



The Tragedy of Greek Politics: Nikos Kazantzakis' play Capodistria

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Traditionally we associate the Greek word “hubris” with ancient Greece, and especially with tragedy and history. We recognize it in Oedipus, Prometheus, Clytemnestra, Ajax, and so many other mythological figures. But we also know that historians attributed it to Asian monarchs, like Xerxes, or Greek cities, like Athens. Is it legitimate, though, to transfer the ancient notion to contemporary situations? In what sense can we talk about modern hubris? “Hubris” refers to self-serving immoderation that transgresses communal standards of shared wealth and power, and violates the self-governing balance of a particular social order. We can trace this Greek principle from archaic poetry and Presocratic thought to classical theater and Hellenistic history. But can we detect it in the modern world?

A look at contemporary Greek literature can provide us with much relevant material. Hubris constitutes a unique point where questions of ethics, politics, and justice converge. In order to explore it in some depth, I propose to look at its operation in a modern play. I have in mind Capodistria, a three-act tragedy in verse by Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) which was written in spring 1944, premiered at the National Theater two years later, as part of the

celebration of March 25, 1946, less than a month before general elections, and was withdrawn immediately due to criticisms from the left and attacks from the right.

Ioannis Capodistria (1776-1831) was a Greek from Corfu who had a distinguished diplomatic career in Russia, reaching the rank of Foreign Minister under Czar Alexander I. Because of his international experience, he was elected first President of Greece for a seven-year term. Greece had emerged victorious from a long struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire but had also been wounded by local civil strife that often accompanies such struggles and tears emerging nations apart. The President's central concern was to bring order to an embryonic state that was not used to centralization. Convinced that the nascent polity could not afford democracy, he adopted an authoritarian outlook: he did not allow the democratic constitution of 1827 to operate, he postponed the meeting of the National Assembly, he persuaded the legislature to dissolve itself, and he set up a personal cabinet. Capodistria assumed office in January 1828 and was assassinated in October 1831 by feudal rulers.

Kazantzakis' drama takes place on the last two days of the hero's life, October 8-9, 1831. Capodistria is an Enlightenment idealist whose highest personal value is virtue. As the play opens, he is celebrating his fifty-fifth birthday, having spent a sleepless night weighing his life on "virtue's scale" (11). He is also a steadfast patriot driven by an overarching sense of responsibility. He remains focused on fulfilling his duty as a leader charged with organizing and running a land that has not been free for centuries. During the two days of the play, he is faced with the major interests vying for the future of the new country – military, clerical, regional, ideological, popular and others. In the course of Act I, he meets in his office with religious leader Papayiorgis, military leader Kolokotronis, popular leader Makriyannis, and factional leader G. Mavromichalis. Now that the war of liberation is over, Greece is threatened by civil

unrest: there are rebellions in the land, mutinies on the islands, clashes at sea, conspiracies in the capital. In all his conversations with the other leaders there is a lot of talk about striking a balance among competing interests. Socio-economic justice is a dominant theme in the play, culminating in the land distribution announced by the President in Act II. People call for their due share. The need for a fair apportionment of goods and rights is obvious to all. But there is broad disagreement over the criteria. Individuals have very different ideas about fairness depending on their background, their status, their role in the national revolution, their allegiances and so on. How can they reach concord?

The issue at hand is the kind of organization the country needs at this stage. What regime would best serve the interests of the people? Which form of government would best honor the sacrifices of the freedom fighters? Is the new country ready for broad representation? Can it afford to hold free and open elections or should it first go through a phase where power is concentrated in a few clean, calm hands? Capodistria believes in the law, others advocate the constitution and yet others insist on practicing local rule. Some support the President's approach as a constitutionalist one while others oppose it as tyrannical; some uphold the rule of law while others denounce it as despotism. The public is divided between law and liberty, governance and justice, necessity and freedom.

Kazantzakis' play has tremendous material for a great tragedy. It presents a state in the aftermath of revolutionary change reaching independence, experiencing civil unrest, facing the threat of tyranny, and asking how autonomy can be founded. It deals with the responsibilities of governance following a revolution and confronting the fundamental constitutional question: how can self-rule be constituted? The demands of justice on governance during a period of violence following liberation are tremendous. Must revolution choose between tyranny and anarchy?

In their confrontation in front of the Presidential Palace in Act II (94-5), General Kolocotronis and the President debate the meaning of fair share. Kolocotronis is the most famous military figure of the struggle for independence, who witnessed the ravages of war and led the Greeks to victory. Capodistria was brought to Greece after the war to lead the nation into its modern era. To the former, it is self-evident that for every task, be it nursing or fighting for freedom, there must be some reward, some share in the success. Having fulfilled his task, he feels his country owes him. Since he is no monk to fast, he heeds the wild voices of hunger when he hears them inside him, and does not stop to consider whether others are in greater need. In a defiant rebuttal, Capodistria says that he is no monk either but he does fast because he can combine his own horrible voices in a higher synthesis – the voice of Greece asking him to save her.

You all quarrel, moan, [claiming] only

What each one of you considers his own advantage

And [nobody] can see the entire sacred cycle;

But I discern the cycle and judge uprightly (95).

Capodistria is the only leader who holds steadfastly to his patriotic commitment, allowing no personal advantage, considering no tactical moves, making no compromises, encouraging no half-measures (30). While others declare their interests and pursue what they consider theirs, he is the only incorruptible public figure in the play. Each morning, he swears that he will not let human or demon distract him from his path (30). He believes in absolute consistency and total purity. Kolocotronis, the military leader, suggests to him that reality is very complicated. Today's Greeks are not like the ancients or the Byzantines, neither are they Westerners or Easterners, but rather a new and strange mixture that must be approached in a

complex way. Capodistria responds that he does not like this *loxos*/indirect approach. In return, the General warns that his path is too straight, and he will perish (55).

ΚΟΛΟΚΟΤΡΩΝΗΣ

Συμπάθα να σου πω την πάσα αλήθεια ο νους σου

Δε φόρεσε, θαρρώ, ποτέ του φουστανέλλα

Και δεν μπορεί ποτέ φουστανελά να νιώσει.

Μήτε Έλληνες παλιοί οι Ρωμιοί, με τσελεμπίες,

Μηδέ βυζαντινοί καλόγεροι με ράσο

Μηδέ και Φράγκοι ψαλιδόκωλοι, ούτε Τούρκοι,

Μηδέ και ρούσικες χαχόλικες αρκούδες

χαρμάνι αλλόκοτο στη γης αυτή, καινούργιο!

Έμπα μες στο χαρμάνι αυτό και κάμε ρίζες

κι ανήλεα φάε δεξιά ζερβά, να ρίζεις μπόι!

ΚΑΠΟΔΙΣΤΡΙΑΣ

Λοξός ο δρόμος ο δικός σου, δε μου αρέσει!

ΚΟΛΟΚΟΤΡΩΝΗΣ

Ίσιος περίσσια, κόντε, ο δρόμος σου, κι εχάθης! (55)

Capodistria's reason is haunted by mixture. Things never turn out as pure as he wants them. For example, his fervent patriotism flees the specter of the double motherland. For three thousand years two Greeces fight one another. One represents blind passion and shameful interest while the other stands for noble struggle and bright vision (29). As he invokes this specter, though, he addresses himself not just to Kolocotronis but to all the freedom fighters and the other people assembled before the Palace. And he does that in order to differentiate himself

from everyone else. He too feels inside him the stir of the Greece who is lazy, blind, and fratricidal. But he can also feel noble Greece coming. For her alone he works and suffers, and for her glory he will die.

Gradually, Capodistria begins to entertain an alternative, more comforting vision of his country. Greece is a magnificent edifice that is in the process of being built. The site is still under construction (94). Those who work there are unable to comprehend the entire project and can think of their own interests only. As a result, they complain and fight. Only the President, the masterbuilder, can see fully and accurately the plan of the building, keep it in sight, and judge with uprightness.

Capodistria is an unselfish leader who takes a rationalist approach to national progress. As a true man of the Enlightenment, all he has in mind is “schools, justice, virtue, and order” (67). His mission is to impose structure upon chaos (54) through order, law, and education. However, despite his great faith in human potential, he finds it hard to embrace people. As somebody who sees the world as a struggle of mind and body, mission and temptation, he feels that everybody around him is prone to sin. That is why he lives fearless but friendless. No matter how much he wants to help his fellow Greeks, he feels an irrepressible contempt for them. Early on, he confesses:

I detest the Greeks; I endeavor, I struggle,

I suffer and I die for them but I don't want them;

They taint the immortal light of Greece! (34)

It is here that we see Capodistria begin to yield to hubris. His greatest vision is undermined by the suspicion that hatred, crime, dishonesty have damaged the Greeks irreparably – that the one Greece has destroyed the other. Thus he is determined to create order by imposing law on the

new nation and put a harness (14) on those who disobey. Law may be tough but it is like God's will on earth and must not shy from getting armed, fighting, winning (54). Capodistria sees himself as a fearless penman who will break the swords of the rebellious military leaders (22), uproot the traditional pursuit of honor (55), and challenge old passions to yield to "new virtues" (96). He will mold Greeks to his ideal.

Thus Capodistria may stand unselfishly above all material rewards but he is not exempt from arrogance. His "ascetic, fiery purity" (in Kazantzakis' own words) makes him confident of his moral superiority and privileged insight. His hubris is that, because he understands virtue as purity of motivation and disposition, he becomes inflexible. Self-righteousness will prevent him from showing forgiveness or love. Law is above love, and virtue is mother of freedom (90). The violation of modesty and moderation will draw Capodistria farther away from those around him. Unable to listen to any advice, he takes the path of increasing alienation. His hubris becomes most pronounced in Act III when, on his way to church and his death, he meets Old Demos, a blind singer who used to be a freedom fighter and is now reduced to begging. This is Capodistria's last encounter before he faces his killers. The singer scorns the President, rejecting with contempt the kind of freedom he has advocated. Capodistria's response captures his hubris better than anything else: "Shut up your shameless mouth. Your mind is small and too narrow to understand. You, fighter, do not know what freedom is" (142). This is the play's best way to depict how aristocratic behavior dishonors the citizen body. By the time he announces to the people his radical decision to distribute national land to the poor (99), his mind is no longer in the daily business of government. He now sees his mission in existential terms. He will preach a "new deep revolution" (103) – getting rid of one's own tyranny (103). This is the next, greater war of independence from the inner Turk.

Capodistria is an ascetic figure who disciplines himself and is determined to discipline his people as well. Ultimately, he wants to lead them to moral perfection. Yet, as soon as he preaches his moral revolution to the people, the news arrives that the civil strife is turning into a war with Greeks killing Greeks. At the end of Act II, Capodistria concludes that the most powerful force is not fate but “the soul of the free, pure, desperate person” (121). His path and that of the nation have diverged. He finds the courage to admit that his presence has become divisive:

My name raises a flag of discord;

So long as I live, brothers, you won't enjoy reconciliation. (124)

Returning to the symbol of the masterbuilder, he decides to build himself into the edifice of Hellenism, sacrifice himself at its foundations, and die in the hands of his opponents. “His ultimate political act (yet at the same time one which gives him personal and even ‘existentialist’ salvation) must be a willingness to accept death, indeed to make it his final weapon in the struggle for true freedom. This is what Kapodistrias comes to realize (p. 53), and why he refuses to take any action to protect himself from the conspirators Mavromichalaioi, even though he knows their plan to kill him (pp. 9, 65, 70, 97)” (Bien 1977: 163). The politically active intellectual justifies his struggles in transcendental terms. From a national standpoint, the politics of virtue has failed and Capodistria must die because he has become part of discord; but from an existential one, his death will bring him the ultimate justification as he is dying for his ideal. The political leader is an exemplary tragic figure in that an inflexible pursuit of an absolute ideal leads a noble character to loss of *sophrosyne* and a community to *dysnomia*. Not only the protagonist but all the other Greek leaders are men who remember how just three years earlier the same city welcomed Capodistria with exalted hopes, or how ten years earlier the

nation rose in the name of freedom to fight oppression. Yet the commitment of these leaders to self-rule is so passionate, so selfish, that, with the exception of Makriyannis, it drives them to the abyss of hubris too.

The same sense of hubris can be found in another work with the same hero. The British historian C. M. Woodhouse too sees his protagonist as a tragic figure in his book Capodistria: The Founder of Greek Independence (1973). Its last chapter is called “The Final Tragedy, 1831” and chronicles events from July of that year till the assassination in October. Woodhouse places the constitution at the center of his hero’s concerns, arguing that “the constitutional question was inextricably interwoven with all the episodes in Capodistria’s life. From the Ionian Islands at the turn of the century, through Switzerland and France and Poland, and back to his own country a quarter of a century later, the same question never ceased to dog his path and torment his mind” (Woodhouse 1973: 506). In 1831, it had become more pressing than ever. To Woodhouse, the tragedy of the situation was that “the most liberal minister of his generation was now hated as a tyrant. ... Having endured failure and exile for the sake of his liberal beliefs, he was now deserted by his liberal friends and pursuing a policy worthy of Metternich” (491). He was accused of despotism. Criticisms of his administration had a certain basis. “It was an ironic circumstance that Capodistria, who had been responsible for introducing a constitution in the Ionian Islands, was also responsible for abolishing it in Greece” (508). Yet the biographer is at pains to show that in fact Capodistria’s positions remained consistent throughout his career. He never betrayed his principles. It could be argued that history betrayed him as it kept switching his opponents. “He remained, by 19th-century standards, a liberal from first to last. But the antagonists of his liberalism changed. In his youth they were the Venetians and Turks; in his

middle life, Napoleon and Metternich; in his last years, the primates and Phanariotes” (509). He cannot be accused of inconsistency or tyrannical tendencies, Woodhouse concludes.

And then, in the last three pages of the 500-page book, the historian names the many manifestations of Capodistria’s hubris. His faults were interpreting his selflessness as self-righteousness; viewing himself as philosopher-king; indulging in a speculative temperament prone to contemplative mysticism; assuming that God was on the side of Greece and those like Capodistria who were trying to save her; intending to mold the future of the people on the basis of his political philosophy. In trying to assess Capodistria’s place in history, Woodhouse reaches for a literary model: “His tragedy was that of a Shakespearean hero, at least as defined by A. C. Bradley: a good man raised to high estate by his own merits, and then utterly cast down by a combination of character and circumstance” (512). Capodistria was the protagonist in the play of his nation’s founding. “These are the common tragedies of nations newly emerging to independence” (513).

Kazantzakis’ drama depicts the tragic encounter of governance, violence, and justice. Today we notice the same encounter in nations torn by factionalism, emerging into independence, debating land rights, fighting despotism, forging a new constitution. In addition to the expertise of legal advisors, the learning of historians, or the experience of politicians, such negotiations can benefit from the dialectic of freedom as elaborated by tragedy, ancient and modern. I would propose that in many respects Kazantzakis’ Capodistria remains as urgent as it was when he composed it in early 1944. The play also shows us that it is time to rediscover its author in a new way. If Kazantzakis was famous in the mid-20th century because readers explored the existential dimension of his work, the 21st century might be able to focus on an

equally important dimension, his reflections on politics and justice. This would be a fitting way to celebrate the 50th anniversary from his death.

References

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