Introduction

Economic crisis was no doubt the main instigator of the socio-political developments that occurred in many of the countries of the European periphery in the course of the last six years. True as that may be, the reflections of the economic turbulences at the political level have varied significantly. Whereas in Portugal, Cyprus and Ireland the political systems remained relatively stable, in Italy, Spain and particularly Greece we have the emergence of rather deeper transformative processes that shook the very basis of the political status quo. What is more, while in Spain the political system is in a phase of fundamental but prolonged transformation, which is, only lately, manifested in its full capacity in the party system and the surge of separatism, in Greece we can rather speak of a ruptural break occurring in a very condensed period of time, between 2011–12.

The enlightening bit of this observation is the fact that despite being the common denominator, economic hardships and dead-ends constitute only part of the equation regarding political developments in these countries. In other words, in contrast to an economically reductionist view, we argue here that the key variable that actually determined the impact of the economic crisis at the political level was the particular character, the magnitude and intensity of social mobilisation. This variable was in itself determined by the specificities of the political and ideological articulations, characterising the social formations of the crisis-hit countries at the time of their encounter with the after-shocks of the 2007 global financial crisis.

It is here that we find the basis of the particularity and importance of the Greek case for the examination of the overall conjuncture. It was only in Greece that the economic crisis intersected with a prolonged crisis of political representation leading, under conditions of mass political mobilisation, to what Gramsci would call an ‘organic crisis’ of the system; a simultaneous rupture at the economic, political and ideological levels, a collapse of the hegemonic
articulations and an intense contestation that radically transformed the means and ‘nature’ of political competition.¹

Hence our objective here is twofold: on the one hand, to substantiate the claim about the catalytic impact of the 2010–12 cycle of contention in the political rupture that manifested itself in the legislative elections of 2012; and on the other, to examine the dynamics that emerged within the movement and their impact on the broader political culture (denoting here discourses and organisational forms) of both the left and the right. We believe that such an analysis will illuminate the short-term dynamics empowered by the movement and will enable us to evaluate the strength and importance of its ‘ideological-cultural’ traits that in reality constitute its long-term impact.

In this context this chapter is divided into three main parts. In the first one, we elaborate on the characteristics of the political system in the period preceding the crisis (i.e. 1996–2009) so as to put our subsequent analysis into context. Emphasis is placed here on the characteristics of party competition, the ideological contestation under the ‘modernisation’ project and the subterranean socio-political dynamics that characterise this period, such as the struggles against the educational reforms and the revolt of December 2008. Following on from this, we examine the cycle of contention and the dynamics that emerged in its course (sections 2 and 3), while in the third and final part we analyse its long-term political impact on the lines described above (sections 4 and 5).

1 Greece in the ‘Modernisation’ Era

As already stated in the introduction, understanding the particular impact of the economic crisis on the Greek social formation is impossible without examining the latent dynamics of the political system in the preceding period. Key parameters here are the structure and character of the party system and the position/status of the ‘modernisation’ narrative within the broader configuration of the ideological field.

The legislative elections of 1996 constitute a breakthrough regarding subsequent developments on both these analytical axes. The formation of Simitis’s government and the launch of the ‘modernisation’ project were, in this respect, catalytic both for the political orientation of PASOK and the political

¹ Although referring to the potential of ‘organic crisis’, Kalampokas’s analysis is quite revealing of the dynamics at play (Kalampokas 2013a, pp. 13–14). A strong support to the ‘organic crisis’ thesis is also to be found in the writings of Kouvelakis throughout the period (e.g. Kouvelakis 2011c).