

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

January 19th, 2006

Speaker: Peter Bratsis (University of Salford, U.K.)

Topic: "Perceptions of Corruption in Greek Politics: Between Commodity Fetishism and Globalization?"

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos (Columbia University)

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich (Columbia University)

Abstract: Beset by a series of domestic scandals as well as persistent criticism from many international organizations, there seems to be little doubt that Greece is, by far, the most corrupt member of the European Union. In opposition to this widespread view, this talk will argue that politics in Greece are no more corrupt than in any other capitalist society. Drawing upon the differences between the traditional meaning of corruption as destruction and decay (*diaphthora*), the modern meaning of corruption as an improper presence of the private within the public, and the post-modern meaning of corruption as opacity, it will be argued that perceptions of and the current emphasis on corruption is a product of the attempt to legitimize the capitalist state as well as to formalize and bureaucratize political forms throughout the world so that transnational capital can minimize its transaction costs and make more precise cost/benefit calculations.

Summary of presentation:

In the ancient world, the distinction between the public and the private operated only in a loose, functional sense; the agora, for instance, is a public space. But when we talk about public and private and corruption today, we're talking about a very different, non-spatial understanding of those two terms. "Public" today has a very different meaning in the context of corruption, and that difference has a lot to do with the development in early modern England of the notion of the king's two bodies. This legal and political idea asserts that the king (and consequently all other actors in the political arena) has two bodies: the private, concrete body (personal obligations, alliances, friends, convictions); and the public body, which is what we talk about when we talk about the body politic, the public, the common interest. The modern conception of corruption emerges only after that distinction is made. Also, in that duality of the public and private body we see the core of the peculiarity of the modern state and the way the experience of capitalism transforms social thought. The duality of the king as being himself and more than himself is no more than the commodity fetish produced in a different context (the commodity as itself and as having abstract existence, as labor-time). This modern notion of corruption is thus very much tied to the rise of the nation state, and premised upon the drastic increase in the exchange of commodities, which set the groundwork for the belief in this peculiar idea.

But why does something then become a corruption, in this new understanding? In the old system it's very clear when you become corrupt; but in the modern context, when both the public and private are acceptable, it's a very different understanding of what corruption is. Corruption here is not deterioration or destruction but adulteration, that

which is out of place. Politics today is all about conflicts of self-interest, interest groups competing for influence, people with different visions on different issues engage in conflict accordingly. So when does that become a corruption? If people look to Greece and say politics are corrupt, what are the criteria for making that characterization? If we look to the idea of corruption in Mary Douglas's *Purity in Danger* we find a good clue. She looks to Leviticus to try to understand the rules that regulate clean and unclean foods. To understand these cultural traits, Douglas says, you have to take them literally as rules of separation. Dirtiness is that which is out of place: it is not about the object itself but about its placement. Douglas says the rules in Leviticus are there to maintain the purity of the categories, which must be kept believable.

So one function of corruption discourse today is to keep the categories of the public and the private pure and believable. In the US and in most of Western Europe there are very specific rules about what is and is not allowed in terms of the distinction between public and private. There is no law that explicitly outlaws corruption; it would be the end of modern politics. There are only laws about *particular* instances, like the congressional ethics rules, which seek to keep these categories distinct (the case of the "candidate" being one separate to private individual and public servant). The first rule is that members cannot do anything that casts suspicion on the body: anything that even *looks* like corruption is prohibited. We have developed in the west a large number of these rules, which help structure our own perceptions of corruption.

One problem for the Greeks is that others look to Greece with the experience of these rules and judge Greeks to be corrupt. But the function of the rules are primarily domestic, to keep the public and private separate. The second problem with Greece is that there is increasingly a third way of understanding corruption, which begins to crop up around 1993. There are, for instance, groups like Transparency International, which is a collection of bureaucrats from the World Bank. The kind of corruption they are talking about is quite different: they care less about the presence of the private in the public than about transparency and predictability. In the context of globalization where capital becomes much more mobile, there has been a mushrooming of interest in the question of corruption, which usually comes in the form of a discussion of how people are poor because of corrupt bureaucrats and we have to save them by eliminating political corruption. Corruption determined from the point of view of transnational capital involves the question of transparency: how easy is it to understand the rules, how do you know whom to bribe, and what happens if the parties change? This sends us to Max Weber's three types of authority, traditional, charismatic, and rational. Rational authority presupposes legal bureaucratic form: you know the laws and you know they will be more or less enforced. The needs of capital in the global context are for the state to become more powerful, more autonomous, more bureaucratic. From the outside looking in, even though clientelism is no more corrupt than the corporatism of the US, Greece appears more corrupt according to these new transnational criteria because it is less stable and predictable. Greece is the state in Europe the most tied to clientelism in Europe, and it is therefore seen as the most corrupt. Clientelism becomes corrupt first of all because it's too obvious, and second of all because it creates an indeterminacy in social policy. Even the volatility of policies is perceived as corruption: even within the legal system, things

are more likely to change. In the context of the Greek case, this results in a number of contradictions and problems. There is the contradiction between the needs of political parties and the increased dominance of this western conception of corruption. You can't maintain the integrity of the party as constituted without honoring these clientalist linkages, and yet they decrease the legitimacy of the state by constantly bringing up charges of corruption. This becomes even more of a problem because what Greeks call corruption, *diaphthora*, is also associated with the older sense of destruction or moral decay (lying, for instance, as corruption). Greeks use *diaphthora* in both senses, and so the contexts in which the word can be used multiply.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: If corruption is about keeping the categories pure and believable, with instances that are considered pathological being corrupt, can the categories and the corrupt change from time to time and place to place?

Bratsis: Yes, what's considered pathological can change over time.

Q: Then there's the issue of people like Martha Stewart. She wasn't tried for anything like corruption, she wasn't a public official, she was convicted of perjury. No doubt there was an element of scapegoating in her case.

Bratsis: And again it was the moral issue. But the idea of corruption has a number of components. In a way it's a kind of cloaked normativity, because the state perceptions or declarations of what is corrupt is based on some idea of what is public and private, and what is opposed to that becomes branded as corruption. It's not corruption as we find in Aristotle, where there's an overt normative construct—what is a proper kingship?—and anything else is corrupt. In the modern system there's a hidden normativity, a political sleight of hand. Think of the *fakelakia* in Greece, the practice of informally giving money to doctors to get preferential treatment; from the western point of view it's a corruption, and probably most Greeks don't like it either. But if you formalize it and call it co-payments, or take it into account and compare the overall functioning of the system to that of other systems? Perhaps even with the extra cost of the *fakelakia* taken into consideration, medical care in Greece might be more egalitarian than in other places. But because of the informality of the exchange, because there is no fixed price or fixed avenue for payment, it is considered corruption.

Q: But doesn't someone has to benefit from this lack of definition?

Bratsis: Certainly, and this discussion of transparency in the 1993 Transparency International reports is built on the interests of capital. Recently you see a shift in the terms of the corruption debate, whether there's a move from a technocratic appeal (Simitis) to a more moralizing argument for transparency in the system (the current government, which includes this argument in the center of its profile). However, Greece has actually gone down a few steps in the ranks of corruption. Because there's a

limitation to how much you can implement this idea and keep out clientalism, if you're a political party organized like PASOK or Nea Dimokratia. The skeleton of the party, the active apparatus, is formed from these networks, and you can't disregard what they want.

Q: So how does the issue of *monimotita* fit into that system? And what effect does making more a moral issue of it, as the government now is, have on the people?

Bratsis: Some people say it's a cultural issue, but when he was ombudsman Diamandouros was hiring people with educations from outside, because he wanted people there who had seen another way of doing things. But in practice that means we want people who do things the "proper" way, not the Greek way. It can also become a moral issue, like in the US: there's nothing wrong with business being involved with politics in the US, it's just an anomaly, people being too greedy. When Transparency International sends these packets to countries, it's all about morals, how to teach the children proper restraint. There's also a sort of repetition of the white man's burden, how to educate public officials to act properly.

Q: You don't have a problem with transparency, though, do you?

Bratsis: No, I'm just trying to get at why it is that these organizations are calling themselves things like Transparency International, why that becomes the rhetoric. Through the early 70s there was a sizable group of academics who would say that corruption greases the wheels of commerce; that's no longer in fashion. Why is that?

Q: Can you tell us about your book?

The book, which should be out in April, is called *Everyday Life and the State*. Part of what I said tonight is in there; the main scope of the book is explaining the state by looking to everyday routines. I do think the critical function of social science has failed to give us new theories and understandings of the state. I argue that certain everyday activities are foundational to the existence of the state, and that the commodity form and the idea of exchange is foundational to the understanding of the distinction between public and private. The everyday foundations for national identities is also part of that, and so I look at things from Cavafy and Seferis to street vendors and souvlakia.

Q: Is there a bibliography in Greece about all this that we should have in mind?

Tsoukalas is one scholar who's made me think about this; we're combining some of our essays to make a book out of it. In general Greek academics follow the external trends, they reproduce dominant viewpoints from elsewhere, and repeat the old modernization theory that there's something out of balance that creates public corruption. I don't think that's the case. Mine is a paradoxical position; I'm saying that in order to understand corruption you shouldn't look to Greece, you should look to how the perceptions are organized outside. The attempt to present Greece as a pathological example has to do with the legitimizing functions for the other systems. A case study approach will always fail in the case of Greece, because the rules come from elsewhere.