

Greeks learning from the Germans learning from the Greeks

“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 - 1832

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

The aim of this text is to discuss the historic relationship between the two countries and how the use of historic narrative and most specific arts can be a tool for occupation and perpetuation of the status-quo.

Through-out the XIX century the German presence in Greece had such an intensity that even today most of us passes through it without grasping the past events. When Otto von Wittelsbach - the Bavarian prince - became the king of Greece he was only 17 years old and ten years previous to that the war against the Ottoman Empire 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 symbolic and the King's sentimental relationships, at that time this small town build 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 ware the materials for constructing the city which would now became the corner stone of an identity construction.

A vast quantity of germans came along with the young King to create not only the political body of Greece, not only to elevate the capital but to construct the images of an identity: the Greek identity. The identity of what we call Europe was than under construction and a solid base was needed. This was a crucial moment for the formation of the future nation states and the construction of the greek identity to crucial to be left for a new-born country with a vast mix of beliefs and cultures.

First we should acknowledge that the Bavarian rule was much imposed by Russia, France and England as a way of having a neutral government in the region, preventing those who have been dominating the Balkans for centuries, the Ottomans were an active menace to the other three empires. So the conquest and establishment of the German rule in the region had become a project of negation and affirmation: the negation of the Ottomans, its multiplicities of beliefs and cultures; and the affirmation of an identity - yet to be created - would be, then, the birth certificate of a whole series of plans and movements based on this myth. The future economical and geo-political importance for this birth of a tradition would become a clear place and from there a multiplicity of other identities would deploy from.

In 2017 another the Germanic displacement arrived in Greece and such as in the XIX century is full of good intentions and paradoxes which have been seen both in the past and today. In 3rd of September of 1843 the Athenians engaged in a revolt against the Bavarians, demanding a constitution which will later on be granted (in German) by Otto von Wittelsbach, during the many seminars and events of the Documenta 14 Greek and Greeks were hardly heard or seen, the reality of the event did not relate with the reality on the ground. Hardly one could hear the Greek language spoken around the Documenta, the prices did not match the Greek economical reality nor the Berlin-Fabrik-Techno opening party. Just as the Greek constitution and the re-urbanization plans were made by Germans, a light-imposition of ways of conducting the daily life comes today once again but with a different motto: Learning from Athens.

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

"all the remains of barbarity will be removed, here as in all Greece, and the remains of the glorious past will be brought in new light, as solid foundation for glorious present and future." - Leo von Klenze - 1833

The barbarity had names and forms. Everything that was not enhancing the idea of a Greek past would be demolished or replaced by something else. Mosques were destroyed, Byzantine churches removed and on its place the movement of modernity: Neoclassicism. The Neoclassicism was not the only apparatus for the materialization of this project but it was a form of speaking without imposing directly, a form of creating on the facades slogans, a sophisticated ideography. Being a northern artistic movement (Neoclassicism), Greeks were not among the key players who developed such aesthetic which would - together with archeology - be an important support that form this identity. When walking in the downtown area of Athens one will see multiple buildings in that style, the majority of them composed by German architects referring to what they proposed as a Greek past. The Philhellenism delirium was so strongly sedimented that the amount of artists from the Documenta 14 making pieces about the classical myths is substantial, from performances to lectures, the question and fascination with ancient Greece is still very much present and its relationship with the narrative of the winner or western culture evident. Perhaps the perpetuation of such ideas was a form of maintaining the establishment, creating myths about the myths and monuments which were constructed by Germans imitating

what they called the ancient Greece. This period showed us how the medicine can fastly become a poison, the lack of dose and the use of the arts in order achieve an specific goal can have long-aging deployments such as these one that we are experiencing today and a vast realm of subjects as for example fetishisation of the greek life-style, soft-colonialism, austerity mesures, etc's, but above all the conservation of hierarchies and the use of symbolic matter for that.

For sure that the German art event had many reasons to come to Greece but for sure as well that the narrative above-mentioned is also part of these reasons. The refugee-crisis, the informal way-of-life and the south perspective were all narratives which comes from the north, that is to say, definitions and identities are still being imposed and composed by the leading powers and incorporated (forcibly?) by the subjects.

As in the XIX century Greek architects were imitating the neo-classic germans architects imitating the classic Greeks architects. Today we see Greeks learning from Germans learning from Athens.

Even today when the Bienal from Athens makes a slogan-joke: *"Waiting for the barbarians"* gives us the sense that they are not already here, in the urban planning of Athens, the space where the Bienal itself takes place (a building designed by the german architect Erst Ziller) or by the german presence in the backstage of privatizations. The question here is not construct a blind criticism towards the Bienal, nor Documenta 14 or towards the construction of greek identity but to analyse the long perpetuation of the ideas and modes of behaving, and how such things can be part of a greater project of constructing subjectivity, control and ideological domination. What I am trying to say is not that Neoclassicism was constructed to create this Proto-european idea but it indeed have become the oficial nomenclatura in order to make the project stronger in the XIX century, just as archeology was as well serving as a vast material to re-enforce the story being told.

"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, Sammlng Architektonische Entwürfe, Munich, 1830, 1. Also quoted in BERGDOLL, European Architecture, 150.



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



Bageion Hotel - design by the german architect Ernst Ziller



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



Restoration of the Temple of Athina Nike by the german architect Eduard Schaubert and the danish 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 the Documenta 14

When reading in a first glance the phrases above one can feel that in both cases those new-german-comers have had a difficulty on engaging with the greek society. In the first case maybe because of the absurdity of the situation, that is to say, an aftermath of a war which expelled the Ottomans followed by the arrival of the allies which now would control and rule the country; speaking a different language and engaging with activities which did not match the greek reality. Perhaps the most important event upon which one should reflect is the imposition and the control that Germans have imposed, Greeks, in both cases, were perceived not as co-producers of something (Identity / Documenta 14) but as receivers of a kind of a “philanthropy” which act, instead, as masked ways to nurture hegemonic power and hierarchies.

The Old man seemed to not have understood anything about what the Germans were doing there nor the Germans seemed to have cared. During the Documenta the situation was very much alike, the social relationships have not changed because there were still impositions being made. Perhaps that would be the best thing to have learned in Athens, the possibilities of new forms of social relationships and co-existence, as well as how the similarities of what have happened in the XIX century still have great resonance today. Imposition was perhaps blindly and naively made, the non-participant was supposed to be the protagonist and still the doxa-aletheia dualism between philanthropy receiver Vs. co-producer is still very much alive still.



The Zappeion - designed by Danish architect Theophil Hansen