

HELLENIC HISTORIC LANDSCAPE AND MODERN POLITICAL ETHICS

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E.1. *The Rape of Europa*, by the Italian artist Titian (ca. 1560-62). It seems that the idea of the common origin of the European culture was born in eastern Mediterranean, in correlation to ancient Hellenic civilization. To this part of the world European social and political ethics “return”, at the dawn of Western modernity, in order to enforce their democratic discourse.

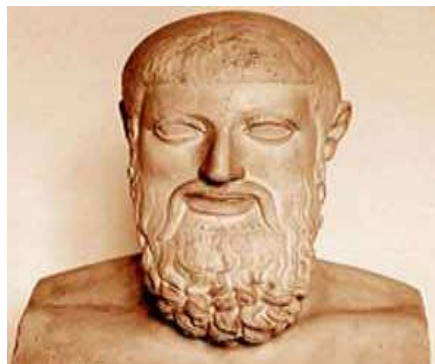
Abstract

What the island of Syros presents is the correlation, in one and the only place, of the ancient Aegean Cycladic past with the “modern” neoclassical identity. It is this double reference that makes Syros an exemplary case, combining ancient origin with modern association to antiquity. Thus it offers us a chance for inquiry, concerning the need for this historic association in modern and contemporary Greece as well as in Europe and Western world.

A concise answer could insist on the political validity of this re-inscription of the ancient paradigm, in modern civilization through neoclassicism; the latter being an emblematic mode of expression connoting modern political reason and, in extension, modern democratic ethics. In this emblematic function neoclassicism is closely accompanied, by the analogous ethical reference of modern Western thought to Greek landscape, either used as an idealized, non-really existing geographical condition or as a real, material formation attracting the pragmatic interest of the Western travelers and Philhellenes. It is this vanished glory of antiquity and its paradigmatic association to modern bourgeois society that Western thought seeks in neoclassical architecture and in Greek landscape and it is this same paradigmatic association that Syros Island exemplifies.

If according to a proverbial dictum attributed to Pherekydes, the ancient philosopher from Syros, “gifts that Earth delivers should be used with respect and determinism in order to be sustainable”, then we have to correlate Hellenic earth and Hellenic landscape with a precious contribution, that of cultural and political heritage, “sustaining” ancient Greek Ethos, in its social and political indications, in modern and contemporary societies.

Keywords: *Syros Island, Hermoupolis, Epano Syra, neoclassicism, Greek landscape, modern Western political ethics, Arcadia.*



E.2. – E.3. Why is it so important to refer to Syros, speaking about Hellenic historic landscape? The Cycladic island of Delos (on the left) and Pre-Socratic philosopher Pherecydes of Syros (on the right).

The ancient origin of the Cycladic island of Syros and its modern neoclassical identity

The decision to organize the annual meeting of CIVVIH ICOMOS of 2015 and the relevant scientific symposium in the Cycladic island of Syros, could be easily appreciated as a an immediate effort of correlation between the subject of the meeting and a special place of reference. If the chosen subject concerns Heritage, as driver of Historic Towns and Urban Landscapes and the Sustainable Development, then Syros could be considered as an excellent example, combining rich historic sequence and the final association of its multilayered past to a still vivid urban landscape. Thus we may refer to the contemporary city of Syros, trying to preserve its valuable heritage. We may also recall the ancient sacred past of the surrounding Aegean archipelagos and try to describe, in-between, the successive periods of the byzantine era, of the Catholic – Western orientation of Syros in the middle of the ottoman occupation and the creation of the wealthy neoclassical city of seamen, merchants and ship-owners, after the liberation of Greece.

We have to explain in addition that the word “modern” in the title of our presentation refers to Western European civilization and culture, during 18th and 19th century, as formed through Enlightenment and reformed through Romanticism, and that the term “modern” may qualify not only for Hermoupolis, the neoclassical city of Syros in correlation to the modern Western civilization and political identity, but also for the creation, in the same island, of an extremely fertile folk-culture, principally correlated to the traditional, pre-existing settlement of Pano Syros (Moraitis, 2013).

Classicism as an emblem of modern European and Western political reason

Following the above short introduction it could be rather easier to continue our argumentation, by insisting on the importance of Syros Island, in reference to Hellenic historic landscape and to modern political Ethics. Why is it so important anyway to refer to this subject today in Greece, in a state of political crisis, probably under a state of ethical crisis as well? Why is it so important in a state of international political and ethical crisis that may lead to the “destruction of history”, to the disintegration of ethos, of political and historic ethos, as it happens in Syria for example?

Let us propose an immediate reply. We could insist on the fact that Syros is correlated to the sacred cycle of Cyclades, to the ancient glory of Delos, to the ancient cosmogony of Pherecydes of Syros, to whom Plutarch and other ancient writers gave the surname of “Theologus”, of somebody who could speak about gods; Pherecydes the pre-Socratic thinker

who was Pythagoras's teacher and predecessor of the Platonic philosophy. *However we shall assert that Syros is important for the combined qualities of this ancient past in correlation to its neoclassical identity, in correlation to what this neoclassical identity indicates in reference to the ancient Greek antiquity, as well as in reference to modern Western civilization and modern Western political democratic qualities.*



E.4. (above), Syros is also important for its neoclassical identity and...

...E.5. (below), neoclassicism as emblematic political reference. Jacques-Louis David, *Le Serment des Horaces* (Oath of the Horatii - 1784, museum of Louvre).



It is a rather common remark that neoclassicism had not only to do with “kalology” of expression, with an eloquent, graceful rhetoric of forms, with aesthetics restrained to the domain of arts only. In a more profound sense, neoclassicism could be described as an “emblem of reason”, “emblème de la raison” (Starobinski, 1979), as an emblematic expression related to the modern Western formation of political reason or in a more precise way to the formation of the Western democratic regimes and to the development of the European bourgeois class.

It is under this general scope that neoclassicism was established; it is under this general scope that the formation of Western European landscape architecture refers to antiquity. It is under this scope that neoclassical Syros had to promote its bourgeois identity, insisting on the fact that Hermoupolis, the modern city of seamen, merchants and ship-owners, was related to Western Europe and that, even more, modern Western ethics were related to ancient Greek references. It is also in this way that modern Athens had to be rebuilt in neoclassical style, the whole city had to be designed in a neoclassical layout and its principal buildings of reference in neoclassical order.

We may refer to the city as a “cityscape”, as a complicate natural and cultural landscape, as a cultural landscape “par excellence”, whose formation exemplifies the principal

characteristics, the social ethics of a given society in a given historic period. However we prefer to refer to landscape and landscape architecture in a more specific way, in reference to the design and formative intervention in non-urban places of natural identity. We prefer to address them, insisting on the cultural and historic validity of those interventions and also in order to refer to certain, probably less reputed historic examples.

Hellenic historic landscape and modern political ethics

It is in the gardens of Stowe, in England in Buckinghamshire that we find the “Temple of Ancient Virtue” a neoclassical park “follie”, dedicated not to the commonplace everyday morality of the 18th century English society, but to its political identity and political virtue. In the interior of the temple the visitor may see the statues of famous ancient Greek politicians, as Lycurgus, the legendary lawgiver of Sparta, and Epaminondas, the ancient general and statesman whom Montaigne, the French philosopher, judged as one of the three “worthiest and most excellent men” that ever lived.



E.6. *The Temple of Ancient Virtue*, interior (Stowe Park, England, by William Kent - 1734). Lycurgus, the ancient lawmaker from Sparta and Epaminondas, the Theban general and statesman.

However the Temple of Ancient Virtue does not principally possess a historiographic intention. It rather insists on an exemplary indication of references that could be valuable for English society of that historic period. It is in a similar way that the exemplar bas-relief of Lycurgus, in the U.S. House of Representatives Chamber, in Washington City in United States, symbolizes the correlation of modern American regime to the ancient Greek political quality.

Moreover in the case of Stowe Park, the Temple intends to offer the above exemplary political indication at the interior of a more extended formation of space, that of the whole park, which in total symbolizes the new liberal ethics of English society, connoted by natural-like design treatment, in contradiction to the formal authoritarian identity of the French formal garden.



E.7. Thomas Eakins – *Arcadia* (ca 1883). Dr Faust to Helen of Troy: “our bliss Arcadian will be and free”. Afterwards The German doctor continues: “sweet a place you have found, and lack... and Arcadian liberty our love attains”.

It is within this general ethical and political context that ancient landscape appears in Western art and literature, in Claude Lorain’s and Nicola Poussin’s paintings, it is in this framework that the idealized imagery of Arcadia symbolizes happiness. It is in this very context that Dr Faust, in Goethe’s second volume of the famous romantic story, refers to the Arcadic vision. He promises to Helen of Troy that there, in Arcadia, they will have a blissful life; “our bliss Arcadian will be and free” (Panofsky, 1983).

Western thought confirmed through this dictum, Faust’s dictum and of course Goethe’s dictum, not only its demand for a possible happy existence, in a place of incomparable landscape beauty, but also the political demand for freedom. Johann Wolfgang Goethe knew, when writing the second volume of his celebrated work, that Hellenic country was finally free from its previous bondages. Thus the legendary German doctor continues, speaking to Helen, “sweet a place you have found, and lack... and Arcadian liberty our love attains”. It is not strange that in classical and romantic thought, liberty of morals, of love and bodily happiness, is correlated to political liberty and both of them to natural landscape. In 18th century for example, liberal political ethics and liberty of everyday social behavior were both associated with nature-like landscape architecture and at the same time with the ancient paradigms of democracy, freedom of life and idyllic landscape.

Thus reference to Hellenic landscape appears to be associated with important intellectuals of the Western world, through cultural and political visionary proposals. Among those “Hellenic landscape heroes” of the 18th and 19th century we may locate personalities of real political participation as the famous English poet George Gordon Byron, commonly known simply as “Lord Byron”. Some of them were prominent scientists as Johannes Sibthorp, author of “*Flora Græca*”, the botanic index of the Greek plants, others were important scholars and writers, as Johann Joachim Winckelmann or Friedrich Hölderlin whose novel *Hyperion oder Der Eremit in Griechenland*, *Hyperion or the Hermit in Greece*, clearly refers to the relation between Hellenic antiquity and the demand of Greek independence, both projected on the idyllic background of the landscape (Hölderlin, 2008).

In this novel of stirring lyricism and sublime quality that stands among Hölderlin’s most extraordinary achievements, a Greek hermit recounts the pivotal phases of his life. He recites the discovery of the vanished glory of antiquity and his encounter with his beloved Diotima. “Diotima”, a well-known name from Plato’s *Symposium* related to the concept of Platonic love, embodies in Hölderlin’s novel the goal of merging with "the All of nature". It is in the same novel that we find the political description of a Greek uprising against Ottoman Turkish tyranny, twenty years in advance of the real historic event.

Concluding I shall not insist on the validity of Arcadia, of the real Arcadia, as a huge landscape monument, as a unique cultural landscape monument. I shall not refer to the Aegean seascape, to the network of sacred historic islands enclosing, an important part of the Western history. I should rather refer to the political identity of Hellenic history and Hellenic landscape, adorned with islands, as described in Günther Grass poetry. “Contemned to poverty, this very Land whose wealth adorns museums: loot this wealth is, by you hoarded” the German poet protests, in order to conclude that “even those who attacked this blessed Land of islands, by force of their arms, even those in their military sacs Hölderlin’s books were carrying” (Grass, 2012)¹.

Conclusion

If we should like to refer to “monuments” as a totality, as a sequence of constructions and space we have to refer to “sites”. However if we have to insist on the relation between nature and culture, of earth substratum and human structures, we have to refer to landscape, to “cultural landscape” in particular, having in mind that landscape is always “cultural”, that environments and ecosystems are always related to cultural communities, that aesthetics of place consisting an important part of environmental validation have always to do with social ethics and social behavior. Thus the attribute “cultural” over-defines the noun “landscape”, being always, in principle, related to human existence and human culture, to everyday life and “culture”, to the cultivation of earth as well as to such an important human expression, as political life. Thus landscape concerns human existence in space as a totality. It also concerns our relation to past existence, to tradition and history, to the “immanence” retained in earth and place. Those remarks are of course familiar to experts as those composing our audience.

What we could emphasize in addition is the importance of the Hellenic landscape as a historic construction transcending Greek borders or Greek nationality, in correlation to the European and Western dream of democratic happiness. It is in this way that Hellenic landscape in totality, as a generalized historic, ideological abstraction, as well as an ensemble of concrete specific places and formations may be considered as a political monument.

We have referred to an abstract example that of Arcadia which, though correlated to a concrete Greek geographical territory, was principally used, in modern Western history, as an idealized imagery. We have also referred to the concrete example of Syros, a composite multileveled cultural environment, presenting at least two important cityscape paradigms; the traditional settlement of Pano Syros and the neoclassical city of Hermoupolis. Both of them are correlated to a much more extended landscape of islands, composing in their turn an important historic network of places, having, however, as center the island of Syros.

¹ Let us present the whole poem, under the title *Shame of Europe* (initial German title *Europas Schade*):

Close to chaos, because the market is not just, you’re far away from the country which was your cradle. / What was searched and found with one’s soul, is now considered to be as worthless as scrap metal. / As a debtor put naked on the pillory, a country about which you used to say you were grateful, suffers. / Poverty doomed country whose maintained wealth adorns museums of the loot you kept. / Those [World War II German nazi occupation soldiers] who hit the country, blessed with islands, with the force of arms wore both uniforms and [books of German poet, inspired by ancient Greek poetry] Hölderlin in their knapsacks. / Barely tolerated country whose colonels were once tolerated by you as an alliance partner. / Country which lost its rights, whose belt is tightened and tightened again by the cocksurely powerful. / Antigone defying you wearing black and all over the country, the people whose guest you have been wear mourning clothes. / However, outside the country, the Croesus resembling followers have hoarded all what glitters like gold in your vaults. / Booze at last, drink! [European] Commissioners’ cheerleaders shout. / However, Socrates gives you back the [hemlock poison] cup full to the brim. / Curse you as a chorus, which is characteristic of you, will the gods, whose Mount Olympus you want to steal. / ***You’ll waste away mindlessly without the country, whose mind invented you, Europe.***



E.8. and E.9. Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) (on the left), and his novel (on the right) *Hyperion* or *The Hermit in Greece*.

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