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From Plato to NATO 2,500 Years of Democracy and The End of History¹

Despina Lalaki

The ideas of ancient Greece helped inspire America's Founding Fathers as they reached for democracy. Our revolutionary ideas helped inspire Greeks as they sought their freedom, and Americans came here to help fight for Greek independence. At the dawn of the Cold War, when President Truman committed the United States to the defense of Greece, he said, 'I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their destinies in their own way.'

President Obama, Athens Greece, November 15, 2016

On the occasion of his recent visit to Greece, President Barack Obama's remarks – protracted echoes of familiar pronouncements about the end of history and ideological evolution, endorsements of laissez-faire economics and the individual freedom that our Western democracies purportedly serve – not unexpectedly were uttered against a background of Doric columns and numerous invocations to the ancients.² Appropriately if rather predictably, President Obama drew from history and stressed the strong connections between his country and his host, emphasizing the political culture shared between Greece and the United States. What caught my attention, however, was the American President's explicit reference to President Truman, whom he briefly quoted from his famous 1947 speech in the Congress, a speech that encapsulated the post-war US foreign policy of containment and became known as the Truman Doctrine.

Despite the new Republican president-elect's statements during the campaign, Obama's trip to Greece, more than anything else, was meant to affirm the U.S. commitment to transatlantic ties and NATO. The insistence that the message would be delivered against the historic backdrop of ancient Greece – allegedly it was the President himself who resolved to visit Greece on his final state tour – is the topic of this brief paper.

Here I wish to unpack and further problematize the symbolisms employed to illustrate and operationalize the relationship between the two countries following the end of the Second World War, and raise a few questions regarding the uses of cultural heritage and cultural representations as well as the relationship between history and political imagination.

Celebrations for the 2,500 Years of Democracy

The end of the Cold War prompted some great celebration in the Western world for what was understood as the ultimate victory of free market ideology and liberal democracy. To those with vivid and creative imagination the timing, exactly 2,500 years since Kleisthenes had reformed the Athenian constitution in 507 BCE, was almost uncanny. Democracy as understood by Fukuyama and his proponents, along with his pseudo-Hegelian historical determinism, served to guide a series of events, scholarly discussions and talks.³ Among the more illustrious were two exhibitions: “The Birth of Democracy: An Exhibition Celebrating the 2500th Anniversary of Democracy” and “The Greek Miracle. Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy. The Fifth Century BC.” I will briefly discuss both in the following paragraphs.

“The Birth of Democracy” focused on illustrating practices associated with the development of Athenian democracy from the time of Solon, through that of Kleisthenes’ reforms, to the fourth century BCE. Among the artifacts, works and models in display were ostraka shards used as voting ballots (the most famous among them those that led to Themistokles’s ostracism), a reconstruction of a waterclock used to time speakers at trials, a fragment of a jury-allotment device, a bust of Perikles, models of buildings, and a fragment of an inscription from a statue-base (possibly from the statues of Harmodios and Aristogeiton in ca. 475 BCE, which served as a reminder of the reverence held for the two ‘tyrannicides’ in ancient Athens). This was an exhibition on the ‘Great Men’ of Athenian democracy, featuring the speeches of Demosthenes; Pericles’ funeral oration; a section of Solon’s reforms in the sixth century to illustrate political tensions a century before Kleisthenes; Themistocles and his ostracism from Athens; and Socrates’ trial and condemnation to death by an Athenian jury. Texts by Plutarch, Thucydides, Aristotle, the conversations of Socrates as recorded by Plato and Xenophon, and the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Menander and Aristophanes were all included to highlight key individuals in the story of democracy. The curators provided that some space was also given to female Athenians as well as slaves, though they had no voting rights and took no direct part in the Athenian democracy.⁴

“The Birth of Democracy” was housed in the Rotunda of the Charters of Freedom in the National Archives, a building that serves as the treasure house of the American

nation, housing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which were also among the documents in display. The ancient Agora of Athens, where most of the Athenian materials had been found, was explicitly compared to modern civic centers such as the Mall in Washington D.C.⁵ With the permanent murals on the side walls illustrating important scenes in the story of America's democracy, the exhibition's statues of Pericles and Demosthenes suggested that this celebration of the birth of democracy in Greece was even more so a celebration of American democracy.

The exhibition catalogue further stressed the connections and continuities between the two democracies. Josiah Ober's introductory remarks again stressed the opportune timing: "Today democracy has come to be virtually synonymous with fair, free government; the last quarter of the twentieth century could quite easily be designated 'The Age of Democracy' by future historians. Thus it is very happy coincidence that the decade of the 1990s (specifically 1993) will mark democracy's 2500th anniversary."⁶ William D.E. Coulson, Director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens at the time, wrote along similar lines, emphasizing the ASCSA's institutional role in connecting the shared democratic heritage of the two countries. Other essays explored the practicalities of how Athenian democracy worked, the private lives of Athenians, and the modern reception of democracy, including the Founding Fathers' reservations about the Athenian democracy.⁷

"The Greek Miracle. Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy – The Fifth Century B.C." celebrated Athenian democracy in a different register, although there was little nuance in the ideological message the exhibition tried to convey. The Greek prime minister saluted it as follows:

The exhibition of sculpture being shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York celebrates the birth of humanism in Greece twenty-five centuries ago. There the value of the individual was first recognized, and that recognition produced the first self-government on earth – the first democracy... Although we take it for granted in our time, democracy is a delicate plant that has flourished for brief periods in the long sweep of history. Only in ancient Athens and in the United States has democracy lasted as long as two centuries on a continuing basis. That is why our two countries have special roles to play in nurturing the democratic system, the United States providing the political leadership and Greece the spiritual force to ensure that free men live in harmony everywhere.⁸

In a less maximalist tone and while alluding to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist block, President Bush would write:

At a time when people around the world are beginning to establish systems of representative government... it is fitting that we commemorate the birth of democratic ideals some 2,500 years ago ... Today, modern Greece stands as a valued partner in an alliance that has helped to defend and to promote human rights around the globe while ensuring the collective security of Europe.⁹

The exhibition brought together a rather small number of sculptures, including, however, some of the finest examples of fifth-century Greek art from a number of institutions. The loans from Greece generated some strong reactions, especially among the Left. The Archaeological Society at Athens seemed to be divided, on the one side arguing that the export of the antiquities highlighted their global character and functioned as an embassy of Greece abroad, on the other stressing their significant national meaning could not be exposed to the dangers involved with traveling. A campaign led mainly by the Panhellenic Cultural Movement emphasized the dangers to which the artifacts were exposed and evoked images of fragmentation of the national body, dismemberment and disintegration.¹⁰

The most celebrated sculpture of the exhibition was undoubtedly *The Kritios Boy*, shown today in the Acropolis Museum. Occupying a prominent place in the history of Greek art for radically departing from the established aesthetic of its times, the statue has been seen as physically embodying the developing democratic politics of Athens: "Critics have seen this figure as perhaps the first sculpture image designed to express the new sense of individual responsibility that grew out of the Kleisthenean reforms and the Persian challenge."¹¹ Overall the exhibition was praised for its aesthetics but not for its scholarship. One paper described it as "political PR." Paul Richard in *The Washington Post* wrote: "Intellectually unambitious masterwork exhibitions like this are really about power as much as anything else."¹² And Cotter for *The New York Times*: "The world renowned objects have been gathered not in the interest of new scholarship nor in an attempt to see with fresh eyes the complex society that produced them, but as a kind of travel brochure, replete with a jingoistic promotional title meant to perpetuate clichés about art and its meaning that recent art history has been trying to dislodge."¹³ The sponsorship of the exhibition by Philip Morris Companies Inc. also raised questions about the ethics and politics of sponsorship in general, and more specifically about the implicit correlations articulated between the ancient Athenian democracy and capitalism. Philip Morris's so-called "Corporate Citizenship Program," which provided the funding for the exhibition, alluded to such a connection.

If the scholarly work and the academic credentials of the catalogue's authors tended to conceal the agenda of the exhibition, the introductory essay by Nicholas Gage

and his biography rendered it explicit. The Greek-American writer Gage, born Gatzoyiannis in Greece in 1939, fled from Greece to the United States at the end of the Civil War. In the United States, while working as a reporter for *The New York Times* in charge of the Greek bureau, he would investigate the case of his mother's execution – allegedly for arranging her children's escape from their Communist-occupied village – and publish his findings in a memoir entitled *Eleni*. The book became a best-seller in 1983 and in 1985 was made into a feature film starring John Malkovich. It has been translated into 32 languages, awarded first prize by the Royal Society of Literature of Great Britain, and nominated in the category of Best Biography by the National Book Critics Circle. Firmly anti-communist and a committed democrat, Gage opened his catalogue essay with the following:

First, there was the vision. In the fifth century before Christ, an unprecedented idea rose from a small Greek city on the dusty plains of Attica and exploded over the Western Hemisphere like the birth of a new sun. Its light has warmed and illuminated us ever since; sometimes obscured by shadows, then bursting forth anew as it did when our new nation was created on the model of the Greek original. The vision – the classical Greek ideal – was that society functions best if all citizens are equal and free to shape their lives and share in running their state; in a word democracy.¹⁴

Cultural Heritage and the End of History

In the decades that followed the war representative democracy as an endorsement of a capitalist economy was offered as a public narrative through various collaborative cultural projects between the United States and Greece, normalizing the postwar political and economic status quo and offering legitimacy to the American hegemony. For the United States the active engagement with the foundational culture of Western civilization has always been a question of legitimacy, of moral and symbolic authority. After the war, the explosion of the United States into the world scene as the new 'civilizing' force engaged a combat mission against communist 'barbarism' and its 'de-civilizing' properties, while putting forward a new set of values and principles with which modern civilization was meant to be understood and operationalized. Classical Greek antiquity was unleashed as a civilizing and disciplining force while in the process the uses of cultural heritage and the meanings attached to it were radically transformed.

If the Cold War was not the major engine of the great postwar global economic boom, as has been argued,¹⁵ the recognition on the part of the United States that the rapid growth of their competitors was politically urgent led to massive economic assistance

programs such as the Marshall Plan. Due to the fear of communism, American policy-makers did not merely focus on aggressive economic expansion, but took a longer view leading to almost three decades of unparalleled growth, the Golden Years, as Hobsbawm describes the postwar period until the 1970s.¹⁶ The lessons of the interwar period, the Great Slump, were not missed to the economic policy planners who after the Second World War combined economic liberalism and social democracy – a kind of New Deal world policy – to promote full employment, modernization of ruined economies, and communist containment. In Hobsbawm’s words again: “The Golden Age of capitalism would have been impossible without this consensus that the economy of private enterprise (‘free enterprise’ was the preferred name) needed to be saved from itself to survive.”¹⁷

A state-sustained capitalist system was offered as a bulwark against totalitarianism and guarantor of democracy and modernization – a process of urbanization, industrialization and overarching rationalization. Under the threat of communism, modernization was promoted with great urgency in Greece by the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), an ambitious program emphasizing heavy industry – chemicals and steel, refineries and cement. Already in 1949, this program was revised to favor alternative capacities such as the development and promotion of tourism.¹⁸ Tourism would radically change the lifecycle and economies of many regions, especially those located close to archaeological sites. Olivier Picard, Director of the French School and excavator at Delphi, has called the site “a sort of Disneyland whose economy depends on the organizers of touristic enterprises.”¹⁹ The emphasis on this new industry, most often in absence of a complete framework of institutional planning, presented great challenges for the archaeological heritage, which, however, also benefited from measures that provided for their protection and economic development. By the end of the twentieth century a new kind of archaeology would emerge, a ‘touristic archaeology’, “the kind of archaeology in which attendance figures and revenue expectations are no less significant than scholarly insights.”²⁰

For the decades to come, the Greek economy would rely on agriculture, a small-scale industry – with the exception of a few large industrial units – and an ever-growing public service sector, which would also sustain and expand political patronage and clientelism.²¹ Nonetheless, American investment would rapidly propel war-ravaged Greece into modernity – albeit by force and in a one-model-fits-all manner – and the signs of it would be prominently put on display. A process of what we could call ‘monumentalization’ of modernity, especially in the urban centers of the country, but also in the newly designated seaside resort centers, began to rapidly unfold.

In the capital, the Attalos Stoa, for instance – a complete reconstruction of a stoa (covered walkway or portico) in the ancient Agora of Athens, the Hilton Hotel, and the American embassy were some of the most prominent monuments to the accelerated modernization of the country. All built within the decade from the early 1950s to 1960s. “Athens, Ancient Capital of Culture,” as Hilton advertised at the time, “Treasure-trove of antiquity and a modern, vibrant city, entrusted with the architectural wonders of the centuries ... [T]he majestic Athens Hilton, twelve stories high, entered through a series of descending stages in ancient Greek amphitheater style, classic lobbies, gallery terraces, gardens, superb swimming pool, health club, garden rooms. Interior courts in the manner of old Greek atria, surrounded by fascinating shops.”²² Similarly, the American embassy, a direct homage to the Parthenon complete with podium, quadrilateral plan, interior patio and exterior columns, but with distinctly modern materials – glass, steel, and reinforced concrete – was designed as both a modern monument and a monument to modernization, a contemporary foil to the Parthenon and the ancient Athenian democracy.²³ The American Embassy, the Hilton Hotel, the Attalos Stoa – all marks of an advanced modernity and of a modern civilization synonymous with cultural refinement, consumer culture and democracy – directly engaged with the Classical past of the country while pushing their way in an impoverished urban landscape and a society that could receive this pristine monumentality only as a burden, if not an assault. Ultimately, they stood as marks of oppression and alienation; in May 1969, a bomb exploded at Hilton in retaliation for the American support for the Colonels. ‘Warn foreign tourists that our patience is running out,’ a woman was reported to have said over the phone to *New York Times*, calling for a tourist boycott of Greece for as long as the army-imposed regime was in power.²⁴ In January 2007, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the American embassy by Revolutionary Struggle – a self-fashioned anti-globalization and anti-authoritarian group – in opposition to American terrorism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Palestine, Lebanon, Nigeria, Latina America and Europe, as they suggested in their 12-page proclamation.

Today, as state policies related to the country’s cultural heritage rapidly change, tourism and the privatization of the cultural sphere are offered once again as an answer to the state’s economic limitations, but also as a remedy to the state’s alleged asphyxiating control and as a mobilizing force for civil society-building and democratization. The private sector, misrecognized as civil society, is offered as a medicine to the state’s corrupting powers. Yet, cultural heritage is redesigned as a branding mechanism with the objective of promoting tourism and affirming the greatness of a country in steady decline. The recent exhibition “The Greeks: Agamemnon to Alexander the Great” – grounded on a nineteenth-century nationalist aesthetic narrative – that toured Canada and the United States, rather unprecedented for the value of the pieces that traveled

outside the country, serves as an example. Apparently, the Ministry of Culture has plans to continue with a series of similar blockbuster traveling exhibitions. The narratives offered serve as theatrical props in a capitalist liberal democracy that breaths its last breath, while the Greek state vies to draw legitimacy by representing the glories of the nation abroad.

Obama's careful selection of the backdrop against which he gave what he probably aspires to be his "legacy speech" merely constitutes an effort to sustain a historical narrative engineered during the Cold War in order to sustain the inherent righteousness of liberalism. Despite all evidence and the series of revolutions that have erupted around the world the past few years the drive of the establishment to maintain the existing social world order is in the process showing unmistakably some of the darkest sides of liberalism. A strong sense of insecurity is increasingly difficult to disguise. However, the greater the feelings of insecurity, and the weaker the establishment's proponents become in their decline, as Norbert Elias suggests, "the more they develop the sense that they are fighting for their supremacy with their backs against the wall, the more savage for the most part does their behavior become and the more acute the danger that they will disregard and destroy the civilized standards of conduct on which they pride themselves ... With their backs against the wall, the champions [of civilization] easily become the greatest destroyers of civilization. They tend easily to become barbarians."²⁵ And this appears to be our task in the new century, once again to avoid barbarism.

¹ The title alludes to David Gress's book *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Opponents*. New York: The Free Press, 1998.

² I refer here to President Obama's visit to Acropolis since the initial speech venue, for security purposes, had to be moved from the historic and symbolic but very exposed Pnyx Hill next to the Parthenon to an alternative location, the new Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center south of the city center.

³ The National Archives and Records Administration of the United States, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Greece and the American School of Classical Studies at Athens joined forces in organizing a number of conferences and exhibitons, including the two I discuss in this paper.

⁴ Josiah Ober and Charles W. Hedrick (Eds). *The Birth of Democracy. An Exhibition Celebrating the 2500th Anniversary of Democracy*. The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1993.

⁵ *Ibid*, page30.

⁶ *Ibid*, page 1.

⁷ For more on the exhibition see Deborah Challis. *Exhibiting Democracy: Material Culture from Ancient Athens and the Democratic Ideal*. Open University: Reception of Texts and Images of Antiquity.

<http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Projectsite/Challis/contents.htm>

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- ⁸ Diana Buitron-Oliver with contributions by Nicholas Gage et al. *The Greek Miracle. Classical Sculpture from the Dawn of Democracy – The Fifth Century B.C.* Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1992, page 6.
- ⁹ Ibid, page 7.
- ¹⁰ Eleana Yalouri. *The Acropolis. Global Fame, Local Claim.* Oxford: Berg, 2001, page. 67.
- ¹¹ J.J. Politt, “Art, Politics, and Thought in Classical Greece,” in *The Greek Miracle*, page 35.
- ¹² Paul Richard, “Beauty and the Greeks: At the National Gallery. Timeless Sculpture from 500BC,” *The Washington Post*, G.01, November 22, 1992.
- ¹³ H. Cotter, “Ancient Greeks at the MET: Matter Over Mind,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 1993.
- ¹⁴ Nicholas Gage, “Introduction,” *The Greek Miracle*, page 17.
- ¹⁵ Martin Walker, *The Cold War and the Making of the Modern World.* London: Fourth Estate, 1993.
- ¹⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of the Extremes. A History of the World, 1914-1991.* New York: Vintage Books, 1996.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, page 273.
- ¹⁸ Sotiris Rizas. *Η Ελληνική Πολιτική μετά τον Εμφύλιο Πόλεμο. Κοινοβουλευτισμός και Δικτατορία.* (The Greek Polity after the Civil War. Parliamentarism and Dictatorship). Athens: Kastaniotis, 2008, page 121.
- ¹⁹ Olivier Picard and E. Pentazos, (eds). *La Redecouverte de Delphes.* Paris, De Boccard, 1992.
- ²⁰ Neil Asher Silberman, “Promised lands and chosen peoples: the politics and poetics of archaeological narrative,” in *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, edited by Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pages. 249-262
- ²¹ Konstantinos Tsoukalas, *Κράτος, Κοινωνία, Εργασία στην Μεταπολεμική Ελλάδα* (State, Society, Work in Postwar Greece) (Athens: Themelio, 1987), page 53.
- ²² Annabel Jane Wharton. *Building the Cold War. Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture.* Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001, page 62.
- ²³ An interesting study about the American embassies around the world built as ‘monuments,’ see Ron Robin, *Enclaves of America. The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad 1900-1965.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- ²⁴ Ibid., page 66, n.92.
- ²⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.* Cambridge: Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, pages 358-9.

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