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The Agrarian Dream of Kefhalonia: Organic Farming is the Answer

By E.G. Vallianatos

I come from the mountainous village Valsamata, Kefhalonia, the beautiful island of Odysseus, whom I love so much that, shamelessly, made him my first cousin. At least, Odysseus was my first cousin in the stories I used to tell my young daughter.

Growing up in Valsamata was growing up with the land, working hard for lentils, wheat, olives, grapes, sheep and goats. So agriculture, which Xenophon, a student of Sokrates and a general, aptly described as the mother of the sciences and civilization, stayed with me, becoming a permanent vision of what is good about human culture. There was also Demetra, my maternal grandmother carrying the name of the goddess of agriculture, Demeter or Demetra. This coincidence became, much later, an additional tie that linked me so very strongly to my Greek agrarian culture.

So each time I visit Greece, and especially Kefhalonia, my heart breaks seeing the near collapse of the country's ancient food and agriculture. No one bakes bread in Valsamata anymore; a man with a truck sells the peasants white bread. I still remember my mother's round heavy dark loafs of bread, the smell and taste being divine. Now some strips of land in Valsamata still produce wine and olive oil, but nothing else. Like other Greeks, the peasants of Valsamata, and they are not many left, have abandoned their ancient umbilical cord with the agrarian civilization of their ancestors, opting for urban employment. This means, among other things, eating imported food that is drenched with chemical poisons. I find it strange accompanying my niece in Athens to buy food at farmers' markets and hearing farmers telling me they consider toxic sprays, which they refer to as "medicines," absolutely essential in the production of their fruits and vegetables. In fact, some of them laugh at me when I speak to them about the thriving trade of organic food (or, as the Europeans call it, food grown in biological farming) in both Western Europe and the United States.

For this reason I welcomed the Greek Government's establishment in Argostoli, the capital of Kefhalonia, of a school for organic farming in 2001. This was a pioneering school, the only one of its kind in the entire country. Kefhalonia, for a precious moment, had an opportunity to revitalize its life-

sustaining and most important asset, agriculture, even becoming a model of how to produce food without poisons for the rest of the country.

Unfortunately, however, no sooner did the school, and students from all over Greece, start building their agrarian dream in classrooms and out in the fields that both local and national government authorities abandoned the school to its miserable fate of inadequate space; no laboratories; not enough professors; and without infrastructure, allowing it becoming like a Third World institution.

This is unacceptable and irresponsible behavior that does little to raise the esteem of Greece in the European Union. Here is a country with the oldest agrarian civilization in Europe deliberately allowing its villages to fall apart in exchange for foreign illusions and dreadful life in the cities, which has nothing in common with the life of ancient Greek poleis. Instead of building libraries and schools and small-scale enterprises in the villages, making them self-reliant and prosperous, bringing back to the countryside millions of Greeks from the unlivable mega cities, the Greek government is subsidizing urban conglomerations of people living in heaps, with no privacy and no green space. Athens, the jewel of the classical Greek world, has been made into a monster.

Moreover, organic farming, the intended mission of Kefhalonia's wrecked school, is the fastest growing sector of agriculture in both the United States and Western Europe, increasing by 20 to 25 percent per year. In 2005, organic agriculture was estimated some \$ 25 to \$ 30 billion. In 2003, Austria had 18,292 organic farms; France 10,364; Germany 14,703; Spain 15,607; Turkey 18,385; and Italy the largest number of organic farms: 56,440. Greece might have had some organic farms in 2003, but the number must have been so small that it is not listed in the literature.

Greek men of wealth ought to step in and fund the organic school of Kefhalonia, sowing the seeds of future prosperity and food "autarkeia," in other words, food security and sustainable development. Greece must also return to her senses, abandoning the deleterious agricultural system it borrowed from the United States. Organic farming is simply a right step in that direction. Greeks need to get away from processed food laced by toxins enriching foreign corporations. They must rediscover their treasured agrarian traditions, which will enable them to eat well, while re-establishing their connection to their ancient ancestors.

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