



The  
**Problem**  
of  
**Modern**  
**Greek**  
**Identity**

*From the Ecumene  
to the Nation-State*

*Edited by*  
Georgios Steiris  
Sotiris Mitralaxis  
Georgios Arabatzis

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of Modern Greek identity is certainly timely. The political events of the previous years have brought up yet again the questions: What does it actually mean to be a Greek today? What *is* Modern Greece, apart and beyond the bulk of information that one would find in an encyclopaedia and the established stereotypes? With this volume, we endeavor to go into the timely nature of this question and to provide the outline of an answer to it not by referring to the often-cited classical Antiquity nor by treating Greece as merely and exclusively a modern nation-state. Rather than that, we will be approaching our subject in a kaleidoscopic way, by tracing the line from the Byzantine Empire to the Modern Greek culture, society, philosophy, literature and politics. We do not claim that our approach is prominent or dominant—quite the contrary. Our intention remains within the confines of dialogue, since we aspire to provide new insights on a diachronic problem in order to encourage new arguments and counterarguments. Despite commonly held views among Greek intelligentsia, Modern Greek identity remains an open question.

The enquiry that led to the present volume began through a scholarly event that took place on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2013 in Berlin, Germany, during very difficult times for what has been named *the Greek crisis*. The Department of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology of the National and Kapodistrian University Athens and the Hellenic Student's Association in Berlin organized the conference “Reflections on Identity: Greek Identity as a Philosophical Problem—from ‘Byzantine’ Times to Today’s Greece in Crisis” at the Berlin office of the Greek Cultural Foundation on Berlin’s Wittenbergplatz, in order to bring this discussion to the heart of the European public square, as this has taken shape during the crisis’ transformative years. While the papers presented there have been included in the present volume, the latter is of considerably wider scope; new papers have been included, while—among other aims—we have tried to make some texts, written by influential Greek intellectuals (or analyses thereof) available in English for the first time, or for the first time *in such a context*, so that non-Greek-speaking scholars can peek into certain

discourses within the Greek public sphere, to which they would otherwise have no access.

As we do not wish to impose a particular and detailed view on how the reader should approach this volume's contents, we will merely present their sequence and flow before proceeding to the texts themselves. The volume begins with **Kostas Koutsourelis'** essay "Images of Modern Hellenism: Historical Dilemmas and Orientations," in which the author examines the concept of identity and counter proposes the notion of *image* to better portray the preconditions for a Modern Greek self-reflection. In chapter two, **Christos Yannaras** provides us with an introductory historical approach to the relationship between Greek Orthodoxy and the West as constitutive of the complexity of Modern Greek identity. Following this, **Ilias Papagiannopoulos** examines today's Greece through the piercing gaze of the late writer, director and public intellectual Christos Vakalopoulos. In chapter four, **Theodoros I. Ziakas** addresses the contemporary anthropological context that is presupposed in any question concerning each individual nation's identity, i.e. the crisis and deterioration of the subject in (late) Modernity.

These four very different chapters can be approached as a general introduction, a framework of diverse parts in which our question can be properly examined. In chapter five, **Dimitrios Faros** addresses the diverging worldviews concerning Modern Greek identity that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century, having the polarization between the *principle of nationalities* and the *ideal of the Empire* as a focal point. The ideas and arguments linked to these key notions are thoroughly compared and examined in the context of their time concerning the debate on the most suitable strategy for the country and the nation, as well as within the framework of the still ongoing debate on Greek identity. The next chapter by **Dionysios Skliris** focuses on theological aspects: a number of thinkers in Modern Greece consider Trinitarian theology as a very peculiar achievement of the Byzantine tradition and extend their thinking to the possible impact it might have had on the Modern Greek condition, including sociological and political characteristics. In light of this, Skliris attempts a comparative panorama of the thought of four such thinkers: Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon, Christos Yannaras, Stelios Ramfos and Fr. Nikolaos Loudovikos. Following this, **George Contogeorgis** analyses what he terms the *Greek paradigm* from antiquity up to the present day, summarizing his wider research on this enquiry's constitutive questions.

In the eighth chapter, **Georgios Steiris** attempts to reappraise the ways 15th century intellectuals perceived identity. He suggests that the basis of philosophical elites' Hellenism in the 15th century was not only common language and literary tradition, but also historical continuity and cultural otherness. As a consequence commonly held views, according to which Hellenism, as cultural and historical identity, and Christian religion were incompatible, are not supported by the writings of the most prominent philosophers of the 15th century. Subsequently, **Athanasia Theodoropoulou** gives an interpretative presentation of the views of a most active scholar of the Greek Diaspora in Western Europe during the 15th century, Cardinal Bessarion, with reference to modern Greece. She analyzes Bessarion's take on the causes of the Byzantine Empire's decline and the reforms he recommended in comparison to the causes of the financial crisis in Greece and the implementation of austerity measures, in an attempt show that the identity crisis of modern Hellenism was first cultivated and formed gradually from the Renaissance to modern Greece. In an exercise on discerning identity through imperial otherness, **Nicoletta Hadjipavlou** proceeds then to examine the representations of the Ottoman Empire of Vasilis Michaelides (1849-1917), Cyprus' national poet. By reading Michaelides' representation of the Ottoman Empire parallel to the rise of nationalism, ethno-symbolism and the history of the island, Hadjipavlou sheds light on the quests for a 'Cypriot National identity' from a literary perspective. A very different approach to discerning identity through otherness is attempted by **Georgios Arabatzis**, who analyzes the profound bias of earlier Western European philosophy's reception of Byzantine philosophy and thought. In the next chapter, **Michail Mantzanas** provides us with a case study of Byzantine political philosophy, Greek identity and the goal of independence through the work of Leonardos Philaras (1595-1673), an early advocate for Greek independence. The volume concludes with **Sotiris Mitralaxis'** appendix, in which he draws attention to elements of political thought on Modern Greek identity that can be traced in an essay by the poet and Nobel laureate Odysseas Elytis.

The present volume would not be what it is without the toilsome efforts of Fr. Joseph Bali and Nasia Lyckoura, both PhD candidates at the Department of Philosophy, Pedagogy and Psychology (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Lyckoura formatted the work and did the initial proofreading; Fr. Bali translated in English Koutsourelis', Contogeorgis', Papagiannopoulos' and Ziakas' contributions. In addition, their careful readings were crucial and provided us with valuable feedback.



Apart from being a kaleidoscopic one, this is also a volume that is introductory in character. Its aim is to start a discussion and to provide intriguing material for it, not to exhaust it. We remain in the hope that it will serve its purpose.

Georgios Steiris

Sotiris Mitralaxis

Georgios Arabatzis

## CHAPTER ONE

# IMAGES OF MODERN HELLENISM: HISTORICAL DILEMMAS AND ORIENTATIONS

KOSTAS KOUTSOURELIS

Today it should be common knowledge that we cannot generally use the term “identity” in the same way or with the same precision as it is used in natural sciences, i.e. by Leibniz or in modern mathematics. Thus, prominent theorists have often criticized its use to describe social phenomena. Wittgenstein said characteristically that the proposition that someone identifies with oneself is deprived of any meaning whatsoever.

Two basic interpretations of the concept of self stand out in modern philosophical thinking. The starting point of the first is the idea of a self that is more or less unchanging, divided in sections and clearly defined, of a self that I would call *singular*. The second considers the self as an entity which is always fluid, contradictory and difficult to determine. As a consequence, we may not refer to it as though it were a unit: there are many different selves. Depending on the moment, the conditions and circumstances, each one of us adopts a different version of it. For instance, Panagiotis Kondylis asks: “To what extent is the Self of the ten-year-old the same as that of the fifty-year-old?”

Does it change completely, like the ship, parts of which are replaced every now and then until all is left of it is its name—thus it is the same only because some consider it to be so? If society did not view the individual as identical with itself through the course of time, how would this person be aware of this identity? In other words: if the fifty-year-old was to see his ten-year-old self, to what extent would he be able to recognize the uninterrupted continuity of his Self? And even further: if I could see my present self moving and acting, would I be able to recognize who it was, if I had never seen him in the mirror? Why does the past sometimes seem like a dream, in other words, how much truth is there in the reconstruction of past experiences? Is it that the absence of an unchanging self does not