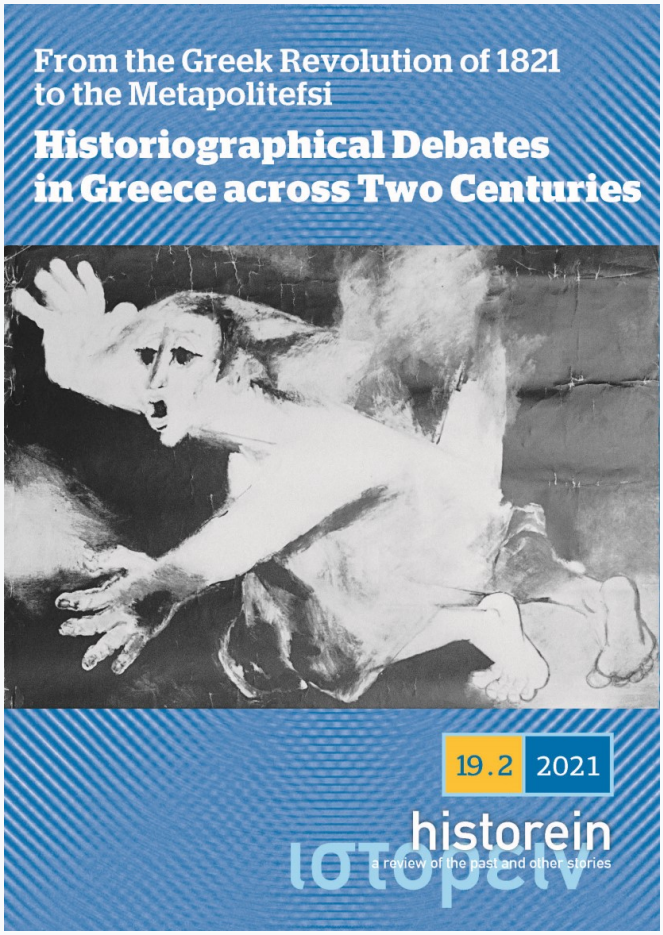
**Historein**

Vol 19, No 2 (2021)

From the Greek Revolution of 1821 to the Metapolitefsi: Historiographical Debates in Greece across Two Centuries




**David Vincent, A History of Solitude**

*Rolf Petri*

doi: 10.12681/historein.24577



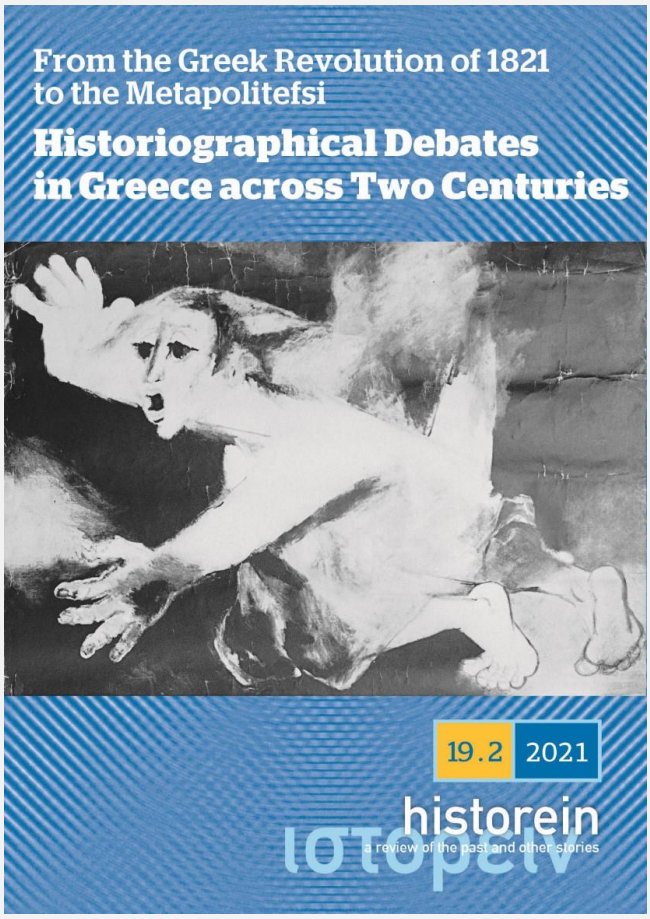
**To cite this article:**

Petri, R. (2021). David Vincent, A History of Solitude. *Historein*, *19*(2). https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.24577

*Historein*

Vol 19, No 2 (2021)

Historein 19/2 (2021)




**David Vincent**
***A History of Solitude***

***Rolf Petri***

**doi: 10.12681/historein.24577**

To cite this article:

Petri, Rolf. 2021. "David Vincent, *A History of Solitude*". *Historein* 19 (2). https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.24577.

# David Vincent
## *A History of Solitude*
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020. 341 pp.

Rolf Petri
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

David Vincent's *History of Solitude* is not the history of an emotion, even though, at a certain point, he states that solitude must have a time-resistant emotional kernel if we still can engage in unambiguous dialogues about it with texts from the eighteenth century. However, the concrete features of solitude have been changing incessantly under the stimulus of changing historical circumstances, and exactly this continuous remoulding is what the author is interested in. His book offers a cultural and social history of how people behaved in the absence of companions and of what they uttered about their lonely experience. It also offers fine pages in the conceptual history of "solitude" and "loneliness". The investigation spans from the late eighteenth century to the eve of the Covid-19 lockdown, which might be worth an additional section in a future edition. The study includes references to international debates, but the empirical data and the corpus of literature refer to Britain. This is, however, an almost neglectable limit. It is true, for example, that the chronology of demographic and urban change in the nineteenth century, which plays an important role in Vincent's book, preceded similar changes in most continental European countries. Still, whoever has some knowledge of the Swiss *Bauernroman*, French *littérature régionaliste*, the German reconceptualisation of *Heimat* or American discourses on wilderness, will admit that the "British solitudes" discussed in the book, if with an initial anticipation or other specific traits, stand for a general phenomenon of what the author calls modernity.

To adequately set up the starting line, Vincent hints at strands of thought on solitude that developed between the Renaissance and the late Enlightenment. Petrarch, Michel de Montaigne and Robert Burton appreciated it as a meditative retreat from the corruption and distraction of urban life. If for John Thelwall lone walking in nature could deepen the walker's philosophical reflection, for Rousseau it was suited to finding one's self. Yet an increasing number of Enlightenment authors held that similar propositions contradicted the wisdom that human nature is essentially social. For John Evelyn, solitude "produces ignorance, renders us barbarous". And what was deemed to be against nature soon would be pathologised from a medical and psychiatric point of view. For Dominique Esquirol or

William Buchan solitude was an aspect of melancholy and insanity. More in harmony with Rousseau's propositions, Thomas Gray pointed out that there was not just mental disease, but also "white melancholy", a worthy dimension of lonely contemplation of nature. In short, at the end of the eighteenth century the terms of the debate polarised between positive and negative views of solitude.

With one of the texts of the period, Vincent embarks on an intense dialogue that in some ways has a structuring effect on his own work: *Über die Einsamkeit*, which the Swiss medic Johann Georg Zimmermann published in 1785. In Zimmermann's time, the debate was polarised between those who conjectured that humans are social animals to whom solitude is naturally detrimental, and those according to whom the free individuals' true nature risks being perverted by the constraints of society. What stands out in Zimmermann's work, according to Vincent, is the refusal to resolve the question of solitude with philosophical disputes. He agreed that humans belong to a species of social beings; hence, he was far from being a Romantic admirer of the lone soul. Still, he did not join the chorus of those who condemned solitude. Rather, he was interested in understanding why a person chooses to be alone, convinced, as he was, that their own state of mind, and not an abstract "nature of man", would determine the positive or negative impact of that choice on individual and societal well-being.

What seemingly has inspired Vincent most in his own work is that Zimmerman, instead of debating the pros and cons of an antithesis, was interested in the dialectics and synthesis of or, perhaps better, the movement between, sociability and retreat. This is also Vincent's main effort: to find out which ideas and circumstances codetermine whether and how people are capable or willing to transit from society to solitude and back. He conceives solitude and the movement between it and sociability as necessary preconditions of modern life. Therefore, he is interested in the whole range of behaviours that people unfold when they are not in company. Zimmermann assumed that only a minority of educated, wealthy males had the adequate mental and intellectual preparation to safely shift back and forth between sociability and solitude. Vincent shows that the capacity for navigating between the two conditions "has widened in our time to include men and women of every age and class" (236) thanks to social and technological change.

Not only is the dialogue with Zimmermann's text for Vincent a fertile ground for theoretical and methodological reflection. Even the two extremes of the antithesis, targeted by the author's critique whenever they are sterilised by a static conception, help him to organise the truly complex material he endeavours to tackle. This seems justified also because the references to solitude as an inherently detrimental or, on the contrary, an inherently liberating condition have never died out in the public debate. Given that the ways people experience and talk about solitude influence each other, they both are part of the social process that the author is interested in understanding. His chapters, which follow a

chronological order, alternate between subject matters in which an affirmative reference to solitary practices prevails and others, in which the actors fear that a pathological impact might gain the upper hand.

However, the effects of solitude, Vincent argues, have often been obscured by either-alone-or-in-company approaches, especially when they fail to distinguish physical from communicative isolation. As long as we proceed in this way, we are unable to grasp two important forms of solitude that increasingly characterise our modern life: network solitude, whereby a physically solitary state favours the engagement with others through various types of media, such as letters, phone calls or today the internet; and, abstracted solitude, whereby the physical presence of a fervently pulsing social environment inspires temporary mental withdrawal – a form of abstraction that has reached a climax with the use of smartphones in our days.

The chapter “Solitude, I’ll Walk with Thee” presents the lone-walkers movements of the nineteenth century in their increasingly organised forms of withdrawal from urban sociability: From walking in the fields, or through a landscape taken for wilderness to alpinism and to the emerging habit of dog walking and other forms of strolling through urban spaces, an activity that “honourable” middle-class women remained excluded from for a long time. But also compulsory forms of lone walking to faraway fields or factories that workers had to face on a daily basis. The chapter on “Home Alone in the Nineteenth Century” tackles forms of leisure time that made the pressure of work and society more sustainable thanks to moments of happy solitude in the private sphere. Hobbies such as philately, gardening, sewing, embroidery, fishing and pigeon or rabbit breeding are discussed in their idealisation as a last refuge, their relationship with the living conditions in bourgeois and working-class homes, and the editorial and equipment industry that immediately bloomed around them. The chapter on “Prayers, Convents and Prisons” illustrates the complex interplay between theoretical arguments borrowed from monastic tradition, and the experience of inmates for whom solitary confinement had not much of the purported reformatory effect, and much more of a cruel punishment.

The chapter on “Solitude and Leisure in the Twentieth Century” shows that many hobbies remained the same as in the previous century, while others were added with enormous social and commercial success. This was the case of magazine reading, crosswords and a number of activities made possible by the electrification of homes, such as reading in the dark, then radio and television. Thanks to the Walkman’s capacity for isolation from the surrounding soundscape, walking and jogging achieved a new quality. Here, again, the author shows how technical, demographic, urban and social change broadened the possibilities for all classes and genders to access multiple possibilities of transition between solitary and social activities. The chapter on “The Spiritual Revival” that the same century witnessed shows that attempts to relaunch practices of a salvific spiritual retreat on the basis of religious or ideological belief systems were met with increasing scepticism. Not for that was the hunger for spiritual recreation stilled. Rather, it began to

feed on a myriad of different beliefs and intuitions, a multiplication and "personalisation" that has been further favoured by the internet.

Vincent makes ample use of fiction and poetry, but is aware of the social biases that similar sources entail. To not entirely rely on higher or middle-class intellectual self-representation, he focuses on what he calls "lower-case solitude", a generally neglected field, the ignorance of which has contributed greatly to an undue over-dramatisation of solitude. Did all classes and genders always experience lonely breakaways from the working day as moments of contemplation and relaxation. For the great majority, "solitude has been a snatched experience found in contexts where company and its absence are equal and overlapping possibilities" (27). First and foremost, it was embraced as a "form of relaxation from work and family" rather than as religious meditation, philosophical contemplation or therapeutic self-finding. According to the author, these aspects have been under-researched because social historians and social scientists prefer to analyse forms of collective activity. This is not only due to the fact that collective practices are seen as the source of historical change, but also to the scarce documentation of solitary moments in working-class environments. However, suitable sources, indirect ones at least, are not absent. The historian can rely on the periodicals and associations concerned with solitary leisure-time activities, for example. The thorough inclusion of seemingly unspectacular manifestations of everyday solitude is one of the outstanding achievements of Vincent's study.

Against the background of the long-term evolution of "lower-case solitude" dissected in the previous chapters, in the seventh chapter – "The 'Epidemic of Loneliness' Revisited" – the author can deconstruct with relative ease the alarm regarding the "epidemic" launched in recent times. He shows that since the postwar decades loneliness as a source of actual psychophysical suffering has displayed stable figures rather than a recent spike. One purpose of the alarm seems to be proposing low-cost solutions for the state budget, in the hope that the warmth of familial and societal self-help may remedy the institutional gaps created by continuous cuts in social spending. As the author also explains, in the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century, "loneliness" has become the semantic placeholder for all supposedly detrimental and pathological forms of solitude.

Overhasty deductions about loneliness could impair our judgement regarding "Solitude in the Digital Era", the title of the last chapter. The author does not downplay potential risks for psychophysical health that the personality of children and adolescents may be exposed to by an excess of digital solitude. Still, several aspects of that solitude are not yet conclusively understood. The alarm regarding digital addiction may be exaggerated when these raising it fail to grasp the dimension of abstracted solitude. The momentary estrangement from immediate social surroundings not only leads to moments of loneliness; it also serves to connect with physically distant interlocutors. On the other hand, there is no

reason either to celebrate this possibility as the ultimate triumph of individual freedom. The ubiquitous corporate and state surveillance of digital activity, as well as technologies such as facial recognition, “threaten to abolish the very concept of solitude” (251).

We might become at this point bitterly ironic by saying that in the digital age, we are no longer alone, not even with our solitude, unless we disconnect from a medium that tends to permeate the entirety of social life. And perhaps this alternative, no less ironic, throws us back to a radicalism of choice that modern development seemed to have left behind. However, Vincent is not prepared to conclude his brilliant and extremely stimulating study on such an epically pessimistic note. He prefers to conclude it by recalling the minimalist possibility to walk away from company into a nearby park or take up working alone in a private garden: not just to escape from reality, but also to re-energise our participation in the social process that can change reality.