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The Relevance of the History of Modern Greek Society and Culture for Comparative and International History



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GREECE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the reasons why, despite changing historiographical concerns and debates, the history of Modern and contemporary Greece continues to occupy a prominent place in English-language research and studies on the comparative and transnational histories of Europe and the Mediterranean world.

I am very grateful to Professor Paschalis Kitromilides for the opportunity to participate in this discussion and the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Institute for Neohellenic Research and the National Hellenic Research Foundation. For a historian whose principal focus is the Western and Central Mediterranean, this offers me a welcome opportunity to think about the ways in which recent English-language studies on Modern Greek history have contributed to many of the broader debates that currently engage historians of Modern Europe, and especially those of the modern Mediterranean world. What follows makes no claim to be a comprehensive survey of recent anglophone writings on Modern Greece – something that I am not qualified to attempt – but is instead a reflection on why Modern Greece continues to hold a prominent place in many of the most hotly debated aspects of Modern European history. While my comments are limited to publications in English, these of course include the work not only of many Greek scholars but of scholars of other nationalities too.

Starting from the work of British and Greek historians, however, it is not surprising to discover that the changing and often contradictory relations between the two countries since the time of the Greek War of Independence continue to give rise to new research and debate. Since the early nineteenth century there has always been a distinctive “Greek Question” within the broader issues posed by the internal and external relations of the Ottoman Empire, which were collectively known as the “Eastern Question”. When the terms of the “Greek Question” changed following the political reorganisation of the Balkans and the Middle East after World War I, Greece continued to play a critical role in Britain’s broader strategic objectives in the Eastern Mediterranean, and of course after World War II both territorially and politically Greece’s destiny (as well as that of Cyprus) posed questions of vital

concern both for Britain's remaining imperial interests and its broader geopolitical alliances and alignments.

These issues rightly continue to hold a prominent place in English-language publications by both Greek and anglophone scholars, but it is not only these complex historical relations that have assured Greece an especially prominent place in English-language writing on contemporary and Modern European history. As was the case for other Europeans – and also the citizens of the newly founded American federation – British encounters with Greece were from the start profoundly shaped and coloured by Hellenism. The European rediscovery of Ancient Greece and its impact on the European imagination since the eighteenth century has been the subject of bibliographies that stretch back to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Friedrich Schiller, Keats, Shelley, Byron and the Romantics. This is a seam of scholarly enterprise that continues to yield new findings, and in David Ferris' recent study *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism and Modernity* (2000) Hellenism provides the focus for a wide-ranging reconsideration of the aesthetic or philosophical contradictions and uncertainties that pervaded nineteenth-century European notions of modernity.

While Ferris' study emphasises the continuing importance for literary and cultural historians of the ways in which the European Romantics encountered Hellenism, anglophone historians have also found new contexts in which to study Hellenism and its influence not only on European culture but also on politics. An outstanding example is the study by the American historian Suzanne Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, which reconstructs the many different ways in which archaeology, Hellenic images and imagining shaped both German political culture and national identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Marchand's impressive and original study draws attention to the wider roles of archaeology and public museums as agents in the formation of political cultures and national identities, and suggests the need to reconsider many of the older interpretations of the impact of Hellenism on nineteenth-century Europe.

Hellenism (the admiration for Ancient Greece) continues to be an important theme for historians of Modern Europe. But there has also been new interest in the parallel but quite different issue of philhellenism (the nineteenth-century admiration for contemporary Greece and Greek aspirations to national independence). Helen Angelomatis-Tsougarakis' study of the ways in which British travellers perceived Greece in the period before the War of Independence (*The Eve of the Greek Revival: British Travellers' Perceptions of Early Nineteenth-century Greece*), for example,

offers an account that complements Richard Stoneman's earlier exploration of the origins of British Hellenism.¹

Philhellenism is also developed as a central theme in the study of Anglo-Greek relations by Robert Holland and Diana Markides (*The British and the Hellenes: Struggles for Mastery in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1850-1960*). Although primarily concerned with British foreign policy objectives and the permanently "awkward" relations between British and Greek interests, their book offers a well-nuanced account of the ways in which across this extended period philhellenist sympathies had a critical impact on both British public opinion and British policy makers.

The French historian Gilles Pécout was the first historian, however, to set nineteenth-century European philhellenism in both its Mediterranean and transnational contexts. In his reconstruction of the political programmes and initiatives of the international volunteers who mobilised in support of the project for Greek independence during the period of the War of Independence and in the Balkan conflicts of the later nineteenth century, Pécout argues that nationalist, democratic and humanitarian ideals came together in these movements to create genuinely transnational political platforms. In this context the case of philhellenism reveals also the scale of international organisation and mobilisation that Pécout argues nonetheless was unique to the nineteenth century.

Set in these broader transnational and Mediterranean contexts, late nineteenth-century philhellenism can be related more closely to other nineteenth-century emancipationist projects: the international movements to promote the abolition of slavery, the protection of children, animals and religious (especially Christian) minorities and the civil rights of women. But these were also closely linked to the more overtly political "causes" that aroused international sympathies, from the struggles for Italian independence to the American Civil War and the Balkan Wars.²

¹ Richard Stoneman, *Land of the Lost Gods: The Search for Classical Greece*, London 1987.

² It is worth noting, however, how rarely the Anglophone literature on the Italian Risorgimento refers also to the Greek struggles for independence: the two are invariably treated as quite separate issues even in the most recent literature that reveals a new sensitivity to the complex issues that were involved in foreign perceptions of these movements – see for example Lucy Riall's recent study of Garibaldi (*Garibaldi: The Making of a Hero*) and the work of Maura O'Connor (*The Romance of Italy and the English Political Imagination*). But few Anglophone historians of the Italian Risorgimento seem familiar with the now classic study by Antonis Liakos, which remains the essential starting point for any comparative study of the Greek and Italian nationalist movements.

Modern Greece has also become a firm point of reference in recent debates on the processes of national representation and the construction of national identities. The spate of new studies on the invention of tradition and the construction of the “imagined communities” has been inspired at least in part by the work of Benedict Anderson, which is well known to historians of Modern Greece and was the subject of an important review article by Paschalis Kitromilides. Although its principal focus is the history of ideas, Suzanne Marchand’s book on Germany can also be read in this context.

For historians of European national identities, however, the Greek case always has a triple significance. If Hellenism offered one of the models around which nineteenth-century European national identities and self-representation were explicitly configured, it also shaped the ways in which the Greeks saw themselves. Like every other “Other”, Hellenism more often captured the image of the observer more accurately than that of the observed. These are now familiar themes to historians of Modern European nationalism, but it has been only more recently that historians have also explored the ways in which these same models contributed to the shaping of Modern Greek identities and self-awareness.

This dual process has been addressed most recently by the Greek scholar Yannis Hamilakis, whose evocatively titled study *The Nation and its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology and National Imagination in Greece* reconstructs “indigenous Hellenism” from the War of Independence to the 2004 Olympics. In his study, Professor Hamilakis sets the case of Greece into a broader debate on European representation and self-representation in ways that invite comparison with Maria Todorova’s 1977 study *Imagining the Balkans*.³ As in the case of Suzanne Marchand’s book, the work of Yannis Hamilakis also reveals how much can be learnt from a field of study that even a decade ago, at least in mainstream anglophone historical writing, was virtually ignored: the public museum as an agent of ideological and cultural history.

While Greece has become an important and in some senses even unique point of reference in the historical debates on the cultural dimensions of modern nationalism and national identities, historians of contemporary Europe have of course also followed the more recent chapters in the history of Modern Greece in ways that move beyond the questions posed by Greece’s place in the politics of the Cold War. The aftermath of the Cold War and

³ The model for many subsequent studies of how the European peripheries came to be perceived as the “Other” – including Nelson Moe’s study of the making of Italian identities, *The View from Vesuvius*.

especially the break up of the former Yugoslavia, together with the progress of the European Union, has caused anglophone historians to “correct” and widen their understanding of “Europe”, and the work of Mark Mazower has been of special significance in bringing hitherto unfamiliar features of the history of Greece and its people during and after World War II back into the mainstream of debate on contemporary European history.

So it is not only the key geo-political positions that Greece has occupied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its intellectual, cultural and political contributions to the history of Europe since the eighteenth century but also the complexity of the issues posed by Greece’s own emergence as a national community that have assured a special and unusual prominence in English-language historical writings. The researches promoted by the Institute for Neohellenic Research and the National Hellenic Research Foundation – many of them published in *The Historical Review / La Revue Historique* – have made important and distinguished contributions to this literature and have also been the forum for developing other themes and approaches.

Looking to the future, Modern Greece and its history also offer many opportunities for rethinking or reconfiguring a history of the modern Mediterranean world in transnational perspectives. This is something that has attracted a great deal of discussion and a variety of initiatives, and it would be wrong to underestimate the problems and difficulties. After Braudel – in other words after the seventeenth century – in what sense is it possible to speak of a “Mediterranean World”? What forces of cohesion if any came to replace those that had contributed to create a Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II? In the centuries that followed, the forces of disunity are perhaps more evident, while the problems are compounded not only by nineteenth-century colonialism but also by twentieth-century post-colonial legacies. Even if these problems could be resolved, what would be the geographical boundaries of a modern Mediterranean world? Could they exclude the Black Sea, and how far into the hinterlands of North Africa and the Middle East should they reach? What are the confines of “Mediterranean Europe”?

These questions are not easy to answer and are made more complex by the legacies of colonialism and post-colonialism, which still often made it difficult to look beyond the binary contrasts of supremacy and domination – or to use the terms adopted by Holland and Markides with reference to the relations between Britain and Greece: “Mastery and Despair”, “Love and Deception”. It is not surprising therefore that although there have been many attempts to redefine a modern Mediterranean world, few have proved very successful. The Mediterranean world that the anthropologists tried to

rediscover in the 1960s probably tells us more about the observers than the observed. More recent attempts to define “Mediterranean” categories – for example, cities – almost always become bogged down in local particularities.

By contrast, those projects that have looked instead to patterns of material and cultural exchange and interchanges, especially those that move beyond the questionable models of “comparative” histories to address the reconstruction of transnational histories in which the modern Mediterranean world seems especially rich seem more promising and less constrictive. Pécout’s work has already been cited and offers one excellent example of how a transnational perspective can serve to bring together developments and processes that are otherwise treated as separate and different. Another important example of transnational studies is offered by recent work on mercantile communities and migrations, of which the Greek Diaspora was and remains a major element.⁴ How much can be learnt from this research can be seen in the work of Maria Christina Chatziioannou, whose studies on the entrepreneurs of the Greek Diaspora bring to life a Mediterranean world that stretched to Edinburgh and Liverpool, in which not only goods and people circulated but genuinely transnational networks also existed.⁵ Other examples of the ways in which communities of foreign merchants gave rise to genuinely transnational networks can be found in a recent collection of studies on the communities of foreign merchants that settled in Italy from the eighteenth century to the early twentieth edited by the Italian historian Gia Caglioti. The studies reveal how histories of these merchants and foreign commercial communities offer opportunities to reconstruct processes of adaptation and assimilation as well as the dissemination of “different” models, not only in terms of commodities and commercial organisation, but also forms of family life, marriage patterns and religion.⁶

The transnational perspectives and realities that emerge from these studies offer a model for other transnational approaches to the history of the modern Mediterranean world that might, for example, explore the role of cities as producers of culture and intermediaries in the formation of commercial and

⁴ See, for example, D. Tziouvas (ed.), *The Greek Diaspora and Migration since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture*.

⁵ Maria Christina Chatziioannou “Relations between the State and the Private Sphere: Speculation and Corruption in Nineteenth-century Greece”. See also the earlier studies edited by Georges B. Dertilis, *Banquiers, usuriers et paysans. Réseaux de crédit et stratégies du capital en Grèce, 1780-1930*, Paris: Fondation Des Treilles, 1988.

⁶ D. L. Caglioti (ed.): “Elite Migrations in Modern Italy: Patterns of Settlement, Integration and Identity Negotiation”.

cultural networks that stretched across the Mediterranean world from north to south as well as from east to west and back again and at the same time linked it to its surrounding worlds. The Enlightenment,⁷ Romanticism, religion and nationalism, as well as colonialism and imperialism, are all themes that can be reconsidered in these perspectives, as are the longer-term dynamics of political and commercial relations. Indeed, the modern Mediterranean world also offers an important platform from which to question the assumptions that underpin contemporary notions of “globalisation”, revealing that this phenomenon is best understood in its historical contexts and is neither new nor unilinear.⁸ But as historians of the modern Mediterranean world move to replace earlier national with transnational perspectives, they have opened up new spaces in which the history of Modern Greece and its inhabitants can expect to figure prominently.

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⁷ For example, John Roberston, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Naples and Scotland*.

⁸ See G. Eley, “Historicizing the Global, Politicizing Capital: Giving the Present a Past”.

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