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The study of modern Hellenism as an academic challenge

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

THE STUDY OF MODERN HELLENISM AS AN ACADEMIC CHALLENGE

Studying modern Hellenism is an academic challenge in many ways and on many levels. For those working on the subject, for the researchers who have devoted their scholarly toil in uncovering the many facets of the Neohellenic experience, the clarification of this challenge is mandatory, as a component of academic self-awareness and as a factor in the epistemic understanding of the work we do.

I confess that this issue has been on my mind since my early years, during my graduate studies and for the entirety of my academic life, and I have not arrived

at a definite conclusion or an entirely clear view of its varied implications and complexities. What is it exactly that we do when we study modern Hellenism, what are the stakes and what is the meaning of our intellectual efforts?

The questions often become torturous in one's individual existence, especially as time goes by and as the necessary self-reflection, required by intellectual honesty, becomes a pressing need. The questions, however, can also become controversial on a collective level, where factors relevant to our social existence play a role, with the contradictions,

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conflicting interests, ideological battles, obsessions and deficiencies that define the social stage.

The issue has thus already been reformulated, taking up the dimensions of a problem. I must reemphasise that I have no answers, perhaps because I am not an adherent of some kind of methodological orthodoxy, nor do I believe in theoretical certainties. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you, at this important moment in my personal journey on the rugged path of scholarly practice, some hypotheses and some impressions, stemming from repeated attempts to confront the problem. I will share my thoughts and my hypotheses by presenting four versions of the form that the challenge we face often takes.

The first form the challenge takes is connected with the choice of the subject itself by us, the bearers and heirs of the Greek intellectual tradition and the speakers of Greek. For us Greeks, the option to study modern Hellenism versus studying, say, Greek antiquity, appears an uncertain career path. Greek antiquity is a subject infinitely better established and recognisable in international academic circles that, furthermore, offers many more opportunities to become integrated in international academic life, provided that academic rules and quality standards are respected. Modern Hellenism as an academic subject does not offer the same opportunities and guarantees and, thus, is a much riskier choice to make, academically speaking.

A dilemma also arises from the choice of modern Hellenism vis-à-vis other internationally acknowledged academic subjects, such as European histo-

ry, comparative literature, social anthropology or the history of political ideas.

The solution to the dilemma emerges from an existential choice: we choose to study modern Hellenism because, as things stand today, we are the only ones who can do so, since there is a worrying lack of serious study of the field outside Greece. By choosing this subject, we keep alive a specialisation in the wide domain of the humanities which is in danger of becoming extinct as a serious research field if the current Greek academic community does not attend to it. The responsibility and the challenge are considerable. The real problem, and the real danger arising in considering this choice, is that the subject may be picked up by researchers who are not qualified or capable of doing anything else. If modern Hellenism is chosen as a field of study for this reason – and the end result will always inevitably show – then the prospects for the field are indeed dim and its future decline certain.

The second form of the challenge arises from the question of how we should study the subject of modern Hellenism, an admittedly limited specialisation in the grander scheme of the humanities, but one which has its own readily discernible identity, and its own rules and quality standards. Here we tread on more solid ground, and the rules are much more obvious, given that the general principles of academic research hold in this field as everywhere else. First, a familiarity with, and a precise sense of, the corpus of source material, historical and literary, concerning modern Hellenism is necessary, as is a general knowledge of the whole range of

the spectrum of archival sources of the field. This is usually the problem that many foreign researchers face, especially the younger ones who work in the social sciences, who tend to be unfamiliar with and unaware of the range of sources, and often prove incapable of recognising the necessity of this familiarity. It is urgent that we avoid this pathology in the native academic community of Neohellenists.

Secondly, a familiarity with the bibliography of modern Hellenism is absolutely essential. We Neohellenists are lucky, but also doubly accountable, because there are complete bibliographical compendia for our subject, prominent among them those by Émile Legrand and his successors. These invaluable reference works should be in the hands of everyone, as our tools of the trade. Bibliographies are compasses in tracing our sources and guides in their criticism. Furthermore, a knowledge of literary history, or more precisely a knowledge of the main intellectual products of the various phases in the literary history of modern Hellenism, is also required. This is essential knowledge not only for historians of literature but for practitioners in all disciplines of the humanities: historians, ethnologists and social scientists should be acquainted with the literary and intellectual delimitation of modern Hellenism, from the fifteenth century onwards, in order to have a full awareness of the work challenge they face. Competence in our specialisation also entails an understanding of the importance of prosopography, historical geography and ecclesiastical and political history.

This is the required intellectual background. Neohellenists need a general

education in these subjects, to ensure that things said in their own specialised personal research are not unfounded, arbitrary or obsolescent. Unfortunately, and in all sincerity, we cannot claim to work seriously in the field without this general educational infrastructure.

The third challenge has to do with the dangers that beset, and often exist within, the discipline of the study of modern Hellenism. The dangers are intrinsic to the subject: introversion and ethnocentric parochialism. These dangers lurk within the nature of the subject of modern Hellenism itself. They can be confronted, however, firstly, if we are aware of their presence and, secondly, if we have the determination to avoid being trapped in them. Introversion and ethnocentric parochialism emerge when we study our subject in temporal and spatial isolation. The dangers are magnified in the case of local and regional studies, which can be of great help and contribute meaningfully not only to knowledge of very specialised subjects and questions but can also illustrate and thus help elucidate broader issues and problems, provided they are transacted seriously and with respect to the standards of academic methodology. However, even in this case, the confinement of the subjects to a strictly local level and failure to converse with a larger bibliographical purview leads to a lack of quality, and turns local studies into illustrations of the dangers I have been discussing.

The next inescapable question is how we can avoid such dangers. The answer is academically somewhat obvious in principle, but becomes more complex in applying it in practice. The dangers of

introversion can be confronted, or more accurately be controlled, through the use of the comparative method.

Comparative approaches allow for a better appraisal of the facts and can help combat one-sidedness and a tendency to exaggeration. This is the simple part of the answer. Things become more complex when we ask how comparison is to be carried out in actual research practice, in our evaluations and interpretations. At the most critical level, the level of the practice of research, a knowledge of theoretical debates is necessary, not as an end in itself, but as a source of suggestions and pointers that may prove useful in raising research questions and looking at the subject in alternative ways. One must also be brave enough to make inferences, so that it may become possible to recognise which of the general regularities and phenomena in the broad focus of research in the human sciences can be connected to and illustrated by the phenomena of the Neohellenic experience, in order that the latter can be better understood or interpreted and, hopefully, also attract the interest of the broader research community of non-specialists. This is how introversion can be avoided.

The necessary precondition for all the above is, of course, that we should ensure that our comparisons, connections and inferences are based on actual facts and the evidence of the sources, that they are strictly bounded by the possibilities inherent in our research material and its context. This is why the general education I mentioned earlier is a necessary infrastructure for the work of any Neohellenist, so that we remain in context and avoid equivocation.

I hasten to clarify. Comparison does not mean streamlining, or a blunting of the edges of the peculiarities inherent in the phenomena, so that they can be fitted to theoretical schemes, often themselves artificial and substantively irrelevant. Comparison aims to refine, adjust or revise those schemes. Nor does comparison entail that we abandon the view of the phenomena we study within the contextuality of Greek historical and cultural reality, that is, as a discussion with an ancient evolving tradition shaped by the Greek language. Adjustments and critical evaluations that can emerge from comparative perspectives are always useful and constructive on multiple levels.

Nevertheless, the successful transaction of comparison can contribute to achieving the most important academic goal in the study of modern Hellenism, its establishment as a valid and recognisable academic specialisation within the broad field of the humanities and, moreover, its disassociation from the legends and emotional lore that the discipline is often associated with. Such a goal is difficult to achieve, but in my opinion it is in fact feasible, due to the wealth of themes and truly important subjects that emerge when we deal with our subject matter. Furthermore, the establishment of the study of modern Hellenism as a valid and recognisable academic discipline, what could be called the “canonisation of Greece”, is not only of intellectual, but of even more general national importance, exactly because it is tied to the survival and future of our culture as a component of the European commonwealth of peoples and civilisations.

This last facet of our subject leads us to the fourth challenge that I believe I must mention, the difficulties which are intrinsic to achieving the canonisation of modern Greek studies and of producing serious new knowledge in the field – which is par excellence the purpose and test of any academic discipline. The difficulties are many, some obvious, others hidden, unexpected and unpredictable. I will list some, as food for thought, for consideration and reflection.

A first difficulty, which should be obvious to anyone working on the study of modern Hellenism, is the sparsity of serious foreign Neohellenists and centres of study of modern Hellenism internationally. While Neohellenists abroad should, or could, act as intermediaries for the establishment of the Greek model in international academic practice, their own marginal position, the result of several adversities and insufficiencies, does not lend itself towards such a goal.

Rather, it promotes introversion and isolation. Unfortunately, things have changed radically in the study of modern Hellenism outside Greece. Gone are the days when foreign Neohellenists, historians, philologists and anthropologists were at the top of their respective disciplines and defined the level of quality for the whole field. That generation is gone, and current researchers find it exceedingly difficult, due to the many distractions, to produce work of similar quality in basic research, which could in turn help canonise the Greek model. Of course, important exceptions exist, mainly in Britain and Germany, but these are few and are limited mostly to literary and philological research. Difficulties also exist beyond

the international decline of Neohellenic studies. The weakness and lack of cohesion in the field have made possible the intrusion of irrelevant disciplines and of arbitrary postmodern approaches, which are characterised by exactly the lack of the general education I mentioned earlier, disabling them from rising to the level of serious academic work. The resulting further weakening of the discipline makes it even more vulnerable to intentional efforts to radically change its character, as is the effort mostly observable in the US to Ottomanise the study of modern Hellenism. In my humble opinion, this is a very worrying trend, because it is unfortunately connected with so-called Hellenic Studies programmes in powerful universities. Due to space constraints, I cannot further expand on this issue, which I have raised on other occasions as well.

Beyond those external difficulties, there are also internal ones. The universities and research centres of Greece constitute today the epicentre of the study of modern Hellenism. However, this development exposes the future evolution of such a critical, for our identity and self-awareness, discipline to the malaise inherent in Greece's intellectual life. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that serious research is being conducted in Greece in all fields of modern Greek studies, and that serious progress is being made, despite the many difficulties. Several examples could be mentioned that would justify this assertion.

The evolution of modern Greek studies in our country, however, is still being haunted by the endemic malaise of factionalism and ideological intolerance, which would be the province of the

sociology of knowledge to explain, and which affects the momentum and direction of scholarly practice. These forms of ideological one-sidedness and sectarianism operate through extended networks of clientelism and patronage, which are in turn, as a rule, shaped by political partisanship.

These phenomena are by now well-known and unnecessary to dwell on at length. The worrying thing about them is that they act as a deterrent to academic progress and that, having as a main concern the safeguarding of advantages gained through clientelist loyalty, they end up producing research that is fit only for internal consumption and not internationally competitive, thus in turn being unable to contribute to the goal of canonising the Neohellenic model, which, as it has been repeatedly stated above, should be the principal need and challenge we face. Exceptions exist, of course, but they are in the main specific and represent the results of solitary tenacious efforts.

It is time that we guide our reflections on the study of modern Hellenism to a conclusion. I would not wish for this conclusion to be pessimistic. I presented a series of reflections, impressions and conclusions on the basis of my personal trajectory and service in the study of

modern Hellenism, to which I have devoted my life and academic effort for almost half a century.

It is possible that I have presented the current status of the field a bit more sternly than it deserves, but please consider this as an expression of my concern and worry for the study of modern Hellenism and its prospects. I strongly believe, however, that a clear strategy exists to face up to and overcome the challenges, problems and dangers: Intellectual honesty in their recognition and seriousness when confronting them with the only infallible and appropriate method, which is hard and serious work, with a non-negotiable adherence to the norms and rules of academic deontology and with a firm belief in the value of modern Hellenism as a component of the millennial Greek intellectual tradition, which constitutes an invaluable treasure for all humankind, and which we in Greece must do our utmost to keep alive and creative.

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