

Greeks learning from the Germans learning from the Greeks

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All the Greeks have to do in order to be what they used to be, is to mimic the Germans.

Georg Ludwig von Maurer— President of the Legislative Body of the first Kingdom of Greece, 1832.

The historic relationship between Greece and Germany arises once again in the year 2017. It has been coming and going for the past two centuries, but this time has the subtitle *Learning from Athens. documenta 14* displaced itself to Athens, expanding its venue to a location far away from the historical Kassel, where not everyone speaks but everyone listens, perhaps aiming to create a multiplicity of voices, perspectives and political bodies.

The goal of this text is to discuss the historic relationship between the two countries and the use of historical narratives and specifically art as a tool for the occupation and perpetuation of the status quo. Throughout the nineteenth century the German presence in Greece was of such intensity that even today most of us pass over it without grasping the past events. When the Bavarian prince Otto von Wittelsbach became the king of Greece, he was only 17 years old. Ten years prior, the war against the Ottoman Empire had changed the geopolitics and the controllers of the region.

Together with Otto came the changes. In 1834 Athens was appointed the new capital of the kingdom because of its symbolism and the king's sentimental relationships. At that time this small town built on the slopes of the Acropolis had only four thousand inhabitants who used to take pieces from the ancient ruins to build their own homes; the classic pillars and the stable marble were the materials for the construction of a city which now became the cornerstone of an identity construction. A vast quantity of Germans came along with the young king to create not only the political body of Greece, but also the images of Greek identity. The identity of what we now call Europe was then under construction and a solid base was needed. This was a crucial moment for the formation of the future nation states and the development of Greek identity, which was considered too important to be left to a new-born country with a vast mix of beliefs and cultures.

Bavarian rule was imposed by Russia, France and England as a way of establishing a neutral government in the region, impeding the Ottomans who had been dominating the Balkans for centuries and were an active menace to the other three empires. So the conquest and establishment of German rule in the region was a project of negation and affirmation: the negation of the Ottomans and their multiple beliefs and cultures; and the affirmation of an identity—still to be created—that would herald the birth of a whole series of plans and movements based on this myth. The future economic and geopolitical importance of this *birth of a tradition* became a clear place from which a multiplicity of other identities were deployed.

In 2017 another Germanic displacement arrived in Greece and, as in the nineteenth century, it is full of good intentions and paradoxes. On 3 September 1843 the Athenians revolted against the Bavarians and demanded a constitution which was later granted, in German, by Otto von Wittelsbach. During the many seminars and events of *documenta 14*, Greek was hardly heard and Greeks were hardly seen. The *reality* of the event did not relate to the *reality* on the ground. There was hardly any Greek spoken at *documenta*, the prices did not match Greek economical *reality*, nor did the Berlin-Fabrik-Techno opening party. Just as the Greek constitution and re-urbanization plans were made by Germans, today there is an imposition of ways of conducting daily life, once again, but with a different motto: *Learning from Athens*.

On the occasion of his arrival, Bavaria's favourite architect Leo von Klenze delivered a speech on top of the Acropolis, where the king, soldiers and courtiers had gathered:

*all the remains of barbarity will be removed, here as in all of Greece, and the
remains of the glorious past will be brought in new light, as the solid
foundation of a glorious present and future*

The barbarity had names and forms. Everything that was not enhancing the idea of a Greek past was demolished or replaced by something else. Mosques were destroyed, Byzantine churches removed and replaced by the aesthetics of modernity, Neoclassicism. Those aesthetics were not the only *apparatus* for the materialization of this project, but an indirect imposition, a way to create slogans on the facades, a sophisticated ideography. It was a Northern artistic movement, so the Greeks were not among the key players who developed the aesthetic that, together with archaeology, was the support that formed Greek identity.

Walking in downtown Athens one sees many buildings in that style, the majority of them composed by German architects referring to what they proposed to be the Greek past. The Philhellenistic delirium is so strongly sedimented that there were a great amount of artists at *documenta 14* that made pieces about the classical myths, from performances to lectures. The fascination with ancient Greece is still very much present, as is the narrative of 'the winner of Western culture'. Perhaps the perpetuation of such ideas is a form of maintaining the establishment, with myths about myths and monuments constructed by Germans who imitated what they called ancient Greece.

This historical period shows us how medicine can quickly become a poison: the lack of dose and the use of arts to achieve a specific goal can have long lasting effects such as those we are experiencing today: the *fetishization* of the Greek lifestyle, soft-colonialism, austerity measures... Above all, the conservation of hierarchies and the use of symbolism to accomplish that.

The German art event certainly had many reasons to come to Greece, but the narrative told above is also part of it. The *refugee crisis*, the 'informal way of life' and the notion of the 'south' are all narratives that come from the north, meaning that definitions and identities are still imposed and composed by the leading powers and incorporated by the local subjects. Just as the nineteenth century saw Greek architects imitating neoclassical German architects who imitated the classical Greek architects, today we see Greeks *learning* from Germans who are *learning* from Athens. Even now that the Athens Biennale (2017-2018) proposed the slogan-joke "Waiting for the barbarians", it overlooks that they are already here, in the urban planning of Athens, the space where the Biennale itself takes place—a building designed by the German architect Ernst Ziller—, and with the German presence in the backstage, through privatizations.

The point is not to construct a blind criticism towards the Biennale, *documenta 14* or the creation of Greek identity, but to analyze the long perpetuation of ideas and modes of behaving, and how that is part of a greater project of constructing subjectivity, control and ideological domination. Neoclassicism wasn't constructed to create a Proto-European idea, but it became the official nomenclature that reinforced the nineteenth century project just as archaeology served as a vast material to reinforce that story.

There was and is only one architecture [...] which realized its perfection in the formative years of Greek civilization... [and that architecture] belongs as much to Germany as to Greece.

L. von Klenze, *Sammlung Architektonische Entwürfe*, Munich, 1830, p. 1.

Also quoted in: Bergdoll, *European Architecture*, p. 150.



Hellenic Parliament or Old Royal Palace - designed by Bavarian architect Friedrich von Gärtner for King Otto of Greece and his wife.



Bageion Hotel - designed by the German architect Ernst Ziller.

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens - designed by Christian Hansen (XIX century)



Restoration of the Temple of Athena Nike by the German architect Eduard Schaubert and the Danish architect Christian Hansen.

It is true that many of the so-called foreigners often go by my village and I have had the opportunity to get to know them and talk with them. But what do you want me to learn, my friend, from these odd gentlemen who, when you ask them about the people, they examine the piles of stone, and when you talk to them about the living, they want information about the dead?

Letter signed 'The Old Man from Dalamana,' *Athena* 2:112, 13 May 1833.

Naturally one could accuse us that we didn't engage enough with the local art scene. We weren't that interested in the Athens art scene, but rather in the city as a living organism. And that goes beyond contemporary art. Athens does not stand on its own, it also stands for other places in this world. Lagos. Guatemala City. We are equally engaged with this here. The expectation, to connect ourselves with the Athens art scene, would be much too narrow for this documenta."

Adam Szymczyk, Chief Curator of *documenta 14*.

When reading at first glance the phrases above, one can sense that in both cases the German newcomers had difficulties engaging with Greek society. In the first case, maybe this was because of the absurdity of the situation, the aftermath of a war which expelled the Ottomans and the arrival of the allies who now controlled and ruled the country, spoke a different language and engaged in activities that did not match Greek reality. Perhaps

the most important issue on which to reflect is that of German imposition and control. In both cases Greeks were not perceived as co-producers, neither of an identity nor of *documenta 14*, but as receivers of a kind of *philanthropy* which is a masked way to nurture hegemonic power and hierarchies. The Old Man didn't understand anything of what the Germans were doing there and the Germans didn't seem to care. During *documenta 14* the situation was very much alike: social relationships had not changed, because impositions were still made. Perhaps this would have been the best thing to learn from Athens: the possibilities for new forms of social relationships and co-existence, and the great resonance of what happened in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the imposition was blind and naive; the non-participant was supposed to be the protagonist, and the *doxa-aletheia* dualism between *philanthropy receiver* vs *co-producer* is still very much alive.



The Zappeion - designed by Danish architect Theophil Hansen.