** to learn rather than to learn particular things, so that individuals become autonomous — that is, capable of self-reflective activity and deliberation.^[2] In other words, an environment in which citizens, through their assemblies, would determine the general content of the programmes of study and research, the details of which would then be determined by the assemblies of educators and the educated. In the mid-term, universities could be controlled by a national federation of new *demoi* in which the citizens’ assemblies would determine the general outlines of education and the way in which it would be financed through a steeply ‘progressive’ personal income tax system, which would secure a truly free education system covering not only the students’ strictly educational expenses but also their maintenance expenses. Apart from these general outlines, however, universities should be autonomous in running their own affairs and in promoting teaching and research methods. Therefore, the present examination-centered system should be replaced by a system of continuous assessment (which would complement a democratic system of teachers’ assessment), based on regular essays that students would be called upon to defend in front of their teachers and fellow students.

Clearly, the present problems in education are the direct result of the contradictions created by the very system of the market economy and its political complement. A democratic paedeia, therefore, presupposes a struggle for radical change not just in the educational structures but also in the socio-economic structures, so that students are not forced to choose only those programs of study meeting **market needs** but, instead, are able to select those programs of study genuinely meeting **human needs**.^[3] This choice is fundamental if we take into account the fact that there is little (if any) relation between

market needs and human needs in the market economy system, in which what determines 'market needs' is crucially conditioned by privileged social groups, through the concentration of income, wealth and economic power at their hands.

The myth of “free” public education

In this context, we may understand the reasons behind the present attempt by European political and economic elites in general and the Greek elites in particular to enforce the indirect privatisation of higher education. The education system in Greece has always been directly or indirectly controlled by the state. However, this did not also apply to its financing, since private schools were also allowed in primary and secondary education, attracting the offspring of the privileged social groups seeking better educational facilities and better chances of success in securing a place in domestic or foreign universities. This could explain the results of a recent OECD report documenting public spending on education among OECD countries, according to which Greece comes third from the bottom after Indonesia and Slovakia, with only 8.4% of total public spending being allocated to education.^[4] Similar conclusions are drawn by a recent World Bank Report which confirms below-average public spending on education in Greece in comparison to other European Monetary Union countries.^[5] No wonder the privileged social groups send their offspring to the better-funded private schools. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of higher education places forces Greek parents to pay exorbitant fees to privately-run preparatory schools in the hope of giving their children a better chance of securing a university place. This affects particularly the lower social groups who view education as the only possible means of achieving social mobility, if not as the only way to secure some sort of employment in a country in which youth unemployment is one of the highest in Europe, having now reached 26.5% among those aged 15-24.^[6] This could easily be explained if one takes into account the fact that, since Greece's post-war integration into the world market economy, her joining the EU in the early 1980s and the effective dissolution and phasing out of primary and secondary production,^[7] the service sector has been providing most job opportunities and education has, therefore, become the only vehicle for a (very) low degree of social mobility in Greece.

It is, therefore, clear that 'free public education', which was supposedly established in Greece in the 1960s and, after a long and frequently bloody student struggle, was later inscribed in the Greek Constitution, has always been a myth —as far as higher education is concerned. A very recent report^[8] showing that Greeks spend a sum corresponding to 2.2% of the GDP on the education of their offspring, while the state spends just 3.5% of the GDP on public education, confirms this. Still, many parents and students, particularly among the lower social groups, rely heavily on public education. No wonder the Constitution restriction forbidding the creation of non-public universities became the target both of local and foreign elites and, recently, of the neoliberal party governing Greece (New Democracy), with the expressed connivance of the social-liberals presently in opposition (PASOK), who began a campaign to revise the Constitution so that this restriction could be abolished. On the other hand, it is not at all surprising that this attempt functioned as a catalyst for a powerful student and teacher movement opposing the attempted creeping privatisation of the last bastion of public education in Greece.

The two preconditions for a democratic and free

education system for all

The issue explicitly or implicitly raised by the Greek movement was, which is the best way in which the two basic preconditions for a truly democratic and free education system can be met, the preconditions being that:

- The object of study and research is to be determined by society in general and educators and the educated in particular, within an institutional framework of academic autonomy, and not by social groups with their own vested special interests and the power effectively to undermine this autonomy.
- Higher education is to be provided free for everybody, as a common good, and not just to the very poor by the elites, as a kind of charity in the form of scholarships, sponsorship and the rest. This implies that education in general and higher education in particular should be financed by a steeply progressive tax on income and wealth, so that it is the privileged social groups that bear the tax burden for it.

The system of ‘non-profit-making’ private universities proposed by the Greek elites clearly did not satisfy the first precondition, as it would always be possible for any capitalist enterprise involved in ‘cultural’ activities, apart from the Church (a particularly powerful player in Greece given the role assigned to it by the political, economic and mass media elites), the Army, etc. to finance similar ‘universities’. Under this system, the object of study and research, as well as the composition of the teaching and research staff and therefore the teaching and research methods, would be determined on the basis of the special interests of economic and political elites –if not those of the irrational religious establishment, leading to the conquest by the forces of irrationalism – ‘from the inside’ – of the leading hegemonic institution of rationalism in modernity, the university.

Of course, this does not mean that today’s state-controlled university, which is common all over Europe, adequately meets the first precondition, as it is also controlled directly by the political elites and indirectly by the economic elites. However, in state-controlled universities it is much easier for changes in the programmes of study and research to be imposed ‘from below’, i.e. by students and staff, who do not see their work just as a career and a means for social and economic advancement, than it is in the case of private universities. It is well known that significant changes to the programmes of study and research as well as to the running of universities were introduced in Western European universities in the aftermath of May ’68 –later to be mostly reversed within the context of neoliberal globalisation. On the other hand, education in a private university is nothing more than a commodity which, like any other commodity, has to be produced on the basis of the principles of economic ‘efficiency’, in other words on the basis of the criterion of how useful its research and teaching output is to the needs of the market system and those controlling it. No wonder that even the most prestigious private US universities offer much sought-after places to the offspring of generous sponsors and alumni relatively easily, a practice apparently well utilised by the Bush family, which succeeded in having its offspring, George W. Bush –not exactly an example of a well-read person– admitted to Yale University. ^[9]

As far as the second precondition is concerned, the abolition of free education, which will inevitably follow as a result of the establishment of private universities, effectively denies the right of many citizens to any kind of specialised knowledge, being obviously a classist

move . A clear example of this is Britain where, as figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) revealed last year, the proportion of young first-year university students from low-income families has fallen as a result of the introduction of “top-up” university tuition fees, as has also the percentage coming from schools and colleges funded by the state.^[10] Although the 2007 results just published do not show a similar decrease, there was no official evidence provided to establish how students from “under-represented and debt averse backgrounds” were responding to the new fees regime in England, and one could reasonably assume that although middle class students have no problem paying the fees and help to boost student numbers, students from low income groups may still be paying a high price for this indirect privatization of universities. Furthermore, the new system of student loans, which was introduced by the social-liberals of the “New” Labour party to replace the old system of student grants adopted by the Labour party of the social-democratic era, is not only pushing students to work in bars and McDonald’s restaurants — if not striptease joints— to complement their income, but is also leaving them with serious debts at the end of their studies.^[11] This has the important indirect social effect for the system of creating a docile class of citizens struggling to repay their student loans, on top of their mortgages, credit card loans, etc. —the perfect formula for a passive postmodern citizen who works hard and simply follows the elites: the American prescription for a ‘dream’ society!

The student movement: resistance and repression

The struggle against the privatisation of education in Greece did not only take the form of student occupations and lecturers’ strikes, which lasted for months. The struggle also took the form of a series of weekly demonstrations, with sometimes-significant confrontations with riot police, at least on one occasion —March 8— taking the form of a serious riot. On that day, a mass demonstration through central Athens was attacked violently by riot police, within an orgy of beatings and tear gas, on the usual pretext that a small number of militant demonstrators belonging to anarchist groups had started off the conflict with minor skirmishes. In fact, as leading police officers admitted,^[12] the demonstration was attacked because of a government order to break it —even though the demonstration had never been forbidden. This led to the mass arrests of over 60 demonstrators, who were sometimes charged with very serious offences —the most serious charge being made against a construction worker, presumably as a lesson to the working class not to join students and university staff in their struggle against privatisations. The attack also led to scores of demonstrators being injured, many with very serious injuries, according to the Union of the Red Cross hospital workers who treated them in the emergency department.^[13] Furthermore, the beatings and the blatant violation of demonstrators’ rights continued beyond their arrest, as their defence lawyers stated, who were not allowed to visit their clients until almost 24 hours after they had been arrested, and after their clients had been forced to sign “confessions” of illegal actions against the police.

Of course, the political elite and the mass media spoke of the “political violence” of demonstrators, confusing the systemic violence of the state with political counter-violence, which is founded on the questioning of the elites’ systemic violence.^[14] In other words, the elites and the media, once again, confused oppressors with oppressed, arguing that it was not the elites, who are attempting to privatise education, who are to be blamed for the violence, but their victims, who are attempting to resist it. This is the same logic used to

explain away the violence of Zionist occupiers against the Palestinians resisting the occupation, or the violence of the transnational elite's occupying forces against the victims of their occupations, either in Iraq or Afghanistan. No wonder that the next step taken by the Greek elite, following these militant mobilisations, was hurriedly to introduce another bill in Parliament effectively undermining "academic asylum", i.e. the right of students and staff not to allow the security forces to enter the university boundaries –for the sake of securing freedom of thought– without their prior expressed will. This had been another social conquest, which had been won after long and bloody struggles in the 1960s and which the present neoliberal government was keen to emasculate. As expected, the provocative passing of this bill by the governing majority in Parliament was another act by the elites that further enhanced the struggle of militant students.

Meanwhile, the social-liberals of PASOK (the main opposition party), although also committed to the EU line on privatisation, opportunistically made an about-turn and did not support the revision of the constitution procedure, under popular pressure and the pressure of its own youth movement. This merely represented a postponement of the revision procedure, which is expected to continue, with the support of both main parties, after the general election next year. This is because, for both neoliberals and social-liberals, neoliberal globalisation is indeed a one-way street, given that, in the present institutional framework of open and liberated markets, both sides have no option but to open education to the market.^[15] In fact, the main social consequence of neoliberal globalisation is the unprecedented increase in social and economic inequality which, however, is expressed not only by the huge concentration of income and wealth at the hands of privileged social groups, but also by the increasingly classist nature assigned to social services like education, health, and pensions. This is the direct or indirect result of the mass privatisation process going on everywhere at the moment, including Scandinavian countries which used to be the models of social democracy. It seems, however, that this is an incomprehensible fact to the reformist Left, which still hopes piously for the inevitable return to some kind of social democracy, given the present 'de-socialisation' of society which it believes is not reproducible for much longer. Clearly, this Left misses the point that American society, for one, has long been de-socialised and yet has still managed to reproduce itself!

Ideological repression to complement physical repression

However, it was not only the physical repression mechanism that was put into operation against the anti-privatisation struggle. The ideological repression mechanism played an equally important role in the elites' attempt to suppress the growing mass movement. The mass media and particularly the TV channels (with the state TV channels playing a leading role) orchestrated an attack against the students, presenting the militants among them, in particular, as hooligans of some kind, and systematically cornering the rest of them in stage-managed 'debates' in which the student view was always the minority view!^[16] The Prime Minister himself expressed the tone of the ideological repression when he stated, referring to the occupations and the demonstrations: "Some perceive that the state belongs to them. These people consist of minorities and marginal groups who do not respect democracy...the state belongs to all citizens".^[17]

This statement makes clear the fact that, for the Greek political elite, the country is still living in Pericles's Golden Age, when the state did, indeed, belong to its citizens (however narrowly defined), since at that time the separation of society from polity –which emerged some two millennia later with the American invention of representative 'democracy'—had not yet been established. It is equally clear that, for the same elites, modern society is not separated from economy, something which was institutionalised with the emergence of the system of the market economy almost at the same time as the establishment of representative 'democracy', two centuries ago. [18] In other words, for the supporters of the present system, there are no political or economic elites which monopolise political and economic power respectively, even though the majority of citizens are merely given the right to choose between parts of the political elite every four years or so – which, in today's neoliberal globalisation, have only decorative programmatic differentiations between them.

As a result, the elected part of the political elite is able to declare wars against other countries, not only without bothering to ask its citizens in advance, but even without hesitating sometimes to rebuff their protests contemptuously, even if they are expressed by millions of people in the streets (as in Britain, on the eve of the launching of the criminal invasion of Iraq in 2003), and further still by ignoring the mass disapproval of its policies in a subsequent election (US Congressional elections in 2006). Similarly, the Greek political elite never asked the views of educators or the educated before embarking on a process leading to the privatisation of higher education, or to the effective undermining of 'academic asylum', and yet had no qualms about calling the popular reaction to its unilateral decisions 'fascist'!

Another variation of the same argument by the elites is that it was only a minority of students and university staff who supported the occupations of universities, given that those who took part in assembly discussions and voting numerically represented only a small percentage of the total number of students and lecturers. However, it is preposterous indeed that such arguments are supported by professional politicians, who are given *carte blanche* every four years or so to carry out a vague political programme which is usually approved by less than one third of the electorate (in the USA this figure has now shrunk to less than a quarter!), as against student or lecturers' delegates who are elected through weekly or even daily assemblies to carry out specific assembly decisions, which are taken after thorough discussions of the issues involved!

Conclusions: The short- and long-term outcome of the struggle

The mobilisations against the privatisation of education are, at the time of writing (end of March) being phased out, although students and university staff associations have vowed not to implement the law undermining academic asylum, and to fight any attempt by the elite to revise the Constitution in future with the aim of abolishing the present exclusively public character of higher education. However, the long-term consequences of this struggle are much more significant.

- First, it is a major achievement, in the context of the Greek political scene, that many more students were able, this time, to act independently of the established political parties, than in the past. This particularly applies to the students belonging to the

PASOK social-liberal party, who effectively turned against their own party in their fight against the privatisation of higher education.

- Second, the consequence of the blatant violation of even elementary civil rights in the context of the creation, in Greece —like everywhere else in Europe and in the USA— of a democracy of repression and electronic surveillance of citizens (so that the growing social struggle against neoliberal globalisation may be checked), will inevitably be an even more massive organisation of this movement in future, with even higher demands than at present.

In other words, the present simple **antithesis** to the elites' decisions will, sooner or later, lead to the development of a **thesis** by this movement aiming not just to transcend the elites' decisions, but the elites themselves!

* – This article is based on a series of articles which were first published in the fortnightly column of Takis Fotopoulos in the mass circulation Athens daily *Eleftherotypia* on 24/6/2006, 3/2/2007, 3/3/2007 and 17/3/2007.

[1] See “[France: The revolt of the victims of neoliberal globalization](#)”, *The International Journal of Inclusive Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (November 2006).

[2] see T. Fotopoulos, “[From \(mis\)education to Paideia](#)”, *The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (September 2005).

[3] *ibid.*

[4] *Eleftherotypia* (26/09/2005).

[5] World Bank, *World Development Indicators* 2005, Table 2.10.

[6] *Eleftherotypia* (26/03/2006).

[7] see T. Fotopoulos, “[Economic restructuring and the debt problem: the Greek case](#)”, *International Review of Applied Economics*, vol 6 no 1, 1992.

[8] see *Eleftherotypia* (13/03/2007).

[9] Rick Fantasia, “United States: unequal opportunities- elites still control the universities”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, November 2004.

[10] Matthew Taylor, “Tuition fees blamed as number of students from poor families drops”, *The Guardian* (21/7/2006).

[11] Will Woodward, “Students are the new poor”, *The Guardian* (27/6/2001).

[12] see *Eleftherotypia* (9/3/07).

[13] *ibid.*

[14] See for these conceptions, T. Fotopoulos, “[The global 'war' of the transnational elite](#)”, *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July 2002).

[15] see T. Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy (2005)*, ch 3.

[16] see e.g. the debate program ‘Proskinio’ in the state-run channel NET-World (12/3/2006).

[17] see C. Karamanlis statement on 10/3/2007.

[18] T. Fotopoulos, [*The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy, ch 1*](#), see also for a more extensive treatment, T. Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy*, (London/N.Y.: Cassell/Continuum, 1997) ch 1.