CYCLES IN THE MODERN GREEK PROJECT:

FAILURE OR SUCCESS?

John Ferri

HIST 1164-1020: Small Countries and the European Union

John Ferri

Professor Hagerty

Small Countries and the European Union HIST 1164-1020

9 April 2016

Cycles in the Modern Greek Project: Failure or Success?

I believe that the dramatic ‘boom-bust cycle’ theory proposed by scholar Stathis Kalyvas is a very effective way to explain modern Greece, because it gives the reader a more accurate and holistic impression of the nation and its progress than the two other most common perspectives, which are to see Greece as a failing, corrupt attempt at a Western European democracy, or to see Greece as an Eastern or ‘Oriental’ nation which is part of the developing world and can never be expected to consistently perform at the same level as the large Western nations leading the E.U. The truth is somewhere in the middle of these opposing statements. While it is obvious that Greece is not a ‘leading Western nation’ in exactly the same way as Germany and Great Britain, or perhaps France, it is still more prosperous, westernized, and international than many of its Balkan neighbors. Additionally, I agree with Mr. Kalyvas that Greece has not failed. It has, at times, thrived, and it has done so because of its setbacks, not in spite of them. They have served as calls to action for the Greek nation, each time spurring the government to completely alter its status quo, enact reforms, and make great progress. Throughout this paper, I intend to prove that Greece’s ‘boom-bust cycle’ is actually what has enabled the nation, which we must remember is still young in its current form, to move forward, and that the ‘Danish model’ (or ‘Northern European model’– perpetual stability, peace, meek compromise, and extreme humility) – simply would not fit Greece, and would never have allowed for the same levels of progress.

Kalyvas, in his work *Modern Greece: What Everyone Needs to Know,* confirms that while the booms and busts of the modern Greek state may be difficult for the Greek people, they are in the end what propels the country forward into the future, because Greece is always better off at the end of the ‘catastrophe’ than it was previously. Kalyvas writes about Greece that “Despite many flaws, its pursuit of modernity has been largely successful.[[1]](#footnote-1)” He goes on to write about the booms and busts, stating that “… each cycle led Greece closer to its goal of becoming a modern European nation.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Kalyvas is successful in making this argument, supporting it with sound evidence, strong historical knowledge, critical analysis, and a logical structure. One of the main sources of support for his argument is Greek history, going back to the ancient era and showing how the cycles prominent in modern Greece have actually been an intrinsic part of the Greek identity from the beginning.

Ancient Greece was no stranger to disaster. Of course, it would be difficult to neglect all of the amazing contributions which Ancient Greece has made to the world – most notably, being the lauded founder of Western civilization. Outsiders, understandably bewildered and frustrated by the lack of unity, the wealth of major disagreements, and the strong localism exhibited by the modern Greek ‘nation-state,’ sometimes call these tendencies ‘backwards,’ ‘pre-modern,’ and ‘petty,’ or refer to them as an inescapable ‘Mediterranean Pattern.’ These claims are not entirely invalid, but such people, according to Kalyvas, need look no further than Ancient Greece to find answers.

For example, the Ancient Greek civilization, despite its glorious golden age, had many periods of intense conflict, some of which threatened – or even succeeded with – the destruction of the entire civilization. The Peloponnesian War, for example, ended the entire golden age of Greece by destroying Athens, the formerly pre-eminent Greek city-state, which was also the birthplace of democracy, as well as being one of the most intellectual, technologically advanced, and cultured of the Greek powers. As Kalyvas points out, “Greece is often regarded as the cradle of Western civilization, the universally admired source of some of the greatest intellectual and artistic achievements of humanity.[[3]](#footnote-3)” However, it was always a land of internal competition and strife, so it should not be shocking to realize that this tradition has continued into the present. It should also be noted that, like with Ancient Rome, and many other advanced early civilizations, Greece made advancements as a result of various kinds of adversity – it is like the saying, ‘necessity is the mother of invention.’

Returning to the idea of the ‘Mediterranean Pattern,’ Greece is not the only country to have improved itself via an intensely emotional yet effective series of booms and busts. In both modern and premodern periods, this cycle has been used by three of Greece’s most prominent Mediterranean and Aegean neighbors – Italy, Spain, and Turkey.

Turkey, at times the ruler of modern-day Greece, and at other times an important rival, has exhibited similar traits to the Greek nation in the past two centuries. Byzantium, a Greco-Roman empire and the Eastern successor to Ancient Rome, derived its power, as Kalyvas tells us, from “its wealthy Anatolian and Syrian hinterlands.[[4]](#footnote-4)” The Byzantine empire then crumbled in 1453, as Constantinople was invaded by the Ottomans, a largely Muslim group from the modern-day geographic region of Turkey, who took over the remains and formed a new powerful empire. This empire, despite serious decline towards the end of its life, lasted into the twentieth century. That is a boom-and-bust cycle at the end of which Turkey emerged more powerful and wealthy. Even after the independence of the Greeks and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a proud new Turkish nation was formed.

Two other examples of countries benefitting from boom and bust cycles, also from the Mediterranean-Aegean Seas region, are Italy and Spain. These two countries have seen major booms and busts throughout their history, much like Greece and Turkey. Italy went from being a peninsula of Italic tribes and Greek colonists trading and warring with each other, to becoming the huge and immensely powerful Roman Empire. After the devastating fall of Rome, however, the new Italian city-states, as well as the new Holy Roman Empire, in central Italy, and the kingdom of Sicily, in the south, emerged, all becoming power players in European affairs. The city-state of Florence, in particular, was the very prosperous but tumultuous on-and-off democracy which started the Renaissance. As for Spain, it was at one point under the thumb of the Muslim Moors, at another point a violently Catholic European kingdom, then a glorious empire spanning territory from the Caribbean through large parts of South America and even some of North Africa. It was later a backwards dictatorship under General Francisco Franco, and finally, a modern Western European democracy which is a member of the European Union and the Eurozone. Both of these countries used the boom and bust model, so at times they appeared ‘down and out,’ or ‘backwards,’ but at other points they were very prominent, even revolutionary and innovative.

However, there is an interesting third example which could be used not only to again prove the viability of the boom and bust model, but also to show that this cycle was not just a ‘Mediterranean Pattern,’ unique to the supposedly atypical levels of corruption and ‘backwardness’ in the Mediterranean region. This example is Latvia. Latvia is a country with a long history of oppression and conquest by outsiders. In this way, it is not unlike Greece. Both Greece and Latvia were ruled by outsiders for much of their history, and they both went through periods of great prosperity and great poverty. Latvia first proclaimed independence in 1918, and its capital, the port city of Riga, achieved a high level of prosperity due to its strategic location for trade and its intellectual and artistic movements. Following this period of optimism and self-governance, Latvians were forced to live under Russian rule during the Soviet period – much like their previous periods of Russian rule over the centuries. Latvia was once again poor for many decades, until it was freed from Soviet rule at the end of the twentieth century. When it regained independence, however, it entered the European Union and became much more prosperous (although still considered ‘developing’). In this way, Latvia had periods of economic ‘busts,’ but also came out at the other end stronger than before (the ‘boom’ phases).

As Latvia proves, having great periods of prosperity followed by periods of intense despair is not a trait unique to Greece or the Mediterranean, and it is not necessarily a mark of incompetence and inability to achieve ‘modern’ status. Greece’s neighbor Italy, which also used this cycle, is now one of the ten largest economies in the world, a leading country in the Eurozone – although still lagging behind France and Germany – and an internationally respectable, important, and fairly stable country, in spite of major flaws which are not unlike those of Greece.

Of course, Latvia and Italy also prove, through both their struggles and their successes, that Greece must find a new model in the future - a more stable and consistent model - if it wishes to attain the same status as Italy or France in the European Union and globally. This does not mean that Greece needs to mimic places like Denmark or Switzerland, which are almost by definition destined to always be stable and peaceful, as well as being far more orthodox and Northern European in their homogeneous, hyper-efficient, strictly rule-following approaches to governance and society. It means that Greece must learn from more realistic models, like Latvia, Italy, and Spain, or even France to an extent, in order to minimize its constant internal drama and frightening ups and downs. Kalyvas’ book has convinced me that the still-young governmental system of modern Greece must acquire a great deal of courage and maturity, and open-mindedness, and it must place a greater emphasis on balance, honesty, and stability, if it wishes to be a leader in the upper ranks of the prosperous Western European Union countries. After all, this does not mean that Greece needs to completely disassociate itself from its turbulent nineteenth and twentieth century periods, or sever the cord with Ancient Greece; this transformation should actually enable Greece to show the rest of the world more clearly, and with more secure pride, Greek cultural continuity and the strong link between the glories of its ancient heyday and the positive traits of its new incarnation.

Bibliography

Kalyvas, Stathis N. Modern Greece: What Everyone Needs to Know. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

1. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Modern Greece: What Everyone Needs to Know.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Emergence,” in *Modern Greece,* ed. Stathis Kalyvas et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)