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Studying Contemporary Greek Neo-orientalism: the Case of the “Underdog Culture” Narrative¹

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: This paper studies the prevalence, pre-eminence, premises and political usage of the “cultural dualism” narrative in contemporary Greece, which is predominantly attributed to Nikiforos Diamandouros.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The “cultural dualism” (“underdog culture”) reading of Modern Greece divides Greek society and political life into an “underdog” Orthodox conservative culture and a “reformist” Western secular culture, thus forming a Neo-orientalist schematization. The paper traces and analyses instances of this dichotomy (particularly instances in which it is presented as self-evident, a given) in Greek academia, journalism and political discourse.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: This “underdog culture” narrative, broadly understood, is here identified as the implicit hermeneutic approach almost universally employed when studying non-standard political and cultural thought in Greece: other forms thereof comprise the dichotomies of “normal/non-biased” versus “anti-Western,” “European” versus “national-populist,” “secular” versus “religious/Byzantine/Orthodox” etc. I proceed to analyse those and propose the term “Greek Neo-orientalism” for their categorization.

1 I am grateful to the German Research Foundation (DFG), which provided me with the means necessary for the research behind this paper through *Forschungsspendium* MI 1965/2-1.

RESEARCH RESULTS: In the paper, the prevalence of Diamandoureaan “underdog culture” reading in the Greek public sphere – academic as well as political and journalistic – is demonstrated, concluding that a non-Neo-orientalist reading of contemporary Greek political thought and theory is yet to appear.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The paper underscores the need for an alternative research agenda that would for the first time examine non-standard Greek political thought that affirms Greece’s Byzantine past and Orthodox culture not via the Neo-orientalist approach, but through a methodology suitable to that end.

KEYWORDS:

Neo-orientalism, cultural dualism, Greece, Eastern Orthodoxy, Nikiforos Diamandouros

There is arguably nothing more fulfilling for a scholar than witnessing one’s hermeneutic *schema* becoming the standard frame of reference, giving shape and voice to pre-existing discourses and achieving almost universal recognition – even more so if this *schema* describes one’s own country, and if its acclaim emerges within the country itself. It is safe to say that this is precisely the case with Nikiforos Diamandouros’ “underdog culture versus reform culture” theory:² the narrative that there is a fundamental division in Greek society and political life, a division into an “underdog” conservative culture on the one hand and a “reformist” western culture on the other, the former emerging as an impediment to progress, the latter as guaranteeing it—reminiscent, in a way, of Russia’s *Zapadniki* versus *Slavyanofili* cultural dualism. In Diamandouros’ dichotomy, the “underdog culture” represents the majority of the Greek population; it has deep roots in Byzantine and Ottoman times as well as in Orthodox Christianity, and reflects tendencies towards populism and clientelism, nationalism and xenophobia. It sees domestic politics as well as international relations as a conflict between the powerful and the powerless, always sympathising with the ones it perceives as powerless, as the victims, Greece being one of them. It is a culture of

2 Diamandouros, 1994, later translated in Greek as Diamandouros, 2000.

protest and resistance, with an hostility against reform, modernisation, globalisation, Europe, the US and the West. On the other hand, the “reform culture” of the modernisers is its polar opposite: it has deep roots in the philosophical and political legacy of the Enlightenment and strives towards Europeanization, rationalisation, liberal democracy and an institutions-based state, the separation of state and society and cosmopolitanism. It affirms capitalism and the free market economy, and while it reflects a minority in the Greek people, its strongholds are certain political elites, academics, intellectuals, and the diaspora. Not without important fluctuations and occasional changes, Modern Greek history and political history in particular can, according to this theory, be read as a struggle between the “underdog culture” of the backward-looking majority and the “reform culture” of the Enlightened minority, with the latter losing the battle and the former winning it.

I do not only hold that this model of Greece is fundamentally flawed, but more importantly that its prevalence and pre-eminence in diverse analyses concerning contemporary Greece renders non-partisan (or, at the very least, less-partisan) readings of Greece impossible; it blinds us even to basic facts, dictating a problematic framework of interpretation and reference and becoming a very real impediment to the progress of social sciences as far as the scholarly engagement with modern Greece is concerned. For the “underdog culture versus reform culture” reading is not only prevalent in analyses of Greece’s political culture, but spans to a surprising number of disciplines. Aston University’s Ioanna Ntampoudi is right to note that “disparate and varied research projects on Greek politics and society often begin their inquiries by referring to the well know cultural dualism that Diamandouros first elaborated,” (Ntampoudi, 2014b) citing Kalpadakis and Sotiropoulos (Kalpadakis & Sotiropoulos, 2007) on foreign policy change, Paraskevopoulos (Paraskevopoulos, 1998) on social capital, Spanou (Spanou, 2008) on reform, Halkias (Halkias, 2004) on the politics of reproduction, Stavrakakis (Stavrakakis, 2002) on religion and politics, and so on.

My claim here is not that the perpetuation of this dichotomy in analyses of modern Greece’s state *originates* in that paper by Diamandouros; rather than that, I am proposing that this narrative *gave voice* to this theoretical dichotomy and that it was later *recognised* as

such – and that, consequently, it deserves to be examined as central to the present research enquiry. In referring to Diamandouros’ “underdog culture versus reform culture” analysis, I am indicatively referring to a host of interrelated ideas and converging analyses by a particular group of influential scholars, with Diamandouros’ being the most visible and celebrated one – but Diamandouros’ theory itself is merely the starting point, not the object of my inquiry. That is, I am more interested in how this dichotomy *is used* and on how it *evolves* rather than on Diamandouros’ argument *per se* – however, in order to be able to analyse the former, I will first have to present the latter.

Central to my argument is that such schematisations constitute a peculiar *Greek Neo-orientalism*, in that they embody the very essence of cultural imperialism in Orientalism (or “Balkanism,” as described by Todorova, 2009), which sees Western society as developed, rational, democratic, and thereby superior, while non-Western societies are undeveloped, irrational, inflexible, and implicitly inferior (Mamdani, 2004, p. 32). Here, the main traits of *Greek Neo-orientalism* are that (a) it is voiced by *Greeks*, rather than by others, when they describe/criticize their own country, (b) it employs typical Orientalist/Balkanist stereotypes, albeit appropriated accordingly, taking into account Greece’s historical background (and proposing a rather peculiar hermeneutical framework for its understanding), (c) it always proposes, explicitly or implicitly, a further and enhanced political, cultural, and economic alignment with “the West” (in whichever way this is being defined by particular Greek Neo-orientalists), while holding that such an alignment was never truly the case.

Greek Neo-orientalism is similar to but distinct from Balkanism; an analysis of this difference would be beyond the scope of the present article, but has to be addressed in the future. Suffice it to say it is central to Greek Neo-orientalism that its narratives, in the particular form and state in which they emerge as Neo-orientalism, originate in Greece, or at least by Greeks abroad, and may then be exported and reiterated by non-Greeks – rather than coming to Greece “from the outside” as it were, from external sources, and then becoming internalised. In insisting on maintaining a connection between the two terms, one could say that Balkanism evolves into Greek Neo-orientalism precisely at the moment when its stereotypes are internalised

and appropriated to the point that they undergo a fermentation and emerge as *original* ideas, having turned into the particular schematisations under scrutiny here, which are perceived as a distinct universe of ideas – often acquiring a loftiness and theoretical refinement that is not to be found in the original and by far surpass it.³ In such an understanding, Neo-orientalism is implicitly responding to the need prompted by Balkanism in Greek intellectuals: in attempting to escape being themselves characterised by the stereotypes of Balkanism, in attempting to “become Western/European,” they take these very stereotypes to a whole new level as *original intellectual production*, to which they indeed result, rather than merely reiterating them. Thus, Greek Neo-orientalism acquires its particular characteristics and deserves to be studied as a phenomenon of its own.

While Diamandouros centres in his “Cultural Dualism and Political Change” on “post-authoritarian Greece,” i.e. on Greek *metapolitefsi* after the fall of the colonels’ *junta* in 1974, he extends his analytical claims to the emergence of the modern Greek state in the nineteenth century and earlier still, to the Ottoman rule and Byzantine times. Other scholars, such as emeritus Professor of Political History at the University of Athens Thanos Veremis, will compose similar narratives centring on the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) and its aftermath, while others still will apply this reading to contemporary events and the Greek crisis (2008-?);⁴ the July 2015 Greek referendum offered a regal occasion for the renewed implementation of such formulas in public discourse. Diamandouros’ “underdog culture versus reform culture” analysis functions, thus, as a placeholder for all such cognate analyses and dichotomies such as “normal/non-biased” versus “anti-Western,” “European” versus “national-populist,” “secular” versus “religious/Byzantine/Orthodox” etc. The last dichotomy is exceedingly crucial, as all analyses and versions of these dualities place particular importance to the foundational role of religion, i.e. Orthodox Christianity, in the alleged reactionary backward orientation of what is identified by Diamandouros as the non-reformist, non-modernising, populist, Eurosceptic, anti-American camp.

3 Stelios Ramfos can be cited as an extreme example of this metamorphosis.

4 Triandafyllidou, Gropas, & Kouki, 2013b and particularly their *Introduction* (2013a).

Before examining the possibility of readings that are *obscured* by the prevalence of Diamandouros' narrative, it is of essence to embark on a closer inspection of the narrative itself, as well as of its socio-historical context.⁵ After introducing the reader to scholarship on cultural dualism, Diamandouros asserts that the Greek case fits well into this general pattern.

The construction of a modern state in Greece during the first half of the nineteenth century entailed the introduction in that country of Western, liberal political institutions (e.g., constitutionalism, rule of law, legal-bureaucratic state, regular army) and their grafting onto traditional and pre-capitalist, indigenous structures that were essentially the product of the long Byzantine (Church law) and Ottoman (state) heritages (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 12-13).

This political and cultural reorientation in state-society relations engendered social, political, and cultural struggles between potential beneficiaries and potential losers: cultural dualism is here essentially power struggle. This is recognised by Diamandouros as *the* major critical juncture in modern Greek history, shaping its encounter with modernity and ultimately disclosing

two powerful and sharply conflicting cultural traditions, embedded in the novel (Western) and antecedent (Byzantine-Ottoman) elements of the modern Greek historical experience, which, over time, reproduced themselves through on-going and overlapping processes of interaction, accretion, assimilation, and adaptation (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 13).

5 Some biographical context would be useful here. Born 1942 in Athens, Nikiforos Diamandouros served as European Ombudsman for ten years, from April 2003 until October 2013. He was elected thrice to that post, in 2003, 2005, and 2010. From 1998 to 2003, he was the first National Ombudsman of Greece. He is Emeritus Professor of Comparative Politics at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the University of Athens. After graduating from Indiana University in 1963, he then attended Columbia University, where he was awarded an M.A. in 1965, an M.Phil. in 1969 and a Ph.D. in 1972. In 2014 he was elected a member of the Academy of Athens, Greece's national academy and the highest research establishment in the country. For this biographical information, see ("Nikiforos Diamandouros," 2016, "P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, European Ombudsman: Curriculum vitae," n.d.).

The author holds that, despite later developments, the major premises of each culture remained quite identifiable over time and formed Greek society and politics from the emergence of the modern Greece nation-state until today. These two cultures are not always visibly formed into two opposing cults; Diamandouros stresses their *cross-sectional* nature, i.e. their

the tendency to cut across Greek institutions, strata, classes, or political parties in Greek society and not to become *exclusively* identified with any one such structure across time or even at any given moment. Put otherwise, though particular institutions or social actors, including political parties, have, in specific historical periods, tended to become more explicitly identified with one or the other of the rival cultures and to serve as their primary exponents, the extent of identification has varied from period to period and cannot be taken for granted;

this means that both cultures live on in virtually all Greek institutions, structures, and social arrangements, annulling the possibility of substantial consent (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 13-14).

Diamandouros will then proceed to assign historical depth to the two cultures. What he will later describe as the underdog culture is

steeped in the Balkan-Ottoman heritage and profoundly influenced by the *Weltanschauung* of an Orthodox church which, for historical, intellectual, as well as theological reasons, had long maintained a strongly, and occasionally militant, anti-western stance (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 14-15);

this identification of the underdog culture as *primarily* rooted in Orthodoxy and Byzantium is of particular importance for the alternative reading I will later provide here. To offer a definition of the term with the meaning employed here by Diamandouros,

an “underdog” culture can be conceived as a subcategory of “traditional” that can be applied to societies or cultures which have experienced contact with more “developed” systems, have established asymmetrical, subordinate relations with them, and have internalized this asymmetry in negative and defensive terms that have translated in a commensurately diffident and xenophobic view of the international order (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 89-90n18).

The author ascribes a number of (negative) qualities to this Orthodox/Byzantine current: introversion, a powerful statist orientation, a profound ambivalence concerning capitalism and the market mechanism, preference for paternalism and protection, adherence to pre-capitalist practices, moralism and parochialism, intolerance, authoritarianism, and a host of other negative characteristics (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 14-15). Diamandouros' blaming of Orthodox Christianity for these negative characteristics is *the* central and most indispensable characteristic of his reading, which he presents in historico-theological terms (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 16). He concludes his historical treatment of this "powerful underdog culture" that is shaped by Orthodox Christianity and Greece's pre-modern past without being short on words and negative designations: this culture is represented by the "least competitive strata and sectors of Greek society," which are characterised "by low productivity, low competitiveness, the absence or tenuousness of economic, political, and cultural linkages to the outer world and to the international economy, the aversion to reform" etc. However, this enemy of modernisation can claim "the allegiance of a majority of the Greek population since independence" (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 22-24).

Following his exposition of the "underdog culture," Diamandouros proceeds to paint an idyllic picture of the "reformist culture" (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 24-29). A culture that "draws its intellectual origins from the Enlightenment and from the tradition of political liberalism issuing from it;" it is decidedly secular, extrovert and Western-oriented; with liberal and capitalist reform as its programme for society, economy, and polity. Favourable to the market mechanism, it is more receptive to innovation and less focused on the preservation of tradition. Outward-looking rather than parochial than its rival, Greece's reform culture favours "the creation and proliferation of international linkages for Greece" and its integration into the international system (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 24-25). At the political level, it strives towards liberalism and constitutionalism; Diamandouros describes it as being characterised by a commitment to democracy, in implicit contrast to the Orthodox underdog culture. He also lists

a distinct and normative preference for the mediated exercise of power, through the establishment and gradual consolidation of modern

political institutions suited to that purpose; and an expansive rather than restrictive conceptualization of civil and human rights and, more generally, a central and, over time, mounting concern with the nature and content of citizenship in the Greek the political system.

This results, he argues, in a focus on institutions and on the rights of citizens and “the desire to diminish the pervasive influence of clientelistic relations in politics and the dependence on particularistic arrangements and corporatist structures which it implies” (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 25-26); as we will later examine, this conceptualisation is, in practice, starkly contrasted to recent historical experience in Greece, where the reform camp has utterly excelled in clientelism, corruption and particularistic arrangements. It cannot but be remarked that the argument tends to being cyclical, in that words of cognate semantic content are used to explain and elaborate on other such words: thus, the “reform” and “modernising” culture is “progressive” in that it seeks to replicate the advancements of the “advanced” industrial West’s “developed” democracies (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 23-30). According to Diamandouros, the cosmopolitan Western reformist culture was on the rise in Greece from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the mid-1930s. From then on it started its decline, while the underdog culture was experiencing an ascendancy in Greek politics (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 29-30).

His study will then focus on the struggle of these two cultures during Greece’s *metapolitefsi*, i.e. during the period after the fall of the 1967-1974 military junta. Three aspects require our attention: firstly, that Diamandouros insists on the dissemination of both cultures across the political spectrum, i.e. that they are not two wholly distinct and visible camps. He points out that the two rival cultures do not neatly coincide with any one particular party: “the two cultures cut, to a very large degree, across the major Greek political parties and defied facile, unidimensional identifications with partisan structures” and singles out Costas Simitis as a clear representative of the reform culture (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 42).

Secondly, he places his hopes on the European project for strong-arming the “underdog culture” and establishing the “reform culture” as the dominant political power in Greece (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 55), contrary to the majority’s alleged allegiance to the “underdog culture.” Thirdly, he insists that reform is a *cultural* battle at least as

much as it is a *political* battle – but, in any case, primarily a battle over power and influence:

to be sure, the realization of reform (and all that it implies) ultimately depends on the capacity of the domestic social actors identifying with this tradition successfully to profit from the powerful external support provided by the Community and its multiple structures and sufficiently to enhance their own position within Greek society, economy, and politics in order to overcome the confining conditions to the permanent ascendancy of the reformist culture which the tenacious resistance of the strata adhering to the underdog culture ultimately represents.

In this, Diamandouros lays out a plan for dominance and hegemony:

success in this direction would suggest that the forces identified with reform and modernization in Greece have managed (a) to overcome their historic inability to translate their temporary ascendancy into a permanent one; (b) to serve as the logic of integration in Greek culture and politics; and (c) to open the way for their eventual hegemony and the long-term marginalization and eclipse of the underdog culture (Diamandouros, 1994, p. 60).

The programme rests on *cultural* premises and as such is first and foremost a battle of symbols, minds, and public opinion, while it aims at the very *eradication* of the underdog culture, its eclipse. Seeing that the primary premise of this underdog culture is Orthodox Christianity and the symbolic holding onto Greece's Byzantine heritage, the implications of this for the reform culture enthusiast's code of conduct is quite explicit: for Diamandouros, the way to modernisation and reform is the battle against the impact of this heritage on the minds of Greeks.

Diamandouros is aware of the need to back up these bold claims by demonstrating a firm grasp of his material, i.e. a firm grasp of Orthodoxy's nature, history and theory; he is aware that without such a demonstrable grasp, such claims would appear as little more than arbitrary. To that end, he will summon an impressive array of bibliographical sources on Orthodoxy in note 14, which spans pages 84-86, leading the reader to recognise the erudition behind the author's claims. However, this bibliographical torrent can be seen as

problematic in a number of ways; I will indicatively mention two of them. On page 85, Diamandouros invites the reader to consult two books “on Orthodox theology”: P.N. Trembelas’ *Dogmatique de l’Eglise orthodoxe catholique*, 3 vols. (Paris: Editions de Chevetogne, Desclee De Brouwer, 1966-1968), a markedly scholastic treatise universally recognised by theologians today as much more Roman Catholic than Orthodox, in effect as a book on Roman Catholic Dogmatics (Yannaras, 2006, p. 206-212). This means that in order to back up his claims on Orthodoxy as a cause of Greece’s inability to follow the West, Diamandouros cites a book outlining the theology behind the very historical developments of the West that purportedly Greece cannot follow up with due to its denominational distinctiveness.

His second recommendation on Orthodox theology, on the same page, is “Vladimir Lessky’s *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989).” Of course, the celebrated theologian of the Russian diaspora is Vladimir *Lossky* and not Vladimir *Lessky*;⁶ there would be no reason to regard this as anything more than a typographical error, were the same *Lessky* not to appear in the notes and bibliography of the Greek revised edition of Diamandouros’ book six years later (Diamandouros, 2000, p. 45n14, 148). The pertinent question here is whether Diamandouros’ theory is indeed based on a thorough knowledge of the theoretical and historical subjects at hand to the extent that he claims it is, and this is a question with implications for the current of ideas that is formed, informed and represented by his theory.

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Diamandouros recently updated and reaffirmed his theory, effectively claiming that it holds now true more than ever (Diamandouros, 2013). In spite of his schematisation’s problems and shortcomings, some of which have been already expounded by scholars and intellectuals,⁷ he is exceedingly admired for precisely this schematisation by a host

6 This is not a transliteration variant, as the book in question was published in English and is cited as such.

7 Particularly noteworthy is Kostis Papagiorgis’ review of Diamandouros, 2002, i.e. the Greek translation of Diamandouros, 1972 in which the background

of Greek “reform culture” scholars, academics, journalists, and politicians, who employ it as a self-evident hermeneutic key, as a theory that *explains* and *proves*, but does not need to be *explained*, much less *proven*. Indicatively: Paschos Mandravelis, a prominent journalist and opinion maker of the newspaper *Kathimerini* (dubbed by *The Telegraph’s* Ambrose Evans-Pritchard as “the voice of the Oligarchy”⁸) will present the Greek edition of *Cultural Dualism* as “impeccably researched” and “one of the most important books analysing modern Greek political history” (Mandravelis, 2011). George Pagoulatos, Professor of European Politics and Economy at the Athens University of Economics and Business, replicates the *Cultural Dualism* schematisation, noting how Diamandouros has elegantly conceptualized it (Pagoulatos, 2003, p. 238n14). Virtually every controversy entailing the Church of Greece will be explained in the media using this theory or at the very least this vocabulary, with titles such as former president of ELIAMEP Professor Couloumbis’ “the underdogs bite back” (Couloumbis, 2001). The “underdog culture” is casually cited as “the main source of resistance to the processes of modernization, Europeanization and globalization” (see also Ntampoudi, 2014a; 2014b, where its purported anti-European element is challenged).

The “underdog culture versus reform culture” theory has a prominent role in analyses published and disseminated by the “Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy” (ELIAMEP) and by scholars affiliated with it,⁹ such as the aforementioned Theodore Couloumbis. Loukas Tsoukalis, Professor of European Integration at the University of Athens and the current president of ELIAMEP, does not explicitly mention the theory, but composes a similar analysis in his “Greece: Like Any Other European Country?” (Tsoukalis, 1999). For Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruby Gropas and Hara Kouki, Greece is “a country that did not modernise,” with “strong legacies of

of this cultural dualism is projected on the Greek War of Independence, in Papagiorgis, 2012.

8 “The Greek newspaper *Kathimerini*—the voice of the oligarchy—reported that the charges would include (...)” (Evans-Pritchard, 2015).

9 For information on ELIAMEP’s formation and its role in Greece, the reader is asked to consult (Anguelova-Lavergne, 2008) This thesis centres on the role and formation of think tanks in Bulgaria but deals with Greece as well.

a backward political culture impregnated with clientelism and institutionalized corruption that can be traced back to the formation of the Greek nation state" (Triandafyllidou, Gropas, & Kouki, 2013a, p. 1); this is, according to the authors, demonstrated by Diamandouros in his underdog culture theory which has since "been disseminated to political discourse and has become a reference point for understanding modern Greece and the country's relation with Europe."¹⁰ This distinction is presented as "profound" and "all-encompassing," so that "elements of both cultures are to be found across the political spectrum in both the left and right-wing forces of the political system," as the authors claim citing Diamandouros and in agreement with him (Triandafyllidou et al., 2013a, p. 4). Antonis Liakos, Professor of History at the University of Athens, former president of Costas Simitis' think tank OPEK "for the modernisation of our society"¹¹ and president of the SYRIZA government's committee for the restructuring of the education system up to November 2016 will speak of "the predictable backlash of the underdog culture" and its hegemony citing Diamandouros (Liakos & Kouki, 2015, p. 54-56, 58-59).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, my claim here is not that we are dealing with "Diamandouros' theory" per se in encountering versions of his dichotomy; these do not necessarily *originate* from his writings. I am claiming that an already existing theoretical dichotomy was fleshed out and epitomised in his version thereof, and that the authority vested in it by extension of its author's authority further reinforces both the cultural dichotomy narrative in general and its particularity as Diamandouros' theory. Furthermore, while I am refuting the correctness of his theory at large, I am certainly asserting that there is a multitude of actors in

10 "While the former of the two cultures is a pre-democratic, nationalist, defensive culture, favouring clientelistic networks of power, bearing a strong imprint of the Orthodox Church, phobic of the Western world view, and rather ambivalent towards capitalism and its market forces, the latter – described in a more favourable light – is inspired by European Enlightenment, promotes rationalization in society and politics along the lines of liberalism, secularism, democracy, and free-market economics, and privileges the exercise of power through modern political parties" (Triandafyllidou et al., 2013a, p. 3).

11 Όμιλος Προβληματισμού για τον Εκσυγχρονισμό της Κοινωνίας / ΟΠΕΚ. Retrieved from: <http://www.opek.org.cy/>.

academia, politics etc. that see themselves as representatives of an elite cosmopolitan “reform culture,” which is set against the majority’s mindset; keeping in line with Diamandouros’ vocabulary, I shall call these Greek Neo-orientalists “overdogs” later in this paper. This position is a natural corollary of Diamandouros’ theory and, most importantly, its reception. What Diamandouros’ dichotomy and its reception demonstrate is much more the existence of a Neo-orientalist “overdog culture” camp seeing itself as such under the euphemistic term “reform culture,” “modernisers” etc. rather than the accuracy of the dichotomy as such.

Seeing that numerous variations of the dichotomy circulate widely in Greek public discourse, why was Diamandouros’ chosen as *the* theory *par excellence*? To this I would like to propose two possible explanations. Firstly, Diamandouros’ own stature as a public figure imbues his theory not merely with a generic authority, but with precisely the *type* of authority needed for a theorist of the “reform culture.” An academic trained at an Ivy League U.S. university, Columbia, who would then proceed to become the European Ombudsman, i.e. to occupy the primary seat of an important and respected European institution that is mediating between civil society and the European Union: Diamandouros is in many ways the very embodiment of the reform/overdog culture’s ideal type. That this culture’s theoretical narrative and academic self-understanding would be articulated by that embodied ideal type is, indeed, optimal. As such, every invocation of this dichotomy cannot but draw its authority from Diamandouros, and by doing so proves its accuracy and self-evident reality.

A second, supplementary explanation relates to the extremely polemical character of this discourse in the public sphere. Theorists and figures of the reform/overdog culture see it as a cultural warfare with the media and academia as its arena: their discourse is full of scorn, irony and depreciation towards the purported “underdog” majority of the Greek population, lamenting their backwardness (the aforementioned *Kathimerini* journalist Paschos Mandravelis is a prime example of this rhetoric). The fact that Diamandouros himself is *not* explicitly polemical but maintains an interpretative distance making his intervention academic rather than purely political plays a crucial role here, in an implicit invocation of a “wise old man” *topos*

that is outside of the battlefield, so to speak. The landscape is highly polemical – while Diamandouros is not. To illustrate this polemical landscape, let it suffice to be said that Thanos Veremis, Professor of Political History at the University of Athens, founding member (former director and chairman) of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy ELIAMEP and a prime representative of the “reform culture” refers to what Diamandouros would call the underdogs as “the sprayed ones” (*psekasmenoi*), a derogatory term¹² which he himself aligns¹³ with the American term “white trash,” a racial slur.¹⁴

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Cultural Dualism and Political Change appears in 1994, two years before Costas Simitis, who is largely known in Greece for his political programme known as *Modernisation* (“*eksynchronismos*”), will become the prime minister of Greece (1996-2004). In studying *eksynchronismos*, Kostis Stafylakis will frame it as part of the “clash between ‘tradition’ and ‘progress’” possessing a historical depth reaching to the formation of the Greek state and further back in history. Stafylakis explicitly correlates *eksynchronismos* with Diamandouros’ cultural dualism thesis, referring to the clash between the underdogs and the reformers, with the latter coming to power under Simitis (Stafylakis, 2010). Diamandouros’ theoretical framework was repeatedly implemented by *eksynchronismos* theorists, but he himself had not yet appeared as a *political* figure. Other evolutions and variations of Diamandouros’ dichotomy include the one created, or manifested and disclosed,

12 Literally referring to a purported belief of the “underdog” majority in the chemtrails conspiracy theory but never actually mentioned in that context: it denotes extreme imbecility in general and tries to portray the majority as afflicted by it.

13 “τα λευκά σκουπίδια όπως συνηθίζουμε να τους ονομάζουμε, (...) όλους αυτούς τους «ψεκασμένους», όπως θα λέγαμε κατ’ αναλογία με τους δικούς μας” (Veremis, 2016b).

14 Elsewhere, Veremis will complain about the “ασφυκτικό εγκλεισμό στον μικρονοϊκό εθνικισμό των ελληναράδων,” a practically untranslatable phrase of extreme scorn, hostility and depreciation, targeting Christos Yannaras, one of our case studies here (Veremis, 2016a).

by the 5 July 2015 referendum on the bailout agreement in Greece. We witnessed there a “We are Staying in Europe” coalition on the one hand (*menoume Evropi*), with references to modernisation and the Enlightenment (which were, obviously, not directly related to the matter at hand, i.e. the bailout agreement, but acted as the symbolic ammunition in this cultural warfare), against what was portrayed by said camp as a coalition of populism or, as it abruptly entered the press’ and public academia’s vocabulary, “national populism” (*ethnolaikismos*).¹⁵ The results of the referendum, 38.69 percent for the “We Stay in Europe” campaign and 61.31 percent for the “No” (*Oxi*) campaign (Greek bailout referendum, 2015, 2016), ignited a new round of references to Diamandouros’ dichotomy.

A few months after this referendum, new legislative elections would take place in September 2015. Whenever the formation of a provisional government was being discussed during Greece’s economic and political crisis, in November 2011 and May-June 2012, Nikiforos Diamandouros’ name was always on the table for the post of the Prime Minister of Greece; while he explained the reasons he declined the 2011 offer, he also hinted at his availability for the post after the then forthcoming 20 September 2015 national elections, should the need for a consensus provisional government emerge.¹⁶ Diamandouros was a candidate for parliament during these elections, but not through popular vote; Greece’s election system has a provision for twelve cross-country members of parliament, who are elected on the basis of the percentage of votes that each political party receives across the country. Diamandouros’ name was the first in the cross-country list (*psifodeltio epikrateias*) of the party *To Potami* (“The River”) headed by the journalist Stavros Theodorakis, a party distinguished for its Diamandourean persuasion and reform-driven, Western-oriented and Europe-centred rhetoric (Konstandaras, 2014). In spite of the fact that *To Potami* had achieved a 6.1 percent electoral outcome in January 2015, thus electing one MP from the cross-country list, the dawn of the 26th of September saw the party with a 4.1 percent electoral percentage and no cross-country list candidate

15 Afouxenidis, 2015; Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016; “Menoume Evropi,” 2016; Tsatsanis & Teperoglou, 2016. See also Mademli, 2016.

16 Ioannou, 2015b and the interview’s analysis by Ioannou, 2015a.

elected – meaning that Nikiforos Diamandouros, who had hinted at the possibility of being proposed as a potential consensus prime minister after these elections in his interview just five days before them, did not succeed to be elected as an MP. With this, the attempts at electing Diamandouros as a pro-European reform prime minister based on parliamentary alliances rather than the leadership of a party winning national elections (that is, much in the style and pattern of Italy's Mario Monti) ended without success.

During these events, Diamandouros' role as a composer of ideology has not gone unnoticed. Upon the announcement of his candidacy for parliament in 2015, journalists immediately pointed out that this candidacy aptly demonstrates the ideological continuity of *To Potami* with Prime Minister (1996-2004) Costas Simitis' "modernisation" agenda (*eksynchronismos*), of which Diamandouros is credited as having been an ideological guru (Zenakos & Natsis, 2015).¹⁷ In a thorough analysis of Diamandouros' thought based on the Greek translation of *Cultural Dualism and Political Change in Postauthoritarian Greece*, journalists Augustine Zenakos and Christos Natsis pointed then out that his theory forms the ideological backbone of a trajectory of political ideas starting with Simitis' *eksynchronismos*, passing through liberal-conservative Nea Dimokratia's 2004-2009 "middle ground" (*mesaios choros*) centre-oriented strategy and arriving at what Zenakos and Natsis dubbed Greece's political "extreme centre" (*akraio kendro*). That is, a "There Is No Alternative" coalition which (a) presents itself as moderate, "common sense," centrist and liberal while (b) proposing and implementing policies that form a violent, radical departure from pre-existing social, political and economic order and (c) brands every other political option, space and narrative as utterly unacceptable for any moderate citizen, as political extremities, as the left-wing and right-wing "two extremes" (*ta dyo akra*) by positioning itself as the only reasonable and moderate political space.

Zenakos and Natsis note that by describing modern Greek history as a battle between reactionary underdogs and progressive reformists, Diamandouros formulates the narrative which will function during the crisis as a "theory of everything," systematically employed and implemented by virtually every public figure of the hegemonic

17 For a right-wing perspective, see Stalidis, 2015.

social coalition of the “extreme centre.” Zenakos and Natsis correctly identify that Diamandouros’ theory is proposed as an axiologically neutral, distanced reading, in spite of his clearly discernible preference for the reformist camp. Diamandouros’ paper is not explicitly polemical and does not form part of a collective polemical scholarly attempt, it is rather “the precursor to what happens after the battle, i.e. after *eksynchronismos* has already achieved its hegemony; as such, it functions as the model of the required style for deepening and widening this already existing hegemony, which can then be articulated in a moderate, low key, sober-sounding voice” (Zenakos & Natsis, 2015).

Setting aside the fact that the “underdog” reading of Greek politics and culture is woefully simplistic, the problem persists: can we find traces in Greek public life validating the claims raised by the self-appointed modernist camp, the representatives of the “reform culture,” and its most self-righteous elements in particular – i.e., the claim that this camp stand for the rule of law, liberal democracy, and the prudent running of the state *versus* the corruption and clientelism characteristic of the “underdogs”? To subject the *metapolitefsi* period of Greece under close scrutiny with this criterion in mind would be the focus of a comprehensive study of its own, and a fascinating one indeed.

Let it suffice to be said that it is under the *eksynchronismos* regime of the archetypical prime-ministerial figure of the “reform culture” camp, Costas Simitis, that the country suffered arguably the worst and most far-reaching scandals of corruption, clientelism and bribery. Costas Simitis himself was dubbed the “archpriest of corruption” in parliament by the opposition, while major scandals erupted, hinting at Simitis’ inner circle. In the context of one of them, the Siemens scandal, Theodoros Tsoukatos, one of the senior and closest consultants to Prime Minister Simitis, confessed to having illegally received one million German marks (500.000 Euros) from the company Siemens in 1999 and to having deposited them to the treasury of Simitis’ party, PASOK, with the party denying the allegation (Papadiochos, 2008). Cabinet ministers of the reform camp’s inner circle were also involved: “the only Greek politician to have been convicted because of the scandal is PASOK’s ex-Transport Minister Tasos Mantelis, who was handed a three-year suspended sentence in 2011 after he

admitted to accepting 450.000 Deutschmarks (230.000 Euros) from Siemens between 1998 and 2000" (Deutsche Welle, 2015) for his (re-) election.

Concerning that Siemens scandal in Greece, *Der Spiegel* reported that "'anyone who pays bribes to get a government contract can pad his margin with a few extra million,' says one investigator. 'The excessive prices are of course shouldered by taxpayers'" (Schmitt, 2010). Costas Simitis' "Socialists were in government when most of the kickbacks are alleged to have been paid" ("Answers sought in Siemens scandal," 2008); it is precisely the "modernisation" (*eksynchronismos*) project, a dream of the reform camp come true, that made this unprecedented extent of corruption and bribery possible. Even more telling was the reaction to corruption, and more importantly to attempts at bringing it to a halt: according to former PASOK Minister Haris Kastanidis' evidence, "there was a bill of law in 1997 which would bring transparency to the procurement process, but due to Mr Simitis' handling it never reached Parliament" (Bokas, 2011).

The torrent of scandals also involved distinguished "reform camp" members from other political parties, such as the conservative-liberal Nea Dimokratia's Mitsotakis-Bakoyanni family, validating Diamandouros' observation concerning the cross-party emergence of certain common characteristics but annulling the basic premise of his analysis, as it is here the "reform culture" that engenders corruption, scandal, clientelism, and a profound disrespect for even the most basic commitment to abide by the laws of a modern democratic nation-state. The sheer magnitude of the refutation of the Diamandouros dichotomy by recent events and the *eksynchronismos* regime of 1996-2004 seems like a true irony of history, but this does not seem to hinder the hermeneutic *schema* from being revisited, cited anew, employed as a key concept and updated with miniscule revisions.

*

My aim here will not be to further argue against the underdog culture theory: that could be the aim of an entirely different project. Rather than that, what interests me is the *usage* and *impact* of such analytic patterns – or, more concretely, the alternative viewpoints that are obscured and rendered impossible when these patterns achieve hegemony.

Instead of arguing against the underdog culture theory, a much-needed alternative research agenda would consist in passing directly to an analysis of contemporary Greek thinkers that see Greece in a quite different light. Arguably, understanding modern Greece's political mentality through the perspective of its Orthodox and Byzantine roots has long been a monopoly of "underdog culture versus reform culture" readings exerting ideological hegemony through this schema. A much-needed project and scholarly aim would be to shed light on alternative viewpoints, with the hope of achieving an understanding of modern Greek mentality that was, so to speak, in the dark side of the moon up until now, seeing that it was dominated by "underdog culture versus reform culture" readings and thus rendered invisible for scholarship that would not approach it with this particular bias.

Seeing that Diamandouros et al. identify Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine past as guiding forces behind the underdog culture, this alternative research agenda would centre on thinkers assessing these traits *positively* (to cite two indicative examples, philosophy professor Christos Yannaras or public intellectual Theodoros Ziakas). For them, what shapes modern Greece, dominates its political scene and decisively puts its currently unfolding history in specific tracks is precisely the modernist camp and a Western-oriented political and cultural mentality – to which they aspire to counterpropose a postcolonial identity, one drawing from Greece's Byzantine past and the Greek people's Orthodox tradition. In many ways, these contemporary Greek thinkers see themselves as refuting a triumphantly victorious "modernising," i.e. Western-oriented, programme for Greece, precisely on the basis of their religion and of the awareness of their historical past but *not* from a pre-modern point of departure. If an underdog is "a person or group of people with less power, money, etc. than the rest of society" and "the person or team considered to be the weakest and the least likely to win in a competition" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2016) then those thinkers would affirm the nature of the victorious Western-oriented camp as the "overdogs," an overdog being "one that is dominant or victorious" (Merriam-Webster English Dictionary, 2016). Seeing that this is the case and that the reading that is pending would consist in trying to see these thinkers with their own eyes rather than through

the Diamandouros et al. dichotomy, it would make sense to refer to the reading affirming Diamandouros' formula as "the overdog culture": as a reading imposed by the Neo-orientalist "overdogs," an analytical/theoretical emancipation from which would be most timely. A pending task, then, would be to offer a reading of particular contemporary Greek thinkers *beyond the overdog culture*.¹⁸

This task would respond to the need for an alternative research agenda examining Greek political thought that affirms Greece's Byzantine past and Orthodox culture, for virtually the first time, *not* via the Neo-orientalist "overdog" approach but with a methodology suitable to that end, thus opening up a field of scholarly enquiry on contemporary Greece that had been effectively "locked up" up to now and, by extension, enabling the proper examination of the secularisation debate in Greece as well. The first step towards this would be to specify such a suitable methodology, as well as to specify all particular non-Neo-orientalist contemporary Greek thinkers in question: I intend to embark on such a project soon.

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18 In a case of self-fulfilling prophecy and cyclical argument, precisely this could be seen as affirming Diamandouros' theory, as the opponents of the "reform camp" see themselves and the version of Greece they represent as victims. While such a conclusion would be a logical fallacy, it is quite interesting that both "camps" see themselves as the ones losing the battle.

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