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## Patrick Leigh Fermor’s ‘Hellen-Romaic Dilemma’

Research on Modern Greek identity consistently focuses on its core problem, the perpetual identity crisis (Faubion 1993:138, Verinis 2005:140, Wrazas 2010:45). The majority of scholars, both Greek and foreign, who deal with that issue constantly compare the present state of Modern Greek reality with its past, especially with the ancient times, obviously finding such a comparison necessary or even inevitable; they are probably right, for as it seems most of Modern Greek humanities thrive and develop in shadow of the ancients. Linguists dauntlessly seek etymological proofs that provide connections between Modern Greek words and their supposed Ancient equivalents.<sup>1</sup> Ethnographers and researchers of modern social life in Greece strive to find similarities between modern and ancient customs and social institutions (Danforth 1984:56). Other Folklorists that gather folk songs and document dances are satisfied if they can justify a link between modern and ancient lyrics, or trace the present village dance footsteps to some ancient patterns, either described or depicted. Historians, starting perhaps from the most famous 19th century scholar Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos,<sup>2</sup> try

<sup>1</sup> For example: In the Greek semantics, apart from borrowings (*δάνεια*) from other languages, occurs a phenomenon of ‘counter-borrowings’ (*αντιδάνεια*): foreign words that originally were Greek now come back to the Greek language via a foreign language. One good example is *μπάρκα* (boat) that through Latin *barca* came from the Ancient Greek *βάρης*, another is *πέναλι* (i.e. penalty kick in soccer), the word that came from English where it was based on Latin (*poenaltas* and *poenalis*) itself originating from Ancient Greek *ποινή* (Μπαμπινιώτης 1998:206).

<sup>2</sup> Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos (Κωνσταντίνος Παπαρρηγόπουλος) wrote the massive *Ιστορία του ελληνικού έθνους: Από αρχαιοτάτων χρόνων μέχρι σήμερα* (*History of the Hellenic nation: From the Antiquity until today*, 6 volumes, published 1860-1877). His work is so influential that it has been constantly republished. An updated edition is available from National Geographic, in



to build a bridge that would naturally join Modern and Ancient Greece together (Kitromilides 1998:27-30).

This orientation toward Antiquity only was sometimes taking on alarming dimensions. Margaret Alexiou (1986:10) observes that

scholars have been at pains to prove that everything positive in Greek culture is either prior to or free from, alien Balkan and Turkish influences, whether by postulating links (however tenuous) with Greek antiquity, or stressing the “purely Hellenic treatment” of motifs, whether in folk songs, dances, weaving or shadow theatre!

Anyone who dared to question this connection or to doubt the fact that Modern and Ancient Greeks belong to the same nation or race was ridiculed and excluded from the mainstream of Greek discourse. Such was the fate of Austrian historian Jacob Fallmerayer who in 1830, in his *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea während des Mittelalters* as well as in later works denied the Greeks the right to be descendants of the Ancients. He was labelled “mishellene” and became first and most notable of the kind. He in fact occupies this position until today though his arguments were rejected already by his contemporaries (Ρωμανός 2001:27-30, Alexiou 1986:9, Bien 2005:228).

Ever since the foundation of the Modern Greek state in 1828 the Greeks consciously and continuously strengthened the link between themselves and their ancient ancestors, starting from the choice for the name of their new country and their eponym: The first independent Balkan state since 1832 was called the Kingdom of Greece (Βασιλείον της Ελλάδος), while their inhabitants were referred to as the Hellenes (Ελληνες) or rather the Neohellenes (Νεοέλληνες). Such a decision was the result not only of Greek plan to build their independent identity on the ancient foundation, but also it met the expectations of Western Europeans or more specifically of philhellenes who were co-architects and to some extent saviours of this new state. Philhellenes raised funds for Greece, lobbied for Greece and even fought and died for Greece because of its glorious past, the past that was the common cradle of all Europeans. (Romanos 2001:9-26, Droulia 2007:35-37) For Greeks, rejecting this blessing - and burden - would be unwise, ungrateful and in fact impossible.

The Greeks gladly present their past and their link to it. Ancient language and history are important items of school curriculum (though children may have to read the Ancient in Modern translations). Archaeological sites and other places of Ancient interest are well exposed and visible - in many cases the ruins were carefully cleansed of latter additions, as it happened

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35 volumes and in Modern Greek (translated from *Paparrigopoulos'* archaized *katharevousa* into a simplified form of *demotic*).

at the Athens Acropolis where anything built after the Golden Age was dismantled in the 19th century, just after Greece became independent. (Tziovas 2001:202) The Modern Greek connection with the Ancients is constantly strengthened not only within the Greek society, but also in many presentations of Hellas addressed to foreign visitors, chiefly tourists (who are yearly more numerous than the population of the country!). The advertising slogans of Greek National Tourist Organisation (GNTO) frequently relate to ancient or even mythical times – ‘Greece, the Land of Gods’ or ‘Live Your Myth in Greece.’ The Greeks also willingly stress that many words in foreign languages originated from the Greek language. The famous advertisement of the beer Mythos, listing a lot of international words that have Greek roots is based on this idea. The publications such as *You speak Greek, you just don't know it*, listing more than 6 thousands Greek words in English (compiled by Anne Stefanidou, published by GNTO) are promoted abroad for the same reasons.

In order to achieve firm and everlasting connection between the present and the ancient past many obstacles were and still need to be overcome. Among them, the aforementioned earlier burden involved in referring to the Ancients. Nikos Dimou (2004:29) says:

Whichever nation that would descend from Ancient Greeks, would be automatically unhappy. Unless it could forget them or overcome them.

In my view, this is a very important point. It must be hard to live with what he later calls the Modern Greek inferiority complex (2004:34), that is the result of confrontation of the Ancient ideal with the Modern reality. Many writers and intellectuals were dealing with this well-documented problem, but it is not my intention here to follow their tracks. Instead I would like to move on to the next obstacle, the one that remained in the centre of interest of Patrick Leigh Fermor, namely, the attitude towards the times between Ancient and Modern, towards Byzantine and Post-Byzantine period.

While the link with the Ancients is institutionally promoted and enhanced, the connection to the Byzantine legacy does not seem to require such effort. After all it is transmitted by the living tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church. The language of liturgy is still *koiné* and the readings from the Bible are still in their original form (i.e. they are not translated into the Modern Greek, unlike the readings in the Greek Catholic Church) and any attempt to change it has met with firm opposition from the clergy and the congregation alike. Despite this natural, irrefutable and, I daresay, intimate relation between the Modern Greeks and Byzantium, it is the ancient Hellas that defines their contemporary identity.

This is however the result of a profound and long dispute. In the 18th and early 19th century the Greeks referred to themselves as *Romii* (Ρωμιοί), literally «Romans», calling their language *romeika* (ρωμαίικα). This was the eponym of the righteous Greek Christians living in the Byzantine Empire (which was called in its times the Eastern Roman Empire), while *Hellene* was limited to pagans who persisted in worshipping the Ancient false gods. *Romios* was also the name by which the Greeks were called by the Ottomans (Χρήστου 2003:91). Towards the dawn of independence Greek intellectuals started pondering on the appropriate name for the nation. The most influential of them, Adamatios Korais, was in favour of the name ‘Greeks’ (Γραικοί), because this was the name the Western foreigners, the bringers of modernity, called them (Roudometof 1998:25-26, Χρήστου 2003:140). The famous chronicler and fighter for the Greek independence Giannis Makrygiannis seems to have used the expression ‘Romii’ when speaking about the meek Greek civilians, while he calls ‘Hellenes’ his brave brothers-in-arms (Χρήστου 2003:142). It is characteristic how these two expressions began to differ. While *Romios* started to acquire the underlying meaning of an enslaved, [“Turkicized”], superstitious and orientalist individual, *Hellene* designated a modern and proud descendant of the great Ancients, ready to join in the course of Western culture; and the so called Hellenist thesis became the pivot of 19th century nationalist ideology (Herzfeld 1986:18-21).<sup>3</sup> The attempt of Αργύρης Εφταλίωτης to rehabilitate the concept of *Romiosyni*, ‘being Romios,’ made at the turn of 19th and 20th century<sup>4</sup> was unsuccessful despite the heated debate it provoked (Leontis 1991:194-195). Now the notion of *Romios* still persists at the outskirts of Modern Greek thought, having vaguely sentimental and nostalgic meaning of nostalgia (and at the same time an unfavourable sense of backwardness), appealing mostly to those who yearn for the Byzantine glory, the grandeur of the Orthodoxy<sup>5</sup> or to those who bewail the sad fate of vanishing Greek diaspora.<sup>6</sup>

One interesting contribution to the understanding of the *Romiosyni* is a digression that Patrick Leigh Fermor made in his travelogue *Roumeli. Travels in Northern Greece*. Fermor is a great admirer of Greece and maybe one of the last true travel writers. Before the World War II he managed to walk on foot from the Netherlands to Constantinople.<sup>7</sup> The journey

<sup>3</sup> The main theme of Herzfeld’s book (1986) is the struggle between ‘Hellenist thesis’ and ‘Romaic thesis’ conducted by the 19th and early 20th century Greek ethnographers.

<sup>4</sup> Ιστορία της ρωμιοσύνης, Εστία, Αθήνα 1901.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ιωάννης Μ. Χατζηφώτης, Οδοιπορικά της Ρωμιοσύνης, Modern Times, Αθήνα 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Άρης Αμπατζής, Μαρμαρωμένη Ρωμιοσύνη. Οι Έλληνες της Κωνσταντινούπολης, Α. Α. Λιβάνη, Αθήνα, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> He died only recently: on June 10, 2011 at the age of 96.

was later described by him in *A Time of Gifts* (published in 1977) and *Between the Woods and the Water* (published in 1986). During the war he was a British officer in the S.O.E. sent to fight beside the Cretan partisans.<sup>8</sup> Because of his pre-war and war experiences he grew so fond of the Greeks that he gradually decided to stay among them. He extensively travelled throughout Greece and he gathered his impressions in two superb travel books: *Mani. Travels in Southern Peloponnese* (first published in 1958) and *Roumeli. Travels in Northern Greece* (first published in 1966). The former book is a highly seductive guide to the continental Greece's most southern peninsula filled with wild mountains and savage people, in my opinion an indispensable read for anyone who wants to be captivated by this exotic patch of Modern Greece that still preserves Spartan values. The latter is a collection of most interesting essays on the land that lies above the Corinthian Gulf, wonderful stories about the people of Epirus, about Sarakatsans, the nomadic shepherds of Northern Greece, or about the monastic life in the Meteora Monasteries before the tourist era eroded it permanently. Fermor writes with great acumen and erudition while maintaining a light style and is surely responsible for the fact that many of his readers went to Greece to follow in his footsteps and did not come back disappointed.<sup>9</sup> In his old age Fermor lived in Kardamyli, one of the chief villages of the Mani peninsula and – as it is reported by Robert D. Kaplan who met him in 2002 – was still working on the last volume of his memoirs (Kaplan 2009:212-218, also Marozzi 2007:3).

The 'Hellen-Romaic Dilemma' constitutes one of the chapters of *Roumeli...* The pretext to talk about it is the question Fermor was asked while speaking Greek in Panama City: *Romios eisai? (Are you Romios?)* (Fermor 2004:96). First he speaks about the origin of the word, the very origin that I have attempted to outline in the preceding paragraphs. He favours the theory that *Romios* is distorted *Romaïos* (literally 'Roman'), distorted because it came through the Turkish 'Rum'.<sup>10</sup> He shows that because it is 'Hellene' that won the contest for the national eponym, 'Romios' came into disuse or even misuse and from being a neutral epithet of the Greek people, still popular at the beginning of the 19th century it now has a pejorative or even humiliating meaning. He exemplifies it with the expression 'romaika pragmata' (ρωμαϊκά

<sup>8</sup> Cf Fermor 2004:125-144. His feats during the war were also the subject of the book *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1952) by Bill Stanley Moss, Fermor's brother-in-arms.

<sup>9</sup> Fermor started off his travel writer career with the book on Caribbean *The Traveller's Tree* (1950). Fairly recently (1991) he has published a book on Southern America, *Three Letters from the Andes*.

<sup>10</sup> In Greek translation of *Roumeli* Fermor is corrected by a Greek translator, who in the footnote remarks that in reality 'Romios' is Graecized form of 'Romaïos' (Fermor 2001:154), thus implying that any mention of Turkish linguistic mediation would be a mistake.

πράγματα) – literally ‘Romaic things’ or ‘Romaic business’ that came to mean ‘*slovenly goings-on*’ or, *worse still* ‘dirty work’ (Fermor 2004:101).<sup>11</sup> He then states that while the term ‘Hellene’ may have ousted ‘Romios’ from the language, the essence of ‘Romiosyni’ (‘being Romios’ or ‘Romaic-hood’) (Fermor 2004:98-99) is still prevalent in the Modern Greek soul.

All Greeks, according to my theory, are an amalgam, in varying degrees, of both [i.e. of ‘Romios’ and of ‘Hellene’]; they contradict and complete each other. But it is antagonism of the two which concerns us here, not their possible synthesis. (...) It suggests a lifelong Zoroastrian war in which the Hellene is Ormuzd and the Romios, Ahriman. I advance all this with diffidence (Fermor 2004:106-107).

But instead of describing each side of Greekness separately he presents the difference between them combing their characteristics in a list of opposing pairs. *Some [of them], for the sake of illustration, are purposely slight and frivolous.* (Fermor 2004:107) All in all through the next few pages Fermor identifies no fewer than 64 such pairs.

He starts off by saying that while the *Romios* is practical, concrete and realistic, believing in the power of argument, instinct and improvisation, the *Hellene* is theoretical and idealistic, relying on what is more abstract, logical, systematic or even dogmatic. One of substantial differences is their attitude to Europe and to the Europeans. While the *Romios* stays distrustful of Western customs and excludes himself from Europe, seeing it as the region of alien ‘Franks’ (Fermor 2004:108), the *Hellene* gladly accepts both European customs and identity. Another difference is the way they look to the future. The *Romios* is characterised by pessimistic although stoic fatalism, expressed through numerous sayings and proverbs as well as love for various conspiracy theories that explain the forthcoming failures, while the *Hellene* subscribes to a more cheerful vision of the time to come. They both share a love for politics (and political newspapers), but the *Romios*, blind member of a political party believes in any means necessary to achieve a goal (money plays an important part here), while the *Hellene* shows a more – we would perhaps say – civilised and objective attitude to political world.

Fermor then describes in detail various aspects of Romaic and Hellenic life. The *Romios* listens to Oriental *rebetika* and *amane* songs that have their roots in the Ottoman Empire. The *Romios* smokes *narghile* (smoke-pipe)

<sup>11</sup> This ambivalence is noted by contemporary dictionaries of the Modern Greek language. Μπαμπινιώτης (1998:1577) defines Romios (Ρωμιός) as (1) citizen of the Roman Empire, (2) Orthodox Christian in the late Byzantine Empire and in the Ottoman times, (3) chiefly in the 19th c. - a Modern Greek (Νεοέλληνας), observing Orthodox tradition of Byzantium (in opposition to the followers of European Enlightenment), (4) a kind of Modern Greek that is characterized by the Greeks themselves as blindly obedient to official ruling power, lazy and naive (in opposition to the ideal Greek of the ancient times) and (5) Orthodox Greeks of the diaspora.



and constantly plays with the *komboloi*, a rosary-like object used not for religious purposes but as something to keep one's hands busy. The *Romios* is fond of klephtic legends, connected with warring brigands (*klephts*) that in Ottoman times used to rob Greeks and Turks alike but were a considerable force during the Greek War of Independence. Klephtic legends strengthen the Romaic sense of *leventeía* – 'fire of youth' – and *philotimo* – 'honour-love'. (Fermor 2004:110, cf. Broome 1996:66-67) The *Hellene* tries to keep himself aloof from these objects and concepts. He may not be opposed to all of them, but if he pursues them or believes in them, he does so secretly or with a faint feeling of shame.

Fermor sums up his list showing that the *Romios* craves Byzantium and the 'Dome of St. Sophia' while the *Hellene* longs for the Golden Age of Perycles when looking at the columns of Parthenon.

The list is superseded however by examples of many traits that the *Hellene* and the *Romios* share. Fermor points at, among many others, readiness for self-sacrifice, passion for news, lack of snobbery (and conviction that every Greek is equal to any other), sense of individuality, quick temper, sharp wit and humour (Fermor 2004:113-114). It is truly an imposing list of merits that constitutes a unique homage to the Greeks.

Such a dichotomous Romaic-Hellenic approach to explain the 'Greek character,' though rather popular throughout the scholarly texts, is sometimes criticized as a dangerous simplification (Tziouvas 2001:200-202). Fermor is however protected by the genre of his text. He is no academic, but a traveller who had an interesting vision and a whim to share it, as something more playful than serious. Nevertheless, I believe his classification can be useful as a starting point in understanding the Modern Greeks. He compiled his list in the 1960s and since then the notion of the *Romios* has continued to fade while that of the *Hellene* has risen to dominate, or at least so it seems. Greece joined Europe, i.e. Western Europe in every possible official way: not only has it become the 10th member of the European Union (almost 30 years ago!), but also in 2004 it joined the monetary union, thus abolishing the drachma (which can be seen as a great sacrifice, in view of the ancient connotations connected to this currency). But in times of crises the *Romios* mentality (in a negative sense of the word) appears to surface and suddenly the pictures from the Athenian newscasts are somewhat incoherent, illogical, disturbing. Conspiracy theories flourish, angry mobs chant unsettling slogans.

But I do not want to ponder on the reasons for such events, because I believe that it is impossible to comprehend the situation without being there (and that here the media do more harm than good to our understanding). Instead I would like to express my concern about the

mentioned above twilight of the *Romios* (in a positive sense of the word). From my own observations the Greeks more and more often reject any suggestion of Oriental origins, especially anything that brings to mind the Ottoman times and places. While the *komboloi* are still common in Greek hands and the characteristic *rebetiko* rhythms (and *zeibekiko*<sup>12</sup>) dominate in Greek nightclubs, performances of the shadow theatre, with Karangiozis, this model *Romios*, playing the leading role, are much less popular and it is harder every year to get a glass of decent resin-flavoured retsina. I vividly remember the open disgust of my Greek friend when I expressed my fondness for this golden-hued wine. He explained to me that this drink is not worth of Modern Greeks, because it brings to mind the poverty stricken old times when wine used to be of so poor a quality it had to be retsinated in order not to go sour.

Maybe the time of the final decline has already come for the *Romios*, as Fermor perceives him, and it is left to us to preserve the *Romiosyni*, because it stands for most of the things that constitute 'Greekness,' that make the Greeks Greek and that distinguish us from them. I think this is the fundamental trait we look for in any 'other' – his 'otherness,' i.e. being different from us, as well as any possible link between the 'other' and even more exotic peoples and cultures.

As for the (dis)continuity in the Greek identity, there is no issue of discontinuity, while its continuity has several, complementary 'paths' to choose from. During the past centuries it proved to be a problem of national strategy – which period in the history of the nation to choose as the basis or a point of reference for the contemporary 'self-definition.' Making such a decision brought about serious and lasting effects. I endeavoured to describe briefly two of such possible scenarios for the Modern Greek identity, showing the consequences of each choice.

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<sup>12</sup> *Zeibekiko* is an expressive, improvised, Oriental solo dance, traditionally danced only by men.



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## Patricka Leigh Fermora rozterki helleńsko-romejskie

Autor omawia jedno z ujęć dychotomii między Hellenem a Romiose, popularnej w badaniach nad nowogrecką tożsamością. Ukazuje proveniencję i sposób użycia obu pojęć, posługując się materiałem zaprezentowanym przez angielskiego pisarza i podróżnika, Patricka Leigh Fermora, w jego monografii *Roumeli Travels in Northern Greece* (wyd. 1966).

Fermor wyróżnił 64 pary koncepcji i sytuacji, pokazując jak w obrębie każdej z nich funkcjonuje Hellen oraz Romios. Z porównania wyłania się obraz logicznego, zwesternizowanego Hellena, zapatrzzonego w dokonania starożytnych Greków oraz spontanicznego, orientalnego, nieco zacofanego Romiosa, który tęskni za Bizancjum. Choć obraz naszkicowany przez Fermora jest przejaskrawiony (oraz nieco żartobliwy), to jednak pomaga zrozumieć, że to obraz Hellena, a nie Romiosa, jest tym, w który wierzą i do którego dążą współcześni Grecy.

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