

THE SELF- ADMINISTRATIVE MUNICIPAL TRADITION OF THESSALONIKI (GREECE)

Michail Tremopoulos

Thessaloniki has a history that lasts over 23 centuries and its social organization has a very long past . In its wider area there were small settlements, the most important of them was ancient Thermi.

During this period in the nearest Chalkidiki and Thermaikos Golf dominate the "*Olynthian Confederacy*" of the cities and the "*Common of Chalkidians*" which had inspired in the whole region the political culture that the ancient athenian democracy symbolizes internationally.

It's Kassandros, the claimant of the throne of Makedonia, who found the city of Thessaloniki in 316 BC, after the fragmentation of Great Alexander's Empire. He forces the citizens of 26 small towns (*polismata*) to stay in the new city. Among them there are also the refugees of Olynthos and Potidea, which the King Philip the second had earlier devastated. One of the most important reasons of their emigration was the abolishment of every political function in their settlement .

Thessaloniki , because of its important position was made known very soon as the metropolis of Macedonia with a strategic port and fortification. Apart from the strategic power, there is a political one as well with constitutions almost alike with those of the contemporary greek cities.

There is a Parliament in the city where representatives of the central government participate in and the Assembly of the city of Thessaloniki. In this Parliament decisions are taken about the city's matters with a broad participation of the citizens.

The political tradition that has been created is so strong that even after the conquest of Macedonia by Romans (148 BC) Thessaloniki has still the right of self-administration according to the old laws and the right to elect regularly its own governors. The parliament and the assembly of the city are still in function and Thessaloniki is called "free city" (*Liberam Civitatem*) having succeeded in not having a Roman guard. Here is the "*Common of Macedonians*" that is to say, the congress of the Province. The city gets into the *Delphic Amphictiony* and the *attic Panellinion*.

This period Thessaloniki becomes a political, economical and cultural center. The ancient gods and especially Athena, Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus, Aphrodite, Poseidon, Herakles and the Egyptian gods had an outstanding position in the cult.

In Hellenistic Ages prevails the divinity of Kabiri, that was brought here by the powerful nautical corporation from Samothraki.

Gradually the christianism banishes the ancient divinities. Apostle St Paul in 50 AC founds in Thessaloniki the first christian church in European territory and here Constantine the Great gets inspired to make christianism the official religion of the Empire in 325 AC.

But the ancient spirit resists as far as religion and political function, as well is concerned. The citizens who are now organized in a mass in independent municipalities do not accept the authoritarian administration and the taxes and exterminate the gothic guard that Great Theodosius had established. The response of the Emperor Theodosius was to invite the citizens of Thessaloniki in the Hippodrome in 392 AC and to decimate over than 7000 citizens ! With this barbarian action he intended to satisfy his German allies and at the same time to extinguish supporters of the ancient pagan spirit, not taking into consideration that even Christians frequented the Hippodrome.

But the independent spirit and the democratic sensibilities of the people of Thessaloniki as well as the great esteem they had towards the ancient greek thought prevailed in the christian Thessaloniki too. In the following centuries they didn't hesitate to rebel against the empire's power and to take off political offices from its local representatives.

The great emigrations of people drive Thessaloniki, for several centuries, into adventures, wars and sieges since it was the object of desire for various invaders. For a long time Thessaloniki doesn't belong to the Byzantine Empire but to independent Kingdoms, domains etc.

At this time deep changes have taken place in the social and economic structure as well. The absolute dominance of feudal lords from the end of 11th century had begun to fade and new forces take over. Apart from the "*powerful*" that is to say the feudal lords, the big-traders, the higher clerics and officials take an important role the "*middle*" that is to say the traders the craftsmen, the independent professionals etc. The "*powerful*" prevail in the parliament of the city while the "*middle*" cooperate with the

"poor" that is to say the small craftsmen, the agricultors, the sailors etc. in the Commune of Thessaloniki. Everybody is considered a "citizen" even those who have come from other areas to the hospitable territory of the city. Thus the population comes to 200.000 people.

This is an explosive mixture which in spite of its peculiarities, goes along with the evolutions in Central and Western Europe where the medieval communes become from the 13th century to enter into alliances and to form confederacies against the local noblemen and the power of monarchs.

Rebellions of byzantine cities (Larissa, Ioannina, Adrianoupole) which required a regime of communal independence had preceded. But in Thessaloniki these evolutions have to do with the ancient latent current, the spirit of democracy, justice and spiritual creation.

In Thessaloniki of 14th century blooms the teaching of ancient greek texts and the city becomes a center of philosophical and theological thought of the Age of Paleologs. It is very characteristic here for the first time, after many centuries, begins to get used the term "Greek" instead of the term "Roman" for the resident of the Empire.

When the Calabrian philosopher Varlaam, who was a monk and adored the ancient greek thought, arrived in Thessaloniki in 1335 the juxtaposition between the mystical religious tradition of "Quietists" (*Isihastes*) and the provocative enrichment and the landownership of monasteries, acquires an ideological base. Grigorios Palamas as a supporter of the quieting monastic life gathers around him the noblemen and the feudal lords. The person who expresses them politically is the claimant of the byzantine throne Ioannes Kantakouzinus.

The great majority of the citizens is expressed by "Zealots" an organization of craftsmen, tradesmen and professionals. The dominant power is the Corporation of Sailors of the people who lived out of the developed marine trade of the city and they had direct contact with the democratic rebellions of the Italian cities.

Zealots take advantage of the conflict of the palace with Kantakouzinus who nominated himself Emperor and in 1342 established a revolutionary regime which lasted 7 years. They confiscate the revenues of the rich men, of the churches and the monasteries and take measures of life's improvement for the people. All the privileges

are banished and the election of the rulers is made by all the citizens who control the religious and the judicial power.

In 1347 Kantakouzinus reconciliates with the Paleologs. Zealots go on all alone without having a contact with the country and the cities of the region which Turks and Serbians, the aliens of Kantakouzinus had looted. Conspiracies, murders and diseases make the citizens of Thessaloniki to submit.

This is the dramatic end of the most unknown, maybe internationally, attempt of a city of that period to form an alternative political regime against feudality before the nation-state takes birth.

The independent spirit of Thessaloniki won't fade and the byzantine power will have a constant fear of overturning. But in 1423 Thessaloniki is conquered by Venetians and seven years later is conquered by Turks.

The next almost six centuries the city lives within the bounds of the Ottoman Empire, where therefore for special historical reasons it develops and comes to a peak the communalism which in its more perfect form functions in three grades (commune, province, prefecture)

After the Hellenic revolution of 1821 the constitution of self-administration was maltreated from the centralized modern greek state. And while the self-administrative tradition is ignored even by the Constitution of 1864, the ottoman empire in 1865 issues a legislation for municipalities. Thessaloniki acquires a Mayor and a city-council by 1869 but the city becomes greek in 1912.

From then on Thessaloniki finds difficult to show its self-administrative spirit. But nowadays it has to fight with the--most powerful mechanisms of en ment and passivity of the citizen. That's why sometimes we must recall its rich historical tradition.

What's going on today

During the decade of '70 a remarkable ecological movement appeared in Thessaloniki, which from 1982 till today became more organized and radical. From 1990 its members participate in the elections for local authorities. They will also participate in coming elections of October 1998 this time in coordination with the

critical left forces of the town. Their possibility to elect representatives in the local councils is very strong.

"Ecology-Solidarity" claims the substantial function of the constitutions for the people's participation, the collective authority, the revival of the neighborhood and the open meetings

"Ecology-Solidarity" supports the development of the social movements of the city, the direct democracy, the self-management of our social needs.

"Ecology-Solidarity" wants to express the continuity of the rich tradition the city has, in selfadministration and communal spirit.