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THE ITALIAN NATIONAL DISCOURSE AND THE GREEK REVOLUTION: POLITICS, LITERATURE, ART, 1821–1847

Antonio D'Alessandri

Abstract: The article investigates the relations between the Italian national discourse during the Risorgimento and the Greek Revolution, from its outbreak to the eve of the European revolutions of 1848. It proposes some general remarks in an attempt to suggest possible points of interpretation of this relation in light of recent historiography. During the period in question, a specific public discourse about Italian national identity was developed in order to create a community of individuals. Within this debate, it is possible to find many references to the Greek experience: from the enthusiasm of the 1820s to the more thoughtful meditations in the two following decades. Political thinkers, writers and artists were deeply impressed by the Greek events. So they used them to find suggestions, examples and possibly models to shape Italian national identity and to prepare the future national revolution.

This article deals with the relations between the so-called Italian national discourse and the Greek Revolution, from its outbreak to the eve of the European revolutions of 1848. During this period, Greece became an early nation-state while Italy remained divided into multiple local entities. It proposes some general remarks in an attempt to suggest some possible points of interpretation of this relation in light of some recent research.

As the new historiography on the Italian Risorgimento has revealed, during the first half of the nineteenth century, a specific public discourse about Italian national identity was developed in order to create a community of individuals united in a common national family. The literary and artistic production created a specific mythology, a symbology and an historical reconstruction of the Italian nation.¹ This national discourse was not something artificial or invented, as many scholars have pointed out, in reference to Benedict Anderson's famous work *Imagined Communities*. The words, symbols and figures of this discourse already existed and came from quite different contexts. Greece and philhellenism were an example of this, as will be demonstrated below.

¹ Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), 30.

Philhellenism was one of the ideals of the Italian Risorgimento, even if it was not the principal one. Greece and the Greek struggle for liberty and independence represented a model of sorts for the Italian patriotic movement.² The Italian case is particularly interesting because “philhellenism did not ... lose its force once the Kingdom of the Hellenes had come into being”³ and it continued to be used throughout the nineteenth century, even after the Italian unification during the 1860s. On the contrary, in other countries philhellenism lost its strength after the formation of Greece at the beginning of the 1830s. However, it must be noticed that philhellenic feelings cyclically returned in the public debate of other European countries too, when a specific political and cultural situation rekindled sympathy and interest towards Greece. This is the case of British philhellenism during the First World War.⁴

As in other parts of Europe, Italian philhellenism appeared in the second half of the eighteenth century. The events of the Russo–Turkish wars and the attention to classical culture, encouraged by a new season of large archaeological campaigns in southern Italy, were the main motivations for this sympathy and curiosity towards the Hellenic world. The growing demand for information about Greece gave birth to quite a large amount of historical, political, literary and archaeological publications. This also stimulated a considerable stream of travellers to Greece and the related publications of travel accounts.⁵ This earliest discovery of modern Greece by the European and Italian public shaped an initial profile of philhellenism. It varied from disappointment to commiseration for the bad situation of the Greek people compared to the greatness of his ancient past. In this period, the prevailing feeling was a sceptical disenchantment with the ability and effective will of modern Greeks to free themselves from their rulers.⁶

In the post-Napoleonic period things started to change. Italian philhellenism slowly became a positive and sympathetic attitude, generated by Romantic culture

² Antonis Liakos, *L'unificazione italiana e la Grande idea: Ideologia e azione dei movimenti nazionali in Italia e in Grecia, 1859–1871* (Florence: Aletheia, 1995), 23.

³ Gilles Pécout, “Philhellenism in Italy: Political Friendship and the Italian Volunteers in the Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 4 (2004): 406.

⁴ See Slobodan G. Markovich, “Eleftherios Venizelos, British Public Opinion and the Climax of Anglo-Hellenism (1915–1920),” *Balkanica* 49 (2018): 125–55.

⁵ Andrea Giovanni Noto, *La ricezione del Risorgimento greco in Italia (1770–1844): Tra idealità filelleniche, stereotipi e Realpolitik* (Rome: Nuova Cultura, 2015), 71.

⁶ Arnaldo Di Benedetto, “Le rovine d’Atene: Letteratura filellenica in Italia tra Sette e Ottocento,” *Italica*, 76, no. 3 (1999): 336.

and nationalist ideas. In this regard, it can be said that a key role was played by Lord Byron and his poem “Child Harold’s Pilgrimage”, written between 1812 and 1818. This work was essential for the development of European philhellenism but also for the awareness of the Italian question among the international public. Byron expressed sympathy for both for Greeks and Italians and he emotionally juxtaposed the two problems.⁷

In this context a great role was played by the events of Parga in 1819. That story struck the imagination of many writers, artists and intellectuals. The poet Ugo Foscolo wrote that “the free and Christian Parga is now a stronghold of criminals, renegades and slaves”. This sentence and other parts of Foscolo’s writing demonstrate the most relevant topics of Italian philhellenism which would later become part of the national discourse: the opposition between liberty and slavery, civilisation and brutality, East and West, Christianity and Islam to demonstrate the degree of civilisation and readiness for freedom of Mediterranean populations and claim the Italian nation’s “rightful” place in Europe.⁸ In 1949, the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce wrote that Foscolo wanted to base Parga’s rights in the idea of the law of nations.⁹

After the outbreak of the insurrection in 1821, Italian philhellenism became widespread. It would be impossible to go into great detail here, but a few examples from both the ideological and material levels follow.

Regarding the ideological level, the case of the young Cesare Balbo, later a well-known historian and politician, is worthy of mention. In 1821 he penned an essay about the Greek revolt that underlined the uniqueness of the event, compared to the ongoing movements in Spain, Piedmont and Naples. He argued that the Hellenic movement was a mass one, affected by the contrast between different religions, fighting for a just cause against the bad Ottoman administration.¹⁰

In 1823, the romantic Italian poet Giovanni Berchet took up the aforementioned history of Parga. In his poem, “I profughi di Parga”, Parga’s

⁷ Alberto Mario Banti, ed., *Nel nome dell’Italia. Il Risorgimento nelle testimonianze, nei documenti e nelle immagini* (Rome: Laterza, 2010), 124–25.

⁸ Fabiana Viglione, “The Sale of Parga in the Nationalist Imaginary of 19th Century Italy: 1819–1858” (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2017), <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/1560>.

⁹ Di Benedetto, “Le rovine d’Atene,” 344; see also Benedetto Croce, “Il libro inglese del Foscolo sulla cessione di Parga alla Turchia,” *Quaderni della critica*, no. 1 (1949): 20–32.

¹⁰ See Maria Avetta, *Uno scritto inedito di Cesare Balbo sull’insurrezione greca del 1821* (Turin: Bocca, 1913) (offprint from *Il Risorgimento italiano* 6 (1913)).

fate was compared to that of other oppressed nations such as Italy.¹¹ The story of Parga's exiled inhabitants was taken as a mirror of the general condition of the European exiles from many other countries. The people of Parga brought away a piece of their land. The separation of the exiles from their homeland reveals another relevant topic of national discourse in general: the strong link between the nation and the land, which became something deeply felt by the Italian national movement. Shortly after the publication of Berchet's poem, the well-known Italian painter Francesco Hayez sought to depict the scene of Parga's refugees during their sad separation from the country.¹² The famous painting was finished in 1831 and was shown for the first time at the Brera Academy in Milan, at that time under Austrian administration.

The cultural review *Antologia*, published in Florence from 1821 to 1832, also played an important role in Italian philhellenism. It published many articles and analyses of the Greek Revolution, many of which also contained the above-mentioned topics of Italian philhellenism. The issue of the freedom and independence of peoples was seen not only as a Greek one but also as an Italian and European one. *Antologia's* liberal authors considered the Greeks as a kindred people, who represented the fate of Italy too.¹³

The *Antologia* is also relevant to the material level of analysis: the concrete help and engagement provided by Italians. The director of the publication, Giovan Pietro Vieusseux, coordinated the network of the relief committees founded in Tuscany, which were centred around the port city of Livorno. These committees sent all kinds of help: from weapons to money and much more.¹⁴

Volunteers were another type of real support for the Greek Revolution. Most of them were exiles after the end of the liberal movements in Italy during 1821. They "dream that the struggle for Italian independence and for an Italian constitution could somehow be carried on from abroad".¹⁵ The most famous of them was the Count of Santa Rosa, who participated in the liberal movement

¹¹ Maurizio Isabella, *Risorgimento in esilio: L'internazionale liberale e l'età delle rivoluzioni* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2011), 98–99.

¹² Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento*, 70–71.

¹³ Cosimo Ceccuti, "Il filellenismo dell'Antologia (1821/1832)," in *Risorgimento greco e filellenismo italiano. Lotte, cultura, arte*, ed. Francesco Guida, Enrica Lucarelli and Caterina Spetsieri Beschi (Rome: Edizioni del Sole, 1986), 92. See also Ceccuti's larger study "Risorgimento greco e filellenismo nel mondo dell'Antologia," in *Indipendenza e unità nazionale in Italia ed in Grecia* (Florence: Olschki, 1987), 79–131.

¹⁴ Ceccuti, "Il filellenismo dell'Antologia," 92.

¹⁵ William St Clair, *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (1972; Cambridge: Open Book, 2008), 251.

in the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. He fled to Greece and died in battle in 1825. After his death, the European philhellenic public started to see him as one of the most famous icons of European philhellenism, and second only to Lord Byron.¹⁶ This gave a strong boost to the Italian Risorgimento too, because it clearly established a link between the Italian question and the most popular national movement of Europe in that period. Santa Rosa's death in Greece was proof of the peculiarity of Italian philhellenism, which was founded on the close relations between these two national questions and the idea of the Greek Revolution as a continuation and a part of the Italian one, taking place within the broad framework of an international European fight for liberty.¹⁷

As Gilles Pécout has pointed out, in the volunteers' experience, the "image of Mediterranean friendship was also influential. However, Greece brought an additional dimension: the idea of friendship born out of a common civilization."¹⁸ The two kindred peoples inherited a common civilisation, seen as a strong legitimization of their struggle for liberty and independence.

Regarding the meaning of the relation between the ancient past and the modern events, it is essential to recall the thought of the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini. Historians have investigated the importance of Greek civilisation and history, underlining the significance of Hellenic culture and the events of the revolution in the formation of Mazzini's thought. According to him, modern Greece was a nation that carried out a process of liberation from foreign domination that represented a moral model for the whole of Europe. This is the only way the ancient past could speak to contemporaries and spur them into action. The young Mazzini thus made the transition from a literary and romantic vision of Greece (typical of a great part of philhellenism) to an ethical-political one. Moreover, Mazzini saw in the Hellenic war of liberation a model for the revolution in Italy from two points of view: the conspiratorial network and the guerrilla strategy necessary to carry out insurrectionist projects.¹⁹

All these aspects became an important feature of pamphlets, books, paintings and many other cultural expressions during the following decades, even after the birth of the Greek state. However, the concrete support to Greece came to an end

¹⁶ Isabella, *Risorgimento in esilio*, 110 and 114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁸ Gilles Pécout, "The International Armed Volunteers: Pilgrims of a Transnational Risorgimento," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 14, no. 4 (2009): 419.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Monsagrati, "Mito e realtà della Grecia nella formazione intellettuale di Giuseppe Mazzini," in *Studi balcanici*, ed. Francesco Guida and Luisa Valmarin (Rome: Carucci, 1989), 168–69.

in the early 1830s. But, as has been already mentioned, cultural and ideological philhellenism persisted, later to become a form of political engagement, especially from around the end of the century up to the Balkan Wars.²⁰

After the enthusiasm of the 1820s, a more thoughtful meditation developed in following two decades. Political thinkers, writers and artists were still deeply impressed by the memories of the Greek events, so they used them to find suggestions, examples and possible models to shape Italian national identity and to prepare the future national revolution.

The case of philhellenism in Italian art is particularly interesting. While in France the events of the Greek Revolution were very popular during the 1820s, in Italy an authentic wave of passion for modern Greece started in 1831 (with Hayez's aforementioned painting of Parga) and lasted around 30 years. Many years later, Hayez wrote in his memoirs that Italy saw itself in the history of neighbouring Greece.²¹ During this period, the Risorgimento entered its crucial phase and the celebration of the Hellenic struggles had great value as an ethical model. Philhellenic art in Italy (above all in Milan and Venice) contributed to the preparation of minds and forces for the struggle for national independence. The existing philhellenic feelings from earlier years spread out from the confines of Italian cultural circles. Thanks to the visual arts, but also to theatre and melodrama, images, moments, feelings and values started to circulate among a wider public, contributing to the consolidation of the national discourse.

The extent of this panorama would suggest a choral unity of sorts in the way Greece was viewed. However, there were also other points of view. The moderate Massimo d'Azeglio, a novelist, painter and one of the most prominent statesmen of the Kingdom of Sardinia, saw the Greek events in a different light. In 1846, he wrote a book (*Degli ultimi casi di Romagna*) dedicated to the insurrections that broke out the previous year in Romagna against papal rule. The work contains some comparative considerations about Spain, Italy and Greece. He attached great importance to the role of the Great Powers in resolving the Greek War of Independence. Unlike Mazzini, D'Azeglio, as a moderate thinker, had no confidence that guerrilla warfare could be applied to the Italian case. In Greece the revolutionary guerrilla uprisings against regular armies had been made possible by the

²⁰ See for example the aforementioned study by Pécout "Philhellenism in Italy," and Francesco Guida, "*L'ultima spedizione garibaldina in Grecia (1912)*," in *Indipendenza e unità nazionale in Italia ed in Grecia*, 191–220.

²¹ Caterina Spetsieri Beschi, "Il filellenismo italiano nelle arti figurative," in *Risorgimento greco e filellenismo italiano*, 121, 123.

geographical environment and historical traditions. Nothing similar could be accomplished in Italy and the events which had occurred in Romagna had been inopportune, dangerous and harmful to the success of the national cause.²² The antirevolutionary argument began to circulate among Italian patriots, paving the way to what would occur after the revolutions of 1848, when the moderate way became prevalent.

Therefore, the formation of the ideological paradigm of the Italian Risorgimento was a mixed process, built on the basis of multiple international influences and experiences. The Greek Revolution was one of them and it was probably one of the most powerful.

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²² Giuseppe Talamo, "D'Azeglio e Mazzini: Riflessioni sulla guerra d'indipendenza greca," in *Risorgimento greco e filellenismo italiano*, 105–7.

