

Do we need to kill higher education in Greece in order to save it?

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The Greek higher education system is in turmoil. The proposed new law promises many drastic changes, some of which are strenuously opposed by all those affected—presidents, faculty, students, and others. Opposition is to be expected; every change yields an equal and opposite reaction although in Greece it seems that one is not proportionate to the other. Every attempt to change is battered by various groups with such ferocity that would stun even gladiators in Rome. The latest example is the decision by the senate of the University of Athens not to implement the new law if it is passed by parliament. And all that in the name of maintaining what they call a “democratic university.”

I don't want to leave you in the Roman forum scratching your head, trying to figure out what the fuss is about and why the senate decided so. The proposed law makes significant and deep changes in higher education. The government has decided it is time to right all past wrongs. While I understand the desire to dramatically change higher education for the better, especially in this environment of “forced” change, I still think the effort is bad politics; not the substance of the law but its form. It's better to attempt five changes and do them right than to try ten changes and do them wrong. The reason is simple politics 101: the more the changes, the more the affected groups will be. The deeper the changes, the deeper the cuts will be for those who benefit from the current system. Put the two together, and we come up with an explanation of why so many strenuously oppose this law. It affects a whole lot of organized groups and in big ways, especially those who have developed parasitic relations with the state, which is pretty much everyone in the universities. Because higher education must be provided by the state as per the Greek constitution, university problems become public problems. To paraphrase an old slogan, the motto of previous governments has been: “every town a university, every village a college.” Leaving aside the inability to control quality, in an era of budgetary famine this model is unsustainable. But changing it raises opposition not only from within universities but also from local politicians and businessmen who benefit from the presence of schools in their region.

There is a noteworthy question to ponder in the current gladiator fight. Do we have to kill democracy in order to save it? Are the proposed “board of directors” councils, which are the main bone of contention, going to destroy the democratic nature of administration in higher education?

If you have missed the irony, let me focus squarely on the problem. The senate of the University of Athens, which is composed of faculty and student representatives, has determined that the proposed changes will not protect the democratic character of the university by bringing in outsiders who pursue interests of dubious value and whose purpose is or will be to undermine the character and quality of universities in Greece. The involvement of representatives from the broader community is seen as a threat to the current democratic nature of Greek institutions, by which they mean self-governance, i.e., the fact that faculty and students co-decide in many instances on matters relating to the nature and quality of coursework, the ability of administration to design and implement rules including disciplinary action, the distribution of funding, and the ability to dictate whether meetings can take place to decide on these issues. As an academic I applaud the infusion of democracy in higher education. There is a place for it, especially in the production and dissemination of ideas. This is especially valuable when ideas are allowed to flow freely and are used constructively to improve society at large. The problem is of course that such a system does not currently exist in Greece. To oppose changes in the name of sustaining democracy implies that there is democracy in the first place. Unfortunately, much of what is happening fits the term anomy better than democracy. The infusion of partisanship in students, faculty, and administrators alike has decimated any semblance of fairness or rationality so that everyone complains the system is rotten and everyone also opposes changes that

affect his/her benefits. Surely there are exceptions, but the current system works so poorly that almost any change is bound to be for the better.

Besides, universities are administrative bureaucracies and should operate as such. Power does not rest with the "people," be they students or faculty, power in many instances is hierarchical by definition. There are supervisors and employees, implying a hierarchy, and business needs to be conducted subject to repercussions and accountability. Ideas should flow freely but actions must have consequences. Besides the "people" don't pay the bills, taxpayers do. It is not unreasonable for taxpayers to expect greater quality in education or at least some say in higher education. The key is to find the right balance between external participation and unfettered partisan infiltration. The latter is already the case, so why not try at least some of the former?

But even if we make the brave assumption that universities in Greece do indeed function as democracies, we still are left with a puzzle. Can senators be allowed to use their centurions to kill democracy at will? Can representatives of faculty and students decide which laws are fair and which ones to implement? Do we and should we, as a democratic society, expect individuals who do not represent us but expect to be paid by us to decide what is legal and what is not? This is not a trivial matter. Professors and university administrators should know better than to behave like another organized group intent on maintaining its benefits at the expense of Greek taxpayers. This system has brought the country to its knees; it's exactly what needs to change. If the bastion of freedom and ideas does not practice what it preaches, why should it expect others to do it? Being what they are, universities enjoy special privileges; but they also have special responsibilities.

To save democracy we must practice it, not kill it. Seek to change the law if you disagree, conducting yourself in civilized ways. And if it passes, you have no right to unilaterally decide on its legality. Let the courts deal with it. That's what democracy is all about.