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**A DIALOGUE OF PAST AND PRESENT: THE CONSTRUCTION AND
(RE)PRESENTATION OF GREEK NATIONAL IDENTITY**

LEONARD A. STONE

Prof. Dr. Leonard A. Stone is Head of the International Relations Department at Atılım University, Ankara.

INTRODUCTION

This article briefly explores the parameters of the process of Greek national identification and the practice of self-identification in specific social, political and global conditions. The construction of a history of Greek national identity is the construction of a meaningful universe of events and narratives, for a collectively defined subject. What has supposedly occurred in the past produces a relation between 'what came before' and 'what is'. Such a process can be interpreted as a dialogue between past and present. A dialogue which, employing the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's perspective, achieves a voice and point or points of view. An implicit dialogue, no less, of responses to actual, imagined or potential global forces. Such a dialogue can be understood at the level of structural conditions in which shifting identities are identified, assimilated, marginalised or rejected.

PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

The concept of culture, and by relation cultural identity, is gaining momentum within international relations. However, regarding identity, a number of critical issues remain undetermined. The study of identity is not helped by the presence of a complex matrix of specialised terms—from 'hybridisation' to 'transethnicity'. Nevertheless, the politics of identity offers a number of rewarding insights into nations and national identity. Focusing on Greek identity in this way throws a series of different lights, as it were, on national identity. The concept of ethnicity is of central importance here.

In terms of cultural identity, ethnicity is, of course, of paramount importance. There are however, a number of ways that we can define ethnicity. Two are useful here. The first is traditional ethnicity. This form of cultural identity is based on membership defined by the practice of certain cultural activities, including those related to descent. This type of ethnic affiliation can be easily changed or complemented by geographic mobility. This type of cultural identity fits classical Greece. On the other hand a Western (modern) definition of ethnicity is expressed at its strongest in terms of race; of what is inherent, not achieved but ascribed. In a weaker sense, it is expressed as heritage or as cultural descent, learned by each and every individual and distinctive precisely at the level of individual behaviour. This type of ethnicity describes Modern Greek identity and, in one significant sense, the history of the production of Greek identity is the history of attempts at transforming an old identity into a new, yet 'same' identity. As such this is an historical dialogue between the past and the present.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GREEK IDENTITY

Greek identity is a recent construct whose continuity can, and has been questioned. As Friedman notes, “Greek identity has, since the formation of the Modern Greek nation, beginning in the eighteenth century, been represented as truly ancient. But this representation is a European representation dating from the Renaissance, that is, the revival of Western ‘roots’ in classical civilisation in which Greece played a central role as the source of philosophy, science, liberty and democracy, which in their turn became ideological hallmarks of the emergence of modern European society”.¹

In a socio-political context, however, it is obvious that, for example, in the classical Greek period, and in contrast with Greek nationalist claims to the contrary, there was no clear Greek identity. Political identity during this period was in fact focussed on individual city-states (eg. Athenian, Spartan, Theban), and the only clear distinction was between the state and the people (between *ethnos* and *Kratos*). In sum, then, classical Greek identity was a creation of European modernity.

Historians (structuralists, as well as those working from the perspective of historical specificity) have noted, furthermore, that there are ample references to shifting patterns of cultural identity that ensued upon the Roman expansion, the establishment of Byzantium and the emergence of the Ottoman Empire. In each case, an unclear Greek identity shifted among these global forces.

With the establishment of a Christian Eastern empire, ‘Greek’ came to refer to heathen, non-Christian. The term ‘Roman’ was extended to all of the Christian Mediterranean, and the East in this respect, was no different. The term *Romoioi* was used to identify these populations. This is not a contradiction with respect to an ethnic identity as Greeks were not ethnic, as noted in my preliminary remarks, in the modern Western sense: that is, in terms of “blood or substance.”² Under the Roman Empire ‘Greek’ still existed as a category, but now referred to the state of paganism, at the periphery of a Christian order. Thus, it is not at all clear as to what extent this process is a process of a transformation of ethnicity, given the unclear identity of a ‘classical Greek’. If it can be accepted that an ethnic identity was, at best, ‘in the background’, then such a transformation was encouraged by the triumph of a state-based Christian order.

OTTOMAN EMPIRE

With the emergence of the Ottoman Empire, the division between Islam and Christendom became, according to Friedman, “Organised into a quasi-ethnic differentiation, instituted by the regional structure of the Empire itself, all in a situation in which Christianity had spread to such an extent that all Greeks were *Romoioi*.”³ It is also worth bearing in mind that at this time there emerged an opposition between the Eastern and Western churches in which Orthodoxy (one of Samuel Huntington’s ‘civilisations’ from his ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis) represented ‘true’ Christianity and the West represented heretics. What were once theological differences were now (re)presented as national differences.

In one sense, according to Michas, the nationalisation of Eastern Orthodoxy—opposed to Western Catholicism and Islam—was the only basis for a Greek identity in the Ottoman system.⁴ However scholars on the Ottoman Empire generally recognise that the essential organisation of the Empire rested on the division into territorial units based primarily on religious classifications—the *Millet Rum* (the Roman Millet): “All the Empire’s Orthodox Christian subjects, are given corporate

identity placed under the jurisdiction of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople as Millet Ba?», or Ethnarch.”⁵ This simple point serves, once again, as a reminder that this kind of ethnicity is obviously akin to that typical of Western modernity. In fact, the populations of Greece tended to identify themselves as Christiani, equivalent to the religious political category Romii. This is a reflexive connection with Byzantine and its continuity with Rome. Their language, we should also note, was in fact demotic Greek, called Romaiki.

GREEK NATIONALITY

Greek nationality occurred in opposition to the Romioi identity. This was part of a structural process as the geographical area of Greece was integrated into the European economy. Moreover, throughout the capitalist development of Europe, Greece was increasingly incorporated into an emergent European identity as a “legitimate ancestor and the opposite of everything oriental.”⁶ This was a Europe of economic progress, science and democracy, which was (re)presented as having racial attributes to a mythical classical Greece. Such a (re)negotiation of Greek identity served Western interests in terms of (re)producing an identity based on difference—ie. different to ‘Eastern despotism.’ In this way classical Greece is a Western imperialist construction and is crucial to an emergent European identity.

An emerging class of entrepreneurs in the Ottoman Empire, given impetus by a development in commerce between France and the Peloponnese (eg. olive plantations were a major source for soap production in Marseilles in the eighteenth century, and in return gold, cloth and coffee came from Lyon), gave rise to a Greek merchant class. As these Greek merchants began to populate the commercial capitals of Western Europe, they began to see themselves as the founding fathers of the Occident. As such, the emergence of neo-Hellenistic nationalism is this embodiment of the modern European vision of classical Greece among a new peripheral élite. They became the prime movers behind a cultural construction of Greek identity.

POSITIONING THE PAST

A new Greek cultural identity, based on neo-Hellenism, with a constructed ‘difference’ from the Turk, opposed both to Eastern Christianity and Islam and with a call for a return to the homeland became in essence another European nationalism. Students returning from the West came with a new Western ideology—nationalism—and they were supported by European philo-Hellenists. The movement then took the form of the renaissance of Greek history—past meets present—as the practice of giving Greek names of classical origin to new-born Romii became common—names such as ‘Pericles’ and ‘Xenophon’. Dimaros notes that: “A strange mania seems to have overtaken the Greeks: that of giving themselves and their offspring hellenic names... . One hears even the coolies calling themselves Sokrates”.⁷ Western powers, moreover, fuelled this fantasy of classical Greek identity in terms of an explosion of interest in things Greek—eg. Greek pictures, Grecian odes, Grecian plays and Grecian furniture.

The position, thus, of modern Hellas was constructed and (re)presented in terms of a descent from the classical period. Consequently the usual mechanisms for a national identity were employed—especially folklore and general education played a central role in this construction, as it still does today. A ‘glorious message’ was promulgated and at its core was a message of difference; a difference that is, from Orientalism; a difference based on ‘us’ and ‘them’. The former identification of Hellene as heathen and barbaric was now transformed into the ‘best in civilisation’. ‘Freed’ from

the Turk, nationalists asserted the myth of Greek 'purity'.

It is clear that such an assertion of a Greek cultural identity could not have been achieved without a rising hegemonic Europe. However, it should be noted, and somewhat ironically, that some scholars continue to seriously question the European origins of Greek civilisation (perhaps the best among these being Bernal⁸). Classical Greece, so the counter argument goes, took other forms of knowledge production and rules of discourse. Even Socrates' maxim "know thyself" was apparently 'taken' from an inscription over the entrance to an Egyptian tomb.

GREEK NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

Greek nationalists vigorously assert an identity link to a past classical Greece. Their nationalist literature is a labyrinth of myth, connection and disconnection with the past. Within this nationalist text, they employ a discursive strategy that is centred on a conceptualisation of Greek identity. Greek nationalists claim an identity, contrary to historical references, of a fixed and unchanging nature. This claim is based on race and kinship. History, furthermore, is constructed and (re)presented as an unchanging truth. Greek nationalist writers redeploy a strategy of symbolic marking, necessary for their definitions of what constitutes 'true' Greek identity (eg. a 'noble past'). Such a symbolic process is one of inclusion and exclusion.

National differentiation is, on one level, how classifications of difference are 'lived out' in international relations. To a significant degree international relations are organised and divided at the level of discourses into 'us' and 'them'. Within the Greek nationalist text, differences are constructed and marked, but in the process some differences are obscured. For example, the assertion of Greek national identity omits class and gender differences. In addition, differences between Ottoman Greeks and mainland Greeks during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (with the majority of the former seeing the latter as no better than 'Albanians') are omitted. Further contradictions are also not referred to, especially concerning the contradiction that at times arises between Greek nationalism and the individual day-to-day experience of Greek shared culture.

Greek nationalists take up their ideological position and identify with it on a variety of levels. The psychic level forms part of the explanation, as well as the political level. Intertwined with these considerations is the backdrop to Greek nationalist discourse—a belief and express desire for the restored unity of an ancient imagined community. A comprehensive understanding of Greek nationalism, thus, equates with an understanding of the way in which this community is imagined. At its centre, of course, is the imposition of the present onto the past, without which Greek nationalist identity cannot function.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can be drawn from this sketch of the evolution of Greek identity? First, it can be argued that such an evolution cannot be understood as a local evolution: it is the result of a complex interaction of identifications within a global structural process in which regions were undergoing a process of transformation. Second, with a repositioning of the population of the Greek peninsula, such a "Transformation", according to Friedman, "From Romans into Greeks and the forging of a historical continuity between these populations and the image of a classical Greece is the embodiment of the essence of European modernity".⁹ Third, Greek national identity is not a constant (the only constant in international relations is geography, according to Bismarck). The emergence of

a Greek national identity is not a simple game of name giving and classifications, but a socio-political and global context-confined process in which constructions are renegotiated and packaged in various forms of Greek identity. Such an identity is a shifting construction and is constrained in terms of the immediate global political and economic conditions and existences. Such a forging of Greek national identity is, furthermore, part of a global process that inextricably connects significant socio-economic transformation with reproduction and (re)presentation of cultures and nations.

A fourth conclusion which can be drawn is that in terms of making identity, history is a means of producing identity in the sense that it recreates a relation between what has taken place in the past (supposedly taken place, in the Greek case), and present socio-political conditions. History is the present, imposing itself on the past. It is a dialogue between the past and present. A dialectical relationship in which, in the construction of Greek identity, myth intermingles with actual and potential global forces, and where conflicting claims to the truth are negotiated, where a modern ethnic identity is imposed on a traditional ethnic. The emergence of a Greek identity, is part-and-parcel of such a process. Taken to its extreme, Greek identity in a nationalist context has to be understood in terms of the interests which lie behind the Greek nationalist discourse.

1 J. Friedman (1994), *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, London: Sage Publications, p. 118.

2 J. Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

3 J. Friedman, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

4 P. M. Michas (1977), 'From "Romios" to "Hellene" (or Greek): A Study in Social Discontinuity,' MA thesis, Århus University, p. 20, quoted in J. Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, p. 119.

5 R. Just (1989), 'Triumph of the Ethnos' in Tonkin, E., McDonald, M. and Chapman, M. (eds.), *History and Ethnicity*, London: Routledge, p. 78.

6 J. Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, p. 120.

7 T.K. Dimaras (1977), *The Neohellenic Enlightenment*, Athens: Hermes, p. 60.

8 M. Bernal (1987), *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilisation*, Vol. I: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985*, London: Vintage. [Readers may be interested in a review of this book published in *Perceptions*, Vol. II No. 1, March-May 1997, Ed.]

9 J. Friedman, (1994), *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, p. 122.
