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What is to be Greek?

What is to be Greek? Two, quite old poems might provide an answer. The first one is written by Kostis Palamas, the poet responsible for the first Olympic Games anthem in 1896. Palamas wonders *'What is my motherland'*? The response is that Greece is the landscape and monuments left behind by all previous periods. That is archaeological sites, churches, castles, baths etc., left by the ancient Greeks, the Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, Ottomans and others. In the second poem *Mythistorema*, written by the Nobel prize-winner George Seferis (1963), the poet describes Greece like someone who wakes up from a deep sleep holding in his hands an ancient marble head, having his entire life as being inseparable from it; he does not know what to do with it, and he is tired of holding it. In Palamas' poem, contemporary Greece is nothing less than an amalgam of everything that took place for more than two thousand years, including the deeds of her conquerors, all of which left traces on the physiognomy of the land. In the second poem, contemporary Greece is unable to decide her identity; instead, she swings between the present and antiquity, as the latter is unbearable for a country trying to obtain a contemporary consciousness.

Greece, as a modern nation state, originated in a revolt against the Ottoman Empire (1821-30). Prior to this, it was not self-evident that the new state would be called Greece (Hellas), nor its inhabitants Greeks (Hellenes). 'Greek' in the vernacular denoted a pagan, a meaning given to the word by the Church Fathers. Thus, after Christianity has risen to supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean in the fourth century, it had replaced the old religions as well as the culture of the Greek *polis* with its culture of public worship, of debates on public issues at the Agora, of theatre, of the wrestling arena and of the Olympic Games. Undeniably, this was a sensational change. The question has often been asked: did the Hellenic world survive after the end of antiquity?

But first, we must ask, what was the Hellenic world? Plato described the Greeks as frogs sitting around a pond, a reference to the Greek settlements around the

Mediterranean and the Black Sea. But was 'Greek' an ethnicity or a civilization? For the 5th-century BC historian Herodotus, the Greeks had a common language and religion and shared the same ancestors; therefore they were one race, even if they lacked in political unity and national conscience. A few decades later Thucydides held a more sceptical view. He wrote, for example, that the Arcananes were initially barbarians who became Greeks, by which he meant that previously they solved their problems with arms, as barbarians did, but later did so through law, as Greeks did. In these terms, the 'Greek' was a level of civilization, and anyone could be identified as Greek as long as he shared its values and way of life. In the 4th century BC Isocrates observed that Greeks were those with Greek education (*paideia*), suggests that Hellenism was a cultural rather than an ethnic category. In the 'Hellenistic' era inaugurated by Alexander the Great and the Macedonians, Hellenism mainly consisted of cultural features, as cities with Greek culture and Greek way of life extended deep into Central Asia. Many people who had Greek as a second language emerged as Greek writers. In the Roman empire Hellenism, through poetry, philosophy, theatre, sculpture and architecture, emerged as a culture of social distinction. It became the culture of the Roman or rather the Greco-Roman aristocracy.

The Christians adopted the Greek language and safeguarded a selection of philosophical and poetic texts, as well as writings on medicine, mathematics, astronomy and such subjects. However, they destroyed 'visual' Hellenism, its schools of philosophy, statues, temples, theatres and wrestling arenas, along with everything that involved the *agora* and public debate. In other words, the Christians wrought the destruction of the Greek way of life – which is why words like 'Greek' and 'pagan' became synonymous for Christians. Nevertheless, Christianity might not have acquired the form by which it is known to us, if it had not been formulated by a Greek conceptual language. So, the question remains: was Hellenism destroyed or did it survive?

If we consider Hellenism as the civilisation of a particular era, then this era began with the Hellenic settlements in the Mediterranean in the 8th century BC and ended with the complete christianisation of the Roman Empire in the 6th century CE. The prohibition of the ancient forms of worship and the Olympic Games by the Byzantine

emperor Justinian in 528, and the conversion of the Parthenon to a Christian church saw its end. This is a civilization that had lasted for twelve centuries. Certainly, many of its cultural features were passed onto the modern era: they survive in the linguistic and conceptual background of European languages, as well as in the languages of the Eastern Mediterranean (including Coptic, Arabic, Syrian, Armenian, Slavonic, Turkish). The dominant culture of the modern era has reassessed, re-used and especially competed with Greek and Roman concepts and forms. From this perspective, especially from the time of the 18th-century Enlightenment, cultural Hellenism has emerged as a reference point in philosophy, political theory, visual arts and architecture, and turned into the core of the canon of European – and largely of Western – civilization.

However, Greeks today do not see Hellenism in this manner as essentially a level of civilisation. Needless to say, they do attribute primacy to it, regarding it as a supreme civilisation and the mother of the modern world civilisation. Moreover, they consider Hellenism as a manifestation of the Greek nation's brilliance and ingenuity. But modern Greeks believe that Hellenism corresponds to a nation, one that lived on after the end of antiquity in the Eastern Roman empire. This nation in its second life was co-shaped with the hellenised Eastern Orthodox Church. Greeks believe that, despite the Ottoman occupation of Asia Minor and the Balkans from the 12th century CE, their nation managed to survive until it could re-emerge and assert its independence in the early 19th century. Greek scholars of the 19th century in various ways nurtured this notion of an uninterrupted history of a nation from Greek antiquity to the Greek kingdom in 1830. Firstly, they archaised the spoken language and developed a written one as close as possible to the Hellenistic *koine* (vernacular). Secondly, they changed the names of towns, villages, mountains and islands: all regained their ancient forms. Moreover, archaeological sites (such as Acropolis, Delphi, Olympia, Epidauros, Mycenae, Delos, Knossos or Vergina) created a geographical network of historical reference points, underlining their Greek identity. Thirdly, they adopted Neoclassicism as their architectural style for public and private buildings. The same style was used for national symbols and monuments. But above all, Greek scholars created a powerful narrative of a nation with a continuous history from antiquity to the present, using supporting evidence from historiography, folklore and art history. With this notion of Hellenism, the Greeks convinced themselves, and others – not

only their summer visitors but also those who study various periods or aspects of Greek culture and civilization, in their own schools and universities. Moreover, those who were mesmerised by ancient Greek civilization assisted with the 're-birth' of the Greeks. Although Greeks succeeded on this issue, they paid a heavy price, and are still paying it, whenever they are perceived to fall short when compared to their invented, but 'distant', ancestors.

There has always been an asymmetry to how Greeks regard themselves and how others do. Prior the mass tourism, a few learned visitors already knew Greece from their books. These were the people that admired ancient Greece, but looked down on any of her other historical periods. The Greeks themselves manifested a similar contempt, for example by 'purifying' the Acropolis and Athens from any Roman and Byzantine structure. Then there was a change of course and they strove to display Greek elements from all previous periods so to demonstrate the uninterrupted history of Hellenism. By doing so they stumbled on a great obstacle: Byzantium was missing not only from the Greek historical canon, but also from the European. This meant that the history of Eastern Orthodoxy was also absent. Many Western scholars of Byzantium viewed Orthodoxy and Eastern Europe as a separate civilisation to that of Western Europe. The Greeks now tried to appropriate the history of Byzantium for themselves and then promote it as a link in their own national history. They wished to introduce Byzantium to European history as the pipeline through which ancient Greek literature passed to modern Europe. It is interesting, though, that just as Westerners had turned their backs on the Greeks, the Greeks themselves had turned their backs to other Balkan and Middle-Eastern people. Greek historical experiences with Venetians, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians, Arabs and Turks were not ignored, but they were registered in a framework of national antagonisms.

Often a reference to the Balkans brings to mind issues such as ethnic conflicts, wars and even ethnic cleansing. This is a region where everyone fights against everyone else. However, hardly there is something exceptional about the Balkans; no more blood was shed in this region than in any other part of the world. What actually happened was that different ethnic populations co-existed in the same territory. Thus, when a nation gained political will following the decline of the Ottoman Empire, it began to claim areas that other nations were also claiming. For example, Greece and

Bulgaria both claimed Macedonia. The former also disputed Constantinople (Istanbul) and Asia Minor with the Turks. The years leading up to World War I brought an explosion of nationalisms, leading to a decade of constant wars and bloody conflicts (1912-22). These events were to change the physiognomy of the region, as well as each nation's society. Greece quadrupled in size by acquiring the largest part of Macedonia, which was Hellenised, mainly by transferring refugees from Asia Minor. The end of these wars was followed mostly by violent and certainly unwilling mass expulsions or population exchanges, even massacres. In 1922, 1.5 million Christian refugees were forced to leave Turkey for Greece. Six hundred thousand of their Muslim counterparts left Greece to settle in Turkey. Additionally, Greek populations from around the Balkans and Asia Minor converged within the borders of the Greek state. In the following years the state made a great deal of effort to assist the refugees, who comprised 20% of the population, assimilating them into Greek life.

War changed the political scene of Greece; the army became stronger and often resulted in coups d'état that brought crises to the country's parliamentary system. The 1929-32 depression resulted in a series of social unrests. A spectre of a social revolution hovered over the country until 1936. This changed when a dictatorship was established, as in other European countries of this period. In fact, Greece entered World War II under a dictatorship imitating fascism but allying with Great Britain.

For Nikos Svoronos, a leading 20th-century Greek historian, a key element throughout Greek history has been the spirit of 'resistance'. Greeks, he claimed, were always resisting foreign invaders and internal tyranny. This widespread is the result of the fact that the Modern Greek state was a product of a revolution, which in turn created a strong subject: *We, the people!* It gave rise to a tradition of popular patriotism and nationalism, of intense politicisation and strong political parties, as well as of a relatively stable parliamentary tradition. Yet Greece won its independence through the intervention of the major powers of that period, especially Great Britain and Russia. For most of her history Greece has been dependent, first on Britain, then on the USA. Consequently, both powers often had a say in domestic policy. Greece, in other words, was something between an independent state and a colony, without having ever actually turned into a colony. At the same time, Greece maintained an ambivalent stance towards Europe and the West, though Western powers were needed

when it was lined up against Turkey or any other Balkan neighbour. Interestingly, though, Greece held to an anti-imperialist spirit, risking being regarded as the naughty child of the West. This ambivalence was reinforced after World War II, and has had a profound impact on contemporary Greece.

In 1940-42 the Greeks defeated the Italian invasion, but then were defeated by the Germans. From April 1941 to October 1944 Greece endured a tripartite German, Italian and Bulgarian occupation, under German leadership. During this period the entire state mechanism collapsed. The gold of the national Bank flew to Germany, and the poor economy was called to support the German army of occupation. Almost the entire Jewish population of the country has been deported to the camps of death. Famine hit the urban population, while the currency was devalued in uncontrolled inflation. The population had to organize its own survival, and this together with a resistance movement against the occupiers, resulted in the merging of patriotic spirit and social revolt. Liberal and conservative political parties were inactive, so the National Liberation Front, a coalition of Communist and leftist parties, took up leadership of city and village resistance groups. Its military branch was a guerrilla army known as ELAS (Greek Resistance Army). Despite the leadership's cautious declarations that Greek resistance was on the side of the Allies and against Axis, the whole movement acquired the characteristics of an undeclared social revolution. Furthermore, ELAS attempted, sometimes bloodily, to dominate any other political or armed groups. As a revolution often brings a counterrevolution, so this was the case in occupied Greece. With the cooperation of the occupying forces, rival armed groups evolved and were to lead the country to a bloody civil war which did not come to an end after Greece's liberation from the Germans (October 1944), but escalated in December 1944 and then again in the period 1947-49, turning into a full-blown war.

The Greek Civil War was one of first episodes of the Cold War: the British and the Americans responded with immediate interference. This war ended with a crushing defeat for the Left; a large number of its supporters were either executed and exiled to barren islands of the Aegean or fled to Eastern Bloc countries. Until 1967 the country was governed by a very weak democracy. Greece had now ceased to be an agricultural society, most of its population having moving into the cities. The economy was not strong enough to support its people and a large wave of emigrants

went to Germany and the rest of Western Europe. However, Europe's post-war prosperity also impacted on Greece. Steadily the country's living standards began to move closer to those of other European countries, even though together with Spain, Portugal and Southern Italy belonged to the slower-paced Europe. This direction was interrupted by the military junta that ruled for seven years from 1967, bringing significant disaster to Greece as well as to Cyprus, where it dismantled legitimate government and caused a Turkish invasion which has become permanent. The military junta was the final act of a period of wars and fierce political unrests that had begun in the early 20th century. Yet, the last quarter of the 20th century saw a period in which the country's democratic institutions were consolidated. Moreover, thanks to tourism, the standard of living improved, and in 1981 Greece became the tenth member of the European Union. The accession into the European club proved highly beneficial, especially for the country's economy and institutions, both of which to a great degree were modernized.

During the second half of the 20th century, the vast majority of tourists who visited Greece, had not read any of the ancient Greek writers; but they might have seen films such as *Zorba the Greek* starring Anthony Quinn and *Never on Sunday* starring Melina Merkouri in the 1960s. Post-war cinema manifested a fresh, unconventional and jovial Greek identity. This was expressed through difficult to translate words or virtues such as '*levendia*', '*filotimo*' and '*glendi*', as well as through the '*rembetika*' songs (known as the Greek blues) and dances such as the '*syrtaki*'. Although many Greeks, especially males, adopted this identity, the truth is that Greece during the last 30 years lies between an optimistic and pessimistic view of history and identity. Furthermore, the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and consequent globalisation have had tremendous consequences on Greece: a constant wave of new migrants from Albania, Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa have reached her most remote parts, and now make up 10 per cent of the population. There are neighbourhoods and schools in Athens and Thessaloniki where the migrants outnumber the locals. Xenophobic outbursts that the Hellenic identity is in danger from globalisation are frequent – ironic in a land in which people regard '*filoxenia*' (hospitality) as an ancestral trait. At the same time, the 21st century found Greece celebrating her entry in the Euro club. The party went on to the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens; it was a great opportunity for Greeks to show to the rest of the world that

they have succeeded and are worthy sons of their eminent forebears. On the flip side, there was a huge bill to pay which, together with the lack of productivity, the poor insufficient taxation system, the unfitness of the public services and the recent economic crisis, has made Greek people uneasy of their future. An example of this unease was displayed in the angry civic riots in Athens, December 2008 and the widespread anxiety for the future now.

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