

Dispatch from Greece: Myth, Tragedy, Resistance, and Hope



Herodotus begins [his great work](#) by tracing the historical origins of the Persian War to myths involving conflict between Europe and Asia, such as the rape of Io and Europa by Zeus, the story of Jason and Medea, and the abduction of Helen by Paris (which sparked the Trojan War). Thus, the first recording of history in the Western tradition begins in myth. History has been called past politics and politics present history; from a certain perspective the origins of many modern political relations and events are rooted in myth. The myths we choose to believe or not believe have real world consequences – they are of critical importance in shaping popular opinions and current events. Nowhere is this clearer than the current situation between Greece and its European creditors.

If Herodotus were to write an account of the current Greek debt crisis, he might well begin where he left off in his *Persian Wars*, far in the antiquity of Classical Greece, that time when Athens was at the height of its powers, the time

most people envision today when (if) they think about Greek culture. Invaded by the Persians and its wooden Acropolis burned down by the Great King Xerxes, Athens emerged as the victor and rebuilt the Acropolis in marble, an eternal symbol of the potential for human perfection. Athens and Greece were relegated to secondary political status after their subjection by the Macedonians and then the Romans, but any student of the Classics knows those immortal lines of Horace: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis intulit agresti Latio* – “Greece, being captured, captured her savage conqueror, and brought the arts to rustic Latium”. For centuries after, Roman armies and laws ruled their mighty empire, alongside with Greek language (in the eastern half), culture, art, and philosophy. At Rome’s height in the second century AD, the emperors spoke better Greek than Latin; Hadrian was a famous philhellene who rebuilt Greece and Athens on an enormous scale (most of the ruins and remnants we see today date from Hadrian, not from Pericles), and Marcus Aurelius was a philosopher of the Stoic school (who take their name from the porch in the Athenian market where they met).

That same century also witnessed an unparalleled Greek cultural renaissance called the Second Sophistic, which featured a colorful and entertaining cast of literary and rhetorical geniuses. One example was Polemo of Laodicea who was so learned and so arrogant that Philostratus describes in his *Lives of the Sophists* how “he was said to converse with cities as his inferiors, Emperors as not his superiors, and the gods as his equals”. Another relevant personality from this period is the eminent sophist Herodes Atticus—who was one of the wealthiest private citizens in the history of the Roman Empire and also one of the foremost exemplars of the old but now lost tradition of *evergetism*—roughly “doing good deeds”. This was a system by which rich patrons gave back to their communities by financing new public buildings (theaters and baths, for example; the Odeon next to the Acropolis is one of Herodes Atticus’ many legacies) and large festivals and games

(bread and circuses). This philanthropic practice that placed priority on civic duty declined concurrently with that of the Roman Empire as a whole, and was never to be practiced again by the rich excepting a few rare outliers such as Andrew Carnegie.

Even after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Eastern Byzantine Empire continued for another full millennium as a fully Greek institution. And after the fall of that empire in 1453 to the Ottomans, Greeks fled West with their books and set off the revival of classical learning which we call the Renaissance. Those singular founders of America were so steeped in Greek history and culture as to base their new country on the best of classical models. The architecture and symbolism of this new country was classical Greek. Most of our political vocabulary is Greek—Aristotle captured the spirit of the Greek idea of politics as a citizen's public duty with his line "Man is, by nature, a political animal". Indeed it is the ideal of democracy for all citizens to be aware and involved in politics.

All through the various military conquests of Athens, the Acropolis stood proud and undisturbed, even by the Ottomans who merely declared it a mosque. The extensive damage that it shows today was brought about by a great Western power, the Venetians, in 1687. The name of the Venetian admiral who ordered his cannons to fire on the Parthenon was Francesco Morosini, who was later made doge and still bears monuments to his name, including the horribly ugly central fountain in Heraklion, Crete. It should serve as a lesson in the stupidity of war that such wanton and sacrilegious destruction resulted in only a single year of control of Athens by the Venetians, whence the Ottomans regained and held it for another 150 years. After the locus of European power moved north, to France and Germany after Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire, even for an time to the small island of Britain, Greek and Roman models continued to be the normative political,

cultural, and legal models. The somewhat arbitrary gateway to the British civil service was knowledge of classical Greek and Latin, and merely to know those languages allowed one entrance into a cultural and often political elite. Today's British leaders in the Conservative Party, David Cameron and Boris Johnson, both received private elite classical education, and Johnson in particular is a noted enthusiast of the Classics. Our very idea of education itself is Greek, from the ancient tradition of *paideia*, which was based on learning grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy, primarily following Homer (and later Plato).

Despite the theft of the surviving friezes of the Parthenon known as the Elgin marbles, which Britain stubbornly refuses to return to Athens, Greeks have generally been Anglophiles at least since the Greek War of Independence (Lord Byron is still a Romantic hero to the Greeks), continuing during the Cretan War of Independence, and especially after the Second World War. It is thus somewhat ironic that Britain is now one of the countries that supports the failed economic policy known as austerity, to the detriment of more publicly-minded countries such as Greece. Meanwhile, those two countries both have very doubtful futures as members of the European Union—Greece because of the short-sighted preference of some of its northern counterparts, Britain because of the short-sighted preference of its Conservative politicians.

I needed no excuse to go back to Greece, because like the Emperor Hadrian (who was also the first Emperor to wear a beard), I am a philhellene. I feel vitality in Greece more deeply than anywhere I've been, a feeling I could never describe as sublimely as Henry Miller in *The Colossus of Maroussi*. The sea, the mountains, the enormously ancient and gnarled olive trees, Athena's gift to her eponymous denizens, dotting the inhospitable *macchia* landscape combine with a historical and archaeological record so profoundly ubiquitous that nearly every footstep could be footnoted. It's not for

nothing that Xenophon's cry "The Sea, the Sea!" still has so much resonance for Greeks. Greece feels like a place pulled directly out of the sea by the Titans, but whose Olympian successors could not be bothered to smooth the salty jagged rocks or tame the prickly country, and so left it like that for a hardy race of men to emerge from the stones and dragon's blood. Perhaps such capriciousness of their gods in some ways led the Greeks to their search for scientific and philosophic knowledge of the world as it is, and their sense of irony and paradox.

In Greece, I have witnessed no signs of defeat about the economic situation—but when they are asked about politics their ready smiles and good-humor palpably give way to various emotions including betrayal, anger, and confusion. At any time of the day, every ATM I have seen since I have been here has unfailingly had a line of people waiting to withdraw the daily minimum allotment of 50 euro in cash. Otherwise, I see little physical difference here than from my previous visits. Admittedly, I am intentionally avoiding a visit to Athens, where protests and rebellion may be more apparent, in favor of a more low-key and touristy part of the southern Peloponnese (incidentally, northern Europeans, mostly Germans with some British, French, and others, make up almost all of the tourists I have observed around me; it is not unusual to be surrounded by hordes of Germans everywhere else in Europe, which is one of many ways to see that Germans have benefitted more than anyone from the EU). I am exploring the Mani peninsula on this trip—the southern-most part of continental Europe which seems like a long finger extending southward down middle of the swollen hand of the Peloponnese. It was described evocatively in a book by the great travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor called *Mani*, in which he recounts a walking tour of this land detailing its rich history and culture. He designed and built his villa overlooking the sea in the village I am staying in, Kardamyli, though it is now degraded and forgotten four years after his death. In fact,

the Mani is an area of Greece that has never been conquered, which was fiercely independent and from where the Greek War of Independence began, and whose people still maintain this love of freedom. Most people told me they would rather leave Europe than become slaves to more austerity and selling off of their public land and assets.

Traveling through Greece provides evidence of a relative economic poverty compared to northern Europe and even northern Italy, where I live, but this apparent financial scarcity is augmented by a richness of life that is mostly unchanged since the Mysteries of Eleusis celebrated the sacred cycle of life and death. Compare the public spirit here (where entire villages eat and drink outside in the cool night air) with the tradition of quiet privacy of the Germans and Anglo-Saxons. The image of poverty and public debt in Greece is belied by a strong social cohesion and private wealth that still ranks it among the richer countries of the world. One of the Greek government's main problems is that private wealth is either moved out of the country or hidden—tax evasion is almost universal here.

There is something both provincial and cosmopolitan about Greeks—a traditional and insular yet fully realized and worldly human society with a long-standing world-wide diaspora. Maybe “universal” is a better word. “Catholic” means “universal”—a Greek word for a church based in Rome that split from the Greek church over the phrase “*filioque*”—Latin for “and son”. In the middle of the day the sun burns so hot that few people venture outside of the shade, and yet I see Greek Orthodox priests walking in full-length black wool cassocks and long, flowing beards. The current government formed by the leftist Syriza party is the first one ever to refuse the blessing of the Greek Orthodox church before taking office. Despite this, the government has refused calls to open church property to taxation.

The general terms of the recent agreement between Greece and

Germany (obviously, Germany is not negotiating alone but as a member of the European Union, along with the unelected and ominously named *Troika* of the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund, but for narrative reasons I prefer to follow the dominant media trend and reduce the situation to two parties—Greeks and Germans. Germany is, for reasons I will explain shortly, by far the most powerful member of all the European parties), stipulate a raise in taxes, pension and public service cuts, and a massive privatization push that would make Margaret Thatcher blush.

Does Greece have fiscal problems? Yes. Are these problems which have real present effects or are they just numbers in bankers' ledgers? That answer is not so clear. The amount of public debt in Greece is always cited as the highest in Europe, but it is very low in absolute terms. Much lower than Germany or many other countries, who have also all flouted European Union rules as they have seen fit but never been punished let alone humiliated along the lines of the Greeks. Maybe a more appropriate question could also be "Does debt matter?" In America, there is a debt that dwarfs anything else seen in the world today, created by wars, bad tax policy, and the otherwise harmless realities of modern finance. Does it make a difference to our daily lives, or does anyone really care? No. It is used as an economic excuse for a political ideology that calls for privatizing public assets and slashing public expenditures, while simultaneously and counter-intuitively cutting taxes only on huge corporations and the rich. This is called neoliberal economics, and its extreme form is called austerity. It is all a hoax with no economic justification as has been empirically proven and as most professional economists readily admit (apart from the followers of Milton Friedman, who must be either overly stubborn in the face of reality or sponsored with corporate money). What it amounts to is greed, as another economic, John Kenneth Galbraith said, "The modern conservative is engaged in one of man's oldest exercises in moral philosophy; that is,

the search for a superior moral justification for selfishness".

Germany has seen its hard-won and much vaunted reputation take a huge hit in the international media during the last agreement with Greece. Why is that? Germany was the loser of both world wars, the first of which led to the second due in large part to the excessive retributive debt commitments imposed by the victorious countries (insisted on mostly by France). After the second war—the worst catastrophe of Western history for which Germany was almost single-handedly responsible—a triumph of diplomacy led by the United States allowed Germany to not only not pay back war reparations but even provided massive economic stimulus to Germany to help rebuild its country and economy. The geopolitic reason for this was to protect the West against the Soviet Union, but the consequence is that the aggressor in that war, like Japan, emerged economically dominant due in larger part to outside circumstances rather than its own natural merits (as they may like to believe). During that war, Germany took over the botched invasion of Greece from its Fascist ally, Italy, and destroyed untold lives and cultural artifacts, plundered resources and forced interest-free “loans”, and caused altogether huge economic losses in Greece that only a full-scale invasion with a sustained resistance can occur. Germany made a paltry payment of \$160 million to Greece in 1960 and then closed the book on war reparations. While it is valuable to all parties to move on from the war in the name of the continuing *pax Europea*, it is disingenuous of Germany to take the harsh line it has on Greece given its own history. This blatant hypocrisy and self-righteousness is one part of the equation that goes beyond money and debt, and touches everyone in an emotional way. Is it right that Germany can squander two or three generations of generally good behavior and thoughtful reckoning with their past history in the matter of a few weeks or months of negotiations? In Europe, old wounds die hard, especially where the Germans are involved.

The debt negotiations with Greece and Germany appear complicated, but in large part it isn't the finances but rather the uncertainty of political consequences that make the situation seem so labyrinthine. Economically, the amount of money that Greece needs to continue to function properly is relatively small as far as these things go—somewhere around 50 Billion euro from what I can tell. It is a small fraction of the amount of the massive bailouts given by Europe and America to private banks who have profited handsomely with public money. Likewise it is a small fraction of the annual military budget of the NATO countries. The question is not, therefore, economic, but political. I totally agree with many opinions I have read lately, including the recently fired Greek Finance Minister [Yanis Varoufakis](#), that the goal is not merely repayment of relatively small sums of debt but the humiliation of Greece and a harsh warning to any other country that may rebel and elect a government to challenge the by now entrenched neoliberal consensus. This means especially Spain and Portugal, and to a lesser extent Italy and even France. The European Union and Central Bank have sacrificed democracy and public welfare in the name of authoritative economic control and the guarantee of continued neoliberal policies. For this, they are ready to destroy the economy of one of their members and sell off a large part of its assets at cut-rate prices. It is cruel, and even the IMF has belatedly [admitted](#) that it is unrealistic and has no basis in economics

What has the humiliation of Greece caused? Human suffering and resistance. The human spirit cannot be broken by things such as increased taxes and lowered pensions and public services as easily as war and violence, but people's lives can be made much worse, through little fault of their own, and political apathy and extremism can set in. Meanwhile, the CEO of Goldman-Sachs is fiddling while Europe burns. You see, it was [Goldman-Sachs](#) who proposed to the government of Greece a method to hide its debt in return for investments in shady funds, which obviously blew up in the financial crisis. The

real criminals are such gambling bankers who exploit and destabilize entire countries and continents while not only avoiding prosecution but actually getting further governmental support and huge bonuses for their work. The problem is not Greek debt. The problem is this system of non-regulated casino banking and the greed of corporate capitalism which puts the interests of shareholders over the interests of the people and the planet and which will most likely be their undoing.

Statistics tell us of widespread unemployment in Greece, but there is little evidence of reduced well-being where I am traveling in the relatively backwoods Peloponnese. My adopted home of Italy is also always cited for its supposed economic woes, but much of it is overblown. Things are far from perfect and serious reforms are deeply needed, but there is a general lifestyle and standard of living that is among the highest in the world. I am obviously a mere amateur observer and by no means an expert in economics and public policy. Greeks all tell me they are proud of their country, as they should be, and for the most part they were ready to leave the European Union if that is what was necessary. This would have been very bad for Greece, but they wanted freedom most of all, especially freedom from humiliation from their ostensible allies. The government of Greece paradoxically chose to agree to the even harsher German-Troika terms immediately after a national referendum voted overwhelmingly against it. For this, Greeks feel betrayed and confused. Now, things will not be any better for them economically than if they had rejected the terms, but now there is an added indignity that they will have no control over their own land.

In Greece today, from my observations, the people are as politically active and involved in their democracy as anyone—at least as much as in Italy where I live, and most certainly more than America. One of the downsides of the debt crisis and increasingly harsh austerity measures is the disengagement from politics from some people and the

radicalization of others. It was under such a debt crisis that the conditions arose that allowed the rise of the Nazis. In Greece there is a neo-Nazi party with elected members of Parliament, but which has been outlawed for the time being. With increased desperation and little reason for long-term hope, there is no telling what could happen. For a deeper, more nuanced account of the situation in Greece and the best course of action, I completely concur with Jeffrey Sachs in [this article](#).

The beauty of Greece and the spirit of its people will endure, as they always have, even if economic hard times hang over their future. The future of the European project and the peace and stability it has brought is not so sure, due completely to short-sightedness, greed, and glaring lack of leadership in European countries and its institutions. No one has come out well in this manufactured crisis, including the German coalition led by Merkel, the last four Greek governments (which were Center-Left, Technocratic, Center-Right, and Left), and the small army of European finance ministers and unelected technocrats. The primacy of debt and profit over people (the *demos*) is today's foremost myth, and one hopes that this episode reveals this myth for what it is. Greece no longer has the power to overthrow mighty Troy, nor the money to rebuild the Acropolis. Let us hope that somehow a collective spirit emerges as a way out of this fiasco, and the rest of Europe realizes that it is they who are indebted and what it stands to lose.