

Between a European Greece and a Greek Europe: The Elusive Hellenic Quest for a Modern Identity

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Greece is still in the midst of a major economic crisis, brought to its knees attempting to implement a fierce austerity program imposed by the European Union. According to the most recent data, the gross domestic product continues its freefall, contracting by 7.2% on an annual basis and to an overall level that is 20% lower than what it was in the third quarter of 2008, when the downturn began.¹ Unemployment is soaring, reaching 26.8%, the highest in the EU, and consecutive waves of salary and pension cuts and tax hikes are not simply crippling consumer strength, but actually driving to poverty a constantly increasing number of people, currently 31% of the population, which translates into 3.4 million people living on 60% less than the national average disposal income.³ In this economic context, certain crucial questions come to light. Is the crisis only financial, or are we dealing with a crisis which permeates the fundamentals of the Greek society, its ideologies and institutions, its collective mentality and cultural character? Is this perhaps a crisis of the Greek identity as a whole? And towards what ultimate goal are all current sacrifices being made, what do Greeks really want? A Greece modernised through political and institutional Europeanisation, or a self-created modern Greece as a distinctive, yet integral part of Europe's political and economic mainstream setting?

Greece's relationship to Europe is one of the oldest political debates in history, a debate which has been primarily contrastive in its discourse, distinguishing between Greeks and the 'other', whether stereotyped or not. From ancient times,

and particularly from the period between the 8th and 6th centuries B.C., when an Hellenic⁴ ethnic self-consciousness apparently originates, the Greek has defined himself in contrast to barbaros (barbarian, meaning foreigner or of a foreign language). The works of ancient Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides both reveal a clear recognition of the Hellenes' subjective distinction between themselves and the non-Greek 'other'. Although Herodotus assumed a more relativistic approach to this dichotomy, a more neutral and tolerant view of foreign ways as merely expressing different cultural systems regardless of their apparent strangeness, Thucydides was more critical, presenting the barbarians as a polar opposite, based on three elements which informed the Greeks' sense of identity. The colonial perspective through which Greeks viewed certain communities inhabiting the periphery of Greece, the geographical factor involved in their conception of the boundaries of 'their' land, and the system of social and political organisation (in his case, the democratic city-state), which reflected, particularly in the Athenians' opinion, a superior cultural outlook in evolutionary terms.⁵

In the age of the Byzantine Empire (330-1453 A.D.) the relationship perhaps becomes more ambiguous. Especially from the 10th century, Byzantium was essentially a Greek empire of the Christian East.⁶ At its cultural core were the Greek language and the Greek-Orthodox religion, the two basic components of 'Greekness'.⁷ At the same time, Europe is, according to Paul Valery, those peoples who throughout history have undergone the influence of the Greek rational and scientific thought, the Roman institutional and administrative model, and Christianity.⁸ These were the main characteristics of the Byzantine Empire too, so Byzantium was European inasmuch as the heritage of Athens, Rome

and Jerusalem provided the pillars of its foundations.⁹ The Great Schism between the Western and Eastern Christian churches, however, and the sacking of Constantinople by Western Crusaders in 1204 considerably undermined this feeling of commonness in the eyes of Greeks. Enough to bring about great political division over the potential reunion of the Orthodox and Catholic churches, even in the face of imminent total destruction by the Ottomans in 1453 when the now immortalised phrase 'better the Turkish turban than the Papal tiara' expressed anti-Western sentiment and reflected the seemingly eternal Greek vacillation between East and West. Highly indicative of the long-lasting effect of these historical landmarks in the Greek psyche is Pope John Paul II's , 2001 visit to Athens, in which he expressed what came to be considered in Greece as a formal apology for the crimes of the Catholics against the Orthodox, 800 years after the event. This was hailed by a prominent Greek scholar as the greatest victory for Hellenism since the battle of Marathon against the Persian Empire in 480 B.C.¹⁰

The Modern Greek state was established in the early 19th century, following the Greek War of Independence, through such conditions that rendered it a quasi-protectorate state. The fact that the so-called 'French', 'English', and 'Russian' Parties constituted the three dominant forces in the political life of the newly founded state provides a blunt indication of the degree of foreign influence, if not control, and of the dependence on outside support for the continuation of the liberation struggle against the Ottoman Empire, as that dependence was perceived by the Greek political elites of the time. Subsequently in 1832 the Great Powers installed Otto, Royal Prince of Bavaria, as King of Greece. The measures undertaken by his representatives and committees to reform the country and its identity were inevitably condemned by Greek public

opinion, since they were coming from people foreign to the Greek nation, and hence failed to take into consideration its peculiarities, traditions and strong political customs, as well as its fervent aspiration to liberate the rest of the Greek lands still occupied by the Ottomans.¹¹ This sense of distinctiveness, however, was not enough to distance Greece from Europe. In his famous speech during the proceedings of the Greek National Assembly of 1844, politician Ioannis Kolettis argued: 'Because of its geographical position, Greece is the centre of Europe. With the East on its right and the West on its left, Greece is destined to enlighten the east through its rebirth as it enlightened the West with its decline.'¹²

Apart from the East-West controversy, with the advent of the nation-state in European history, the issue of the modern Greek identity has been further complicated by the distinction between ethnicity and nationality because it begged the question of the origins and character of the assumed national identity. Widely accepted definitions explain ethnic identity as belonging to a group of people who perceive themselves as culturally distinct from other groups, usually maintaining myths of common origin and prescriptions of endogamy. National identity, on the other hand, refers to affiliation and allegiance to a particular state, be it a state of origin and/or residence. As is the case with ethnicity, a sense of commonness in terms of any combination of elements like history, ancestry, language, religion, and customs usually underlies nationality as well. What is sometimes considered an added characteristic of national identity we here find at the centre of an ethnic group's right to a political organization and self-determination delineated by the cultural boundaries responsible for its distinctiveness.

Writing from a modernist perspective, Constantine Tsoukalas argues that the

national identity promoted since the establishment of the Modern Greek state, often referred to as 'Helleno-Christianity' is based on a constructed continuity from a mythical past through Byzantium to our days, initially imported from the West as a product of the Enlightenment, when Europe sought to justify its expansionist tendencies by tracing its origins back to a supposedly racially superior and largely idealized cradle in Ancient Greece.¹³ Lured by this very flattering, European version of their ancestors, Greeks were led to believe that they were different from the other ethnic groups which were seeking self-determination in the context of the general national awakening in the Balkans, and went on to connect themselves to that glorious past, a difficult task that implicated ideas of exceptionalism, historical continuity, and a problematic fusion of pagan classicism and Byzantine Christianity as the basis of the emerging national identity.¹⁴ Tsoukalas's view presents an internally incoherent Greek identity stereotype, and hints to an inherent controversy that exists on a seemingly twin axis. He writes that:

The opposition between East and West was to develop into the main cultural issue of Modern Greece. It reflects a profound dichotomy of the discourse over national identity and goes far beyond the mere antithesis between tradition and modernity. The specificity of Greece resides in the fact that both tradition and modernity are traceable to the opposing conceptions of the national 'essence'.... The struggle between tradition and modernity is not reducible to an opposition between domestic and imported cultural tenets, simply because they are the chief constituent elements of modern Hellenism.¹⁵

From a similar perspective, Antonis Liakos points to another dimension of this oscillation: an apparent contradiction of

the Greek national historiography, which aimed at protecting national history from Eurocentrism – with the integration of the Byzantine Empire into the concept of national continuum – while at the same time considering it an essential contribution to European history, ultimately supporting a delineation of Greek citizenship and national identity based on ethnocultural grounds.¹⁶ This modernist view of the nation as being the product of the nation-state naturally assumes that the Greek nation was 'artificially' created by the Modern Greek state and it did not really exist before that.

From an opposing angle, George Contogeorgis asserts that the Greek nation has existed for more than three thousand years, inasmuch as it is based on a Greek identity that had taken shape since at least the Creto-Mycenaean age (circa 1600 – 1100 B.C.) and evolved continuously transforming until the present day. Hellenism was constituted as a 'cosmosystem', i.e. a system of many polities of a small-scale character, with its fundamental societal entity being the *polis* (the city, and its subsequent political manifestation, the city-state), and on anthropocentric, that is, humanist foundations. This was the first instance in human history when alongside autocracy, a system of societies bound by common determinants like anthropocentric freedom and the monetary economy is created. In fact, current Western anthropocentric system is the modern, large-scale version of the Greek one, and is still in its early phase, lacking the latter's historical depth and experience. The Greek nation is essentially a 'nation-cosmosystem', with multiple collective sub-identities (eg. the local, the polity, the ethnos/ethnicity, the overarching national, etc.), and the Greek nation-state is merely one of its expressions, a particular manifestation of the Greek identity in the context of the anthropocentric paradigm of the modern world.¹⁷

The incompatibility of the Greek system and the Western European model lies in the fact that the former had an ultimately ecumenical, all-encompassing character in virtue of its long historical evolution through the whole spectrum of political organisation (from the smallest scale of the city-state to the multi-cultural empire), while the latter was only materialising the anthropocentric, and hence democratic, vision of society for the first time, and most importantly, on principles like the sovereignty of the state over society and national homogenisation, to which the Greek cosmopolitan system was inherently contrary. According to this rationale, the Modern Greek state established in the 19th century – with the foreign dependencies described above – was essentially asking a politically mature Greek society to regress in order to adapt and synchronise itself to the ‘proto-anthropocentric’ steps of the West.¹⁸ Considering this thesis, the subsequent resistance of Greek society against such efforts, whether domestic or foreign, against what the West calls ‘modernisation’ can be explained, as is the apparent paradox that what appears to work successfully in Europe repeatedly fails when it is applied in Greece. I argue that broader Greek society is perhaps subconsciously aware of such a fundamental incompatibility and thus tends to be sceptical of the notion that modernisation requires emulation of the Western European model.

In light of this historical and theoretical framework, how are we to interpret the insistence on the part of Greece to accept, at whatever cost for the last three years, almost all the measures that have been imposed by its international lenders and the EU to rescue the country from default and remain in the Eurozone? Is it an indication that, finally, Greece has realised the necessity of following Europe’s socioeconomic example, and by extension, perhaps adopting a more European identity

as well? At this point, it should be stressed that there is not a single ‘Greece’. This crisis has brought to light a seemingly serious divergence between the country’s political establishment and Greek society as a whole. On the one hand, all governments since 2009 have evangelised the necessity of the austerity programme and of staying in the Eurozone as the only solution to the economic crisis and to a long-overdue modernisation of the country. According to mainstream discourse, there is no other viable alternative, only total economic destruction. It was Greece’s last chance to rebuild itself through monumental reforms, which would bring an end not only to its current economic ailments, but also to its general lack of credibility and transparency, to the populism of the political system, to the corruption, favouritism and clientelism of the state apparatus, and ultimately transform the mentalities and practices of the past.¹⁹

On the other hand, the majority of Greeks have opposed the economic measures with a series of demonstrations and general strikes taking place since 2010 and occasionally involving violent clashes between protesters and the riot police. Since the June 2012 elections, anti-bailout radical left Syriza and the extreme right-wing Golden Dawn parties have gained considerable strength in public opinion polls, with the former now being the most popular party, and the latter coming third behind the conservative New Democracy party, which leads the three-party coalition government; the polls also show the majority of Greeks believing that the country will not remain in the euro.²⁰ Officially, Syriza supports the view that Greece should remain in the euro, while the nationalist Golden Dawn claims that if the current crisis boils down to a dilemma between keeping the euro and preserving a free, sovereign Greece, the latter has precedence.²¹ At the same time, there is a general sense of unfairness in Greece.

Public opinion shows deep distrust of the country's political class, which has governed for the last 30 years and is in the greatest part responsible for the current situation due to its self-serving handling of the economy in its endless strife for political power. Furthermore, a clear condemnation of the policies being pursued, which, despite all the sacrifices, have failed to recover the economy; and finally, a resentment of the fact that Greece is wrongly accused as the sole or main culprit for the Eurozone crisis and Greeks being presented as lazy and living at the expense of European taxpayers, whilst Germany, the central protagonist of the euro crisis, is handling it according to its narrow national interests and is consequently undermining European integration.²²

The exact degree to which Europeanness is crucial for the modern Greek identity is difficult to ascertain – the task of collective psychoanalysis seems unrealistic – yet, certain points can be ascertained. To begin with, Greeks do not appear convinced that modernisation equals Europeanisation. The recent rise of political parties which have been known to be sceptical or outright critical of the EU and its federalist trajectory indicates that there is a considerable proportion of Greeks for whom membership of the monetary union and the EU is not an end in itself. A modern country indeed constitutes a persistent aspiration of Greek society, and Europe is geographically, culturally and ideologically the closest example. But Greeks seem to feel European insofar as Europe maintains a character that is compatible to and respectful of the Greek collective temperament. Greeks have historically preferred Europe to imitate them, rather than the reverse. And ideally, they would perhaps prefer a distinctively Greek modern identity than a largely imported one. Of course, a clear and solid theoretical conceptualisation of such a

modern Greek identity has not yet gained traction, so we find Greece still struggling to find a balance between, at times, a pathetic, ludicrous mimicking of foreign ways and, at others, a reactionary and completely myopic disregard of international developments or paradigms. Perhaps the only thing that is missing is a state that can finally put our idiosyncratic uniqueness to good use.

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