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Georges Pletho Gemistus: Reforming Byzantium at the edge of the cliff

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**Georges Pletho Gemistus:
Reforming Byzantium
at the edge of the cliff**
*A short introduction to Pletho's
political thinking*

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Abstract

Pletho's turn to the ancient Gods and Plato signifies actually a turn to the future of the national State. A well-defended country is a well-organized one. In order to be well-organized, the government and administration should be founded on the general national interest, for only national ideology brings the necessary stability and moral force to the long battle for Greek national survival. No wonder that scholars such as Sathas and Zakythinos consider him to be the first of the moderns, putting in the centre of his universe his mystical ideal of στρατιῶται (soldiers).

Keywords: Pletho Gemistus, political thinking, religion, political strategy, state, constitution, political problem, government.

It is no secret to anyone that Georgius Gemistus (1355-1452) translated his name into ancient Greek as Πλήθων (stuffed), which the Dorian accent would render as Πλάθων, that of his

master, Plato. In the late Byzantine era, Pletho considered that a Greek entity, should it continue to exist, should abandon the glory of the Christian Empire of Constantinople and transform itself on the model of the ancient Greek city. This city, Pletho thought, should be placed in the Peloponnesus at Mistra, overlooking ancient Sparta, as the new capital and centre of the revived Greek entity. He wrote several letters to the sovereigns of his time, encouraging them to move in this direction. Furthermore, these *κάτοπτρα ἡγεμόνος* (*specula principis*) were bolstered by an appropriate pagan theology, articulated in Pletho's *Laws* -the last and most important work of this mediaeval sage, after his death, burned as heretical by order of the Orthodox Patriarch Gennadius. Was this scheme a return to the ancient world or an impulse toward a new modern and unsuspected world? The radicalism of Pletho's new/ancient thought is discoverable in this enigma. First of all, let us try to discern whether Pletho decided in favour of the ancient city's political form in response to his platonic readings or to the political, historical and social events of his time.

In a very original work, Tonia Kioussopoulou¹ defends the idea that in the last century of Constantinople's existence, from the Reconquest (1261) of Constantinople from the Latins to the reign of Constantinos Palaiologos, the Empire was a city governed and organized on the Italian city political model. According to Kioussopoulou, the economic and political administration of the State corresponded to those of cities such as Venice and Genoa rather than to the old imperial administration and its political pretensions. Studying the official archives of the time, Kioussopoulou persuades any well-intentioned researcher along the lines of two arguments. First, the Empire was, by its geographical condition, a city; the state was constituted by the city of Constantinople. Second, political power was not in the hands of the Emperor alone but was shared with the upcoming merchant class (necessary to administrative reality) and even the *demos*, 'the people'

¹ Τόνια Κιουσοπούλου, *Βασιλεύς ἢ Οικονόμος. Πολιτική εξουσία και ιδεολογία πριν την Άλωση*, Πόλις Historia, Αθήνα, 2007.

(necessary to counterbalance the merchant class). At this same time, the symbolic union of the Church and the Throne had given way to hostility against Orthodox institutions, mostly due to attempts by the last emperors to unite with the Catholic Church. In other words, in its last century, the Divine Empire had become secularised and republican, resembling Venice and Florence. If Kioussopoulou's analysis is valid, and we believe it to be, then Pletho in his opening towards the city political model, was not a platonic dreamer but a sharp observer of his time and an incisive realist.

In such a reality, why harken to Plato's writings and ideals? Pletho recommends, as would have Plato, to abandon Constantinople, a naval power, and re-establish as a land power in the centre of the Peloponnesus, in ancient Sparta, then called Lacedæmon. According to Pletho, the sea and commercial activities endanger the moral health of the citizens who live and act according to merchant class ideals: profit, political disengagement, luxury, and corruption. Foreign trade and luxury were considered, by both Plato and Pletho, the two plagues of every political regime. A merchant works in his private interest, he has no home and land to protect but rather lives at sea, his ship now on one now on another wave. Ideals of the soldier-citizen and the noble landowner, on the contrary, are patriotic; their lives and prosperity depend on their country's freedom. The choice between Athens and Sparta, that is to say, Constantinople or Mistra, posed no difficult decision for Pletho to make, for he had further reason to defend his views.

The military situation of The Empire was devastating: geographically constricted, with no army of its own, merely a bunch of mercenaries in the pay of the rich commercial families and Venetian and Genoa interests to defend it, total absence of patriotism, and without the national political conscience through which the people might rally to fend the disastrous outcome that threatened. This point deserves an additional explanation. François Masai, in his by-now classical work,

*Pletho and Mistra Platonism*², claims that the sage did not have to seek in ancient glories to rediscover the political virtue of the citizen-soldier. The enemy incarnated the image of this virtue. The Ottoman Turks were the new national patriotic force of the region. The Turkish people's obedience to ancient values –to fight for the glory of the sultan and nation- was all the example that the Byzantines had to heed. Against this moral and military force, Constantinople, defended by strangers, and worse, defended by those who would profit from its loss, the Venetian and Genoa merchant States, had little hope of survival. On the other hand, should the capital of the Greek State be moved to the centre of an arid mountainous region of classical Greece, a virtuous sovereign could, in time, reform the habits and values of his people while defending them from the enemy. The idea of fortifying the Corinthian Isthmus, a brilliant one given the circumstances, could offer the necessary time for reform. The change of capital referred to another of Plato's arguments. While the Turks were eager to take Constantinople -the treasure chest of all invaders' dreams- they would be reluctant to undertake a difficult military campaign against a well-defended and poor mountainous fortress such as Mistra. If only the national and political rebirth of the Greeks could take place in time. This desired rebirth was also the reason Pletho turned to pagan divinities, an abomination for 'Roman' Christians such as the Byzantines. Pletho was the first to reclaim Greek nationality for the emperor's subjects in the name of Greek *paideia* and Greek language (*On the Peloponnesian Things, in principle*). National identity and the land of Lacedæmon are the foundations of the Plethonian reform of the State.

Amidst the entrenched theological and political polarities of that time, pitting those who were favourable to the Union with the Pope and the Roman Church and those who strongly opposed this strategy -reductively put as emperor vs. patriarch- Pletho sought a third solution: an independent

² François Masai, *Pléthon et le platonisme de Mistra*, Les Belles lettres, Les classiques de l'humanisme, Paris, 1956.

secular Greek State; he saw what every astute observer understood. The Orthodox Church, particularly in its Hesychasm, inspired by St. Gregory Palamas, perceived its future ruler as Pope, or Turks. Its deepest interest did not include the state. Hesychasm's vision envisions the pure Christian community living under whatever is the ruler of the moment. Indeed, the Orthodox Church remained relatively free under Ottoman occupation. However, an alliance with the Pope would turn Greeks into a toy of Papal politics, notably those involving the Italian states. The political alternatives, Turks or Latins, offered no future for the nation. It became clear to Pletho that now, only a small and poor state, well administered, politically, ideologically, and economically reformed, could save the Greek Nation. However, as long as Byzantines remained Christians such a reform was impossible. To express it as would Machiavelli, he who seeks salvation in heaven neglects the glory of his country and State. Pletho proclaims laurels and glory upon Manuel Palaiologos, who freed the Peloponnesus from the Italians and restored it to Greeks "to use and to be safe" (*On the Peloponnesian Things, in principle*). His reform proposals address a great secular Prince, who will require a new religion and a new political strategy. Pagan gods were the gods of the city; Zeus, in his stoic conception of himself, was philosophical enough to avoid idolatry and strong enough to endure the political pressure and exigencies of the times. This is the spirit of Pletho's *Laws*, an attempt to reform religion for the sake of the State. As Thomas Hobbes argues, the political problem of the modern is that two rulers, the State and Church, contend: that there can be only one, the State. Pletho thought the same. He discovered, in the Neoplatonic cult, a religion dependent on the State and fortifying the morality of citizenship.

Let us now examine the spirit of Pletho's proposed economic, military and political reforms as they are expressed in his letters to the Mistra Sovereigns. As we have just seen, the principle of them all is the formation of a Greek national identity and a government devoted to the nation and the common good.

It was not common in this period to deeply consider the economic reform of states. Wealth and prosperity were to be found in the sea and commerce, outside the State, that is. Pletho pointed out that a country need not be luxurious to be rich. The soul of the (Platonic) stoic sage is autarchic; so should be the state. In its self-sufficiency, it is richer than the wealthier and most luxurious city. Self-sufficiency is the wealth of states. This is Plato's ideal in his *Laws* and the principle of the Spartan Constitution. But to achieve autarchy, one must look for internal wealth, which is the regime, the political and economic administration of the goods that the country's soil provides. We will make three observations as to the modernity of Pletho's economic proposals.

The first one reflects on the fundamentals of land ownership. In late Byzantine times, land was given to high officials and nobles, who did not always cultivate their estates. This Pletho was deemed inadmissible.

To claim land, you must render it useful to the community. In other words, Pletho argues as did John Locke in defending liberalism and private property. If you take one fruit from a tree, you take it for yourself. There is no public benefit in this act. On the other hand, if you take a parcel of land and cultivate it, the fruits will enter the country's economy and serve the general interest. In Pletho's time, Peloponnesian lands belonged to noble absentee owners, with no ensuing public benefit. He proposed, in opposition to the landed aristocracy, to redistribute land, thus making agriculture the pillar of the future state's economy. He conceived a consecrated relationship between the land and those who worked it, the cultivators or *αὐτουργοί*, those who nourish their fellowmen.

The second observation refers to state fiscal policy. The policy of the empire was to collect numerous small or big taxes at arbitrary times of the year. Pletho argued that taxes should be collected annually, following the harvest –the opportune time. Pletho espoused taxation in proportion to wealth, what is now called graduated taxation. He also argues that taxes should be in kind, not money, which he knew was often counterfeited, an increasing problem, which devalued real tax

receipts. The German early twentieth-century philosopher Georg Simmel, in his *Philosophy of Money*, proved that money's value is relative to expectations of purchases. He also argues money ill-spent becomes counterproductive and harms rather than profits. This was exactly Pletho's *arrière-pensée* in obliging the State to tax in kind. This would stabilize the real value of tax receipts and put the administration on a predictable footing. Christos Baloglou, who studied Pletho's tax reform, found that Pletho's propositions incarnate the later Physiocrat program. In the fifth book of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, argues Baloglou, we find the physiocrats' four principles of tax collection: a taxpayer contributes according to his wealth (principle of equality), taxes are set by law, and not arbitrarily changed (principle of certainty), taxes are collected at a suitable time, realistic for the payer (principle of usefulness), tax revenue is spent with utmost economy; the State does not indulge in ad hoc taxation (principle of responsibility).

The third observation has to do with the economic and social principle of State administration: utilitarianism. All acts on behalf of the State must derive from the public utility: distribution of lands, tax collection, and even criminal law. In the last part of his treaty *On the Peloponnesian Things*, Pletho states that killing or mutilating criminal prisoners is a barbaric and useless act. He proposes to let them be useful to the community by repairing the Isthmus of Corinth walls in times of war. In this way, criminals should pay in benefit to the city for the harm that they caused to society.

These propositions show to what extent Pletho's economic open-minded program was revolutionary and modern. We have yet to consider Pletho's military and political program.

Concerning national ideology, Pletho developed a theory of the national army. The same arguments that served Machiavelli served Pletho. Only a national army can be trusted. Only citizens can value their lives less than the common interest and only citizens and landowners risk death to preserve their property and the state. So Pletho explicitly requires his 'cultivators' to choose between military service and

paying tax. In this way the principle of utility is intact. Who does not fight, feeds those who do. The unity of the city is thus preserved. But the supreme unity is preserved in the person of the sovereign and the institution of common laws.

As we have already pointed out, the regime that best suits Pletho is a constitutional monarchy, in the form, we may add, that the English People by stages, evolved. This political option assembles three essential elements: clear and immediate decision-making, sage procedures of decision-making, and constitutional security for the people. We will briefly comment on these three points.

Pletho's ideal of the State focuses on three institutions: the Monarch, the Council of Sages (a kind of senate), and the Constitution (Νόμοι). As Jean Bodin puts it, a sovereign ruler must be the sole authority in decision-taking if the State is to avoid conflict. No one is allowed to overthrow his decision but he is not the only one to make it. Decision-making and decision-taking are two different procedures. Sovereignty is not threatened where the emperor *must* consult. Albeit that he must consult the senate, the decision is 'taken' by him as sovereign and stands only by his authority. In this sense, we can define distinctive roles for the sovereign (the supreme authority) and the (consultative) council. On the other hand, the council's main work is law-making. Thus, its role is essential as the laws are supposed to assure security and liberty for all citizens. Needless to say, that the laws are supreme in authority, and apply also to the Sovereign. While Pletho did not explicitly distinguish the powers in terms of 'checks and balances' as did later theorists, he did assign a distinct function to each state organ. He was a judge in Lacedaemon, appointed by the emperors.

To end this brief and synthesizing introduction, a résumé of the essence of Pletho's political program is in order. *A well-defended country is a well-organized one.* To be well-organized, the government and administration should be founded on the general national interest, for only national ideology brings the necessary stability and moral force to the long battle for Greek national survival. No wonder that

scholars such as Sathas and Zakythinios consider him to be the first of the moderns, putting in the centre of his universe his mystical ideal of *στρατιῶται* (soldiers). Pletho travelled to Italy; he participated in the debates of the Firenze-Ferrara attempts at the Union of Roman Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox Churches. His ideas travelled with him. He was the main spiritual force behind the foundation of the Platonic Academy in Florence by Cosmo dei Medici. Dozens of early Renaissance scholars attended his courses and debated ideas with him. His students left Byzantium after the inevitable loss of Constantinople, which, luckily, he did not live to witness; they occupied high-ranking positions –for example, Cardinal Bessarion and Ambassador Ianus Laskaris, who taught Greek to Guillaume Budé and persuaded François Ier to create the *College des trois langues*, future *Collège de France*. They edited the great classical texts; for example, Chalcokondylis in Venice edited, and published for the first time, Homer. But it will be very difficult to appreciate the exact extent of his influence in the recent Western world.

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