

THE PUZZLE OF GREEK IDENTITY

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Introductory remarks

- An awareness of common historical origins as determining a shared identity/ directly or indirectly reflected in various aspects of lifestyle in contemporary Greek society - the issue of national and cultural continuity
- Nation/ national identity as a problem for philosophers, theologians, historians, political scientists, social scientists, writers and artists. The recent contribution of cultural studies, classical reception studies and post-colonial studies – methodological issues
- National consciousness and national identity – subjective and objective perspectives
- Memory and forgetfulness – The role of the “other”
- Normative issues regarding the ethics and politics of Greek national identity
- The danger of nationalism (*ethnic vs civic* conceptions of nationalism) – political parties appealing to particular conceptions of national and cultural identity - Contemporary cosmopolitan and “plural” identities.

- Different aspects/ components – historical-cultural factors – language, customs, religion - difficulties in trying to define and elucidate the concept of a nation- the opposition between realist/essentialist and antirealist/constructivist/nominalist approaches - Benedict Anderson’s conception of an “imagined community” – the importance of comparative studies for the understanding of national, ethnic and cultural identities
- Anthony Smith’s emphasis on the role of preexisting ethnic elements that are reelaborated and revived in a new context – invested with a new symbolic significance – “ethnosymbolism”
- ethnicity as arising from a nexus of (1) individual subjective belief that membership in a named group derives from ancestry ; (2) possession, expression, or favoring of certain social and cultural traits or ethnic markers, and (3) awareness of a boundary and contrasts. (Page)
- competing narratives and debates among historians – “official”/national historical narratives, popular perceptions and academic/”scientific” historiography

The case of Greek identity

- The puzzle of Greek identity – two senses of “puzzle” (enigma and jigsaw puzzle)
- trying to assemble different aspects of Greekness/Hellenicity - imagining and re-imagining the past
“cutting and pruning of earlier ethnic and religious identities”
(Costas Carras)
- taking into account the “external perspective” of the “Other” non Greeks - Philhellenes and enemies
- The peculiarity of Greek identity – A “crossroad” of civilizations - A synthesis of East and West – past and present – “ruins”/ “layers”/ “traces” - Academic and popular history – Collective memory and political rhetoric – The central role of the Greek Orthodox Church in modern Greek culture

The official narrative

- The official narrative of Greek history – three periods (Ancient, Byzantine, Modern)
- The Helleno-Christian synthesis (Spyridon Zampelios) appropriated and elaborated by intellectuals -the burden of the historical past – The role of “laografia” (Volkskunde)
- The “helleno-romaic” dilemma according to Patrik Leigh Fermor (clash between a purist ideal of Hellenism and a popular /folk conception integrating the Byzantine/orthodox tradition and Greek culture at the time of Ottoman rule)
- The ideological uses of culture and the elaboration of different forms of nationalism – “Neorthodox”/ “Hellenocentric” thinkers

Different approaches to the Greek Past

According to Dimitris Tziovas, we could isolate the following approaches to the Greek Past presumably determining the construction of Greek identity – our understanding of Greekness :

- a) the classical/symbolist/ideal – an emphasis on Classical Greece and its spiritual heritage
- b) the organic/romantic – the appropriation of folk culture- integration of the Byzantine legacy
- c) a modernist/ aesthetic/ dynamic conception of Greekness as a cultural archetype brought to light by artistic creation involving geographical and historical factors properly interpreted – the role of landscape
- d) a post-modernist/ironical/ open stance - images of a complex past “deconstructed”, relativized and “negotiated”

Towards a critical scrutiny and assessment –normative questions

- It is worth focusing on the development of the non-essentialist models associated with c) and d) – but we could perhaps adopt a critical attitude towards extreme post-modernist views
- Could and should we aspire to a full deconstruction of the notion of Greek identity? Should we rather try to resist it – in what sense and in what ways?
- To what extent can we oppose the propagation of aspects of a) and b) and to some extent c) by the Greek state through various political and ideological mechanisms of the State (especially public education) and their assimilation by ordinary people, due to their psychological need to rely on a positive sense of a common identity – related to a supposedly unified long and glorious past?

A brief survey of confrontations and debates among Greek intellectuals

- Continuity/homogeneity vs discontinuity/plurality/diversity (characteristic positions of historians, philosophers, theologians, educators, artists, writers, politicians)
- Appropriating the past vs examining critically and reconstructing historical data – scientific vs popular/public history
- Particular claims about features/aspects of Greekness
- Contemporary critical approaches

Examples of claims – the adoption of apparently mutually incompatible stereotypes about Greekness – the Greek character

- - A particular “way of thinking and feeling” (Theotokas)
- - Individualism, ingenuity also related to defects of Greek character (pride and “φιλότιμο”, - lack of discipline, egoism etc.)
- - but also, “sociocentric” politics, communitarianism recognizing the importance of personhood (different approaches by Giannaras and earlier Ramfos – before Ramfos’ pro-western turn)
- - Sense of measure, harmony, respect for Reason, awareness of limits, finitude - Tragic sense of life (Seferis)
- - Heroism, self-determination, freedom, healthy affirmation of the pleasures of the senses and of our natural self –generosity (Tsatsos, Kanellopoulos, Sykoutris, Glinos, Theodoridis, Kazantzakis)
- - A problematic relation with time – passivity, inability to be creative – lack of a sense of personal responsibility (recent Ramfos)

- - Clarity not of a superficial kind “limpidity”, “transparent depth” (Theotokas, Karouzos, Elytis)
- - A “spirit of resistance” to external threats/invaders - resilience (Svoronos)
- - Coexistence / reconciliation (?) of opposites (Zouraris)
- - More or less essentialist construals of Greekness –the metaphor of the nation as a “silkworm” undergoing transformations (Ramfos)– reference to natural and historical factors including landscape, historical experience etc. (See the debate between Seferis and Tsatsos on the need for rational constraints on poetic creation)
- Questions concerning the helleno-christian synthesis - a simple combination of *Logos* with *Agape* or a deeper affinity and fusion? – The dialectic of universality (oecumenism) and particularity
- - The need for a systematic and thoroughgoing philosophical critique and the clash with common perceptions – how much debunking is possible and desirable?

The “myth” of the Generation of the thirties

- A modernist agenda – attempt at a combination of cosmopolitanism and traditionalism
- The elaboration of an archetypal, aesthetic conception of “Greekness” – aiming at resolving or overcoming the tensions between modernity and popular culture/ continuity and renewal/ uniqueness and universalism
- The political dimension – a dialectic between conservatism and liberalism – the radical/Marxist opposition to the ideology promoted by all bourgeois intellectuals of the thirties – mythologies of the Left negative appraisals and the need for a critical reassessment

Some characteristic positions and arguments

- Ideological uses / alternative readings and misreadings of Classical Greek, Byzantine and Modern Greek texts by contemporary Greek intellectuals
- The appeal of the writings of “neo-Orthodox”, “Hellenocentric” thinkers, drawing to an important extent on certain trends in orthodox theology (mystical, personalist, but also communitarian) who elaborate the idea of a unique cultural identity, displaying a synthesis of Greek epistemology and Christian ontology (Lorentzatos, Giannaras, Ramfos, Zouraris) – Analogies to the “Slavophile” movement in Russia of the late 19th/ early 20th centuries (?)
- Philosophical perspectives of the Greek diaspora (Axelos, Castoriadis, Kondylis)

Tentative conclusions – Questions and prospects

- To what extent and in what ways does the conscious promotion of different conceptions of Hellenism and Greekness influence everyday life? – What might be the importance of retaining traditional values – along different cosmopolitan and “glocal” construals of the Greek heritage?
- Political implications of alternative and competing approaches to Greek culture and to its relation to Western European and to Eastern traditions at a time of crisis (financial but also political, moral and cultural) – clientelism and civil disobedience - Modernizers and Traditionalists at the turn of the 21st century – The persistence of exceptionalist views
- The challenge of multiculturalism

Current debates

- The impact of the recent crisis – the manifestation of pathological symptoms (defensive and introvert stance – megalomania and self-victimization – blaming others – xenophobic, anti-western and anti-european tendencies)
- The political dimension – The rise of the extreme Right and the victory of the radical Left - consequences
- Myths and reality – which myths (positive and negative) could we endorse?
- How much deconstruction? – ethical issues
- Strategies for cultivating a different identity? – promoting a “success story” – seven “boom- bust- bailout” cycles (Kalyvas)
- Drawing on existing institutions – education and public discourse – the teaching of history - modifying attitudes – the role of civil society – public intellectuals
- Ambition – continuity -perseverance

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