

# **Orthodox Social Economies and the Enemies of Social Innovation**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Social Innovation has been an eye-catching term, articulating the basic concept that society can indeed actively take part in reconstructing the way everyday life and institutions function. Our key consideration herein is not to engage in an academic discourse per se; we would rather wish to unveil the most indicative theoretical and practical attributes of social innovation in Greece, in a way that would make sense to active citizens and guide institutions towards promising paths of development.

Social innovation is about providing society with a voice in all typical institutions and grassroots processes that aim at improving the ways social benefit is articulated. Such processes (evident or low-profile) also include the state, the entrepreneurial sector and social economy. The state regulates through formal law, the entrepreneurial sector provides for products and services in economically significant prices and the social economy is a third sector, located between the public and the private that promotes plural public interests through private and market initiatives. All the above, along with active individuals, contribute to the way our life produces sense and utility.

The overall mix of the public sphere in Greece presents a fundamental deficiency. State and individual interests are over-represented; this means that there exists over-regulation and autarchic modalities that favour individual or entrepreneurial interests in disregard to law or justice: the public sphere is fragmented, infested with short-sighted private interests, recalling the image of “islands” in a vast social sea of non articulated institutions and agents. Atypical collectivities and the social economy do not present an adequate capacity, yet having a rich past and a vibrant atypical influence in society (Nasioulas, 2012).

## **CHANNELS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION**

Law 4019/2011 for the first time introduced the concept of Social Economy enacting its presence, though through limited scope and non-articulated to the existing institutional framework, agenda-setting processes and funding modalities. Introducing the concept of Social Cooperative Enterprises, it should be considered a major step towards the institutionalization of Social Economy in Greece, though still suffering from major deficiencies (Nasioulas, 2011). Cooperatives, associations, mutual funds, civil non-profit companies

and foundations are active agents of the Social Economy and social innovation is vital for their identity and function: in a major EU-wide research on Social Economy we found that over 2.500.000 Greeks are engaged through membership involvement, with the cooperative sector alone presenting a GDP share reaching 2 billion euro (CIRIEC, 2012). In light of the ongoing recession collective initiatives match conventional charitable activities. Their main characteristic is that they develop out of the box of an imported “Social Economy Orthodoxy” mainly found in theoretical abstractions but not grounded in the local context: for the first time cattle breeders from Thessaly, Central Greece, joined their forces creating the first coop with the key goal of fighting cemented cartels in the dairy products market. Atypical collectivities through the internet, such as the Pieria Action Team are now nation-wide renowned for their initiative in providing for the market distribution of agricultural products without middlemen, in fair prices.

Social Economy in Greece is not the only channel of social innovation, since Greece has the privilege of possessing a rich ecclesiastical past, with the Christian Orthodox Church representing an independent social agent articulating national and aesthetical essentials in a more traditional and far-reaching perspective. The independency of the Church to the state should not be considered restrictively through an institutional lens; what readers should have in mind, when Greece is concerned, is that the Church has represented the Greek nation in times and places where the state collapsed or ceased to exist, e.g. the Ottoman rule of the Greek locus from the 15th to the 19th century. This is still the case, in cases of state failures, prominent example of which is the sovereign debt crisis erupted in 2010: right now all Greek Orthodox Dioceses in collaboration with major retailers provide with 250.000 daily portions of food for the needy, through a network of 3.500 churches and 1.500 related institutions.

## **ENEMIES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION**

It would certainly sound peculiar, but the mightiest enemy to social innovation is the political system and the state administration in Greece. Regrettably, this also includes the format of the currently introduced Law 4019/2011 on Social Economy and Social Entrepreneurship, which many say it was constructed in favor of various groups related to the politico-state system and the funding mechanisms tightly controlled by it. The third sector should be constructed in Greece but not as a subsidiary to patronage and clientele systems of social corruption as seen in the past decades. Thus, a totally weird image emerges: social innovation and social capital are re-cycled outside official, typical and regulated fields. This relates to what I have coined as “inglorious NGOs’ spring” having taken place since the late 90s: an onslaught of civil non-profits and associations were created in order to take advantage of the massive EU funding channeled through long-standing and politically regulated channels,

eventually de-constructing social capital and humiliating the field, its people and their causes.

## **EPILOGUE**

Social innovation in Greece is in great need of emancipation out of the tight embracement of the politically controlled modalities of institutionalization and funding. Not the administration but in fact the political personnel is mainly responsible for the long-standing deficiency of the institutional context and the peculiar lack of supportive mechanisms of this vibrant and proud field of social activity that has never ceased to contribute ethically and practically to the well-being and the aesthetical development of the Greek nation. The construction of a genuinely independent third sector, a true Social Economy, now emerges as the equivalent of withdrawing the political and private interests out of the social sector.

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