Introduction

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This special issue was inspired by the national and global commemorations of the bicentennial anniversary of the Greek War of Independence (1821-2021), a major historical moment in the national consciousness of the Greek people and a political event of international dimensions. The papers included in this volume draw attention to a rather unexplored territory: the substantial connection between the most tumultuous era in Greek history that led to the birth of the Modern Greek State and the American role in it. By bringing together Greece and the United States in a context of social, political, and cultural exploration and understanding, the essays examine the strong ideological ties uniting the two nations in terms of their adherence to the values of liberty and democracy, while acknowledging their distinct historical backgrounds and social particularities. Despite the obvious differences regarding the instigating forces of the Greek and the American struggles for independence, both revolutions were marked by similar ideals that formulated their political rhetoric and their vision for free, democratic nations. Just as the American founding fathers had relied upon the ideals of ancient Greek democracy to construct their revolutionary discourse, so did the success of their republican experiment invigorate the Greek hopes and efforts towards independence.

“Greek exceptionalism”¹ and American cultural diplomacy

In his widely-read and much-quoted lyrical drama, Hellas, written at the outbreak of the Greek Revolution, English romantic poet Percy B. Shelley underlines the universal nature of the Greek cause as well as its essential distinctiveness in the “Age of Revolution,”² reminding the western world that they are the inheritors of the ancient Greek legacy:

We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece.... The modern Greek is the descendant of those glorious beings whom the imagination almost refuses to figure to itself as belonging to our kind, and he

¹ "Greek exceptionalism"
² Shelley, Percy Bysshe. Hellas, written at the outbreak of the Greek Revolution.
inherits much of their sensibility, their rapidity of conception, their enthusiasm, and their courage. (Shelley 447)

3 When, in 1821, the Greeks rose in rebellion against the Ottoman rule after four hundred years of oppression, both sides of the Atlantic eagerly positioned the Greek Revolution within a framework of romantic ideas about Greece’s glorious past and its direct line of descent from ancient Greece. Scholars of the Greek Revolution have consistently dwelt on the force that this belief carried in the cause of Greek emancipation and in the popular imagination of the Western world. The transition from Greece as a geographical territory in the eastern Mediterranean to the concept of Greece as a national entity was especially arduous for the enslaved Greeks and rather unsettling for the Great Powers whose conservative outlook and reactionary politics dominated post-Napoleonic Europe.

4 After four centuries of imposed social and cultural self-alienation and with a significant number of Greeks dispersed throughout Europe and other regions, the unification of Greece in a common mentality and sense of belonging could ideally be achieved through the rhetoric of origin and continuity from ancient Hellas. The process of imagining the modern Greek nation seems to fall within Anthony D. Smith’s idea of nation-formation as “not so much one of construction, let alone deliberate ‘invention’, as of reinterpretation of pre-existing cultural motifs and of reconstruction of earlier ethnic ties and sentiments” (Smith 83, emphasis in the original). The name “Hellene” was revived as a term of national self-designation for modern Greeks and as the basis for defining Greek identity through a long-awaited palingenesia (national rebirth). This idea was tacitly embraced by the European Powers as it provided them with an ideological context for justifying the radicalness of the Greek cause as a unique case of national recognition. In this sense, Greek “exceptionalism” was successfully internationalized and viewed as a cohesive sociopolitical front—however vulnerable—of a people united by common descent, language, and religion against the tyranny of a barbaric Oriental Other.

5 Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the idealized notion of Hellenic descent and the actual state of modern Greeks was hard to miss, especially by foreign travelers who visited Greece with strong philhellenic sentiments and a nostalgic enthusiasm. Steeped in the classics, most of these travelers were greeted with a grave sense of disappointment upon their arrival in Greece as the splendor of the ancient civilization was evident only in the monuments and landscapes, while modern Greeks were a degraded, poverty-stricken people subjugated to a barbaric conqueror. One of the most comprehensive accounts of revolutionary Greece, Samuel Gridley Howe’s An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution, vividly captures the inherent contradictions in the Greek character and conduct. Howe’s six-year stay in Greece (1821–1827) brought him in close contact with the Greek people, their temperament and particularities. As Howe explains, the traveler in Greece will find the Greeks shrewd, inquisitive, lively, enterprising, industrious, temperate, hospitable, and pious, in their way; ardently attached to their native land; eager for their own, and their children’s education; and often with a rude, but sterling sense of honour; he will find them also, fickle-minded, vain, blustering, and deceitful.

6 Notwithstanding the inevitable adoption of Oriental manners and attitudes, the Greeks, in Howe’s firm belief, were indeed the descendants of ancient Greece.
Were there wanting any more convincing proof of the genuineness of the descent of the Modern Greeks from their illustrious ancestors, than that they speak the same language, which has undergone fewer corruptions than almost any other; that they employ precisely the same characters in writing; that they call places by the same names; that they inhabit the same spots; that they retain many of the prejudices, the manners and customs, that are recorded of the old Greeks. (xxiii)

In a similar vein, Howe's fellow countryman, Frederick Douglas, writing a few years earlier, espouses the Hellenic identity of modern Greeks, however latent that might be, and builds upon a sense of moral obligation on the part of the western world to commit to the cause of Greece's liberation:

It cannot surely be deemed useless to exhibit the little that still exists of the most splendid of people, to point out to other nations the causes of their fall, and to canvass the possibility and means of their restoration.... No country, whose character has been handed down to us by history, awakens more powerfully our interest. (3)

A wave of literary philhellenism swept over America during the first years of the Greek Revolution awakening the American people to the plight of a small nation in the eastern Mediterranean fighting heroically for the recovery of their basic human rights. Like their European counterparts, American writers sought to kindle support for the Greek cause by stressing the explicit – yet for centuries suspended – connection between the ancient Greek grandeur and modern Greece. Recognizing Greece as the birthplace of western civilization and cherishing its legacy in their institutions, American writers embarked on a kind of cultural diplomacy, enveloping the Greek War of Independence in a mantle of romantic nationalism largely defined through the increasing idealization of the Greek past and the vision of its regenerated future. More importantly, however, the uprising of the Greeks was approached through the familiar rhetoric of America’s own successful revolution, her victory against another oppressive empire and her emergence as a republican nation. Within this framework, the American and Greek revolutions were regarded as “kindred events,” in the sense that the Greek rebellion was seen as a validation and extension of the American experiment as well as a return of the classical past (Roessel 93).

The idea of “exceptionalism” was not strange for the Americans, having been ingrained in their national mythology since the Puritan settlement and their divine mission and having reached political dimensions with the distinct historical circumstances of the American Revolution. The establishment of a republican government had afforded Americans their strong claim to uniqueness which shaped their national consciousness and role in the world as guardians of freedom and democracy. However, despite its familiar discourse, American literary philhellenism failed to sway those in power for more decisive and concerted political action. The American government stolidly promoted neutrality and non-interference, sealed by the Monroe doctrine (December 1823). Despite forceful political voices, who championed the Greek cause, like those of Congressmen Daniel Webster and Henry Clay, little was done by the government of the United States to formulate a substantial diplomatic policy and provide Greece with military aid. In this respect, during the first years of the Greek Revolution, there seems to exist in the United States “a sharp clash between official American policy and what might be called popular American policy” (Earle 367). American citizens as individuals were far more unequivocal in acknowledging Greece's rightful claim to national independence as they established philhellenic societies throughout the United States,
aroused public support for the Greek cause, raised money and provisions, and even fought side by side with the Greek revolutionaries.  

**Mordecai M. Noah's The Grecian Captive; or, The Fall of Athens (1822)**

Mordecai M. Noah's *The Grecian Captive; or, The Fall of Athens*, a rare example of early American philhellenic drama, combines all the powerful components of the American public discourse in favor of the Greek struggle: it envisions a brighter future for Greece, befitting her glorious past and the valiance of her people, while invoking the rhetoric of America's own triumphant revolution and highly optimistic destiny. A romantic tragedy with melodramatic elements for maximum emotional effect, the play premiered at the Park Theatre in New York on June 17, 1822, a little over a year after the outbreak of the Greek Revolution. With *The Grecian Captive* the American audience must have experienced a reviving surge of patriotic fervor and self-righteousness, as they cheered and applauded the triumph of culture and civilization over barbarity, the victory of Christians over Muslims, the celebration of republican values and the defeat of tyranny and oppression.

In the preface to his play, Noah triggers the audience's humanitarian sentiment and arouses sympathy for the cause of Greek independence. He draws upon the American uncompromising commitment to civil and religious freedom as well as the idea of ancient Greece's undeniable cultural heritage:

> We, citizens of a free country, cannot observe with indifference the present struggle for liberty in Greece. Though separated by a world of waters we are too familiar with the history of that country, with those illustrious events which mark the pages of her history, not to feel a deep interest in the success of that people, and the cause of freedom generally. In writing plays on Greece we must bear in mind the theatres of Æschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides. Despotism resulting from a frequent change of masters has impaired, if not destroyed, that great human energy, and those lovely blossoms springing from the cultivated mind, for which the Greeks were once distinguished, and celebrated. Still they are Greeks[.] (iii-iv)

Interestingly enough, Noah becomes really outspoken in his desire to see the Greeks triumph over their oppressors. With the liberty of the imagination he is entitled to as a dramatist, he precipitates an optimistic and essentially uplifting outcome with the Greeks recovering Athens, the symbol of western civilization, from the hands of the Turks, while he makes a sharp comment on the unjustifiable inactivity of the political system:

> This privilege of imagination is the peculiar property of the dramatist, who is not bound to wait for the tardy movements of armies, or the cold progress of cabinet negotiations, he is only to know that war exists in Greece, the cradle of the Arts, where Homer sung, where Themistocles conquered, and his fancy and invention must supply the rest. (iii)

*The Grecian Captive* revolves around the story of Zelia, the Greek woman who is taken slave in Ali Pasha's harem, and who is eventually rescued from the claws of infidel masculinity after a series of complications and suspenseful instances. The play has all those aesthetic and ideological ingredients that the American audience recognize as part of their own historical experience. For the Americans, the harem is associated with
the late-18th-century battles with the Algerian pirates when Americans were taken captive and exchanged for ransom. Underneath its exoticism, the harem poses an imminent threat to female chastity, national integrity, western culture, and Christian religion. Zelia and Greece merge in an image of national and gender victimization. In the context of the harem, Zelia experiences a debilitating sense of oppression and degradation as she is deprived of the most basic human rights. However, she bravely resists Ali Pasha’s advances and vehemently stresses the incompatible differences between the two cultures:

Your wife? Ah, Pacha, what a union do you propose! At variance in religion, in laws and in customs, separated by insurmountable obstacles from those tender endearments, those confidential attachments of a Christian wife, what happiness, what comfort can I anticipate. Besides, an absolute master and his slave? Can love preside o’er ties so unequal, so oppressive? (6)

14 Probably echoing the American republican conception of matrimony as a more egalitarian union based on mutual love and respect, Zelia draws the rigid boundaries that separate her Greek/western identity from the Ottoman/eastern Other. Zelia is determined to fight and die for the triptych homeland, religion, virtue: “Fear nothing, my father, your daughter will never tarnish the lustre of her name or the dignity of her nation; she will never sully the purity of the great struggle for liberty, nor poison the pure fountain of love, by an alliance with this ferocious mussulman” (25).

15 In a truly melodramatic fashion, the romance of liberation requires that Zelia be rescued from the Turkish harem and Greece from subjugation. In a spectacular, and cathartic, finale, the Greeks capture Athens with the help of an American frigate. Appearing as deus ex machina, the Americans fight on the side of the Greeks for a worthy cause:

Kiminski. Accept, sir, the thanks of an old Greek warrior. From England, may I ask?
Burrows. No, Sir, from America. My frigate is called the United States, and I am proud of the opportunity to assist the cause of liberty in Greece.
Kiminski. America?—The United States?—Let me embrace thee! Thou art from the country of a Washington, of that patriot and soldier, who gave freedom and glory to the Western world. Sacred be his name—illustrious his example.
Burrows. I thank you, sir, and may you establish in Greece a free and happy republic, founded upon the only true basis, virtue, law, and liberty. (47)

16 The ending of Noah’s play carries an optimistic message for the western world. It is a message of solidarity and common effort out of respect for Greece as the cradle of civilization while, at the same time, it offers the American audience an exhilarating reassurance of the validity and universality of their republican ideals of liberty and egalitarianism for all people:

Kiminsky. Behold a glorious termination to all our painful struggles! Greece is free! The land of the great, the home of the brave. The queen of the Arts has broken the bonds of tyranny and slavery—and a glorious day succeeds to a long night of peril and calamity—Now to merit freedom by the establishment of just laws—a free and upright government—a liberal, tolerant, and benevolent spirit to all. (48)

The essays

17 Given the turmoil the world currently finds itself in, this special issue seeks to approach the Greek War of Independence from a transatlantic perspective revisiting concepts of human liberty, democracy, and the right to self-government. The essays
offer a comparative outlook and critical insight into the Greek insurrection as a pivotal historical event with multiple reverberations whose success, against all odds and setbacks, echoed the value of the struggle for freedom and independence across the Atlantic in an age of political upheaval and social change.

Konstantinos Diogos’s paper, “The Greek Vision of America during the Greek War of Independence (1821-1830),” shifts the focus to the reception of the American Revolution by educated Greeks who sought to find political and ideological similarities between the two nations. Theodosios Karvounarakis offers a political perspective in his paper, “The United States Government and the Greek War of Independence,” as he traces the reluctance of the American government to support the Greek cause to the fear of provoking a negative response from the European Powers as well as jeopardizing the emerging American commercial policy in the Mediterranean. David Roessel, in his paper, “Writing the Greek Revolution: Harry Mark Petrakis’s The Hour of the Bell,” brings to light Harry Mark Petrakis’s largely unknown novel, The Hour of the Bell, and explores its writing process as it revisits the Greek Revolution in the context of two major political events: the Greek junta and the American war in Vietnam. Maria Schoina, in her paper, “Byron and Nineteenth-Century Literary Philhellenism in America,” examines the international impact of the Greek Revolution by establishing the connection between Byron’s writing and his American followers’ philhellenic poetry. Gonda Van Steen’s “Sculpture as Literature and History: Captive and Captivating Venus Figures from the Greek Revolutionary Era,” reads the Greek revolution through the essential juxtaposition between East and West, exploring the concepts of Hellenism and Orientalism against the backdrop of the West’s self-proclaimed civilizing mission to salvage Greek culture. In her paper, “American Philhellenes, Protestant missionaries and the ‘orphans’ of the 1821 Hellenic War of Independence: The case of Christodoulos Evangelides,” Smatie Yemenedzi-Malathouni probes into the so-called Greek “orphans’ immigration” to the United States which was sponsored by the philanthropic reform advocated by the Protestant Second Awakening. The paper focuses on Evangelides’ diary of his experience in the United States, which aims to contribute significantly to the scarce existing literature on the “orphans’” immigration cases.

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NOTES

1. I have borrowed the term from historian Roderick Beaton who argues that the long-standing exceptionalism of the Greek Revolution had been surrounded by a powerful and pervasive rhetoric that established a link of continuity between Modern Greeks and their ancient ancestors. According to Beaton, the importance of the Greek national project deserves to be viewed not through the claim to its ancient origin but within the comparative and theoretical framework of historiography and studies about nationalism. See Beaton, The Making of Modern Greece 1-18.

2. Coined by Eric Hobsbawm, the term has been canonized in historiography as the period of political upheaval and social change extending from the American Revolution of 1776 to the surge of European Revolutions in 1848. See also Kitromilides.

3. According to Beaton, Greece as a modern nation-state was a product of the Romantic Movement which emerged in Europe in the late 18th century, greatly impacting the arts and the individual’s relationship with society and politics, and eventually reaching the United States in the first decades of the 19th century. For more information, see Beaton, “Romanticism in Greece.”

4. In post-Napoleonic Europe, the political climate was overwhelmed by a fear of liberalism and disruption of legitimate rule. The Holy Alliance was intent upon taking counter-revolutionary measures and intervening to suppress uprisings. Within this context, the Greek Revolution was declared illegal at the Congress of Laibach (January-May 1821) as an offshoot of the French Revolution. However, this decision was severely debated by the mass philhellenic movement that spread throughout Europe and the United States. For more information, see Heraclides and Dialla (105-133).

5. The Greeks lived in what is now Greece and also in Western Minor Asia, in Constantinople, in many Balkan destinations, in the Danubian principalities, in Odessa, in Southern and Central Hungary, in Trieste, and in Vienna (Heppner 154-155).

6. See Beaton, “Antique nation.” See, also, Herzfeld; Petmezas; Repousis

7. It should be noted that the cohesion of the Greeks was essentially fragile “due to the varied nature of their terrain, their dispersion, the range of their occupations and the complexity of their society [which] presented diverse forms of social structure, attitudes, experiences and mindsets (Efthymiou 197). All these caused serious internal strife, fragmentation and antagonism eventually devolving into civil war (1823-1825).

8. Constanze Güthenke has explained that, in the 1820s, Greece was “almost unanimously singled out as different in kind from other instances of revolution” (101), while Roderick Beaton has
pointed out that “Greece was the first nation-state to attain full sovereignty and international recognition in the 19th century (The Making of Modern Greece 7-9).

9. There is a whole body of travel literature that offers an intriguing account of the views and expectations of foreigners regarding Greece and its people. For more information, see Angelomatis-Tsougarakis; Constantin; Douglas; Osborn.

10. Boston physician Samuel Gridley Howe was one of the most ardent supporters of the Greek Revolution. His admiration for the ancient Greek culture and legacy led him to travel to Greece in 1824 where he served as soldier and chief surgeon in the Greek army. Howe’s An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution (1828) is the first full account of the Greek War of Independence written by an American. For information on the American experience in Greece, see Larrabee.

11. The geographical location of modern Greece, between the Western and Eastern worlds, made the rejection of the “Oriental” component of her identity and the regaining of her European nature absolutely imperative. For if the modern Greeks were descended from the victors of Plataea; if they were indeed the ancestors of the founders of European civilization, then they should not be the subjects of Eastern barbarism (Roessel 17).

12. The works of American poets, William Cullen Bryant, Fitz Halleck, and James Gates Percival, about the Greek Revolution widely circulated among the American reading public furnishing them with vivid images of Greece’s valiant struggle to shake off the yoke of slavery and oppression. For more information on English and American literary philhellenism, see Roessel.

13. See Caesar’s article “The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism” for an interesting approach to the meaning of exceptionalism as mission in the American political discourse and popular imagination.

14. Henry Clay, in his most eloquent speech before the House of Representatives in support of Webster’s resolution that the American government appoint “an Agent or Commissioner in Greece,” chastises the American government for their “apathy” urging them to demonstrate that “there are hearts not yet closed against compassion for human woes, that can pour out indignant feelings at the oppression of a people endeared to us by every ancient recollection, and every modern tie” (qtd. in Earle 355).

15. Philhellenes like Samuel Gridley Howe, William Washington and George Jarvis provided humanitarian support to the Greek cause and even fought side by side with the Greek revolutionaries. Furthermore, Edward Everett, the Harvard professor of Greek, was particularly active in stirring public sentiment in favor of the Greek Revolution. As publisher of the North American Review, he published articles and speeches for the recognition of the Greek Revolution by the United States and for sending military aid to Greece.

16. Written by Jewish-American dramatist, Mordecai M. Noah, The Grecian Captive is the only play about the Greek Revolution that was produced on the American stage. Actually, only two other American plays focusing on the Greek war of independence have come to our knowledge. Both written by John Howard Payne: Ali Pacha; or, The Signet Ring, which did not reach the American audiences but premiered at Covent Garden on 19 October 1822, and Oswali of Athens (1830), which is not extant. For more information on philhellenic drama in Europe, see Muse.

17. Susanna Haswell Rowson’s Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom (1794) was the first and most important American play dealing with a pressing national issue: the American war with the Barbary Coast pirates and the fact that American citizens were captured and enslaved in the exotic, but dangerous, land of Algeria. Well-written and spirited, Rowson’s play enjoyed a number of performances. It was performed on December 22, 1794 at the Chestnut Street Theater in Philadelphia, and, during the next few years, was also presented in Baltimore, New York, Hartford, and Charleston. Other plays about the struggle with the pirates were James Ellison’s American Captive; or, The Siege of Tripoli (1812), John Howard Payne’s The Fall of Algeria (1825).

18. The sexual threat to Greek women from the Turks becomes a familiar metaphor which carries political meaning, reminding Americans of the powerful revolutionary imagery of America as a
violated woman. In the years leading to the American Revolution, the image of America as an
Indian woman became a national emblem, a political instrument in the emerging rhetoric of
republicanism as it provided the necessary sense of connection between an Arcadian, pre-English
past and an American future of progress and expansion. A number of political cartoons of the
time as well as American revolutionary plays identified the body of the Indian woman with the
national body creating a powerful metaphor of violation and resistance. For more information,
see Tyler, for the political cartoons of the revolution; see Philbrick, for the American
revolutionary drama.

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