

"Greece and the World at the Dawn of 2009"

Report of a Listening Post
held on 14th January



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives,' that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

1. The police forces as an expression of the state and their role in today's society

This area was very much connected with the December riots in Greece following the suspected murder of a 15-year-old activist from a police officer in Athens. The three-week social demonstrations that followed all over the country reached levels of violence not seen in Greece since the years of the military coup and the militant activism against it (1967-1974). The members reported distinctly diverging opinions on the perception of the events, the role of activists as well as that of the police forces: some supporting more police action and some more social activism (even if that is violent). A point of common agreement was that while there had been widespread demonstrations all over the country, there had not been common demands expressed by the demonstrators, nor had there been a common social movement that emerged from these riots – rather the common denominator was anger (against the death of a child, social injustice, economic downturn, corruption in government, amongst others).

2. The growing influence of the media in contemporary Greek society

Following from last year's meeting, special emphasis was placed upon the role of television which was experienced as aggressive, evasive and misleading. Although this year, the participants focused more on the effects of this particular type of television on them and society at large. On one hand, television was seen as presenting 'fake' news, shallow entertainment and hypocritical journalism. While, on the other hand, members discussed the ways in which this kind of television works against thinking, participating and reflecting ("to switch your mind off, switch the TV on").

3. The area of education and culture ('paideia') and the marked absence of both in contemporary Greek society.

The participants connected the lack of education (here discussed in its wider meaning, beyond just schooling) with the state of things in society and most particularly with apathy and non-participation. Furthermore, they reflected on the sources of education in society: the family, school and various social groups.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The recent social demonstrations throughout Greece contributed significantly to the prominence of the theme of police and its role in Greek society. Some members associated the role of police with injustice, corruption, abuse of power and lack of interest in providing any kind of meaningful social service. Others were more sympathetic to the police and how afraid they must have been in these latest demonstrations, especially if one takes into account their inadequate training, which tends to promote a view of demonstrators as people on a mission to assassinate police officers. The attention soon turned to the state as a whole as the group suggested that the police is the 'arm' while the state is the 'brain'. And that prior to physical violence, as in this case exercised by the police, the state has been experienced as psychologically violent to its citizens (through lack of public services, inadequate health system, economic corruption, etc). In that sense the demonstrations against the state/police were examined as a reaction to a long history of psychological and physical violence that has been experienced as coming from the outside ('the state'), which was acted out by the markedly violent but otherwise mindless demonstrators (with no clear demands in mind). Thus, in hindsight, the latter phenomenon served as to reinforce state-expressed violence and block any opportunity for meaningful social change.

Hypothesis: The years-long lack of meaningful change in Greek society has left citizens feeling that they live in an unfriendly, cruel and violent environment. Society reacts to this self-inflicted violence by projecting it outside to an external enemy, 'the state', which is then allowed to exercise increasing psychological and physical cruelty. The continuous fear in taking up responsibility for our own destructive tendencies towards our own society leads to a circle of violence between 'the state' and 'the citizens' that further polarises these two extremes and provides a safe haven from coming into contact with our self-destructive tendencies.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The rising prominence of the media in Greek society, particularly television, has been a reoccurring theme in this country's Listening Posts. This year the media were reported as 'force-feeding' exaggerated news, reporting dubious facts and being obsessed with celebrity culture. That is, a medium that "numbs our mind" and "lessens our reaction to unhappiness." The group reported a growing sense of anger towards television and the effects it has on all present. Reflecting further on that anger, the group associated the numbing effects of contemporary Greek television (i.e. numb

viewers who don't think of anything or anyone) with the gradual loss of direct communication, through other media, for example, mobile phones and emailing. Frequent contact with friends, family and neighbours (a common occurrence fifteen, twenty years ago) is a characteristic that seems to be now rapidly fading away from everyday life in Greece ("we are losing basic elements of our [social] lives"). This increasing isolation was also considered an influencing factor in failing to find a 'common voice' in the recent demonstrations ('a gathering of individuals'). These changes were also thought about in a global scale, as a member put it "maybe we are just catching up," as influences from other Western European and US societies.

Hypothesis: Due to internal and external influences, Greek society is gradually shifting to more individualised models in which citizens feel increasingly alienated and lonely. Society reacts to these shifts and subsequent emotions of loss in an exaggerated (almost manic) way by allowing the prominence of 'mind-numbing' television which has contributed in exacerbating further the initial feelings of isolation, weakening social bonds and intensifying the citizens' frustration.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: The group's discussion on education and culture was closely connected to the previous two hypotheses in that educated and cultured citizens are thinking citizens and ones that are considered to be able to initiate real change. In discussing this issue the participants used the Greek word 'paideia' which refers to a holistic approach in educating a person beyond the practical learning of a trade. In ancient times, 'paideia' was considered the highest form of mental and spiritual cultivation and a necessary prerequisite for (active) citizens. The group members seemed preoccupied with the lack of such cultivation in today's society which they reported was evident in lack of environmental, cultural and political awareness. The shortfall of 'paideia' in Greek society was then thought about in connection to family and school – both of which were until recently seen as the central providers of such mental and spiritual cultivation to citizens – but are now felt as absent. And while 'paideia' is on the decline, it was noted that other more destructive, self-obsessed and superficial behaviours are on the rise. The members reported a feeling that the latter behaviours are increasingly becoming dominant as the main characteristics of contemporary Greek identity.

Hypothesis: The continuous changes in Greek society stir up anxiety about the founding blocks of our society (family, school, culture, identity) that are at times experienced as being gradually altered and corrupted. Rather than acknowledging this shift and actively engaging with it, society appears to defend against it by regressing into a narcissistic position in which superficiality, belittlement of the 'other' and self-importance become idealised. This type of unconscious collusion seems to guarantee the upkeep of the *status quo* and the feeling that we (as citizens) are 'safe' from such painful realisations.

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