

Amphitheater under crisis: the effects of debt and Covid-19 crisis in Greek Higher Education

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Abstract

The current study aims to contribute to the discussion of the social dimension of the Higher Education Area under crisis (economic debt crisis, pandemic crisis), regarding the debate concerning social cohesion and the quality of the democratic characteristics of modern western states. Higher education systems all over Europe have been going through considerable changes because of the recent European economic and health crisis (Covid-19). The changes because of the crisis were substantial in Greek Higher Education too. The remaining strength of the structures of the welfare state and specifically of education will be particularly tested by the looming pandemic of COVID-19. A key aspect of the changes because of the crisis is being related to the transformation of the modern welfare state. Respectively in the Amphitheater, the subjective strategies have to face the lack of resources, but also the increase of the cost of the necessary resources that the 'professionalization' of the studies introduces, while the State recedes and new organizational forms emerge, as part of a new socio-economic crisis environment.

Keywords: Debt crisis, covid-19, Higher education

Introduction:

***Amphitheater and Crisis*¹**

On March 28, 1946, shortly after World War II, Albert Camus delivered his famous lecture on *The Crisis of Man at the amphitheater* (at the McMillin Academic Theatre) at Columbia University. The lecture was re-delivered 70 years later, at the same amphitheater.² Under the prism of the social dimension of Higher education and for the understanding and interpretation of the characteristics of the formation of the dynamic field that we call amphitheater, it is important to identify and study the consequences of another modern crisis, as a phenomenon of

¹ The current study is an extended version of the Kamarianos I. and Gouga G. (2016), "Amphitheater in crisis: The regulation of the Greek Higher Education Area under economic crisis", which was presented at the Fifth Conference of the Hellenic Sociological Society, Athens.

² "Le Crise de l'homme" delivered by A. Camus the Nobel Prize-winning author on March 28, 1946 at Columbia University. Camus was a leading voice of the postwar generation of French intellectuals. The lecture was re-delivered 70 years later, at the same McMillin Academic Theatre at Columbia University, as narrated by actor Viggo Mortensen. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crisis_of_Man. and <http://maisonfrancaise.org/> Retrieved: October 10, 2020.

deregulation of the institutional process in direct connection with the consequences of the current Greek debt economic crisis. The effects of the financial crisis and the retreat of the welfare state on Greek education are so significant that they bring about a total change in the terms of discussion and meaning of actions in the field of higher education in Greece. The relevant financial data of the Ministry of Finance are indicative. In total, the reduction of funding for education from 2012 to date exceeds 40%. Characteristically, according to the published budget data for 2014 alone - after an already significant contraction of quantitative and qualitative quantities - the reduction amounted to 400 million euros.

More specifically, considering the significant reductions in the budgets of the Universities for 2015, the total reduction for the period 2009-2015 exceeds 60% (62.7% for the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and 75% for the Kapodistrian University of Athens). (Feidas 2014: 35). The contraction continues as the reductions increase. While the economic crisis is intensifying because of the Covid-19 effects, the problems of the Greek Higher Education Area are being capitalized. Moreover, the current crisis revealed the same old structural problems and weaknesses whose need for reform has been expressed by Greek scholars for decades as a timeless crisis of institutional identity (Kladis, Kontiadis and Panousis 2006: 11).

Thus, the current study aims to contribute to the discussion of the social dimension of the Higher Education Area under crisis (economic debt crisis, pandemic), regarding the debate concerning social cohesion and the quality of the democratic characteristics of modern western states (Habermas 1984; Staats 2004 Yang 2003; Giroux 2002, Stamelos & Kavasakalis 2015: 34-36).

Debt, pandemic, welfare state and the amphitheater: some remarks on the social dimension of the Higher Education Area.

The debate about the social dimension³ of the Higher Education Area is not new. On the contrary, at times it has been connected to the debate on institutional change and modernization, with a direct reference to the organizational and institutional characteristics of the University but also to the quality of the process that takes place in the amphitheater - the Higher education - as a public good (Kooij 2015).

Higher education systems all over Europe have been going through considerable changes because of the recent European economic and health crisis (Covid-19). The changes because of the crisis were substantial in Greek Higher Education too. The remaining strength of the structures of the welfare state and specifically of education will be particularly tested by the looming pandemic of COVID-19. A key aspect of the changes because of the crisis is being related to the transformation of the modern welfare state. The transformation of the European welfare state has been a common topic of Greek and international literature since the 1970s. During the period of the '90s, the debate at the level of European institutions was characterized by the White Paper on social policy. The decline of the welfare state is directly linked to the deregulation, privatization, and finally the consolidation of a differentiated capitalist model of production (Pace digital capitalism⁴), the flexibility of labor relations, the flexibility of public spending, the dominance of the stock market economy, the complexity of managerial problems and technological development (European Council 2000, Skamnakis 2011: 304). Contributing to this debate, under the weight of the repercussions of the crisis, J. Habermas raised the question of the economic determinism of social policy - and therefore of educational policy - under the hegemony of the market space and the relevant regulatory reason produced (Pace 2018: 254-269, Olssen & Peters, 2005: 313-345). More specifically, Habermas in his writings redefined the issue of the debt crisis as a European problem, which concerns the quality and social cohesion of Western societies (Habermas 2013: 4-13).

As a consequence of the crisis, amphitheater changes from one relatively “closed and stable framework of a pedagogic relation” both concerning its material institution and to its symbolic meaning, into a changing context of actions with strong elements of risk for the success of subjective expectations.

³ The social dimension entered the Bologna Process in 2001 as an ambiguous item, loosely related to the action areas and less clearly defined (Kooij 2015, p.1).

⁴ See Pace J. (2018). The Concept of Digital Capitalism *Communication Theory*, 28,3, pp. 254-269. Jonathan Pace in his study develops a dialectical, historical account of digital capitalism beyond structuralism and nominalism in contemporary theory.

Additionally, the theoretical framework of N. Poulantzas places the authoritative-prescriptive process of the amphitheater at the core of Higher Education. This particular point of view leads us to a revision of university's culture as a field and process of production of moral values, which on the one hand pertain to the democratic culture of Higher education (Balias & Bestias 2016) and on the other hand pertain to the characteristics of a legalizing technocracy, where motives and institutional arrangements are connected with symbolic control. (Gouga & Kamarianos 2006). Those arrangements based on performance and efficiency constitute the beginning of the formulation of the pedagogical relationship since the technique is directly connected with the taught knowledge as well (Bernstein 1989 & 1990; Panagopoulos et al. 2020).

Academic staff and students will also find themselves faced with a series of dilemmas, as in the context of the dynamics of the social and economic framework, a lot happens, that the constitutional texts (legislature, texts-instructions pertaining to the instrumental function of the mechanism) are unable to predict. In particular, the weight of the repercussions of the crisis, the unpredictable, and the liquidity constitute a defining element of the educational normality itself, since even prescriptive-legal texts change – as we will subsequently show – dynamically. Thus, academic trajectories (students and educators) in a changing context consist of their ability, through formal and informal rules, to regulate the relative autonomy of the organization (Rousis 1984: 89; Gouga & Kamarianos 2006). Hence, the particular difficulty of the conceptualization and definition of the amphitheater as an educational-academic relationship is an outcome of the transition from a stable hierarchical framework to a framework with elements of liquidity. The dynamic frequency of institutional processes change creates significant feelings of insecurity and potential danger in the conceptions of the educational process as a whole.

As a result students and staff are called to make their choices alone and develop their strategies, according obviously to their ability, their social network, or their social, economic, and cultural capital. The short-term individual conventions of choice, and the carving of subjective paths, render the brief and cut-off instrumental subjective strategies, to dominant narrations of the public sphere (Gouga & Kamarianos 2011; Balias et al. 2016). The significant effect of liquidity of education policy and the frequent change of the legal-regulatory framework is indicative, as it produces risk for the successful confirmation of the subjects' expectations (Giddens 1999).

Organizational transformations and ruptures with the past, in turn, produce new perceptions on the part of the subjects. The quality of these subjective conceptions is important for the quality of the institutional consolidations in the interdependence of the structure with the subjective.

Linearity, -as a result of provided subjective strategic choices in a stable organizational framework is replaced by liquidity -as an effect of dynamic change, because of the economic and digital determinism of the recent crisis. The emerging of the subjective micro-narratives, the transformation (or retreat) of the welfare state, the transformation of welfare capitalism towards a liberal capitalist conception of the market, the abolition of security, and, most importantly, the consciousness of endangering societies, marked the transition to postmodernism (Gouga & Kamarianos 2011: 6).

Thus, in Education and Health, the social subject becomes a customer/consumer, while the dynamic management emphasizes the issues of efficiency and effectiveness and the principle of the market reason (Ball 2008). Efficiency and effectiveness are the main principles related to the transformation of the pedagogical process in the amphitheater (Castree 2006; Castree, N., and Sparke M., 2000).

Larsen, Berg & Huijbens (2016), focus on the ever-increasing competition, the connection of the investment in knowledge with the investment for profit, the increasing shifting of the policy of the central Universities to the more peripheral, but also the expansion of control and accountability systems, based on the value of investment and financing so that the academic loses his identity and is considered as a human capital characteristic. For example, what has happened in recent years in Icelandic higher education, consists phenomena that have been particularly acute during the Icelandic crisis. Indicatively, we mention that during this period, the extensive and temporary teaching staff of the university increased significantly. Thus, at the University of Iceland in 2014, 2,443 part-time teachers worked, while the permanent teaching staff was only 683 people. In recent decades, universities have been pressured to develop specific forms of regulatory rationale, commercializing the academic relationship, and finally, transform the produced academic knowledge into exchange value through ranking or referral protocols (Castree and Sparke 2000; Larner and Le Heron 2005).

Academic individuals in a competitive framework should use their potential to increase the redemption value of their academic identity, through processes such as finding funding for their research or good exploitation and successful evaluation of the mechanisms and procedures for evaluating their publications, so that they become relevant from scientific reviews and magazines of known recognition, i.e. with a capable impact factor, even with the use of social media, reaching the final result of increasing hetero-reports. Thus, knowledge is produced, developed, and communicated as exchange value, as capital, the utilization of which will bring profit in terms of purchase.

As a consequence, according to the Larsen, Berg & Huijbens study (2016), *The Guardian* newspaper, has put together a collection of more than 40 articles under the title "Mental Health: The University in Crisis", and with the by-line: "Mental health issues have become a growing problem among students and academics" (p.170). Additionally, *The New York Times* recently published an article about the rise of suicide deaths on campus, linking many of these deaths to the "culture of perfection" that predominates in university settings, especially among academic faculty members (Larsen, Berg & Huijbens 2016:170).

Under the weight of the pressure for a successful increase in academic value, the university identity is finally developed. The production of knowledge is subject to the above regulatory practices that characterize modern academic culture.

The Greek crisis in the Amphitheater

In the field of Greek Higher Education and with the legitimation of the needs of the Market, the management of the University has attempted to move to more flexible semi-governmental institutional structures of cooperation between the public and the private, while the subjective study planning options are linked to the toolkit of vocational rehabilitation and the ratio of market needs. Deterministic policy-transfer procedures favoring market evaluations fostering short-term sub-contracts and the setting of subjective paths, such as in education through three-year or even shorter curricula, make short and fragmented instrumental subjective strategies the dominant narratives of the social (Balias et al., 2011). Path-breaking as fragmentation and change of the linear narrative of a continuous coherent subjective choice in the amphitheater as an educational framework became a reality. According to the recent reform efforts such as Law 4009, students are required to select his or her paths and strategies in this area, apparently according to his or her ability or social, economic, and cultural capital (Hepnet 2011).

It is obvious that academic individual (whether student or academic teaching staff) as a social subject is led to define their micro-narrative about his/her educational course according to his dependencies and abilities to move socially and mainly economically. His/Her wider socio-economic perceptions about his/her possibilities to capture the best economic life prospect for him also determine his/her conceptions of the socio-political environment.

Depending on the crisis in Greece, Law 4009/2011 defined new forms of recruitment and employment of academic teaching staff, such as university scholarships, reinforcing competition, and producing new understandings of the role. The term scholarship does not mean a positive scientific-research distinction. It means degrading scientific staff in precarious situations instead. Scholars were expected to be paid not from the Regular Budget under a fixed contract arrangement, but from the unallocated funds of the institutions, depending on their financial availability. According to the specific legal provision, the selected university scholarship holders sign a fixed short-term Private Law employment contract.

These regulatory settings consist of a framework that embraces risk society characteristics, facilitates differentiation, uncertainty, ambiguity, and, above all, constant but dynamic change, both at a subjective and structural level.

For the academic individuals - temporary or permanent - the undoing of linearity presupposes and is connected to the individual flexibility of the social subject to make his choices in the field of economic, social, and political participation in every moment of the daily life of western societies of modernity. Through the adoption of these cut-off paths, the academic teacher becomes, according to Foucault (2008: 226) "an entrepreneur of himself" (Larsen, Berg & Huijbens 2016).

Thus, principles of efficiency and effectiveness, rationality, power, management, and control, transform teaching practice, and communication action. In the framework of the amphitheater, the instrumental redefinition of knowledge legitimizes its connection with control and regulation as starting points for cognitive action choices (Bernstein 1989 & 1990).

What we experience as vibrations of late modernity is precisely the collapse of the constant and the linear and the consolidation of the instrumental. The lack of trust in everyday life in the Amphitheater highlights the pathologies of Western modernity in two basic actions for social cohesion: the reduction of common meanings and finally the erosion of common bonds.

In Conclusion: Instead of an epilogue; Amphitheater: the stripping of institutional discourse or a relationship of trust

In conclusion, the retreat of the Welfare State, the change of welfare capitalism towards a liberal capitalist conception of the Market, the negation of security and, most importantly, the consciousness of risk, give meaning to the emerging new educational relations in the Amphitheater, shaping the conceptions of the academic individual trajectories, differentiating them from the “old”, “traditional’ relatively “closed and stable context” to a changing context of actions, with strong elements of risk for the success of the subjective expectations. Thus, the role and the status of a ‘professor” is not anymore part of a particular structure of hierarchical positions where knowledge means power. More specifically, during the era of crisis and as the framework transformed, the roles changed in a different way from the traditional stable and permanent context of employment, which requires an escalation of earnings with specific rules for professional development and promotion, with a specific allocation of responsibilities. Hence, academic individuals on the one hand are hoping to exchange value of knowledge and on the other hand in frameworks of insecurity and uncertainty, they try to orient themselves perceiving their actions as customers or consumers. Individual adaptation will therefore depend on the ability of the social subject to select and participate in communication grids of communication and management, or even production of knowledge. In this light, the emergence of the crisis-communication-instrumenting scheme refers us on the one hand to the theoretical-interpretive scheme of J. Habermas but also to what theorists such as Beck (1992) or Giddens, referred in their studies as risk society. As risk is meaningful and directly related to differentiation, ambiguity, and especially constant change and dynamic transformation, individuals experience the retreat of linearity, the ambiguity in orientation not only in the economy but also in the society, resulting in the transformation of the economic, social and of course political identities.

Thus, the relationship in the Amphitheater is transformed not only as an educational relationship but also as an institutional process, as a part of institutional discourse, unable to answer the anxious questions and needs of individual paths in risk-taking societies. The emerging question refers to the possibility that if the socially legitimized mixture of job security, market flexibility, and market efficiency with social cohesion can answer the individual needs in the modern risk societies in crisis (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007). These very possibilities answer why institutions such as the Universities, attempt to develop and include flexible and reliable contractual transactions, as a need to control the very weakness of the market evaluations of educational relations. In a time of debt crisis, lenders and borrowers, customers and consumers are looking for ways to secure and meet their needs and commitments. In a framework of action of uncertainty and volatility, the key process in concluding the relevant contract and in the success of the new framework of flexicurity is to achieve positions of trust (trust).

According to this argument, collective and intersubjective communication becomes crucial. Communication here, and more specifically communicative rationality, acquires the importance of a fundamental process of educational texture with a conceptual definition of trust. Furthermore, under the Habermasian theoretical framework, the academic individual is called upon to explore the role of the social and political facilitator by connecting the community with knowledge.

The pillars of the certain argument are the development of ‘practical interest’, the orientation of collective action to achieve common goals, the interaction, the reciprocity, the intersubjectivity, by undoing coercion. On this basis, it is possible to establish trust. Under the above combination, trust is linked to equality of all parties involved’ (Gouga & Kamarianos 2011: 10).

In conclusion, the burden of the economic crisis in Greece and Europe covers and legitimizes the change of the organizational discourse of academic practices, starting with deregulation. More specifically, the Universities are under the consequences of the pathologies of the recent crisis and the dominance of the instrumental discourse of market evaluations.

Respectively in the Amphitheater, the subjective strategies have to face the lack of resources, but also the increase of the cost of the necessary resources that the ‘professionalization’ of the studies introduces, while the State recedes and new organizational forms emerge, as part of a new socio-economic crisis environment.

But what is the role of the teaching and research staff of the Higher Education Area as intellectuals, in front of the new structural developments? It should be noted here that members of the academic staff in Greece are often important actors in society, either in political life or as scientific experts. In the end, the emerging question is if and how academic individuals as important actors, can affect the transformations of the public sphere. On the other hand, how legitimate is it for the academic teacher and researcher to talk about them, as an actor under the conceptualizations of his/her ideological positions?’ (Kladis 2014: 156). Further studies can investigate if subjective position, scientific identity, and ideological construction, can lead to the understanding of effectiveness in the transformation of the organizational culture.

This last remark opens two new perspectives on the debate. One concerns the structural side of the process we called the Amphitheater or more simply the discussion about the future shaping of the institutional characteristics of the Higher Education Area. And the other about what the subjects themselves can do to deal with deregulation and determine by their actions any wanted regulation. At this point stands the possibility of overcoming the impasse of the economically deterministic approach to the crisis as a regulatory framework. Amphitheater as a communication relationship connects theory and action in everyday life in society and politics.

Finally, as a result of the above is that the emergence of the position that the debate on organization (regulation-deregulation) is not a historical type of epistemological research for the University, cut off from social reality, but concerns everyday life and is directly related to subjective choice. Through his presence in the amphitheater, the academic individual acquires the ability to detect and make sense of the organization's reason that defines the academic relationship as a social action, orienting thought, and experience.

This last remark projects a new dimension of the study about the Amphitheater. More concretely, it transforms the Amphitheater into a laboratory where the theoretical elaborations concerning the Higher education Area University are tested, an experimental laboratory open to society. It is this challenge that connects the everyday life in the Amphitheater to the stakes of democracy and democratic statehood. Institutional and subjective narratives are intertwined in an interdependent relationship that makes the educational relationship in the Amphitheater an interaction essentially institutional, scientific, economic, the final formation of which will determine the narratives of the next day. Because as Camus remarked in his lecture when crisis creeps into even the tiniest capillaries of society and all that is left is “power”, the choice is no longer about knowledge production or between the just and the unjust.

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