

ON GREEK INDEPENDENCE

“Of the Greeks I can’t say much good hitherto, and I do not like to speak ill of them, though they do of one another”.

Lord Byron, 1824.

Today, for the first time since my childhood (mostly under the 1967-74 junta) the military parade was followed by traditional dances and an attempt to glorify patriotism. The coalition government comprising of leftist radicals and right wing traditionalists have decided to use the occasion for the unification of the two main populist strands of the Greek people under the banner of patriotism. But “patriotism is the virtue of the vicious” as Oscar Wilde once said. Noam Chomsky went further claiming that “when people are frightened, the more dangerous kinds (of patriotism) tend to emerge, and people huddle under the wings of power”.

Previous governments have tried to scale down the cost of the parades (estimated at 3.5 to 5 million euro) and SYRIZA when in opposition had repeatedly called for an end to this obsolete expression of historical memory. But as we all know good intentions and high morality are abundant in opposition but in scarcity when in government. As a prominent supporter of SYRIZA has said: “Apart from the cost of a military fiesta with popular spice that is an unacceptable cost in times of poverty, there is a major ideological, aesthetic and hence political and cultural issue”.

For all of us that we have a leftist past and have adopted a European perspective in the process of growing up we are saddened to see such pictures and behaviours of backward looking populist psychosis. Is the left now paving the way for a Golden Dawn resurgence? Lest not forget that there is always a more fervent patriot than the last one.

All this superficial patriotism spills over to current problems. Back in 2004 Germany was considered by the Greek people as the most friendly power followed by France. But austerity changed all that and now with the active encouragement of left and

right wing leaders Germany became again the great enemy. In German reparations we are seeing the solution to our financial problems. Mr. Tsipras has rightly so tried to change all that when visiting Berlin a few days ago when he said, "the Germans are not responsible for all the ills of Greece". Let us hope that in this case the prime minister will not use double language and change his story again when in Greece.

Greeks have an inclination of offloading their problems to a third party or simply regard their predicament as an act of god. In an interdependent world problems surely transcend borders and European institutions have miserably failed to promptly address some of the main causes of the current crisis. But the most serious problems are of our own making and some of the causes are traced back to the 19th century liberation from the Ottoman Empire our attitude as a people and the weak institutions that we have put in place at that time. In the course of history we had many opportunities to correct some of the deficiencies as in the 1909 revolution, or after the Great War in 1945 or even after the fall of the Junta in 1975. We have miserably failed to do so despite several sustained efforts to modernise our productive and social system. In fact most modernising politicians (with their failures and contradictions themselves) have been forgotten or stripped from any radical substance and are remembered today as father figures.

We are a people with a long history but have we learnt anything useful from our past? It is true that for generations we are consuming history and we leave off our glorious past. But this is not adequate anymore. One thing is clear that those who "misinterpret history" are bound to draw the wrong lessons. The new government would offer a great service to the nation if they introduce a more balanced history curriculum in schools including some books by great foreign historians that have loved Greece and studied the history of the country in a more objective manner¹. This is a much more profound and radical initiative than organizing fiestas!

S.T. 25/03/2015

¹ I would personally suggest George Finlay's History of The Greek Revolution and William Miller's The Latins in the Levant.