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Popper in Greece

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ABSTRACT

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Notwithstanding Karl Popper's deep admiration for ancient Greece and his affection for modern Greece, his work has been mostly viewed with caution by Greek scholars who, until relatively recently, often chose to either ignore or downplay it. This stance can be partially attributed to the novel approach of Popper's critique to Plato which did not fare well with the foundational biases of modern Greek academic tradition and the prevailing intellectual inclinations of Greek scholars in the fields of the methodology of science and political theory. Although this bias has begun to recede during the last decades, there remains a lot to be done to fully integrate Popper's work into the Greek intellectual and social discourse. Nevertheless, the establishment of the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Athens University, along with the efforts of academics and public intellectuals, particularly during the Greek financial crisis of the last decade, have played a pivotal role in generating a broader interest in critical rationalism and popularizing Popper's ideas among a wider audience. This paper examines the evolution of the reception of Popper's ideas in Greece, both in scholarly circles and in public life, from the time of publication of his seminal work "The Open Society and its Enemies" until today, highlighting the efforts to foster a more comprehensive understanding of his important contributions.

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1. Introduction

Karl Popper read and wrote extensively on ancient Greek philosophy. Even though he was not a classicist, he read Plato and the Pre-Socratic philosophers in the original Greek, and he used the original text for the footnotes in his work. In his Presidential Address at the October 1958 meeting of the Aristotelian Society, he describes himself both as “an amateur, [...] a lover of the beautiful story of the Pre-Socratics”, and “not a specialist, nor an expert” on the subtleties of textual criticism of ancient Greeks. It was this approach that looked for the argument beyond the hermeneutics that invited criticism from scholars such as Kirk (1960; 1961) and Raven (Lloyd, 1967).

Popper famously saw in the Pre-Socratic the dawn of the modern scientific method as, according to his view, their method went contrary to the Baconian thesis, the “myth according to which science starts from observation and then slowly and cautiously proceeds to theories” (1958-9, p. 3). The Pre-Socratic were according to Popper the first thinkers to propose bold conjectures to the problems they perceived, and Popper saw this boldness as a moral imperative addressed to the intellectual, as he writes at the end of *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*: “Bold ideas, unjustified anticipations, and speculative thought, are our only means for interpreting nature: our only organon, our only instrument, for grasping her” (1953 [1934], p. 280). His intellectual affinity towards the Pre-Socratic lasted for his whole life as shown by one of his last works which was dedicated to Parmenides (1998), one of “the early Greek philosophers who gave Europe its philosophy, its science and its humanism” (p. viii).

Furthermore, Popper considered Socrates a personal intellectual hero, as the pioneer of critical thinking. Popper’s famous dictum on the rationalist attitude “I may be wrong, and you may be right, and by an effort we may get nearer to the truth” (Popper, 1945b, p. 225) rings decidedly Socratic. Popper even thought that the Three Worlds distinction that he proposes in *Objective Knowledge* (1972) is heavily influenced by Plato, even though Popper’s and Plato’s metaphysical frameworks and accordingly their conceptions of the world of ideas differ vastly. Besides, Popper repeatedly expressed his admiration for Plato and acknowledged his philosophical stature notwithstanding his critical stance, (see Popper, 1963, p. 89; 1972, p. 122) quoting approvingly Alfred Whitehead’s famous aphorism that all philosophy is footnotes to Plato and declaring Plato a forerunner of Newton and Einstein (Popper, 1963, p. 66-67).

However, Popper was famously critical of Plato’s historicist and teleological political philosophy, especially as expressed in the *Republic* and *Laws* where he saw Plato as a precursor to modern totalitarianism and an archetypical enemy of liberal democracy and the open society (Popper, 1945). In Popper’s view Plato’s fear of the opening of the Athenian democracy led him “to defend lying, political miracles, tabooistic superstition, the suppression of truth, and ultimately, brutal violence” (Popper, 1945, p. 189), and to propose a constitutional arrangement that runs contrary to the humanitarian and democratic values espoused by his mentor, Socrates.

This critical, and at times even polemical, stance against Plato initially alienated Popper from mainstream Greek scholars, who probably saw his critique not only as unorthodox and not

sufficiently backed by textual and contextual data but also as an attack on the ideological foundations of modern Greek academic tradition which since the founding of the modern Greek state had been heavily connected to German and more widely continental philosophic currents. Even though this bias has been largely mitigated during the last decades, Popper's work is still in some extent faced with caution or even enmity by many modern Greek scholars, both in its epistemological and its social and political aspects.

Although the impact of Popper's philosophical and epistemological work should be distinguished from the impact of his social and political ideas in Greece, a common thread can be found nonetheless.¹ Even though the relative absence of discussion of popperian philosophical and epistemological ideas by many Greek philosophers and historians of science can be partly attributed to the influence exerted to them by the work of Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend, this preference can arguably be ascribed to a more general academic tradition that favors more sociological and historical approaches over Popper's critical rationalism.

2. Modern Greek Philosophical Tradition and Popper

The first wave of the belated interaction with Popper's work in Greece was mostly centered on his critique of Plato in the first volume of *Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). Not surprisingly, his view that Plato could be considered a forerunner of totalitarianism did not fare very well with most Greek scholars who mostly ignored or glossed over Popper's work [eg. Vlastos (1973), Tsatsos (2005)] even though some aspects of the Popperian critique have similarities on their work. Characteristically, Despotopoulos (1978; 1988) in arguably the most detailed critique to Popper's view by a Greek scholar talks about the "false impression that can easily be made by some wording of the text of the *Republic* to some readers not acquainted with the book's language, style and intention", going so far as to argue that Plato, properly read, should be viewed as opposed to historicism.

The great differences among these three aforementioned thinkers underscore the scope of Popper's lack of impact on that generation of Greek scholars. Vlastos, a Greek academic philosopher working in American universities was a prominent scholar of Plato and the ancient Greek philosophy. Tsatsos, a Platonist and Neokantian, was a professor of Philosophy of Law in the Athens University and the co-founder and editor of the journal *Archive of Philosophy and Theory of Science* in the 1930's before embarking in politics. Underscoring his influence in the Greek public sphere was his election as the President of the Academy of Athens in 1966 and as the first President of the Hellenic Republic after the restoration of the democracy in 1975. Despotopoulos, a professor of Philosophy of Law and member of the Academy of Athens as well as a left-wing public figure who served as Minister of Education wrote extensively on philosophy, history and politics.

¹ For the unity of the popperian argument both in the theoretical/philosophical and the social/political sphere, see eg. Dimitrakos (1981, 1999, 2014, 2019).

The absence both of a more analytical treatment of Popper's philosophical and epistemological work by academic philosophers, and of a positive review of his argument in *Open Society and its Enemies* among Greek scholars that examine topics covered in Popper's work can be interpreted as the result not just of a lack of availability or interest, but chiefly of a deep difference of approach towards philosophical and epistemological questions between Popper and the then prevalent Greek academic tradition.

3. Academia

A significant step towards the incorporation of Popper's epistemological and social thought into the Greek academia was the founding in 1993 of the Department of Methodology of History and Theory of Science (later renamed to Department of History and Philosophy of Science) in the University of Athens. The Department was initially staffed among others by professors Petros Gemtos whose handbook on the *Methodology of Social Science* (1987, 2004, 2016) was seminal in introducing Popper's epistemological thought to Greek students, and Dimitris Dimitrakos, arguably the most prominent Popperian in Greece, who studied under Popper (see Dimitrakos, 1981; 1991; 1999; 2019). From the department's current staff, Professors Chrysostomos Mantzavinos, Vasso Kindi and Stathis Psillos (2001) discuss in their work Popperian themes albeit from a wider theoretical perspective.

Nevertheless, many representatives of the first generation of Greek academics working on History and the Philosophy of Science (such as Aristides Baltas, Costas Gavroglu and Pantelis Nikolakopoulos) centered on the Athens University Department of Methodology of History and Theory of Science and the National Technical University of Athens were mostly influenced by the work of Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend. It is worth noting that both Baltas and Gavroglu served as Ministers of Education under the 2015-2019 left-wing SYRIZA led government.

Popper's epistemological ideas are discussed in all major handbooks by Greek academics such as Kalfas (1983), Metaxopoulos (1988), Kouzelis and Psychopedis (1994), Kouzelis (1997), Pappas (2002), Drakopoulos et al. (2015) etc., although mostly in relation to the later work of Kuhn and Lakatos, as most of those scholars are not directly influenced by Popper.

On the same vein, the academic journal *Epistimi kai Koinonia* (Science and Society) was founded in 1993 with a stated mission to advance scientific research and the study of subjects related to political, social, and moral theory. Under the influence of Dimitrakos, the journal had initially a more Popperian orientation but still occasionally publishes related articles.

Popper's social and political work (eg. 1945, 1957 [1944]) has been taught as an integral part of Political Philosophy courses syllabi, notably by Pericles Vallianos, professor emeritus at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Athens.

It is notable however that only one original monograph on Popper has been published in Greece by Spyros Makris (2013), associate Professor of Political Theory at the Department of International and European Studies, University of Macedonia, while only three doctoral theses on Popper can be

found in the Greek National Archive of PhD Theses¹ written in Greece since 1993 (Karachalios, 1993; Kosteas, 2021, Patelis, 2022).

A list of Karl Popper's books translated and published in Greek can be found at the end of this paper. It is worth noting though at this point that neither *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959 [1934]), nor *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963) have been published in Greek, the preference being towards Popper's works on social and political topics, while the first book by Popper in Greek, a translation of the first volume of *Open Society and its Enemies*, was published only in 1980. Also, a significant number of the works presented in the list are currently out of print or barely available.

4. Civil society organizations

The task of popularizing Popperian ideas in Greece has been undertaken in a great part by a number of civil society organizations inspired by his work.

The Citizen's Movement for an Open Society (Κίνηση Πολιτών για μια Ανοιχτή Κοινωνία - CMOS)² was established in 1989 by prominent individuals coming from different professional backgrounds, ideological orientations, and political allegiances, resting on the principle of inter-ideological approach. Even though the Movement is not overtly Popperian, it promotes active debate on important issues through an open and critical dialogue. CMOS is mostly active in civil society, the environment, democratic governance and public administration, justice and human rights, higher education, and European and international relations. Its current (October 2022) president is Panos Carvounis, former Head of the Permanent Representation of the European Commission in Greece.

The Open Society Club (Όμιλος Ανοιχτή Κοινωνία - OSC) was founded on July 2012 by academics and active citizens that subscribed to the principles of liberal democracy, liberalism, the rule of law, human rights, and civil society. Its founding coincided the Greek financial and political crisis of 2009-2019 which precipitated a wave of disenchantment among Greeks who then voted massively for anti-liberals at both sides of the political spectrum and even voted the neo-Nazi *Golden Dawn* into the Greek Parliament. The Club's founding declaration was drafted by Dimitris Dimitrakos³. OSC was most active during the crisis years, organizing a series of lectures about open society⁴ as well as on various classical liberal and Hayekian themes, and was responsible for the *Ratio Vincit* blog that hosted opinion articles and pieces that popularized classical liberal ideas mostly by Dimitris Dimitrakos (eg. 2011, 2014) and Georgios Archontas (eg. 2013).

¹ <https://www.didaktorika.gr/>

² <http://www.kinisipoliton.gr/en>

³ The text of the founding declaration (in Greek) can be accessed at <https://anoiktikoiononia.wordpress.com/2012/07/12/διακήρυξη-ομιλου-ανοιχτή-κοινωνία/>

⁴ Eg. The open lecture on *The liberalism of Karl Popper* by Georgios Archontas organized by OSC and the Institute of Diplomacy and Global Affairs on the 23th of October 2014.

The Open Society Club was unofficially incorporated into The Center for Liberal Studies (KEFiM)¹ since two of its most active members, Dimitrakos and Archontas, joined KEFiM's academic board in 2017. KEFiM is currently the main independent non-partisan non-profit liberal think tank in Greece. Its "wide tent" policy allows the popularization of Karl Popper's as well as Friedrich Hayek's political, social, and epistemological ideas to a broad audience via various outlets which span from open lectures and articles to memes. The philosophical and political arguments of Karl Popper inform heavily KEFiM's main educational program on the current challenges of liberal democracy that began in 2022 and will continue for the coming years.

5. Politics

Although Popper's political and social ideas have not been explicitly incorporated into the ideological declarations and policy agendas of the mainstream Greek political parties, some of them, such as the importance of an open society which endorses the free critical discussion of ideas, the preference of piecemeal engineering over more comprehensive, grandiose social planning, and the dangers of the historicist and teleological view of society, are sometimes found in political discourse, mostly coming from the main center-right (Nea Dimokratia) and center-left (PASOK – Kinima Allagis) parties, even though they are rarely properly attributed.

During the 2009-2019 Greek financial crisis, Popperian ideas were often expressed in the public sphere in contrast to trends perceived as populist and totalitarian. However, there was a strong negative bias against any reference to open society, which was often seen even by prominent scholars, politicians, and top state officials as a "neo-liberal" attack to tradition, national coherence, and a perceived historical, normative, and institutional exceptionality of Greece. This mostly anti-liberal bias has been losing some of its momentum especially since 2015 but can be still seen in the public sphere, most notably among columnists in mainstream newspapers, even in newspapers of record. A notable columnist who since the 1990's often examines favorably Popperian themes is Paschos Mandravelis, who writes for *Kathimerini*.

A characteristic token of the widespread caution, if not hostility of many Greeks towards Popperian ideas in the past is illustrated by the following anecdote related by Dimitris Dimitrakos (2011): In September 1992, Dimitrakos visited Karl Popper in England and extended him an invitation on behalf of the University of Athens and the European Cultural Center of Delphi to be honored with an honorary doctorate. Popper was enthusiastic about the prospect because of his great admiration for ancient Greece and his love for modern Greece. He even postponed his programmed visit to Prague, where he was invited for the same purpose, to make time for Athens as he considered the limitations of his old age.

Popper was presented with his University of Athens honorary doctorate on May 17th, 1993. The university ceremonial hall was half-empty with only 50 to 60 attendants and not a single member of the Greek political class, despite various assurances to the contrary.

¹ www.kefim.org

The visit of Karl Popper to Greece was however covered by the Greek national television broadcaster that produced a program in which several Greek public intellectuals spoke about Popper and his philosophy giving the wider Greek audience a chance to get acquainted with his ideas and work.

Next year, Popper visited Prague. He was received there with great honors by the then President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel who insisted on taking a commemorative photograph with him.

6. Conclusion

Although Popper's work had been received with caution by Greek scholars for decades, his ideas are gaining ground slowly but steadily in Greece. Liberalism, which used to be a dirty word in Greece, is currently, in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the previous decade, the most popular ideological self-characterization in the country (Dianeosis, 2018; 2019; 2022)¹. Traditional "ethnocentric" Greek intellectuals that felt they were part of a "Popper vs. Plato" battle that supposedly touched upon the ideological foundations of modern Greece, are giving way to a younger generation of scholars that understand Popper's criticism in its proper context. In the field of philosophy of science and epistemology, the Popperian argument and critical rationalism more generally are being taught and examined favorably and not just in the context of the later work by scholars such as Kuhn and Lakatos.

In this regard, a promising relevant noteworthy development was the publication of five articles on Popper's life and work in *Philosophia*, the journal of the Academy of Athens, in 2019 (Alatzoglou-Themeli, 2019; Dimitrakos, 2019; Goutsia, 2019; Kinti, 2019; Virvidakis, 2019), along with the publication of the Greek translation of Popper's autobiography (Popper, [1974], 2018).

Lastly, Popper's social and political ideas are being presented and rightly attributed by a growing number of Greek scholars, journalists, public figures and civil society organizations to an audience willing to examine them more sympathetically freed from the heavy anti-liberal bias that was prevalent in the past decades.

What remains to be seen, and the challenge for Greek Popperians and classical liberals, is whether the disillusionment of Greeks with anti-liberalism, Marxism and other closed ideological systems that has been expressed in the last years, most notably with the 2019 general election results, will prove to have a more permanent character, assisted by Popper's still relevant criticism.

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¹ See the rolling *Ti pistevoun oi Ellines* (What Do Greeks Think) survey by the independent think-tank DiaNEOsis. In the last 2022 installment, the "liberal" self-characterization was again the most popular one with 18,9% of the answers against 14,1% of the next most popular "social democrat" self-characterization.

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