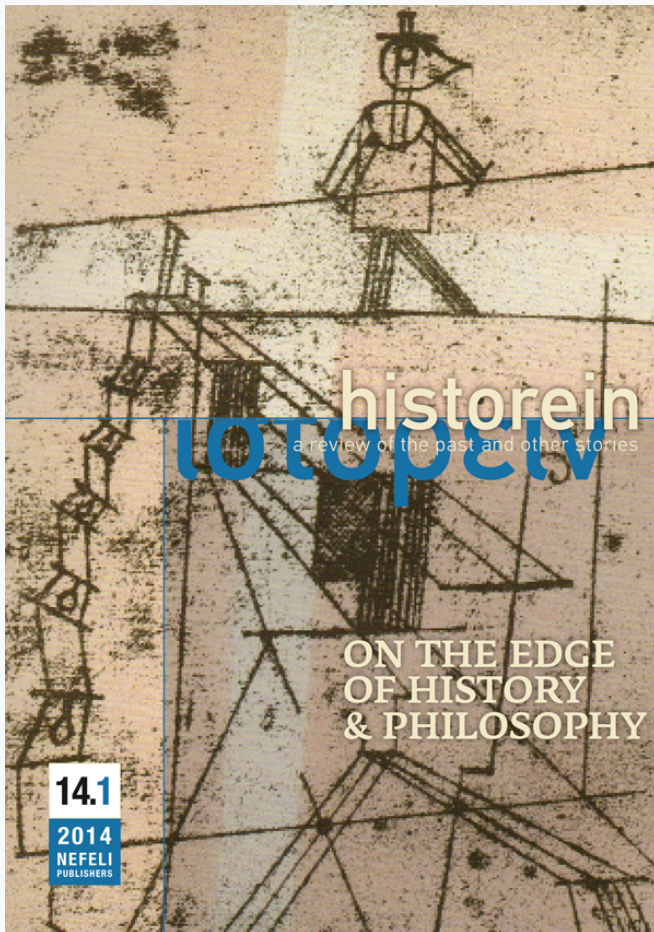


## Historein

Vol 14, No 1 (2014)

On the Edge of History and Philosophy



Review of K. P. Kostis's "Τα κακομαθημένα παιδιά της Ιστορίας": Η διαμόρφωση του νεοελληνικού κράτους 18ος-21ος αιώνας ["History's spoiled children": The formation of the modern Greek state, 18th-21st centuries]

*Sakis Gekas*

doi: [10.12681/historein.259](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.259)

Copyright © 2014, Sakis Gekas



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Gekas, S. (2014). Review of K. P. Kostis's "Τα κακομαθημένα παιδιά της Ιστορίας": Η διαμόρφωση του νεοελληνικού κράτους 18ος-21ος αιώνας ["History's spoiled children": The formation of the modern Greek state, 18th-21st centuries]. *Historein*, 14(1), 121-126. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.259>

**Kostas P. Kostis**

*“Τα κακομαθημένα παιδιά της ιστορίας”: Η διαμόρφωση του νεοεββηλικού κράτους 18ος-21ος αιώνας*

[“History’s spoiled children”: The formation of the modern Greek state, 18th-21st centuries]

Athens: Polis, 2013. 898 pp.

**Sakis Gekas**

York University, Toronto

About 30 years ago, a collective volume titled *Bringing the State Back In* argued for the importance of state-centred analyses, predicting a “sea change” in social sciences with the state playing a key role as an actor and as an institution.<sup>1</sup> No sea change came, however; at most, it was a tidal wave that subsided fairly quickly while in its place a linguistic turn washed ashore many “structuralist” approaches, those focusing on state formation included. The historiography of the Greek state on the other hand followed its own trajectory, mainly in the economic history of Greece, and in many ways “the state” never left the stage. What was missing, however, was a coherent and accessible history that educates without preaching, a quality often lacking in histories of the Greek state; this book by Kostas Kostis fills precisely this gap, bringing the history of the Greek state back in, at a time when, according to some commentators, state is teetering on the edge of the abyss.

Histories of the Greek state, however, don’t come short; a previous work by a single author covers the period up to the 1920s in two lengthy volumes.<sup>2</sup> The *Economic history of the Greek state*, a collective work published in 2011, fills three large volumes, including one

with data.<sup>3</sup> The book under review achieves a fine balancing act that is also extremely challenging: to produce an indispensable work on the history of modern Greece that is both readable and demanding, requiring one’s full attention, not least because of its 850 pages of text.

For some time now, the history of the modern capitalist state has triggered interest in various theories of the state, especially among Marxists. In the 1970s, Poulantzas’ influential approach to the state as a social relation was superseded by the unprecedented popularity and critical acclaim that Gramsci’s writings acquired in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, Foucauldian approaches highlighted the disciplinary organisation of society, the forms of governmentality and the biopolitical power of the state but sidelined the discussion on state formation, essentially taking it out in the backyard after Marxists had brought it back in. Foucault’s intellectual project is still influential for the history of the state but is also difficult to categorise because Foucault refused to tame it within any specific epistemological field. Projects on the ubiquity of power relations, the force of power-knowledge and the “theory” of governmentality are still prominent among approaches to the history of the state.<sup>5</sup>

Such works, however, neglect the importance of law, the fiscal capabilities and deficiencies of states and, especially, the types of state formation that developed under colonial rule as well as the role of violence and the bureaucratic organisation of the modern state as outlined by Poulantzas.<sup>6</sup> Kostis’ book points towards the historical variability of state projects and their trajectory all the way to the present and his account is a fascinating way to read history “backwards” at a time when the present looms large on interpretations of the Greek past. The book, however, is not the outcome of a motivation to complement or modify ex-

isting state theory (which makes it all the more accessible) but contributes to the literature on the history of the Greek state that remains unfortunately rather isolated, given that all recent works on the Greek state mentioned earlier are published in Greek, with the exception of textbooks on modern Greece that are of a different type.<sup>7</sup>

Central to the analysis is the juxtaposition between contemporary perceptions and discourses and an evaluation of the condition of the Greek state, based on historical evidence that documents the state of public finances and the Greek economy over time. The territorial expansion of the state and its ability to “penetrate” traditional – let us call them “premodern” – societies was directly related to the fiscal capabilities of the state, the levels of public spending, primarily for military and defence purposes, and with various spillover effects in the bureaucratic organisation of the state and the modernisation of its administrative structures; the expansion of the road and railways network, for example, was significant, not least for the rapid transfer of troops to the kingdom’s northern borders with the Ottoman empire. Direct prose, well-chosen examples of contemporary sources and publications that link back to historiographical debates are elements that run throughout the volume.

Kostis’ narrative begins with the Ottoman context, revisiting the grand historiography of the Enlightenment and stressing the transformations in the Ottoman empire during the eighteenth century. The book early on sets out to explore a central question: how was a small and relatively insignificant region of the Ottoman empire in the early nineteenth century transformed into one of the most affluent (until recently) and, at the moment, one of the most controversial states in Europe? This question underpins the logic of the spoiled chil-

dren of history, the Greeks, as historian Spyridon Zambelios called them. Kostis shows how history became a “weapon” for national integration, assimilation and continuity, the organising concept that drove the Greek nation forward. The book revises established views such as the positive shock to the Greek economy that the arrival of refugees presumably caused thanks to their hard work, capital and entrepreneurship, all amounting to very debatable and rather nebulous arguments. In fact, the arrival of refugees exacerbated state finances in an already strained national economy, ruined after years of war, and affected negatively the balance of trade because of increased food imports, while the sheer number of people that arrived in the country, most of them in a deplorable condition, represented unprecedented demographic pressures. Therefore, far from suffering a positive shock, contemporaries thought that the sustainability of the Greek economy was in question.

Kostis highlights the role of individuals in history without magnifying their presence and introduces topics for further research, such as the political developments after the Trikoupis period at the turn of the century and the reorganisation of the political space following the open dismissal of the parliamentary system by the interventions of King George and Prince Constantine. Political discourse, economic indicators and the writings of contemporaries offer the author a range of sources to challenge, and occasionally refute, claims by contemporaries and historians alike. The transition from the old political dichotomy of the Trikoupis–Deliyiannis feud to the liberals and the royalists is identified as one of the fields that needs more research to potentially unlock one of the mysteries of the early twentieth century, the social and cultural – and also regional – dimensions of the national schism. The author is more critical towards Venizelos but acknowl-

edges his important role, especially during his formative years, in parliamentary politics, when he landed at the forefront of the national political stage after the Goudi pronouncement of 1909. Kostis regards Venizelos' decision to dissolve parliament in August 1910 a dictatorial act, that only the consent of the king made possible and got Venizelos elected as leader of the Liberal party with a large majority in the subsequent November elections. Venizelos was a "voluntarist" in 1928, although the turnaround of the economy in the late 1920s was entirely his personal success, as were some impressive institutional innovations, such as the Agricultural Bank in 1930. These are just a few examples of the historical debates and turning points in Greek history that Kostis elucidates in his account, within a mostly traditional periodisation. Papagos, Karamanlis and other political figureheads of postwar Greece receive equal attention, inevitably tilting Kostis' account more towards political history.

The book corrects several misconceptions held by historians and contemporary observers alike. The Greek state fared much better in several fields; Kostis, well-known for his works on economic and banking history, Dertilis and other economic historians have established that (to the extent that this is measurable and comparable) the Greek economy performed better than previously claimed by development, periphery and dependence approaches to Greek history. However, Kostis also looks into other areas to "test" the "performance" of the Greek state and, therefore, its trajectory towards modernity. Health policies and the discipline they require were set up for the first time by the interior ministry to address the challenges that the Greek kingdom faced due to its maritime and geopolitical location. Protection against the plague and – from the 1850s onwards – cholera made these challenges very real. Kostis argues that health

policy contained a civilising dimension, that aspired to distinguish Greece from the infested and oriental east.

Comparisons are not missing but are carefully drawn, situated within their historical context and without the backwardness syndrome that burdened the work of a previous generation of Greek social scientists. For instance, it is argued that, over time, the Greek state fared much worse in the infant- and child-mortality index, failing to provide for the most vulnerable at their young age. Chickenpox was hard to subdue because traditional communities resisted inoculation, especially during outbreaks of the disease. The Bavarian state tried unsuccessfully to enforce inoculation within the first year of an infant's life. Greece compares unfavourably with western European countries that saw chickenpox disappear in the mid-nineteenth century; in Greece it was only in the 1920s that people accepted that vaccination could save lives and endorsed a systematic and compulsory inoculation campaign by the state. Other factors that jeopardised public health, such as the long overdue draining of marshes in and around Attica, revealed the limits of the state's intervention, owing to a lack of funds. The distinction between practitioners trained in medical schools and the army of quacks, "barber surgeons" and healers who had the monopoly of care until the state created institutions for the medical profession, tells another story of compromise between the principles and standards set for the profession and ground realities that dictated a more lenient approach.

Beyond the particular and the "case studies", however, scale, geography and fragmentation played a particular role in the emergence of social, economic and political instabilities and divergences in the history of the Greek state and its regional dimension. The different types

of state formation, or rather the different states that emerged, subsided and amalgamated with the national state, influenced its course, the international context and the political and economic fortunes of the Greek state. These are only some of the issues that are explored and addressed in the most compact history of the Greek state published in recent years. The writings of contemporaries, together with an impressive array of publications, has been marshalled to weave the narrative of the formation of the Greek state. A “bibliographic guide” at the end of the book, therefore, makes sense and complements the works cited in the text. Tables with timelines, at the beginning of each chapter, serve the pedagogical purpose of the book and guide the lay, as well as the more informed reader, through the otherwise congested highways of Greek political and diplomatic history.

The role of class in the history of the Greek state could have received more attention, in order to correct another misinterpretation of Greek history, that past societies “lacked” coherent class structures or even class struggle. The different types of state and the various states that comprised the Greek state over time are also missing; the formation of the Greek state could also be seen as an amalgamation and incorporation of other states, now long gone and mostly forgotten or entirely unknown: the Ionian State, the Principality of Samos, the Cretan State or even the short-lived state that Aristeidis Stergiadis tried to create in Smyrna between 1919–1922 and the Italian colony of the Dodecanese between 1912 and 1945. We still know very little about the tensions, conflicts and the historical process that brought these regions, economies and populations into an emerging national project that was being transformed as it was expanding. Most of these changes happened from 1800 to 1912, before the Balkan wars that brought

most of Macedonia, the northern and eastern Aegean islands and Crete under Greek state rule and strengthened the centralised and centralising state. The period from 1897 to the Balkan wars is the period of unthinkable achievement – for the early twentieth century – and success, the result of decades of economic, military and diplomatic political effort. The new status quo, however, was set back and disrupted in 1916 with the so-called national schism, the event that Kostis candidly considers a civil war that shaped Greek politics and society up until the 1940s (for much longer than it has been acknowledged), dividing the country into two state authorities, one centred in Thessaloniki under Venizelos, and the other in Athens under the king.

In the reconstruction effort that the US aid provided in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Greek state as a protagonist assumed centre stage. The failure of the political centre to clarify a policy under pressure from both left and right at home and the cold war abroad explains the road to authoritarianism and the inevitable sense of dictatorship in 1967. Falling victim to the contingency of the cold war, the developmental model that was introduced never materialised until the mid-1960s. The shift to an “anticommunist state” (1950–1974) came not so much as a break with, but as a continuity of, the political climate of the 1930s and the disastrous 1940s. It is in this oppressive, exclusionary, nationalist and conservative state that economic growth fostered the development of the productive capabilities of the Greek state but also saw tens of thousands emigrate in search of a better life, away from poverty and discrimination. The last chapter, “In Europe” (1974–2010), succinctly narrates political events, attributing credit for achievements (the reduction of absolute poverty between 1974 and 1981/82 from 23.5% to 8.8%) and blame (the gradual takeover of the state mechanism



by Pasok) where it is due. The success of the Greek socialists is explained through Andreas Papandreou's role but mainly through Pasok's policies that gradually derailed a suffering economy, most evident in the deindustrialisation of the country. Kostis is more favourable to the Simitis government ("one of the most successful prime ministers in the history of Greece", 832) because he achieved the targets he set, mainly to reduce a budget deficit that was unacceptable for a eurozone candidate and improving relations with Turkey, especially following the 1996 Imia crisis.

The book takes us all the way to the present and, in doing so, floats above the literature that sometimes amounts to an obsession with "reform", stressing the alleged inability of the Greek "political system" to implement those reforms in a number of areas: public administration, education, transparency and the markets. Almost invariably "reform", "stagnation" and "failure" – largely unattributed to political parties, individuals and interests, is to blame and supposedly explains the retribution that followed the 2010 collapse of the state's finances and, soon enough, of the economy. Kostis' book escapes a long tradition of historico-cultural and/or sociopolitical studies that trace many of the state's malfunctions to the foundation of the Greek state in the 1820s. Enduring clientelism, patronage and mismanagement of resources, as well as rent-seeking by key economic actors and their political allies, have been central explanations in the inability of the Greek state to reform. The role of the army in politics also occupies a central place in the range of arguments that invariably compare the Greek political system, economy and society with western European ones. Kostis avoids such pitfalls, "path-dependence" explanations and teleological approaches, navigating confidently through hotly debated periods of recent history such as the 1940s (controver-

sially describing the civil war as an "absolutely pointless war", 711).

The book concludes that even the achievements of the last few decades are not secure given the present calamity; the territory of the coming years remains uncharted. Instead of academic scaremongering or pedantic conclusions, however, the book makes a powerful case for the importance of history in understanding not simply the "pathologies" of the Greek state but acknowledging how far this state has come, reminding us of the tribulations that brought enormous strain on it (the arrival of 1.2 million refugees) or led to its collapse (in the period from 1941 to 1944); individuals, mostly politicians, are the actors in this political and economic history that connects facts with interpretation, not in some abstract Procrustean fashion but by bringing together a number of studies that also highlight advances in recent Greek historiography. The quest for a cohesive narrative ends with a reflection, a rather pessimistic one, on the current predicament in which the Greek state finds itself. Instead of an interpretative framework that castigates the failure to reform, Kostis attempts (and succeeds) to introduce "tools for reading the dynamic of state transformations that have been ignored by Greek historiography although they constitute necessary conditions for comprehending the state" (25).

Kostis demonstrates how financial, geographical and political cohesion was achieved over 190 years of state life. In the analysis, there are two basic "variables" that constitute the state: the first, interstate relations and their repercussions for Greek state formation, such as the history of the army; and the second, the control of population and territory through policies for ordering, measuring and taxing people that gradually found themselves within the shifting borders of the Greek state. In this vein,

the history of the formation of administrative mechanisms, also promised in the introduction, remains largely untold and we are left wondering who “built” that state, which social groups, whether and how any classes interacted with the state over time, with the exception of the working class during the interwar period. Evidently, we need many more specific and in-depth studies before we know who promoted administrative reform and how, in crucial periods where the Greek state had to rebuild, such as in the 1920s or 1950s. As Kostis notes, “we cannot possibly talk about the state and what it means, while ignoring the basic mechanisms that constitute it” (26); the task for future historians of the Greek state is clearly laid out.

- 7 A recent example is John S. Koliopoulos and Thanos M. Veremis, *Modern Greece: A History since 1821*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; and previously Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Modern Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2nd ed., 2002; and Thomas W. Gallant, *Modern Greece*, London: New York: Arnold, 2001.

## NOTES

- 1 Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- 2 George Dertiles, *Ιστορία του ελληνικού κράτους 1830–1920* [History of the Greek state, 1830–1920], 2 vols, Athens: Estia, 2004.
- 3 Thanasis Kalafatis and Evangelos D. Prontzas (eds), *Οικονομική ιστορία του ελληνικού κράτους* [Economic history of the Greek state], 3 vols, Athens: Piraeus Bank Group Cultural Foundation, 2011.
- 4 Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007, 60.
- 5 In a recent approach by Patrick Joyce, the mundane (as in the post office staff), the dusty (as in the ministry office file) and the daily routines of the schools where state employees were educated, presents a very different take on the history of the (British) state since 1800; Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State since 1800*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013.
- 6 Nikos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*, London: Verso, 1980.