

Chapter 5

Public History and National Identity: The 1821 Revolution as Metaphor for the “Greek Crisis”

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, while the causes of Greek “crisis” started becoming the subject of public controversy, a documentary series aired on Skai channel vowing to challenge nationalist and populist accounts of the 1821 Revolution. By popularizing the main arguments of modernization theory, the “1821” documentary approached the past through the lens of “Cultural dualism” – the clash between a ‘reformist’ and an ‘underdog’ culture – and operated as a metaphor for contemporary Greece. Via the study of the media spectacle and the ways the history of 1821 goes public, historical inquiry can reflect on the normative/descriptive complex of rival historical narratives, exercise itself in perspectival seeing and self-reflexivity and move towards a history of the present.

FROM ACADEMIA TO THE MEDIA: THE PROBLEM OF GREEK MODERNITY

Taking as its object *Skai* channel’s historical documentary on the 1821 revolution, this paper attempts to reflect on the ways Greece’s modernization and cultural identity are approached, interpreted and contested in the old media and the new extended public sphere during the era of the crisis.

The eight-hour TV series on the birth of Greek nation attempted to popularize and disseminate the dominant, in the academic field, perspective of modernization theory and make it available to a wider audience. The decision for broadcasting such an ambitious and challenging TV series brought complex historical questions into contemporary debate. “1821” not only made the modernization perspective of the 1821 revolution relevant to a broad public audience but it also stimulated discussion in academic post-graduate courses and seminars.

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Notwithstanding the differences in form and content, *Skai*'s intervention in public history via the creation of its historical documentary on the 1821 revolution was congruent with intellectual and political anxieties. Mainly, the concern for history's present relevance - that during the last decade forged a strong relationship between historians and program-makers in many other countries of Europe; such is the case of collaboration between the English historian Simon Schama with the *BBC* channel. Unlike however Simon Schama's revisionist history of the French revolution, exemplified i.e. in *BBC*'s documentary on Jacques-Louis David (2011) which railed against the *philosophes*' abstract ideals and the modern utopian projects for social engineering following the revolution, "1821" provided a framework of interpretation grounded on the opposition between a malign tradition and a benign modernity. In "1821" the focus of attention was the so called Greek peculiarity, the traumatic encounter of tradition and modernity· or otherwise, a narrative about the never-ending and always postponed modernity due to the burden of the country's Oriental, Ottoman and Byzantine past that makes convergence with Europe an aspiration unfulfilled.

The documentary's message that Greek independence was not the achievement of a heroic democratic people or the accomplishment of a glorious ancient nation but chiefly the outcome of the European power's intervention, was met by strong reactions expressed mostly via the new media, blogs and websites. Using new media, critics of the documentary entered the discussion arguing against an elite-driven historical rupture and in favor of national continuity. They did so either by essentializing (and thus de-historicizing) the struggles of the people against the powerful, foreign or indigenous elites (a quasi Marxist perspective); or by nationalizing (and thus de-historicizing) the social history of the people who, from the classical period and onwards, had inhabited the geographic regions incorporated within the territorial boundaries of the Greek 'nation-state' – (a nationalist perspective). In both cases, history becomes national rather than social.

Although reactions to *Skai*'s documentary are of great importance for the overall understanding of the long-lasting debate over Greece's cultural identity, the paper does not focus on a detailed survey of such reactions, but rather opts to lay more emphasis on the core arguments of modernization theory that have been disseminated to a wide audience. This shift of attention to the effects of the popularization of modernization theory is not only due to the limited space of the paper but also to a number of substantial reasons: a. since the 80's modernization theory has been the most influential paradigm in Greek scholarship and its main assumptions remain largely unchallenged· notwithstanding its contestation by previous, Marxist and nationalist, paradigms that had inspired and stirred the reactions to *Skai*'s documentary, modernization theory's heuristic, descriptive utility as well as its normative premises have not been virtually questioned or deconstructed; b. during the crisis era the popularization of modernization theory and its concomitant ideals gained extra momentum; with the onset of financial crisis, the references to Greek modernization's *Other* evoked and homogenized multiple and various attitudes "that have been resistant towards neoliberal and other planks of Western-inspired modernization projects" (Xenakis, 2013, p. 173); and c. during the last years there is a growing tendency within the field of modern Greek studies towards questioning the essentializing perceptions of tradition, modernity, Europe or the Balkans (Triandafyllidou, Gropas & Kouki, 2013; Bogiatzis, 2009; Miliori 2002; Liakos, 2000). The need to rethink the binary opposition between a benign, progressive modernity versus a backward, traditional, "underdog" mentality can also lead to contemplate on the Janus face of modernization in general, as well as the ambivalences of Greece's modernization project from the early 19th century till the present day, in particular.

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