Migration and the role of conflated ideas

The European Council held the final meeting of 2015 this week intending to discuss issues of major concern such as the effective handling of terrorism, the economic downturn that has plagued several countries since 2008 as well as the current refugee and migrant crisis. Reflecting on the latter, Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, declared in his invitation letter to the Member States that 'Europe is a community of freedom and will always provide shelter for those in danger.' But this is easier said than done taking into account that Europe is undergoing a process of evolution and needs to develop mechanisms to face the emerging challenge.

Related to the aforementioned point, a rather crucial aspect of the migration crisis associates with the discursive schemata being currently used by far-right actors who attempt to exploit these times of intense uncertainty and social rearrangement aiming primarily to promote their agenda. For example, they politicise the potential side effects of migration and present them as an imminent threat that will eventually destabilise the very structure of European societies. Ideas about socio-political issues are conflated and their meaning is often lost since the legitimate concerns of any society transform into a poor and distorted representation of reality. In the next paragraphs I will show how, in the Greek case, Golden Dawn managed to create a climate of confusion enticing part of the populace to follow its rhetoric path.

At the same time, pragmatic voices that describe a more prosperous and different future hardly attract the same level of public attention. Interestingly enough, Paul Hockenos e.g. exemplifies that refugees will change Europe for the better arguing that the negative demographic trends can be reversed, the economy can enter a much needed period of growth and security can be improved as the experiences of refugees can offer a counter-narrative transferring the message to the supporters of Islamic fundamentalism in Europe that their religion is misinterpreted.

In addition, one should not ignore research findings on the benefits that can be derived from environments with racial and ethnic diversity. Examining its impact on how people process information Sheen Levine and David Stark come to the conclusion that it is merely the presence of heterogeneity in groups that has the power to disrupt conformity. Diversity makes participants more likely to emancipate from the influence exerted from people who 'look like' them and as a result they can engage in critical thinking. To use their own words 'ethnic diversity is like fresh air: it benefits everybody who experiences it.'

However, the public dialogue in Greece is usually dominated by views that fail to reach and reveal the true dimensions of the migration crisis; a mistake that can equally be attributed to the incapacity of mainstream and left-wing parties to address concerns with regard to the admittedly acute transformation of social life.

When one looks into the way Golden Dawn climbed the political ranks, language appears to have played an important role in the construction of migrants as enemies. The analysis of Aristotle Kallis indicates that the strategy of this far-right party was communicated through (a) the zero-sum and (b) the tipping point schema in order to spread fear and make use of the cleavages produced by heightened levels of insecurity and uncertainty in the political landscape. The zero sum schema is based on the assumption that migrants and locals are engaged in a battle for limited amount of social and economic resources. Along with this description, security issues come to the surface equating criminality with immigrants as well as terrorist threat with Muslims. The zipping point schema warns in a rather sensationalist manner that the consequences of migration will be irreversible in the future if the Greek society remains inactive in the present. Therefore, it is necessary for people to take action, the extremity of which can be justified since the tipping point for the catastrophic change is imminent.

As a final remark, misinformation resulting from the current debate on migration can have a lasting effect on perceptions and depiction of reality because poorly informed people may take decisions that run the risk of compromising their own interests. Besides, the irony is that several far-right parties across the continent view multiculturalism as a melting pot that put the characteristics of different cultures in danger, while at the same time these parties are adept at 'melting' or conflating ideas with unsubstantiated claims in order to create confusion and attract supporters.