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Recent Futures: Classical Antiquity as Biopolitical Tool

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Demetris Plantzos (Δημήτρης Πλάντζος), *Το πρόσφατο μέλλον: Η κλασική αρχαιότητα ως βιοπολιτικό εργαλείο* [Recent futures: Classical antiquity as biopolitical tool]. Athens: Nefeli. 2016. Pp. 272. 40 illustrations. Paper €17.90.

In 2008, when the economic crisis broke out in Greece as a result of the wider economic and fiscal crisis in the United States and the greater part of Europe, a fierce debate over who was to blame broke out within the Greek public sphere and the international media. Did the fault lie with the economic and political elites of the country who, over the decades, failed to reform the economy while also engaging in rampant corruption? Was it the *ancien* system of clientelism that bound the government and the people into a relationship of increasing co-dependence and led to the creation of a hydrocephalus, dysfunctional state? Or did responsibility lie with the leadership of the European Union, with international financial organizations such as the I.M.F. and the World Bank, and with the world's investment banking system? After the lengthy discussions and biting debates, and once the dust kicked up by thousands of protesters and the smoke and teargas in the streets of Athens settled, the question "why Greece?" may still haunt our imagination for some time to come.

Το πρόσφατο μέλλον: Η κλασική αρχαιότητα ως βιοπολιτικό εργαλείο [Recent futures: Classical antiquity as biopolitical tool] is certainly not a book about the economic crisis, yet it attempts to delineate the crisis' cultural history, as the author Dimitris Plantzos suggests in his introduction. It outlines narratives about violence, civil society, the right to Europe, and the ways these intersect with understandings of the past as a mechanism to control the present and a disciplining apparatus to regulate public sentiment. Western modernity's political and cultural imaginary is inextricably tied to ancient Greek civilization, while the Modern Greece owes its existence precisely to this dialectic between the West's imaginary and Greek classical heritage. Before it was even politically constituted as a nation-state, Modern Greece had been grounded on a series of imaginary significations directly tied to antiquity. The literature on the subject is quite rich. Rarer are the studies that bring questions of Hellenism into the present in order to explore its effects and the ways it informs our aesthetic, moral, political, and social life today. Hellenism, in this sense, is has a dialectic relationship between western and Greek modernity and the classical past. Plantzos's book is a very welcome contribution, especially as it addresses a wider readership beyond academia.

Το πρόσφατο μέλλον is largely based on some of the author's most thought-provoking articles and studies available, until now, only in English. Following a rough chronological order, the book covers the decade between 2004 and 2014. It starts with the Opening Ceremonies of the Olympics in 2004 and interprets the event as both a coming-of-age ritual for the Modern Greek state and as a farewell to the traumatic 20th century. It ends with the events surrounding the re-discovery of the monumental Amphipolis Tomb. The book moves gradually from a discussion of *biopolitics* to an analysis of *thanatopolitique*--by now the central agenda of the West, according to Giorgio Agamben (1998)--and an analysis of the European politics of the crisis. All four chapters of the book critically approach rituals and public performances of local, national or international appeal that have been orchestrated either by the Greek state itself or the general public. Habituated to archaeolatry and progonolatria, these rituals reproduce familiar narratives about the nation, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and racial purity while often changing and recolonizing them in the process. The first chapter analyzes in depth a series of heterotopian technologies--the Olympics opening ceremony, Greek National Tourism Organization (EOT) campaigns, Greek filmography, vernacular architecture--and offers a genealogy of the scientific, literary, and artistic grounding of Hellenism. Historians, folklorists, archaeologists, poets, and artists at large took it upon themselves to Hellenize Greek history or recover the singular essence of Hellenic art. The internalization of the relationship with Ancient Greece would be central in the process of the constitution of the national subject and archaeology, in which Plantzos, a classical archaeologist himself, pays particular attention. Ancient Greece was quickly incorporated in the national agenda in search for origins in ethnic and racial groups believed to be associated with specific material cultures. Plantzos goes so far as to suggest that if nationalism is an infective virus, then archaeology is its most dangerous carrier.

In the subsequent three chapters the author places greater emphasis on unofficial or semi-official narratives and local, experimental archaeologies that seek to destabilize the authority of national narratives while taking antiquity out of the museum and bringing it into the streets. As the crisis deepens it appears, on the one hand, that the state tries to tighten its control over the Greek populace through the use of familiar or new heterotopian technologies. Designed to crack down on irregular immigration, operation Xenios Zeus, for example, was named after the Greek god of hospitality. On the other hand, the once strong ideological schemes designed to maintain the national unity appear to come under attack by various social groups alternatively mapping Modern Greece as a queer nation, reconstructing local, ethnic identities in resistance to the metropolitan ones, expressing anti-western dysphoria, and striving to canonize militarism, patriarchy, and nativism. New subjects seem to be emerging from the cracks of the nation-state that include the resistance movement in Keratea, Greek archaeologists' defending the country's cultural heritage in a state of crisis, and neo-Nazi efforts to reappropriate antiquity. Ultimately, Plantzos maintains, we are all trapped in a scheme which cannot help but idealize the past hoping to secure a more hopeful future in the process. Plantzos draws from Andreas Huyssen's *Present Pasts* (2003) to problematize our notion of the past and the ways we relate to it and points to the direction of a fundamental crisis in our capacity to imagine alternative futures.

Plantzos borrows methodologically from social anthropology, cultural studies, literary criticism and psychoanalysis; he capitalizes on the work of Michael Foucault (2001, 2010), Edward Said (1994), Judith Butler (2006, 2011) and Agamben (2005). He delivers what he promises in his introduction, namely, a more detached approach to classical heritage, an approach that is not afraid of criticism, reflection and even irony. Irony is used by Stephen Bann (2013) to suggest an interaction between metonym and the synecdoche in the representation of the past, a representation that is polysemantic and constantly subject to questioning. At times, however, Plantzos appears to be employing irony in the sense originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions may be clear to the audience or reader (or in this case to the author), while unknown to the character. Plantzos suggests that popular aesthetic emerges as antisystemic despite or even against the will of his subjects and not always as a conscious attempt to reappropriate classical heritage and defy the western and local elites' aesthetic canon. The way I see it, the characteristics of social institutions are largely the unintended consequences of the strategic interactions among many individuals. Most often it does not take a premeditated master plan to create a peasant militia or a new narrative but rather a series of opportunistic individual choices over time, leading to institutions with attributes previously designed by no one. Plantzos's subjects come across as tragic heroes in a story over which they have little control. The marginal space within which they operate is rather suffocating, yet the possibilities or even horrors that may rise out of the freedom of the antisystemic margin, I would argue, call for greater attention.

Research on questions regarding the relations between politics and antiquity is making great strides in Greece the past decade or so (see for instance Hamilakis 2009, Hanink 2017, Lalaki 2012, Leonard 2005, Tziouvas 2014). *Το πρόσφατο μέλλον* represents an important contribution to the growing literature, especially because of its emphasis on biopolitics. The most recent establishment of a neoliberal hegemony in Greece makes such an approach in terms of a post-political biopower very valuable, since this hegemony extends beyond the political into the physical bodies of the population. Biopolitical analyses challenge the distinction between physical corporeality and its social or cultural conditions. The resurgence of political debates revolving around race, ethnicity, or gender identities points to the importance of such an analytical perspective. Plantzos could have further elaborated on the concepts of biopolitic and thanatopolitique in his book while explaining the extent to which these concepts can help us to better understand the current mutations of neoliberal power. He could have also accounted for empirical evidence that challenge what otherwise might appear as omnipotent and invincible modern sovereignty. If biopolitics vie to employ strategies that destroy social solidarity, we have also observed systematic efforts to challenge these strategies alongside the narratives that sustain them since the beginning of the crisis. This is evident in the struggles against the privatization of cultural heritage promoted as civil-society building, the solidarity movements in support of immigrants and refugees, and the organization and mobilization against the rising fascism. These strategies suggest that the neoliberal

state of exception and its biopolitical technologies do not go unchallenged nor they are indestructible. Moreover, they experiment with new forms of collective subjectivities while contesting old narratives about national continuities, racial purity, and gender hierarchies.

In face of the growing challenges of globalization (a historically contingent notion inextricably intertwined with the rise of the nation-state), the rhetoric of national exceptionalism will intensify. Plantzos's book is a provocation against the myth of national continuity and the Greek civilizational superiority and, thus, a noteworthy addition to ongoing debates. Classical heritage has served as the material manifestation of supreme moral authority. It concentrates immense symbolic power and, as a mean of cultural representation, has been employed to amplify the West's ideological domination. Combined with social hierarchies, once categories are formulated and maintained as coherent identities, they perpetuate durable inequality, according to Charles Tilly (1997). Any efforts to address the predicament of a Greek singular antiquity as it relates to the biopolitics of neoliberalism should be looking at this direction.

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