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REVIEW ARTICLE

THREE BOOKS ON MODERN GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT

Adamantios Korais and the European Enlightenment. Edited by Paschalis Kitromilides. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, 2010. Pp. xiv + 278. ISBN 9780729410021. £65.

The Enlightenment as social criticism: Iosipos Moisiodax and Greek culture in the eighteenth century. By Paschalis Kitromilides. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014; orig. publ. 1992. Pp. xvii + 232. ISBN 9780691602844. £19·95.

Ho Veniamin Lesvios kai he Europaike Skepse tou Dekatou Ogdoou Aiona. By Roxane Argyropoulos. Athens: National Research Foundation, 2003. Pp. 328. ISBN 960-7916-27-1. €19,91.

A widespread trend in Enlightenment studies is to emphasize the particular 'national contexts' within which key ideas were disseminated and appropriated during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This may be one way to read the three books under review: on one level they appear to look at how three emblematic figures of Modern Greek Enlightenment (Adamantios Korais, Iosipos Moisiodax, and Veniamin Lesvios) transmitted ideological and philosophical tenets of Western modernity to the non-Western context of a country under construction: nineteenth-century Greece. Yet there is much more at work here. On closer study, these books collectively take an important step by suggesting a reversal of perspectives. The desideratum is an approach that no longer considers the Modern Greek Enlightenment (roughly extending from 1760 to 1821) as an a priori peripheral and dependent movement, but rather as a vehicle for elaborating on aspects of the Enlightenment as a transcultural phenomenon. Seen in this light, the space of the Modern Greek Enlightenment is not primarily geographical or geopolitical, but cultural and intellectual. Owing to the fluidity of borders and the mobility of intellectual agents inherited from the Ottoman imperial structures, the impact of the Modern Greek Enlightenment stretches across a vast area from south-eastern Europe to Asia Minor and from Transylvania to Kydonies. Interestingly, the same is true of the ideological and religious opponent of Enlightenment intellectual constellations in the Balkan peninsula: Orthodox Neo-Palamism. This spread from Mount Athos to Romania, offering a competing version of transnationalism and illumination with roots in Hesychast theology, rather than in the West. The emerging tension tested the application of Enlightenment ideas in ways alien to the West and shaped the outlook of intellectuals who are perhaps

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little known, but who merit a unique place in the broadly construed canon of Enlightenment thought.

Adamantios Korais and the European Enlightenment, edited by P. Kitromilides, is one of the most significant recent publications in the field of Modern Greek studies, shedding new light on the political, philosophical, philological, and religious ideas of a genuine *homo universalis*. The introductory essay by P. Kitromilides ('Itineraries in the world of the Enlightenment: Adamantios Korais from Smyrna via Montpellier to Paris') is a solid intellectual history that utilizes key moments of Korais's life (1748–1833) in France as the starting point for underlining his significance as a social theorist of liberty, major prophet of nationalism, classicist, and religious critic. Turning against notions of 'national' Enlightenments 'marked *ipso facto* by exclusiveness', Kitromilides makes a good case that 'diaspora involves osmosis and encounters, whereas national definitions denote boundaries and hence exclusions. The logic of contextualization therefore could be revised and expanded on the basis of evidence supplied by Korais' *oeuvre* and parallel cases' (p. 30). The first part of the book includes three essays in this vein (Vivy Perraky, 'L'histoire britannique de Coray: une histoire de manuscrits (1789–1803)'; Ioannis D. Evrigenis, 'Enlightenment, emancipation, and national identity: Korais and the Ancients'; and Michael Paschalis, 'The history and ideological background of Korais' *Iliad* project') that explore Korais's formation as a classicist in France and Britain and his ingenious editorial project of the Hellenic Library. Postulating that the corruption of the Greek language was concomitant to moral and political decay, Korais endeavoured to reverse the process by initiating a process of linguistic purification, aptly represented by his philosophical preference for the Ancients over the 'Byzantines'. His vast editorial work on Homer, Hippocrates, and other Greek texts was accompanied by ideologically and philosophically ingenious introductions (the 'improvised reflections') that attributed to the Ancients the main role in the identity formation of a modern political and cultural community. With Korais, the edition of classical texts acquired an urgent (also utopian, in my view) philosophical and political resonance that is perhaps comparable only to the editions of Plato by Victor Cousin. However, Korais's editorial programme and certainly his *Prolegomena* are more radical, extensive, and programmatic, proposing political experimentation as a practical end in the specific context of a Modern Greek nation-state.

The second part of the book contains two papers on Korais's reflections on language and literature (Peter Mackridge, 'Korais and the Greek language question'; Anna Tabaki, 'Adamance Coray comme critique littéraire et philologue'). Mackridge explores Korais's belief in the connection between the 'pathology of language' and socio-political pathology. Korais claimed that barbarism and vulgarity are a disease more than likely to afflict humanity owing to the natural inclination of man and language to impoverished forms of Being. The persistent search for an equation explaining the inter-relation between language, ideas, and morals betrays a man, in Mackridge's words, 'virtually

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untouched by the romantic movement' (p. 135), who elaborates on Locke's belief that words correspond not to things but to ideas.

As is the case with his editorial project, what makes Korais truly unique here is, in my view, the passage from theory to a concrete and practical agenda: the formulation of a Modern Greek identity provided the perfect opening for the experiential application of notions that remained purely on paper for most Enlightenment exponents. Mackridge underlines Korais's self-confessed debt to Hippocratic notions of corruption and recovery; I am here tempted to add Plato.

Korais's insistence on the 'investigation of words' (p. 137) directly recalls the Socratic 'examination of names' and Plato's ideal of a rectitude of names (*orthotes onomaton*) in the *Cratylus*. Platonic realism acquires an unexpected modern political dimension. Korais emerges as a consistent follower of both classical (or 'pagan') and Enlightenment optimism, insofar as he believes in the human potential to approach moral perfection by means of one's own intellectual resources. Still, Mackridge's caveat is noteworthy: 'there is no simple correlation in Greece between conservatism or radicalism in social attitudes and their apparent counterparts in linguistic matters' (p. 148).

Korais's dialogue with contemporary ideas is examined in the third part of the book. In an article destined to become compulsory reading for anyone interested in Korais's philosophical outlook, Roxane Argyropoulos tackles his anti-metaphysical and eclectic tendencies ('Adamance Coray et sa réflexion philosophique: vers une anthropologie médicale et culturelle'). Inspired by the utopian ideals of the *Encyclopédie* and highly critical of German systematic philosophy, Korais advances a utilitarian conceptualization of truth as virtue (p. 189). His exposure to vitalism, neo-Hippocratic medicine, and the cultural anthropology of the *Idéologues* during his medical studies in Montpellier led to his search for possible links between natural philosophy and moral theory. According to this approach, the 'national character' of a people is influenced by climatic agents but may and should be altered according to moral causes (p. 203). Drawing on Theophrastos, Korais subscribes to natural determinism in that he sees in the process of civilization the potential advancement towards the perfection of the human species. Culture and social utility are thus intertwined: the cultivated person is one that is useful to the collective modification and amelioration of natural restrictions.

In a paper on 'Adamantios Korais and the dilemmas of liberal nationalism', Paschalis Kitromilides advances a revisionist approach to the portrayal of Korais as a liberal political thinker and – according to Elie Kedourie – a 'prophet of nationalism'. Kitromilides uses Korais's correspondence with Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Jefferson to provide a summary of his doctrine of national self-determination, but goes on to suggest that this hardly cancelled out the normative priority of the individual. Kitromilides thus refutes a precarious misconception: Korais's thesis 'did not involve an unconditional recognition of the primacy of the national community over the individual'. This is a defensible and subtle

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point. Korais was fully conscious of the antinomies between individual autonomy and national community, between personal freedom and national self-definition: 'national independence is not an end in itself if it cannot guarantee responsible leadership, wise politics and civil liberty' (p. 223).

The final paper by Vassilis Mourdoukoutas ('Korais and the idea of progress: from theory to action') is a successful exploration of the idea of intellectual progress from its ancient (Hippocrates) to modern (Condorcet, Turgot) points of references. Universal perfection rests on an alignment of natural and moral causes by means of political emancipation, education, and civilization. From the viewpoint of the history of philosophy, one might add that the epistemic optimism underlying this thesis is typical of a particular reception of Plato's epistemology that goes back to Porphyry, and is aptly exemplified by emblematic intellectuals such as Gemistos Plethon, Marsilio Ficino, and, of course, the 'modern pagans' of the French Enlightenment. It is against this background of classical epistemic optimism that Korais's ostensibly moderate criticism of religion awaits fuller appreciation.

Korais is undoubtedly the best-known exponent of the Modern Greek Enlightenment. There were others, too, in many respects equally attractive and more enigmatic, but almost entirely neglected by international scholarship. Of these, I would like to focus on Iosipos Moisiodax (1730–1800) and Veniamin Lesvios (1759/1762–1824). In *The Enlightenment as social criticism: Iosipos Moisiodax and Greek culture in the eighteenth century*, Paschalis Kitromilides provides an illuminating study of the first intellectual 'to accept unconditionally and to voice publicly the ideas of the Enlightenment in Southeastern Europe' (p. x). Inspired by the Christian rationalism of the German Enlightenment, modern epistemology, and a firm conviction in the exhaustion of scholastic Aristotelianism, Moisiodax introduced scientific (or rather epistemic) optimism to the Balkan context. Moreover, he became the *spiritus rector* of supra-national schemes for the socio-political reorganization of the Balkan peninsula, of which that of Rhigas Velestinlis is the best known. Investing in cultural Hellenization as an ideology of reform and means for socio-political change, Moisiodax envisioned an indigenous Balkan Enlightenment able to advance beyond the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. This led to an early project concerned with the intellectual reconstruction of Hellenism that in many respects anticipates the vision of Korais, who has occasionally been characterized as a usurper of Moisiodax's ideas (p. 182). Given the recent interest in the transnational diffusion of Enlightenment ideas, it is hoped that this paperback reissue of Kitromilides's book will inspire further research on the enigmatic life and deeds of Iosipos Moisiodax. Interested readers will also profit from Kitromilides's latest monograph, *Enlightenment and revolution: the making of modern Greece* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), which assumes a broader scope in demonstrating how the confrontation between Enlightenment ideas and church-sanctioned ideologies shaped the culture of present-day Greece.

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I would like to close this review article on Modern Greek intellectual history by turning to Roxane Argyropoulos's *Ho Veniamin Lesvios kai he Europaike Skepse tou Dekatou Ogdoou Aiona*. If Moisiodax represents the earliest phase of Modern Greek Enlightenment, then Veniamin may be regarded as the most original philosopher next to Korais. An able mathematician, physical scientist, and moral philosopher, Veniamin developed his own doctrine of the 'pantachekineton': an active force within all physical bodies and the atmosphere that is responsible for physical and psychological phenomena. Though reminiscent of contemporary theories of magnetism, this doctrine appears to develop out of a criticism of Newtonian physics (pp. 161–2). Conservative strands of the Orthodox Church and the Neo-Palamite camp accused Veniamin of 'atheism' and launched persecutions that significantly hampered his teaching in the School of Kydonies. His critics were only partly wrong: though not an atheist, Veniamin was a consistent supporter of natural religion. Whether directly or implicitly, he cast doubts on the exclusivity of religious revelation, undermining the Orthodox distinction between created matter and uncreated divine essence and effectively resacralizing the universe, insofar as God ceases to be a personal agent and a creator *ex nihilo*. Argyropoulos astutely identifies the affinity between Veniamin's belief in the sempiternity of the universe and ancient Greek cosmology. From this perspective, Veniamin may be seen as providing a fascinating Balkan case-study confirming, or at least enhancing, Peter Gay's thesis on the Enlightenment as 'modern paganism'. Veniamin's student Theophilos Kaires provides a further point of reference on this subject (see N. Siniossoglou, *Theophilos Kaires* (Athens and Andros, 2008). Like Korais and Kaires, Veniamin was a persuaded eclectic philosopher critical of the German tendency of 'being led' by philosophical gurus, be it Leibnitz, Wolff, or Kant. He positioned himself close to the French Ideologues while advancing unabashed but philosophically attractive criticisms of Rousseau, Condillac, and Descartes. The introductory chapter of Argyropoulos's key book on Veniamin features a succinct introduction to the ideological parameters of the Modern Greek Enlightenment. A summary in French makes its key points accessible to a wider audience.

The three books presented here make a strong case for the abandonment of the tired construct of a supposedly stagnant south-eastern imitation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western intellectual movements. Important exponents of the Modern Greek Enlightenment naturally assumed a transnational standpoint and moved in a fluid socio-political world, establishing a dialogue with the pagan thought-world and the West in a highly original quest aimed at the consolidation of a particularly modern socio-political identity.

The idiosyncracy of Orthodox anti-Enlightenment tendencies represented by Neo-Hesychast conceptualizations of identity certainly contributed to the uniqueness of their endeavour. Seen in this light, intellectuals like Korais, Moisiodax, and Veniamin Lesvios, educated in the West but active in the East,

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do not merely represent the periphery of the Enlightenment or the fragmentary dissemination and appropriation of Western ideas in non-Western contexts. Rather, they provide fascinating evidence of consistent attempts to apply and eventually reify the Enlightenment ideal of socio-political, national, and religious regeneration within a collapsing geopolitical framework that was more suitable for the consideration of radical intellectual shifts than the nineteenth-century West.

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