

Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece

International Comparative Perspectives

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MICHAEL TONRY

Foreword

Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece is a *tour de force*, an ingenious, useful, and important book on crime, criminal justice, and thinking about both in Greece, as seen from inside by Greek scholars and from outside by subject matter specialists from other Western countries. The ingenuity is to have developed a bifocaled methodology in which topics are discussed by people who see them up close in contexts of national history, culture, and values, and by people who see them from far away in contexts of personal experience and a broader international literature. The usefulness is in providing a comprehensive look at a single country's practices, policies, and politics at levels of expertise and sophistication no single writer could achieve. The importance is in showing that such a venture is possible and provides richness and nuance that comparative scholarship on the criminal law and its institutions seldom achieves.

The writers tell their stories and the commentators offer praise, elaboration, or disagreement. People interested in, say, the evolution of drug policy, the nature of organised crime, or the influence of the media on public attitudes and beliefs should read and learn what the writers and commentators have to say. There is no point in my attempting to summarise or comment on the individual chapters and commentaries. Instead, I comment on a few themes that emerge from the book. Four themes leap out.

One concerns the effects of shifting, as Greece recently did, from being an emigration country to being an immigration country (or, perhaps, from being a relatively homogeneous country to one having sizable ethnic minorities). Greeks are more fearful of crime than are citizens of most European countries, and they identify Albanians and members of a few other groups as the source of their fears, as the crux of the organised crime problem, and as the villains behind human smuggling. In one sense, there is nothing unusual about this. In every country, some ethnic group is stereotyped in that way, but the phenomenon is new, or more prominent than before, in Greece.

A second theme is the existence and power of befuddled public opinion and misconceptions that create social and political pressures in favour of repressive policies. Greeks believe that serious crime in general and serious youth crime in particular have been rising rapidly when they have not been. Steeply rising prison populations are one result, but Greeks believe there are many fewer people in prisons than are really there. The media promote and reify mistaken beliefs, simultaneously creating and reinforcing them, and building support for harsher practices and policies. Here, too, the Greek experience is not unusual. It is paralleled in every country concerning which there is relevant literature. In some countries, conspicuously England and Wales, New Zealand, and the United States, public misinformation and punitiveness have influenced the adoption of harsher punishment policies and practices. In others, for example Canada, Belgium, and the Scandinavian countries, they have not. An important question to be addressed is why Greece appears to be following the English rather than the Canadian, Belgian, or Scandinavian pattern.

A third theme is the inexorable influence of external pressures on national laws and policies. Examples include EU mandates and treaties aimed at the harmonisation of laws and procedures, international and especially American pressures to adopt repressive drug policies and common approaches to combating organised crime, the adoption of unprecedented forms of surveillance to reassure visitors to the 2004 Olympics, and more benignly, the influence of international treaties and conventions on the juvenile justice system. In the last respect, Greece is in the European mainstream: international human rights standards matter. In England and Wales and the United States, they do not. Another important question is why in this respect – in contrast to its adoption of repressive policies – Greece resembles Belgium (and the rest of Europe) more than England and Wales and the United States.

A contradictory fourth theme is the power of national history and culture. The Greek government has invested hugely in surveillance methods and technology, and Greek citizens, remembering life under the colonels, have resisted their use. One Greek government adopted US-modelled organised crime legislation, to external approbation. A successor government repealed it. Greek governments have changed laws in response to international commitments and pressures, but often reluctantly, partially, and belatedly.

The details of the stories told in *Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece* are uniquely Greek, but the stories are, if not universal, common. All developed Western countries are wrestling with the effects of immigration and increased ethnic diversity; public ignorance, fears, and attitudes; external pressures on traditional policies and practices; and the power of national history and culture.

Two features of this book warrant special mention. It is the first major English-language work on crime, criminal justice, and criminology in Greece. That is important. The comparative and cross-national literatures are growing, but so far they deal mostly with Northern and Western Europe and the English-speaking countries. Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe are seldom written about and almost never at length. Publication of a major, high-quality book on Greece is an important step towards broadening the literature, and, I hope, a harbinger of things to come from elsewhere. The book is written in strong, clear, idiomatic English. This is a major accomplishment which is likely to extend the book's reach and influence. For good or ill (I am of mixed views), English has become the international language of scholarship. Most ambitious European scholars speak and write in English. Even so, it is deucedly difficult to write fluently in a second or third language. The editors of this volume appear to have invested extraordinary (and, I assume, exhausting) effort in converting substantively strong articles into accessible English. Commendations are due.

The great strength of *Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece* is that it tells a common story with rich Greek details. I hope its bifocaled approach is emulated by others willing to undertake the daunting effort this book represents. Comparative and cross-national research on criminal justice systems is less rare than it once was, but comparative studies remain confined mostly to case studies, sometimes done in parallel, and genuinely cross-national studies remain somewhere between uncommon and non-existent. The approach Cheliotis, Xenakis, and their colleagues have taken will enable readers to know more about the Greek system than was heretofore possible, and illustrates a promising new way to learn more about their own and other countries.