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## Hellenism, Hebraism, and the Ideological Underpinnings of Modernity

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Following the authors' lead I would like to introduce my commentary on the book *Archaeology, Nation and Race: Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel* (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022) with a short autobiographical note explaining my way into and out of the field of archaeology. I am a sociologist working in the areas of historical and cultural sociology. My first degree, however, from the University of Athens is in archaeology. It is still unclear to me why I chose to study the subject, but I am convinced that it had something to do with the Indiana Jones franchise that was popular in Greece at the time and the fact that I wasn't that good in math. If that was the case, I would have probably become an architect. At the university I quickly developed an interest in prehistoric archaeology. Moving beyond the formalism of classical archaeology that still dominated the discipline, the "anthropological" questions raised in the field of the Greek Bronze Age – questions about culture, social and political organization and so on – were rather intriguing.

Up to this point I think my trajectory sounds much like what Yannis Hamilakis describes in the book as his experience. In my case however, realizing that I would have to build a career studying pots and pans from all possible angles, measuring, photographing, drawing, cataloguing, and comparing them with similar objects to neatly fit them into categories without raising any bigger questions, did it for me, and I left archaeology to study first some art history and then sociology. Had books like *The Nation and Its Ruins* (Hamilakis 2007) been published or had I been exposed to the theoretical inroads that anglophone scholarship was making in archaeology at the time, I might have followed a different academic path. In retrospect, archaeology seemed to me like a straitjacket, limiting and detached from any social realities. It certainly appeared disconnected from politics. The little that I knew! First loves never die, however, and today I do what one could describe as sociology of archaeology and the archaeology of the state, exploring the role that the American political imagination has played in the formulation and transformation of some of the foundational ideas and cultural schemes of the modern Greek nation-state. I investigate the ways in which Americans engaged with modern Greek political culture as they searched for Greek antiquity.

What I am trying to say with this short autobiographical and self-referential introduction is that books like the one in discussion, *Archaeology, Nation and Race: Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future of Greece and Israel* by Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis are an oasis in the field of archaeology that still, to some extent, looks like a desert of sherds and ruins waiting to be catalogued, organized and some of them exhibited for their aesthetic value. Trying on the other hand to unravel, as Michael Herzfeld (2002) suggests in his book endorsement, the ideological underpinnings of global modernity is thrilling and certainly not a small task. Doing it in such a way also that is engaging and accessible to a broad audience of non-specialists, that's also a big achievement. The book is also deeply political, directly addressing current issues of race, territoriality and cultural hegemony. It will be extensively debated and will inevitably find itself at the center of public controversies, some of them already simmering.

I have the honor to be part of a collective called *Decolonize Hellas*. On the occasion of the celebrations for the bicentennial of the Greek Revolution, we held an international conference with the objective to examine the founding of the Greek nation-state in the context of/in a background defined by the colonial legacies of white supremacy, nationalism and racial capitalism. The notion of Greece as a crypto-colony (Herzfeld 2002) over the years had gained acceptance – in Greece at least, because in Israel, as Raphael Greenberg suggests, it never had

much traction, as the attention has been on the fact that Israel is first and foremost a settler colonialist state itself. However, to explore notions of race and nation, going back to the time of the Greek state's inception and applying decolonial theory developed mainly in the Americas, was not very well received, at least not by everyone. Slaves and plantations were not part of the Greek historical record after all, and Greece had never been a colonial power. The accusation is that we are applying methodologies and theoretical approaches that can't be grounded in the Greek experience. I am sure that in many Israeli quarters one would hear the same regarding Israel understood or studied as settler colonial state. How do we respond to these criticisms? How can colonial theory help us to better understand the history of Greek and Israeli nation-states and what is the relevance of colonial history? These questions are also at the heart of the book *Archaeology, Nation, and Race*.

To this day, the legacies of colonialism are felt around the globe while neocolonial practices perpetuate long standing relations of inequality and hierarchies of power. The entanglement of Greece and Israel with British colonialism in the Eastern Mediterranean and American postwar imperialism in the region call for a closer examination. Conventional Greek historiography tells the story of the Greek state – but also of the state of Israel – as one of victimization and manipulation at the hands of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Powers, United States, or primordial enemies like Turkey for Greece or the whole Arab world for Israel. At the same time, there is no engaging with the histories of other groups or nations which have similarly suffered the effects of imperialism, capitalist exploitation and outright violence. Victimhood has played a central role in driving xenophobia, racial hatred and other nationalistic attitudes. Instead, what we should call for – and that is something that Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis do alongside scholars coming from a post- and anti-colonial perspective – is a radical critique from what is identified as the “southern standpoint”. This is not a point of essentialist identities but of marginality, a particular social position within national and transnational hierarchies of power. That is the direction, I think, that Greenberg points to at the end of the book where he calls for a close collaboration of Israeli and Palestinian scholars/archaeologists. Such an approach will also allow for a systematic analysis and understanding of Greece's and Israel's position within imperialist circuits of capital, fields of knowledge and cultural production but also networks of collective struggles and emancipatory politics.

A few words to further qualify the “southern or subaltern standpoint” (Bhabra 2007; Santos 2014; Connell 2016; Go 2016) are needed. The argument is not that we should be looking for a pristine space of “non-Western” indigeneity – this is definitely what Hamilakis does not argue for when he talks about “indigenous Hellenism” – but a kind of postcolonial thought that emerges from the colonial space through a critical engagement with the dominant knowledges imposed upon that space. While analogous to the critical race and feminist standpoints, our approach should give primacy to geopolitical hierarchies and social positionality, the point where the colonial engages with the West, unraveling in the process subjugated knowledges, legacies of marginalization and colonial domination. Our conceptualization of the “southern standpoint” should be understood in conjunction with what has been described as “postcolonial relationism,” an approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness and fluidity of social interactions and the mutually constitutive relationships between colonized and colonizers (Go 2016). Both concepts should be central in our efforts to interrogate the imperial episteme. Here one would locate the centrality of classical scholarship, biblical studies and archaeology, and bring also social theory – a body of thought that embeds the standpoint of empire – and postcolonial thought – an anti-imperial project – in dialogue. From a “southern standpoint” one can explore the forceful Hellenization of ethnic and religious minorities in Greece, for instance, or the colonizing power of biblical archaeology in Israel, yet not from a space that allegedly exists outside the European thought or theoretical traditions but in relation to them.

It is imperative that we foreground the ambivalent and reciprocal relations between the Greek and Israeli nation-states and western colonial and neocolonial genealogies (Lambropoulos 1993; Gourgouris 1996). Liberal capitalist democracy, for instance, lies at the core of the postwar western civilizational onslaughts and the classical Greek heritage as well as the Judaic tradition remain central in narratives about civilizational clashes and the end of history. To this day, the “cradle of democracy,” a Cold War construct which carries the imprints of modernization theory and American and European hegemonic hierarchies, conditions our cultural dispositions and political imagination. Israel also projects itself as such, in a sea of autocratic and dictatorial regimes. In that sense, Israel and Greece serve as buffers against the onslaughts not only of brown Muslim bodies ready to invade the borders of the Christian West at any given time, as the book explains, but also as the last frontiers of democracy, a metonym for western civilization.

These social and political significations invested in Hellenism and Hebraism have developed into internalized structures of domination, coherent identities which perpetuate durable inequality. The inability to perceive alternative modes of political and social organization are intrinsically connected and closely intertwined with identities that are far from immanent or as primordial as they appear. They are, instead, socially and historically grounded on configurations and events that date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also, and I would argue predominantly, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they constitute responses to the American and European Cold War order, fierce anti-communism, transatlantic militarism and free market economy (Lalaki 2012).

Critical and historical anthropological and sociological positions that capitalize on meaning, cultural codes, and systems, much like what this book does, can better illuminate the trajectories of nation-state, Greece and Israel in this case, and empire, the American or British empires, for instance – an empire that resides at the outskirts as much as at the heart of these nations. Studied in conjunction with international and transnational processes, the political agency of the “Hellenic” and the “Judaic” can be better understood.

Greek classical and biblical archaeology have undergone a series of transformations, being repositioned repeatedly within multiple metanarratives about race and cultural evolution even as aesthetic preoccupations continued alongside questions of ethnic origin. Greek and Judaic antiquity, appropriated in various ways by the nation-states of the West, have been written up as the unquestionable progenitors of Western civilization against which other cultures were to be measured, most often to be found less developed, less sophisticated or less complex. Colonization and the increasingly imperialist domination of the West over the rest of the world was cushioned on a civilizing rhetoric inadvertently exposing both the shortcomings of the Enlightenment’s universalistic tendencies and Romanticism’s darker side of cultural particularisms. Archaeology has not just been part of the wider battle for cultural hegemony. It defined the nature of the battlefield itself.

The comparative approach of Greek and Israeli archaeology is also very timely as civilizational discourses have made a comeback to couch the emergent Islamophobia of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and one can look at the relationship between the two from many different angles. In a religious pilgrimage I followed a few years ago in the Holy Land, I became very aware, for instance, about the role of Christianized Hellenism in the Israeli settler colonial project. As the second biggest landholder in Israel after the state of Israel itself, the Greek Orthodox church has been directly involved in the Zionist statehood project. One can also look at the ways that the Hellenic and Judaic traditions have been recently employed to legitimize the antagonisms over fossil fuel extraction in the Eastern Mediterranean, possibly fueling new rounds of conflict along with capital accumulation. The relation of archaeology and capitalism run in many different directions, in addition to that of tourism and the monetization of cultural heritage. The most recent agreement between the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Greek government and the collector of illicit Cycladic antiquities, Leonard Stern, is only one case in point (Hamilakis 2022; Koutsoumba 2022).

I would like to conclude with a couple of images from two separate state visits in Greece, one of Netanyahu in 2017 and the other of the American president Barack Obama in 2016. Netanyahu met with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, after the three countries had signed a joint declaration in Tel Aviv the previous April, to promote construction of what is known as the EastMed pipeline. Netanyahu stressed the shared economic interests between the three countries, spoke of Jerusalem and Athens as the “two pillars” of our modern civilizations, and further grounded the relationship on their alleged democratic traditions: “There’s a simple fact with Cyprus, Greece and Israel that brings us very close together. We are all democracies – real democracies [...] and when you look at our region... that’s not a common commodity” (Kantouris 2017).

The previous year, in his final overseas trip as President, Barack Obama visited crisis-stricken Greece, and against the carefully selected background that featured the Acropolis and the Parthenon, he affirmed the U.S. commitment to transatlantic ties and NATO. The ancients, the Founding Fathers and President Truman featured prominently in a speech that meant to endorse liberalism and capitalist democracy, in face of the challenges that austerity economics, the “waves” of refugees from Middle East and Africa and the ensuing rise of the extreme-right posed.

The above appear like clichés, rather predictable statements, which, however, point to one of the important conclusions that the book offers: “The elites in both national projects, in an act partly of self-colonization and partly of expediency, still hark back to [...] this modernist and humanistic heritage, seeing it as an emancipatory project

worth celebrating. [...] Yet these laudatory performances conceal the racial and colonial grounds of such edifices” (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 182). When it comes to the question of how to cope and counter these self-congratulatory civilizational narratives Greenberg and Hamilakis are quite to the point: let’s “forge alliances with the colonized ‘others’” (2022: 182).

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