

Pandora's Box

Text: Ioanna Rapti

Athens, June 2010: 31 degrees centigrade, two months after getting under the inspection of International Monetary Fund, one month after three bank employees died in a fire caused by the explosion of a bomb in the bank during a demonstration, and thirty days after receiving the first installment of the loan from the IMF.



photos: Nikos Mattheos

Athens, June 2011: 28 degrees centigrade under heavy rain, waiting for the fifth installment of the loan from IMF to give a solution to an impossible equation. It looks like Pandora's box has just opened and tax measures, social and political changes came out of it and huge demonstrations and strikes became the decoration of this box. On June the 16th the total eclipse brought with it the collapse of the government and on June the 17th, birthday of the Prime Minister, a new

government undertook the responsibility to find a way out of the labyrinth.

Last year was full of difficulties and scandals, which were investigated and as a result, today ex members of the government are few steps before imprisonment, while at the same time long discussions take place in cafés or on the streets about the causes of the crisis and the future results of it. The topics either have the form of a question, e.g. "Is there a future for Europe?" or "Can our political system survive?" or "Can we hope that things are going to improve within the next years?" Or they have the form of statements, e.g. "We are lost" or "The end of an era is here" or "We do not surrender". In an article in the newspaper Kathimerini a professor of Law School strongly supported the idea of a united Europe and Modernism, while at the same time he declared that the May of 1968 proved to be a utopia, New Liberalism was a tragic mistake and the decades of the '80s and '90s just a memory of long gone happy years.



The unique hopeful sign he finds is the fact that Athens alone has 120 theaters and many well-educated young people, capable for high performance.

On the other hand, another university professor is rather disappointed by the fact that the financing of universities has been reduced from 45 to 25 million euros for the University of Athens within the last two years. “Cut everything and then cut your throat also” he advises rather cynically, meaning that privatization in education shall mean the extinction of high standards education. Others keep on reminding that political choices of citizens, private over loaning and exaggerated consumption during the period of false development of Greece, can easily

explain the current situation. For them, it is obvious that people always pay for their mistakes in the end and accepting the new reality and making an effort to come out from the crisis, both on the private and collective level, would be the only way out.

The non-arguable fact is that everyday life has been tragically transformed last year. Mary, 26 years old, is working at the Zara shop in one of the main streets downtown of Athens. Almost twice a month the shop is temporarily closed down due to demonstrations, which very often include breaking the windows and use of chemicals by the police. When Mary’s shift is over, the first thing she sees when she comes out on the street,

is the homeless man who permanently has his belongings on the side of the street and is reading the free press, perhaps to have the illusion that he is still a member of this society. Last year homeless people have multiplied, while at the same time decent pensioners search the garbage for bottles of beer or for precious things to resell at the flea market on Sunday. Until midnight immigrants sell their valuables on the street, which include clothing of every kind, toys and female bags, all of them false imitations of expensive gadgets. When Mary walks in the bar to meet her boyfriend, the bar is almost empty, just like the empty streets. People laugh with difficulty and jokes are rather sarcastic. Almost every day a shop closes down, not to mention at least ten burglaries per day in a bank, a super market, a jewelry shop, etc. Everyone is on alert when walking on the street or even when drinking a beer. Mary's future plans are interrupted, but she is trying to adjust to new conditions without losing her faith.

Katherine, 32 years old, was a lawyer at her aunt's law office. Last month her aunt decided to retire and close the law office due to new taxes set on the legal services and due to the new pension system, which constantly changes against lawyers. Katherine went back to her hometown, after having lived in Athens for 15 years, looking for professional sur-



vival. Unemployment is the new crash against young people. The situation changed rapidly and no provision was made for dealing with unemployment. New labor laws are enforced and Katherine knows many people who work only a few hours a day, without being able to make ends meet, and others who work



like slaves with less money than ever before. A general feeling of insecurity intrudes everyday activities like a phantom. The big question is who is going to be calm enough to be the safeguard of civil rights, now that the reconstruction of the society is a common claim, but the orientation of this reconstruction is still not clear.

Many young people follow social media like Facebook or Twitter in order to find answers to their questions. There is a slogan running around "Thought cannot be prohibited, Keep thinking". There are endless discussions about the crisis, about a new type of colonialism, about the transformation of the Greek society. Facebook was also the main organizational platform for the Greek version of the los Indignados movement (their website is www.realdemocracy.gr) with the main demands to refuse the commands of IMF and the European Union because they were unfair and destructive for the way of living and everyday life. They are against the politicians who support MOU with IMF and they feel compelled not to give up until those who brought the nation into this crisis leave. Their enemies are: Troika-Banks-MOU-Government. They say that their fight is matter of dignity and honor and they undertook this commitment towards themselves and towards their children to whom they offer days of horror. The followers of the los Indignados movement

stand on the square opposite to the Parliament and hold general assemblies, like in ancient Athens, where everyone can speak freely and express his ideas. A minister of the government (now Minister of Finance) proposed to the Parliament to invite representatives of Greek los Indignados to talk with representatives of the Parliament, because in his opinion it is rather dangerous to have an antiparliamental movement outside the building of Parliament without knowing its claims.

Moreover, traditional mass communication media go through an Armageddon due to the financial crisis. Major newspapers close down because of debts, while others stop running the everyday edition and are limited to the Sunday edition. Many journalists are laid off and there is a concentration of these media in the hands of a few major players. Often employees are left with no choice and either follow the new boss or lose their job. Television follows the same trend and due to huge financial problems there is no production of new content, and instead only old TV programs or Brazilian/Turkish soap operas are broadcasted.

In other words, the crisis is felt like an earthquake. It happened unexpectedly and had tragic results. The main issue is the political crisis and the crisis in society. Greece is a small country, but unfortunately "trust" in politicians has been

lost since decades, which is the main reason for social disorder. In Athens, the feeling of conflict is everywhere and the strong presence of police and special task forces brings nervousness—but coins always have two sides. In our case, people who were not interested in politics now began to participate in public discussions and are trying to express their claims and unite with others. It seems that the wisdom of ancient Greek Mythology is still vivid. Pandora’s box contained many evil things such as toil, illness and despair, but it also contained hope. Now that the box is opened, these evils as well as hope are released into the sunny country called Greece. We all hope that the sun will shine brighter and we will be able to find the sense of measure and balance again in the near future.

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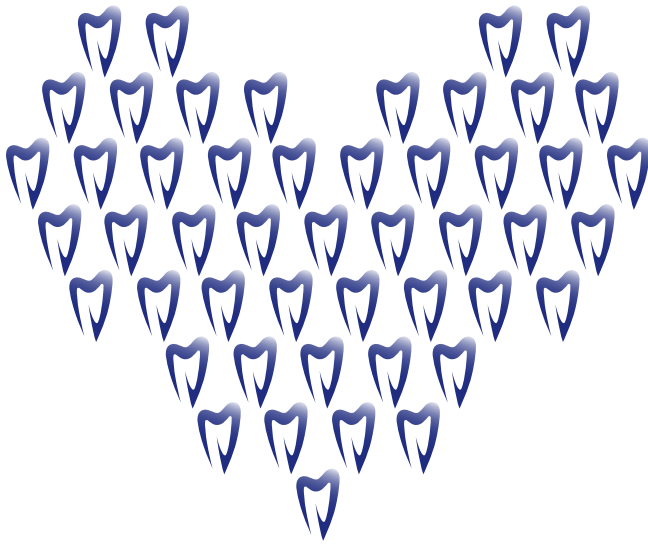
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