

## INTERVIEW

**Stathis N. Kalyvas** Yale University professor discusses the causes of Greece's culture of violence

# Why Greeks protest the way they do

BY HARRY VAN VERSENDAAL

The seemingly subdued reaction to the deaths of three bank employees during a demonstration against austerity measures in central Athens on May 5 indicates that it's not just the protests which are seen as natural in Greece but also the violence that accompanies them.

Stathis N. Kalyvas, a professor of political science and director of the Program on Order, Conflict and Violence at Yale University, talked to Athens Plus about the cultural roots of the rioting and destruction, the misguided role of the left and the long-term impact of recent events.

Contrary to the massive protests in the wake of the police shooting of Alexis Grigoropoulos in December 2008, recent demonstrations to protest the three deaths at Marfin Egnatia Bank on May 5 have been extremely modest in size – a recent demo in Syntagma Square, which had no political affiliation, only gathered some 150-200 people. What is the reason for this?

For a number of historical and political reasons, Greek society remains very sensitive to loss of life caused by agents of the state compared to other types of victims. In turn, this sensitivity is further reinforced by the capacity of various leftist parties and groups to mobilize people whenever state forces are seen as exceeding their authority. Indeed, this type of situation is critical for these groups, as it provides a unique recruitment opportunity for them. Lastly, the mass media, staffed by many journalists who came of age politically right before and after the fall of the colonels' dictatorship, in 1974, are happy to reinforce this type of sentiment through highly emotional coverage.

In contrast, no political organization called for, let alone organized, public protests for the three deaths at Marfin Egnatia Bank; likewise, the emotional reaction of the mass media was much less intense. In fact, there were several attempts to displace a part of the blame for these deaths and direct it toward the bank management, using a perverse way of reasoning – it was argued by some that the bank building lacked effective fire protection.

I think that this biased attitude also explains why no one seems to care much about the tens of deaths caused on Greek roads by avoidable traffic accidents and other similar instances.

Some commentators have branded the events of December 2008 a “popular uprising.” Do you agree with that description?

If by “popular uprising,” we mean a sustained mass protest seeking to challenge a political regime, as is now the case in Thailand for example, then it is pretty clear that the events of December 2008 fail to fit this definition. What happened in December 2008 was a convergence of two distinct events. On the one



Protesters clash with riot police during a demonstration in front of the Parliament building in Athens, on May 5. [EPA]



hand, many high school students protested peacefully against what they perceived, with good reason, to be the unjustified killing of one of their peers. On the other hand, several extreme leftist groups used this opportunity to generate widespread mayhem and destruction. They were helped in this by the fateful decision of a fearful government not to challenge them.

Some analysts appeared to read too much into the December 2008 protests, while certain politicians on the left sought to capitalize on the events. What degree of responsibility do they share for the current violence?

In my opinion, they share a considerable degree of responsibility. By fan-

ning the flames, they sought to gain political advantage. The electorate thought otherwise, however, as indicated by the results of both the European and general elections, which sanctioned these politicians.

Greece's left lost the 1946-49 Civil War but it seems to enjoy a peculiar type of political and cultural hegemony, which has made it largely immune to criticism from the right. Would you agree with this?

Yes, this is correct. The collapse of the dictatorship in 1974, which had appropriated the right-wing narrative of the Civil War, caused the total delegitimation of this narrative. Almost by default, the counter-narrative of the left became the official version of the history of the Greek Civil War, further enshrined in books, school textbooks and art. However, because the left-wing narrative is so closely associated with the so-called “metapolitefsi” period, i.e. the post-authoritarian era, it is unlikely to outlast the present economic crisis, which has brought this era to an end.

It has been argued that Greece has a culture of violence. Is violence in Greece seen as a legitimate part of the political game? Could violence be legitimate under a particular set of circumstances?

It is true that a certain culture of violence persists in Greek politics. This culture is primarily verbal and highly ritualized. Insofar as it is physical, it generally targets objects rather than people. Terrorist activity remains, on the whole, beyond the pale, even when it is not condemned as vigorously as it could, and should, be.

I find it very hard to think of circumstances that would justify the use of violence under a democratic regime. The

biggest achievement – indeed the very content – of democracy has been to decouple conflict from violence.

Does violence in Greece stem from the flawed relationship between the state and citizens?

There is, indeed, a flawed relationship between the state and its citizens in Greece – but it is also a contradictory one. On the one hand, several studies have shown that Greek citizens view the state with distrust. On the other hand, the same people expect the state to also employ them and assist them with all kinds of high-quality services. This flawed relationship can be traced to a history of polarized conflict and the domination of the state in political and economic life.

Do you agree that – much like homegrown terrorism – anarchist violence is, first of all, a question of social tolerance?

Absolutely. How else to explain the impunity that allows this type of violence to go on? According to recently released police data, there have been 5,952 firebombings during the last 12 years; yet one only finds 20 convictions during the same period. It is difficult to find another explanation for this type of impunity than social tolerance sanctioned by political decision. However, I think that the Marfin Egnatia deaths may mark a turning point in this respect: There may be support now for the application of the law.

Do you think that lingering economic and political crisis will turn ours into a more violent society?

Only if these extremist groups are allowed to continue to operate with impunity. Controlling them should not be a difficult problem; after all, their numbers are small. If these groups are placed under control, the crisis will likely generate only peaceful protests, not violence – unless, of course, a huge shock, such as a bank run, takes place.

Do crises like the current one expose the primal elements of a nation's psyche?

Not necessarily. Take the recent violence: There is nothing new about it. Four people died in a similar incident during protests in 1991. There have been several close calls since then. Street violence in Greece has been a constant, not a variable. This is what many foreign correspondents seem to miss when they attribute the violence to the crisis.

Do you see the recurring riots leading to a more aggressive police state?

Only if the street violence problem is not addressed. Indeed, the issue is not to move toward a more aggressive state but toward an effective state – one that applies the law. Failing that, there is a point where a majority will demand order at any cost. There is no question that this would be a negative development.

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Making  
history

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