

THE CHARACTER OF THE GREEK REVOLUTION OF 1821¹

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Abstract

The article explains the social conditions and changes that were taking place in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire. These changes were slow in the 15th and 16th centuries, became somewhat faster during the 17th, and accelerated in the last quarter of the 18th century. That is the period of the Industrial Revolution and the domination of capitalism in Western Europe. The article details this transformation and the maturation of the rupture conditions within the Ottoman Empire that gave rise to the Greek Revolution of 1821. Particular attention is paid to the emerging social classes and their distinct roles in the revolution. The article concludes by arguing that although the Greek Revolution of 1821 possesses its idiosyncratic features, nevertheless it bears notable similarities to the French Revolution.

Keywords: social classes, capitalism, historical materialism, nation state

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Introduction

A common understanding that one obtains from the social conditions during the Ottoman Empire spanning the period from the fifteenth century is that of the historical vacuum. About four centuries of the historical vacuum for the various ethnic groups that are usually considered to have groaned under the weight of the Ottoman occupation. This stereotype is not exactly right, because the Ottoman Empire had adopted the Byzantine way of administration featuring a powerful central authority. Schematically put, the various governors or dignitaries (Pashas, Beys, Spahis, Kocabashis³, etc.) in the first two centuries, had had weak power relative to the central administration, exactly as was the case in the Byzantine

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³ Kocabashis are the local Christian dignitaries, whose role was to collect taxes and bear responsibility upon death for the maintenance of social order.

Empire during its heyday.⁴ The decay of the Ottoman Empire started in the next two centuries and accelerated in the early nineteenth century. For this reason, the Ottoman Empire was characterized as the “sick man of Europe”. The leading countries of the times, namely, the UK, France, Austria, and Russia were particularly interested in the developments taking place within the Empire. The creation of new nation-states would be an opportunity for the leading countries to create new spheres of influence, which, in turn, would imply an expansion of the markets for their products and, even more importantly, cheap sources of raw materials.

The rest of the article explains the general social changes that took place, which were very slow in the 16th and 17th centuries, and accelerated in the last quarter of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, that is, during the Industrial Revolution and the domination of capitalism in Western Europe. In the second part, we explain this social transformation of the Ottoman Empire, which is another way to say that the rupture conditions had already matured. In the third part, we detail the character of the Greek revolution and related debates. In the fourth part, our attention is on the emerging social classes and their role in the revolution. In the fifth and last part, we make some concluding remarks.

Economic and Social Conditions

Contrary to what is commonly claimed peoples and nationalities in Ottoman-occupied territories were free from raids (Franks, Arabs, among others) and wars (as non-Ottomans were not recruited, at least systematically). Thus, non-Ottoman people went through a peaceful period with relative prosperity. For this reason, this long period rightfully can be characterized as *Pax Ottomanica* during which there were no significant demands for social change or social uprisings except for the last quarter of the 18th century. This stand of the various ethnic groups, including the Greeks, is explained, at least partly, by the level of ‘relative’ prosperity they had achieved in the meantime, but mainly because they were facing a powerful central authority. The Ottoman central government indeed granted peculiar (not very different from the Byzantine) property rights to the cultivators (ownership remained in the hands of the central government), and it was against large estates.

That was especially true in the first two centuries of occupation when the Ottoman Empire was expanding and was able to distribute land to its officials. However, the situation worsened for the peoples and nationalities under Ottoman rule in the following two centuries. However, the Ottoman Empire inherited, in a way, all the weaknesses characterizing the Byzantine Empire. In particular, the

⁴ For further details about the causes of growth and decay of the Byzantine Empire (see Laiou 2007).

hypertrophic state required more tax revenues, which could be collected only with the support of local governors. These developments at the beginning of the nineteenth century strengthened the governors (in particular, Ali Pasha of Ioannina and Mohamed Ali Pasha of Egypt), who gained considerable power at the expense of the central administration. At the same time, large landed properties were developed, thereby worsening the position of small peasants.

We discover that the Ottoman Empire (like its Byzantine predecessor), in turn, showed signs of fatigue, as this is reflected in the need to collect more and more taxes required to maintain its ever-expanding state apparatus. Consequently, the central government was forced not only to accept, but also to strengthen the local dignitaries by vesting them with additional powers and, at the same time, creating large estates in the hope of higher tax revenues. Furthermore, the central government appointed locals (known as Kocabashis) to collect taxes on its behalf. In other words, the central government delegated the right to collect taxes to local agents. In modern parlance, the government privatized its tax collection mechanisms. The “chiftliks” large estates where the cultivators had inherited cultivation rights in so far as they exercised them systematically. And, at the same time, paid the corresponding customary and sometimes arbitrarily imposed usually monetary tax.

This tax was sufficient to finance the increasing needs of the central administration since a part of it was previously withheld by the local officials (tax collectors). In case the cultivators did not fulfill their tax obligations, then their land could be confiscated by the tax collectors. Consequently, the survival of a sizable segment of the population became much more difficult, resulting in growing intolerance. Therefore, in such a decaying environment, the survival of the rural population was increasingly more difficult. As a consequence, many cultivators were led to other ways to ensure the material conditions of their existence, such as handicraft trade and shipping. It is important to note that the Ottoman State (albeit not in its intentions) contributed to this direction. In effect, the Ottoman state absorbed a great deal of the output produced for the needs of the army and the government in general. The State financed the construction of roads that were extremely important for the rapid development of the army, where and when its presence was deemed necessary. The above caused the side effect of facilitating trade and broadening the market in general. The idea is that neither a strong army nor the development of meaningful trade would be possible without an adequate transportation network.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire’s ongoing wars with the Venetians strengthened the position of Greek ship-owners, who eventually dominated the trade in the Mediterranean. Therefore, as time went by, and towards the end of the eighteenth century, a rather peculiar relation developed. In particular, the

Ottomans had political power, which in the absence of new annexation of lands and the pressing need for adequate financing of the state apparatus, were bound to grant more freedoms to the big cultivators. The latter, also being in a changing economic environment, gradually moved towards the cultivation of exportable agricultural products destined for the markets of Western Europe. In other words, the traditional cultivations in a self-sustained feudalistic economy were gradually shrinking. The handicraft production and the trade on land or sea were carried out mainly by Greeks, who gradually became stronger economically, especially towards the end of the eighteenth century. In short, the emerging Greek bourgeoisie became economically too strong if not dominant and had demands that could not even think of raising to the administration, let alone wait to be fulfilled within the institutional framework of the Ottoman Empire. These demands presupposed the establishment and operation of new institutions, which were only feasible within a new nation-state.

It could be argued that improving the material well-being of the Greek bourgeoisie would affect negatively and act as a deterrent to seeking a break with the Ottoman Empire. History teaches, time and again, that financial strength is both a reason and a necessary precondition for the success of a possible rupture. Finally, the Greek bourgeoisie is formed initially within the borders of the Ottoman Empire and subsequently expanded its activities to other countries following the demands for their products and services. It is important to point out that the expansion of business activities within conditions of intensifying international competition and the growing arbitrariness of the Ottoman administration demonstrates, if nothing else, the capabilities and ultimately the strength of the emerging capitalist class. In effect, the capitalist class emerges not only without state support but precisely because of its lack and often in rivalry with the official state. Thus, the aspirations of the emerging capitalist class, among other things, included the creation of a modern sovereign state which would be supportive (and not subversive) in the survival and further development of this social class in its intensifying competition in the international arena.

From the preceding analysis it follows that the market economy was not developed outside or on the outskirts of the Ottoman Empire and gradually penetrated inside it. On the contrary, as early as the eighteenth-century new material conditions of social reproduction are in place. The agents of economic life are motivated perhaps slowly but persistently towards changing the society and economy of the Ottoman Empire from the inside. As a result of these processes, a vast market was created that extended from Egypt (Alexandria) to the Danube regions. Such a market promised lucrative profits, and that is why in the eighteenth century, there existed an increasing commercial penetration of Europeans and especially of French merchants in the region. This particular geographical area

is influenced not only by the economic development of the countries of Western Europe but also by the new ideas and the intellectual atmosphere of the time. The Industrial Revolution in expanding production changed the economic life in the Balkans and established trade networks through which along with commodities, we had the spread of ideas of the Enlightenment (see Dimaras, 1989, chs. 10 and 11; Kitromilides, 2013, chs. 1 and 8; Tsoulfidis, 2022, ch. 5).

In the meantime, the Ottoman administration introduced reforms that changed society to a certain extent. More specifically, the Ottoman Empire introduced institutional changes from which the most important are the capitulations; that is, foreign investors could conduct their business within the borders of the Ottoman Empire while subjected to the laws of their countries of origin. In modern terms, the capitalizations were particular policies to encourage foreign direct investment. Greek commercial capital, however, settles and operates on the outskirts or in cities outside the Ottoman Empire. In the same spirit but of different causes was the Kuchuk-Kainarji (1774) Treaty between the Russian and the Ottoman Empires, ending their war (1768 – 1774). The treaty was a landmark in that it allowed Orthodox Christian ships to engage in trade carrying also light weaponry, so long as they were under the Russian flag. The Greek people took advantage of this treaty, and their fleet increased rapidly. All these led to further expansion of trade within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Merchants, mainly of Greek descent, came in contact with the intellectual atmosphere of the French Revolution and embraced its principles of freedom and human natural rights. As a consequence, the restrictions of freedoms made living conditions and the conduct of businesses unbearable within the confines of the still on traditions-based Ottoman Empire. Meanwhile, the Greek origin shipping capital flourished because of the Napoleonic Wars (1793 – 1815) during which Greek ship-owners traded extensively and exclusively with France, despite her boycott from Great Britain.

It is important to note that expansion of trade without production is not possible for long. For example, in the shipping industry, the transport of grain, wine, and timber necessitated the development of shipbuilding, construction of barrels, furniture, and other related products. The conduct of trade on land contributed to the development of transportation and activated production in sectors like silkworms, spinning mills, textile mills, and metal mining, among others. The economic conditions were already well established so that the lending and insurance activities, which were carried out mainly by local officials, would find suitable ground to expand their activities.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars and the blockades lessened the ship owners' range of activities, reduced sharply their profits, created unemployment, and left the merchant fleet virtually immobile. In today's terms, we would say that

the shipping industry experienced significant underutilized production capacity accompanied by high unemployment of labor. The profit rates up until 1815 were surprisingly high. We would dare say pirate or exotic. However, in the post-1815 years, the fall in profit rates was even more spectacular. In order to give a sense of the difference, the rates of profit started at even above a hundred percent and in the post-1815 years plummeted to about ten percent (Kremmidas, 1976). The extant literature finds that in the Aegean islands, during the pre-revolution years, there had been a marked accumulation of wealth. The business climate within the Ottoman Empire remained suffocating, so it is no coincidence that the merchant capital developed mainly in cities (Marseille, Venice, Trieste, Vienna, Budapest, and Odessa) located outside the domain of the Ottoman Empire.

The contradiction between the need of traders and producers to increase their profits and expand transactions abroad. The intensification of international competition combined with the continuing arbitrariness of the Ottoman administration. All the above, separate and in combination, contributed to the strengthening of the ethnic consciousness of the Greeks, who saw their future to be increasingly more within a modern nation-state. Friedrich Engels, a profound scholar of the Eastern Question, aptly noted: “Indeed, Turkish sovereignty, like any Eastern one, is incompatible with capitalist society; the amount of surplus-value gained is uncertain at the hands of predatory satraps and pashas; the first fundamental condition of lucrative capitalist activity is missing: the security of the person and property of the person engaged in. It is therefore not paradoxical that the Greeks revolted once again now since in 1774 they had twice attempted to revolt” (Engels in Marx and Engels, 1985, pp. 473-474).

The Revolution of 1821 and its Character

The Greek Revolution breaks out under unfavorable conditions. In particular, international economies are going through a long depression, 1815 – 1848. The well-known downward phase of the first long cycle of capitalism emerged from feudalism. In general, the revolutions in Europe, after the defeat of Napoleon, were in decline. The famous Holy Alliance (the UK, Austria, Prussia, and Russia) in 1815 abhorred any social change, especially if it came from a revolution. The Holy Alliance was in principle against all revolutions, and the Greek was no exception. However, it is fair to say the dissolution of the Holy Alliance started with the success of the Revolution of 1821.

The Greek ship-owners were undoubtedly for the revolution not only because they were inspired by its high ideals but also because of the underutilized shipping capacity and unemployment of labor. The prospects of the full utilization of ships and the employment of islanders certainly contributed to the uprising. Moreover, there was compensation for the use of both ships and horses. There

were also payments for the people engaged in the revolution. Every revolution, especially when it lasts, depends crucially upon its financing. The sources of finance for the Greek Revolution were, in the beginning, the loot and the liters. Subsequently, voluntary and sometimes forced contributions of patriots in the liberation struggle, and finally, the money via foreign loans. The latter attracted international attention to the Greek cause and, at the same time, strengthened the morale of the revolutionaries.

The first debates about the character of the Greek Revolution of 1821 took place in the 1920s and continued, more forcefully, in the 1930s. It is important to note that the debates were taking place on the pages of newspapers and pamphlets. The purpose of these debates was not so much to honor the Revolution of 1821 but rather to decide upon the precise character of the forthcoming revolution. That is, whether it was to be a pure socialist or bourgeois democratic. According to George Skliros (1907), Rigas Feraios (1757 – 1798) was the first authentic exponent of the ideas of the rising bourgeoisie, and his vision was of a generalized revolution in almost all parts of the Ottoman Empire. From the revolution, Byzantium would be revived, however, this time not as an Empire of the past, but rather as a modern society in which all peoples (“Bulgarians and Arvanites⁵, Armenians and Greeks, Blacks and Whites”), should peacefully coexist with their religions and freedoms based on the establishment of institutions. The latter would be quite similar to those of the French Revolution that would ensure equality and freedom for all the peoples of the former Ottoman Empire. Rigas Feraios saw the Greek nationality playing a protagonist role in the forthcoming revolution due to economic and intellectual progress, especially during the late Ottoman period. The Greek merchants and scholars not only studied the history of ancient Greece but also could integrate it with the ideas of the enlightenment. Kordatos (1924) expanded and deepened further Skliros’s analysis and supported the view initially, at least, of a purely bourgeois revolution following the standards of the French.

In this parallel Kordatos did not find it difficult to consider the dignitaries (Kocabashis), the Church, and the Ottoman officials with the feudal lords. In Kordatos’s view, inspired by historical materialism, the peasants were identified with the serfs while the revolutionaries were the merchants, ship-owners, and small commodity producers, who were described as suffering in many ways under the traditional regime.

This analysis and explanation of the Greek revolution met with a strong reaction from the Church due to Kordatos’s claims that the official Church, at least, was reconciled with the Ottoman administration as it enjoyed many freedoms and privileges and therefore condemned the revolution. Kordatos’s view was not bet-

⁵ Arvanites come from the area of Albania, and they are usually considered Greek.

ter received by the academics of his time. The analysis based on terms *structure* and *superstructure* of historical materialism met the opposition of the academics who claimed it was a national uprising, a war of independence, not a revolution.⁶ Academics searched to create a national redemptive consciousness which was deemed necessary, especially in those years. The harshest criticism of Kordatos's view was that of his comrades, who characterized the analysis of the bourgeois revolution based on historical materialism as "sterile or barren objectivity"⁷. The reason is that in Kordatos's analytic scheme, the capitalists were pictured as if they played a progressive role, which was deemed disorienting for the demands of the popular movement of that time.

Kordatos, and his comrades, modified their views in the decades that followed. The Third Communist International (Comintern) played a critical role in these changes in views. According to Comintern, the revolutions in countries like Greece should be bourgeois-democratic. Consequently, in the conditions of the post-1930s years, the revolutions ought to undergo a stage in which the feudal remnants would have to be eradicated. The capitalist relations of production would be established from the perspective of the radical socialist transformation of societies. Under these circumstances, the debate revolved around to what extent the revolution of 1821 introduced bourgeois relations of production and that the feudal remnants (supported by the Kotzabasids and the official church) were significant, especially in the countryside. The discussions became quite detailed about various manifestations of the incomplete 1821 revolution that had to be completed in an intermediate preparatory stage before the final rupture and the socialist revolution. Here Marx and Engels's dictum in *German Ideology* that "We know only a single science, the science of history" had been forgotten. History for historians in those years became an instrument of political expediency, and the search for truth was considered counterproductive, especially if its conclusions were not in the service of particular goals.

Social classes and their role

It has been argued that the bourgeoisie in Greece was neither populous nor economically strong enough to launch a revolution. However, this claim is weak

⁶ The economic analysis based on historical materialism was further detailed in the writings of Svoronos (1972) whereas the ideas of enlightenment and the way they affected the intellectual milieu during this and post-revolutionary years are discussed by Dimaras (1989) and in Kitromilides (2013).

⁷ Yiannis Zevgos (1897 – 1947) from the Communist Party of Greece was the main criticizer of Kordatos's views arguing that the capitalist relations of production in Greece were not mature enough and there were many feudalistic relics and that the peasants ought to play a protagonist role in this respect.

because it is well-known that everywhere and always the avant-garde consists of few but with great leverage people. The power of ideas, the ripening of conditions and the determination are necessary, but they do not constitute the sufficient conditions for a successful revolution. The latter depends upon the vision of what needs to be accomplished during and after the revolution. We know the Greek bourgeoisie performed a catalytic role in the preparation and outbreak of the revolution. In particular, it imparted its vision and, above all, provided a perspective on both the formation of strategic alliances and the direction to follow. But let us look at the social classes and their detailed roles in the revolution.

Poor land workers (peasants)

The predominant revolutionaries were the impoverished peasants, yet they had a vague idea of their goals and the way to materialize them. For example, were the political freedoms the revolutionaries wanted? Or did their revolution provide a solution to their current livelihood needs and a better standard of living? Land redistribution of land would become one of the central demands that would occupy Greece for over a century. All the above are connected, but their exact connections do not seem to have been understood by the revolutionary peasants. In addition, their knowledge of civil liberties and all related issues was poor to be understood by them and develop them into their urgent and non-negotiable demands.

The Bourgeoisie

The Ottoman administration failed to provide the required support that the bourgeoisie demanded to cope in its international competition. Moreover, the usual obstacles, such as the arbitrary decisions of the state and the organization of economic life through traditions instead of laws, were the two most disruptive features in the normal functioning of the entrepreneurs in production and trade. Consequently, the economic progress of the Greek capitalist class was only possible by overthrowing the Ottoman rule and its replacement by a modern capitalist state. The bourgeoisie is the pro-revolution class, as it plays the necessary guiding role and has contributed as much as any other class to the formation of the national consciousness. At the same time, this class carries out a critical role in initiating the revolution and then having a concrete plan to its direction.

The Landowners (Dignitaries and the Church)

The usual descriptions characterize the dignitaries as conservative people by nature, who initially did not want the revolution and rightly so because they were

worried about the redistribution of land and especially the “clipping” of their privileges. Ideally, they would like to maintain their privileges without being under Ottoman rule. Therefore, this social class did not start the revolution, but when the revolution broke out, they actively participated contributing initially to its success and subsequently to its degeneration.

The truth, however, seems to be those landowners in the years before the Revolution ceased to be limited to merely tax collection and gradually began to expand their activities into production, trade, and lending. Their traditional way of surviving did not secure them as much as their new activities promised, which they sought to expand within a new nation-state.

In the same category, we can put the Church that although the lower clergy unquestionably supported and actively participated in the Revolution. By contrast, the upper clergy, especially the one in Constantinople, had other not at all easy issues to consider. However, it is wrong to assume that the upper clergy was definitely against the Revolution. On the contrary, the Church was in close contact with the Greek merchants and assisted them, in one way or another, in the further expansion of their business activity. The Church was mediating and intervening, if necessary, both concerning the domestic rulers and those of other countries. At the same time, the Church was providing support to Greek merchants against their competitors, mainly merchants of Jewish and Armenian descent. The relationship between the Church and the bourgeoisie has undoubtedly been mutually supportive; however, there were limits to what extent the official Church could openly take sides.

Concluding Remarks

The Constitutions of Epidaurus (1822) and Troizina (1827) explicitly guaranteed the abolition of slavery, freedom of movement, and contracts. There were even discussions about the distribution of land to its cultivators. A promise that took nearly half a century to bear fruit. It is important to note that property rights were instituted even in the first post-revolutionary years. Therefore, the Revolution aimed at establishing a bourgeois democracy with all the necessary institutions, and it eradicated slavery.

From our discussion, it follows that in the period 1821 – 1829, there was a revolutionary movement aiming at qualitative changes in the economic and socio-political structure of the regions in which it prevailed. In this sense, it was not merely a “War of Independence”, as is sometimes described, but the formation of a modern nation-state with bourgeois institutions, as stated in the successive constitutions. The Greek revolution went through various stages and setbacks, but in the end, it achieved its goal, that is, the creation of a modern state with bourgeois institutions. The Greek revolution belongs to a series of

Revolutions starting with the American (1776), and continuing with the French (1789). And other similarly motivated Revolutions took place, about the same time as the Greek, in Latin America and later in France in 1848. Hobsbawm (1962) rightfully characterizes this long period as the “Age of Revolutions”, whose aim was to overthrow the authoritarian and repressive regimes with their feudal-solid remnants.

Consequently, the 1821 revolution did not aim at merely ousting the Ottomans but rather the outdated Ottoman despotic feudalistic regime. Hence, attention must be paid to the words *despotic* and *feudalistic*. From the above, it does not follow that in the Greek Revolution, there were no national characteristics; on the contrary, they were always there but subsumed in the context of bourgeois democracy. After all, there cannot be a nation-state without national characteristics to sustain the change in the socioeconomic structure.

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