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‘Have we lost our marbles?’

Rodanthi Tzanelli, Public Sociology, 15 June 2010



Bring Them Back: Campaign for the return of the Parthenon sculptures and the reunification of the monument.

Yesterday night I opened my hotmail account to find a message from an old Greek friend with whom I shared my first journey to Britain about twelve years ago. My friend, a permanent resident now in her hometown of Kozani, is sending me emails with varied content. This message, the content of which was directed to a global audience of heritage lovers, both moved and angered me: its supplication to heritage readers was with regards to the return of the Elgin marbles to the Greek state. I may have to re-phrase this: the message suggested that the Elgin marbles are returned to the Greek people. **The controversy has been around for about 200 years** but gained in depth and passion in the post-war Greece, especially in the political restoration period (1974-) during the rise of a Greek socialist movement that favoured Greek autonomy in the international political scene. Coming out of a brutal dictatorship (1967-74) that plunged Greek political life in a dark age, the leadership of PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) heralded Greek liberation from the totalitarian handcuffs of the colonels' regime. The primary advocate and spokeswoman (yes, it was a woman) for the Parthenon cause was the famous artist-come-politician Melina Merkouri. We know of Merkouri as the sex worker of *Never on Sunday* (1960, director J. Dassin) who refuses to conform to the civility standards an Anglo-Saxon erudite Hellenophile seeks to impose on her. How ironic then that a few years after this cinematic hit a thoroughly civilised Merkouri was to depart on a global shaming campaign for the return of Elgin marbles to their 'rightful heirs'.

I have been all for this return for over a decade: I wrote passionately about the crypto-colonial rationale that accompanies the claim that these artefacts can only be preserved for future generations in the safe hands of British technology. I use the term 'crypto-colonialism' here because although Greece never served as a foreign colony, it suffered at times under the stifling economic control of Western powers. Greece's hidden (crypto) colonial legacy can be partly attributed to internal political intrigues and mismanagement by various regimes (including dictatorships that promoted cultural introversion, xenophobia and racism) and partly to its strategic Mediterranean location that attracted unwanted Western interference in its domestic politics. The Elgin controversy illuminates the complexity of this condition: as colonial expansion tied the technocratic aspects of 'civilisation' to the Northern European

hemisphere, the English felt free to claim exclusively for themselves the technology to preserve the marbles. This monopoly was enhanced by later 20th-century suggestions concerning the lack of policies on Greek environmental pollution, an allegedly 'primitive' conservation technology in the country and insufficient space to host these material survivals of the glorious European heritage. Greeks emerged from this game of stereotyping as unreliable custodians of their own national treasures for world posterity, primitives who rightly lost their marbles.

In this conflict the 'Western' technocratic mind was also declared victorious over a peasant-style Greek argument that confused heritage with inheritance. The idea that the return of the marbles would enable the symbolic unification of the monument reveals an ethno-nationalist agenda after all: what is in fact united (and retrieved) for Greeks is an essential link between modern Greek culture and its long-lost ancient lineage the West stole from the Greek people 'back then' (in the 1800s). The Elgin appropriation took place while Greek communities were still under Turkish rule (1801) and about thirty years before a Germanophone scholar would suggest that their four-century contact with Turks, Slavs and other 'Eastern tribes' deprived them of their continuity with ancient Greek civilisation. This alleged 'contamination' by foreign cultural elements (wrongly confused with racial miscegenation) assumed the dimensions of a historic trauma in modern Greek culture that British post-colonial environmentalism and technocracy rubbed off anew with their pro-Elgin rationale. Let us reconstruct these claims in a somehow theatrical fashion: Greeks must be viewing these marbles like dowries that have to be handed over to the future daughters of the Greek nation. They think, the marbles are 'in our blood', so how can these evil colonists appropriate them? In the chronicles of Western civility nevertheless this unfair joke continues to poison Anglo-Greek cultural exchange as well as Greece's standing in Europe. As the ancient Greek past continues to cast a heavy shadow over European culture, winning the Elgin battle amounts for the Greek state to strengthening its political standing on the global political plateau. Greece's 'stolen culture' is equated in other words with its privation of political prestige by foreign agents. Winning this symbolic battle would amount to regaining in national honour, just like a male adolescent state's 'coming of age' in European politics. Greece, a rational voice dictates, regain your marbles and you may forgo your political apprenticeship in Europe.

I still feel passionate about this cause and today have voted again for the return of this 'heritage' to Greece. However, there is also a part of me that has gone native in Britain and resists a wholehearted endorsement of the project. The Greek campaign is right to point out in the online video that a reciprocal gesture on the part of the Greeks might have set the record straight (e.g. 'what would you Brits do if we stole the Big Ben to preserve in our empty Parthenon museum because London is very polluted?'). However, one may also play the Devil's advocate and reconsider the overall dispute: how can one take back what has also become someone else's heritage? The contemporary British people did not steal anything from the Greeks but admire the 'Elgin marbles' as part of London's cultural landscape. Hence, some may consider that these artefacts have to stay in the British Museum not because the British deem the Greeks incompetent to conserve them, but because they are now part of British national culture. Understanding 'heritage' from different cultural perspectives is the hard task of UNESCO, but even this organisation does not seem to be able to resolve this issue. Resentful voices may retort that perhaps the Greek

state should exchange with London the Parthenon replicas that fill the gaps left by Elgin in the Acropolis. As London 2012 is approaching fast, the chagrin of the Athens 2004 Organising Committee that they saw the event through minus the marbles, may come back to haunt global public opinion. 2012 will mark the 200th anniversary of Elgin's plunder, making London's 21st-century Olympic debut a painful event to watch in Greece and a shameful occasion to advertise in London (especially given the monetary gains of the city's museum from the English earl's enterprise). Someone will definitely lose their marbles in this event – the question is who?

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