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The paper identifies discursive tropes that informed the official Greek rhetoric of the Athens 2004 Olympiad. It is argued that in order to understand these tropes, which place emphasis on the Olympics as an aspect of Neohellenic heritage, we must re-consider the impact the Orientalist movement had on the formation of a distinctively modern Greek identity. The version of Orientalism that informed the Greek rhetoric was based on the Eurocentric belief that Hellas is the cradle of civilisation. The Western conviction that the modern Greeks (or Neohellenes) are not worthy of "their Hellenic heritage" because they are more Oriental than European is coupled with Greece's economic and political dependency on Western resources. However, in the context of 2004 Greeks contested this power relationship with "the West", both European and American. The Greek argument was grounded on the equation of Greek-Hellenic cultural, with Western economic-political, capital. Tensions characterised the Greek argument: on the one hand, the Olympics were regarded as a relational (universal) value that ought to circulate in an international reciprocal system; hence, their return to their "cradle" was deemed a form of recognition of the Hellenic (and by right of heritage, modern Greek) contribution to human civilisation. On the other hand, Greeks demanded exclusivity in their organisation. This paper follows this debate, maintaining that we can trace its foundational principles in the Greek moral, cosmological, order.

Keywords  cosmology; culture; Greece; Olympics; Orientalism; reciprocity

"When I promote my end, I promote the universal, and the universal in turn promotes my aim".

G. W. F. Hegel

The concern with Classical roots and European identity, the anxiety that Greeks sometimes ruefully acknowledge as progonoplksia [obsession with ancestors], is the symptom of a deeply wounding sense of social, cultural, economic, and political dependency. If one commentator on a recent dispute
[...] rather plaintively wondered why foreign commentators seem disenchanted with romantic philhellenism, for example, I suspect that such hurt and puzzle-ment arise from the perception of precisely that dependency. Apparently the same Western intellectual establishment has duplicitously moved the goalposts and changed the rules of play. Romanticism has given way to deconstruction, and those whom romanticism had once "constructed" as true Hellenes now feel, in every sense, undone.

(Herzfeld)

Walter Benjamin likened progress to the angelic dilemma of movement. The angel of progress, claimed Benjamin, cannot decide whether he should look back, to the past, gather the pieces of debris that fly around him and "make whole what has been smashed" (1992, p. 249), or follow the Edenic storm that propels him toward the future. This metaphor beautifully captures modern Greek associations of "progress" with Hellenic history. This paper aims to explore such associations through the rhetoric that various Greek actors employed to discuss the Olympiad of 2004. This rhetoric, I argue, is genealogically linked to the hegemonisation of modern Greek culture by Western narratives that identified Hellenic civilisation with modernity, and denigrated modern Greeks for failing to live up to their illustrious ancestry. It is my conviction, however, that the Greek state did not simply absorb these narratives uncritically; on the contrary, it used them to contest the power relationship that the narrative itself perpetuates. In the context of Athens 2004, official Greek counter-hegemonic discourse negotiates the nature of the Greek-West relationship and reconstructs its rationale. According to the official Greek line of argumentation, the Olympic Games are a value that ought to circulate in a closed-circuit system of reciprocity between Greece and an imaginary "West"—a West that is metonymically linked to a fictional "Europe", America, or even to humanity as a whole. This argument guarantees the recognition of modern Greece as a benefactor of humanity, and as a country that is culturally and politically equal to those powerful ones that constantly criticise it for its "backwardness". It is this narrative that equates, in Bourdieu’s terms (1984), political and economic with cultural capital.

This paper has been divided into two parts. Part I explores Greece’s cultural and economic hegemonisation by the West. Here I discuss briefly the implication of Western ideas in the process of Greek nation-building, and then tie them to the birth of the Olympic Games and their development into a transnational value. Finally, I focus on how Greek state agents internalised these ideas in their discussion of the 2004 Games and their organisational aspects.

Part II examines closely the response that Greek state agents proffer to past and contemporary Western accusations of backwardness and inefficiency by prioritising Hellenic cultural over Western economic capital. I deconstruct the symbolic value that Greeks attribute to the Olympics by looking at the cultural logic underpinning their attempt to equate economic and cultural capital. In order to do so, I reflect on the role of reciprocity as a stabilising factor in relationships. I maintain that the power relationship between Greece and the West is contested through the presentation of modern Greeks as heirs of the ancient
Hellenes, the alleged cultural benefactors of humanity to whom Western civilisation "owes" its existence.

Part I: Hegemony and Identity

Orientalism Reconsidered

Before we examine the question of reciprocity in Athens 2004, we must look at the trajectory of those hegemonic discourses that represent modern Greece as a European "pariah". These discourses are a significant, though neglected, variant of what Edward Said (1978) termed "Orientalism". According to Said, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a de-hypostasised, homogenous "Orient" emerged in Western textual networks. The characteristics of this "Orient" acquired meaning as the binary opposites of a series of essentialised Western qualities. So, if the West was rational, civilised and governed by "order", the "Orient" was irrational, uncivilised and characterised by savagery and disorder. The texts in which such binarisms emerged were placed by Said into the context of colonialism: Western powers subjected and governed colonies economically, and Western writers (often involved in colonial governance) subjected the category of "Orient" to scrutiny. We nowadays know a lot about the ways in which the multiple "Orients" came into being in Western colonial imaginations. Few know, however, that modern Greece emerged from the same colonial predicates. The memory of its birth throes is retained by modern Greeks in their treatment of all things "Hellenic", including the Olympics.

"Modern" Greece did not exist in the geopolitical map of Europe before the 1830s, when a small part of the so-called "Hellenic peninsula" was liberated from the Ottoman Empire. Despite the preceding bloody Greek revolution (1821-1828), the liberation came, in effect, from the "Great European Powers" of the nineteenth century. Western support was instigated by "philhellenism", a stream of romantic ideas that advocated nationalist feelings and Greek political liberation, but simultaneously demanded the revival of a Hellenic civilisation that existed only in the imagination of Western classicist scholars. The perfection of this imaginary Hellenism has been discussed as the site of colonial oppression: according to Martin Bernal (1991), the supposed superiority of Athenian Hellas in relation to all other ancient civilisations became analogous to the superiority of Western colonial powers vis-à-vis the non-European colonised nations. The rationale of this post-Enlightenment argument was grounded on the belief that Europeans were the spiritual children of Hellas, and that ancient Greek civilisation was the cradle of Europe. Even if we regard Bernal’s argument with suspicion, the reference to colonisation remains central: not only had the European imagination "colonised" Greek culture, but it ultimately provided Greek self-narration with a "kernel" (Laclau & Mouffe 1995), a reference point. The way that modern Greeks internalised Western discourse is still preserved in their persistence in calling themselves Neo-Hellenes or modern Hellenes, unconsciously designating
their “crypto-colonial” (Herzfeld 2002b) identity. Unfortunately, the other, actual colonial past, the subjection of the Greek peninsula to Ottoman rule for almost four centuries, filled the supporters of Greek liberation with scorn and contempt for Greeks. This was so because Ottoman rule supposedly made them more "Oriental" than "European" (Herzfeld 1987). In this contempt, which was followed by the use of derogative terms such as “filthy”, "disorderly", "barbarous", or simply, "Oriental/Turkish", all of them popular in the nineteenth-century Western literature on Greece, we can recall Said: philhellenism (as the love for things Hellenic, but not Neo-hellenic) is, after all, a version of Orientalism (the interest in things Oriental, coupled with a contempt for the actual, living, "Orients" of the colonial nations). The schizophrenic Western discourse, in which Greece simultaneously played the role of the birthplace of European civilisation (in the Eurocentric imagination) and its internal Oriental "other", was also expressed by Greeks in their attempts to repress or resist their Ottoman past in every possible way.

Post-liberation forms of colonisation or imperialist policies also complemented the symbolic colonisation of Greek culture. This took place in different periods, was actualised by different historical agents and had catastrophic consequences. In the 1850s it involved a temporary occupation of the Greek capital by the British fleet. In 1919 it contributed to the outbreak of a Greek–Turkish war that was initially supported ("instigated", according to some Greek historians) by Britain and France, and led to the uprooting of Greek communities in Asia Minor. During World War II, British confrontation with communists within Greece overdetermined a civil war (1944-1949) that still divides Greeks. In the Cold War era Greece was caught between the Western and Soviet spheres of influence. A dictatorship (1967-1974) fully revived the narrative of Hellas-as-Europe, also bestowing it with Christian Orthodox, right-wing undertones (Herzfeld 2002a, pp. 13-15). Gradually, Hellenic excellence became in questions of Greek foreign and domestic policy what Diamantourou (1983) called "underdog culture": an inward-looking, Christian-"Hellenocentric" culture, that defensively warns against foreign interventions, alien elements and cultural difference. Apparently, the "curse of philhellenism", to borrow Stathis Gourgouris’ apt metaphor (1996), continues to cast its spell over modern Greece—constantly changing forms, but not objectives.

This country, considered politically and economically "impoverished" in the West, hosted the Olympiad of 2004. The sheer size of competing cities for 2004 was imposing, and Greece was not everybody’s favourite candidate. One may wonder why this commotion over such an event. Even the purely academic interest in the Olympiad is massive and worldwide, with many centres and universities investigating the phenomenon, its roots and its development (Toohey & Veal 2000, pp. 1-2). It is commonly known that the Games began over 3,000 years ago in the Greek peninsula as a religious ritual that celebrated physical excellence and rigor. But their revival in 1896, examined below, is a question of a different order. Throughout this paper I claim that we must examine closely the importance of the Olympics for the international community, not to celebrate them,
but to uncover the political and moral implications of their ritualistic repetition. The Olympiad should be regarded as a survival of this nineteenth-century narrative that made Hellenic civilisation the core of European modernity. "Olympism" is, in other words, the collective celebration of a metanarrative on European ancestral origins. The circulation of the Games in the community of nations impregnates them with meaning and transforms them into a relational value. It is precisely this relational dimension that Greek state representatives mobilised in their Olympic rhetoric. To fully comprehend this practice I will present the trajectory of the Olympic phenomenon and its significance in contemporary Greek nationalist politics.

"From the Phoenix’s Ashes": Identity in Antiquity/Antiquity as Modernity

From the outset the Olympics and so-called "Olympism", the philosophy of the event, were permeated by nationalist ideology. Although the origin of the modern Games is usually attributed to a Frenchman, Pierre Fredy Baron de Coubertin (1863–1937), a similar proto-movement existed in Greece long before de Coubertin’s initiative. It began with a suggestion by a Constantinopolitan Greek poet, Panagiotis Soutsos (1806–1868), to Ioannis Kolettis, the Greek Minister of the Interior (Young 1996, pp. 17-18). The suggestion was focused around the establishment of a national day on which Greeks would celebrate the War of Independence (24 March), the ritualistic reverence of the Greek "spirit" par excellence that has not lost its importance ever since. Although the national day was immediately established, it took the state over a decade to revive the Olympiad. In 1859, Zappas, a Greek merchant undertook the organisation of the first commercially based Olympic event. In his proto-Olympic movement we note the co-existent promotion of Greek products and individuals with a revival of what were considered as ancient Olympic rituals. The event was institutionalised and a number of similar festivals took place over the next three decades (1870, 1875, 1888 and 1889).

I have already noted that the relationship between nationalism and the Olympics existed long before their universal appeal. The involvement of a man of letters in the Olympic revival is not coincidental, if we consider Soutsos’ literary work in its historical and linguistic context. The institution of modern Greece did not necessarily solve the problem of a polyglot and poly-idiomatic would-be nation that had spent centuries under the Ottoman "yoke". It was not just that Greek citizens were bilingual and trilingual, but also that not all those populations who considered themselves Greek were recognised as such by the Greek state or lived within it. The Babelic outcome of Greek liberation was further worsened by philhellenic dissatisfaction and fear that the Great Powers of Europe had given birth rights to a degenerate non-European "race". To the straightforward Orientalist discourse of "Ottoman Greekness", we can add another that denied modern Greeks any association with their Hellenic forefathers, even one based upon cultural "degeneration". This was expressed by
Jacob Philipp Falmerayer, a Tyrolean historian who assumed the status of Satan in Greek culture when in the 1830s he claimed that the modern Greeks comprised a bastard Slav nation that had nothing to do with ancient Hellas (Skopetea 1999). In an age in which culture was confused with "race" and "blood", this accusation by a Hellenist scholar was unbearable. In fact, the Falmerayer trauma was never overcome, and even today Greek academics assume the same old defensive attitude towards the Tyrolian classicist. In Sout-sos' period, the question of the unity and historical continuity of the Greek nation was manifested mainly in the domain of language. Greek academics and literati were split into three groups, each defending a different version of Greek (and therefore "Greekness"): the demoticists supported the "live" language of the folk, adumbrating a fully-fledged romantic movement; the Hellenists advocated the ancient Greek version, identifying modern with ancient Greek identity; and the katharevousiani (the "purified") claimed that a mixture of the two should represent modern Greekness. It is interesting that Soutsos began as a demoticist, but eventually became an advocate of katharevousa, an artificial Greek language that would dominate the Greek bureaucratic regime until 1974. The merging of nationalist demoticism and katharevousa statism determined the content of Greek state ideology and gave shape to the modern Greek nation-state. Soutsos' interest in the Olympics should not be separated from his conviction that by resurrecting things ancient Greek he would recover this long-lost Hellenic modernity for his homeland.

I have examined the Greek genealogy of the modern Olympics at length, because it sheds light on their role in the construction of Neohellenic identity. Henceforth I will maintain that every time Greeks invoke the Olympic discourse they resurrect their "ancient modernity"—a peculiar modernity that came to represent their national and cultural identity. The Greek metaphor of the nation "risen from the phoenix's ashes" applies here: Hellenism is not simply resurrected every time the Olympics take place, it is also revered as a universal Neohellenic heritage. The language of resurrection is the vocabulary of nationalist primordialism, after all: resurrection ends the "ever-existing" nation's dormant condition and marks its return to the sphere of politics (Gellner 1998). We can place this analysis of Greek Olympic nationalism in the wider framework of Europe and beyond: even de Coubertin's inspiration to revive the Games and establish an International Olympic Committee (IOC) stemmed from his determination to hearten his French compatriots after their devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870). His selection of a venue for the first Games, Greece, is also decisive: the discourse of Hellenic excellence was still alive in 1896, when the Games took place in Athens, despite the country's economic collapse and political upheavals (Guttmann 1988, p. 437; Gallant 2002, p. 51). The involvement of nationalism and politics in the Olympics is as enduring as the institution itself. We can note a few notorious cases: American complaints about biased British Judges in the Olympic elections of 1908; the resignation of an IOC British member when, after the outbreak of the Great War, the German members of the Committee were not ousted (Leiper 1988, p. 332); the refusal of Canada to allow
Taiwanese athletes to enter the country for the 1976 Olympics as competitors of the "Republic of China" (Berlioux 1976).

The classicist-Orientalist discourse of Hellenic superiority influenced the Olympic Charter, de Coubertin's foundational document of the Games. The document describes Olympism as "a philosophy of life" that advocates the merging of culture, sports and education. More significantly, Olympism "seeks to create [...] respect for universal fundamental ethical principles" (IOC, 1995 in Toohey & Veal 2000, p. 51). The appeal to a universal norm of ethics is, in effect, the universalisation of certain norms that derive from an imaginary Hellenic civilisation - the "establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity", to quote the Olympic Chart again. This may sound mere rhetoric, but it has an impact on political reality. The very words of the Charter are manipulated in contemporary Greek political discourse for internal and external consumption. The latter will become the focus of analysis, because it will illuminate the rationale of official Greek resistance to Western hegemony.

Imagining Modernity

I begin by highlighting the political implications of contemporary Western contempt for modern Greece. It has not been long since the assassination of the British diplomat Steve Saunders by the terrorist organisation "17th November" in Greece. On the eve of the production of an American report on terrorism, the Saunders case became a notorious example of loss of state control and disorder. It is significant that the American report and the British press converged upon one thing: that Greece displayed the signs of disorder and Oriental corruption. Greek policy on terrorism was likened to the Pakistani, and the Greek government was condemned for its incompetence.

The exclusion of Greece from the geopolitical map of "Europe" was a slur on Greek honour. It is small wonder that one of the key aims of ATHOC (Organising Committee for Athens 2004) became the preservation of security. The official website of Athens 2004 has an extensive report on how security will be tackled in co-operation with a special Greek Police Unit and a Special Forces Unit. This statement is also linked to the principles of Olympism, especially its peace-related aims, which I will examine at length later. A reference is made to 37 security agreements that Greece signed with other countries, and the establishment of an Olympic Advisory Group (OAG) "with the participation of many countries with experience on security-related issues: the US, the UK, Australia, Germany, France, Spain, and Israel" (Athens 2004). The presence of America and Britain in the OAG is a translucent mark of Greece’s attachment to certain Western policies; the presence of another two American (at the time) satellites (Spain, Israel) only certifies that. On an official level, ATHOC affixed itself to the American "anti-terrorist" movement, as ATHOC President Gianna Angelopoulou-Daskalaki stated in various interviews. Angelopoulou-Daskalaki, together with IOC security consultant Peter Ryan, also debated the fear that 9/11 inspired
about possible terrorist attacks in the Athens Olympiad (Canada Sports, 13 September, 2002).

The fears are very real if one considers the shocking killing of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches by terrorists at the Munich Olympics of 1972. However, the framework in which the argument was placed is identical to the anti-terrorist manifestos of the G. W. Bush administration—a repetition that reinforces Greek internalisation of American hegemony. Following the bombing attacks in Spain (March 2004), which were attributed to terrorist forces, Greece officially asked NATO for help with Olympic security. The possibility of an Al Qaeda attack on the Olympics is aggravated by home-grown concerns that the November 17th group will make a dramatic re-appearance (CBS, 12 March 2004). Such was the fear that Greece would be ridiculed in the eyes of the powerful, that on 24 June 2004 legislation was introduced in parliament that "banned the use of arms by non-Greek guards for athletes and VIPs within Olympic venues and sites" (Channelnewasia, 26 June 2004). NATO accepted the Greek invitation and promised the provision of technology for airspace and maritime surveillance as well as the deployment of its chemical, biological, radiological and Nuclear Defence Battalion (NATO-OTAN, 23-25 June 2004). The whole venture was condemned by the Greek Communist Party (KKE) that saw in such security arrangements an excuse "to justify pre-emptive wars, such as those against Afghanistan and Iraq, and to restrict civil rights and liberties" (Consulate General, LA, CA, 26 June 2004).

Even in this case, the whole debate moved from the context of terrorism to that of Hellenic Orientalism. For example, ATHOC expressed gratitude for the favourable comments on Greece’s progress on the Olympics by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Bloomberg’s endorsement was considered an honour and was included in the official ATHOC website. This “positive report” concluded with the mayor’s compliments to "Athenian” and "Greek" (viz. "Hellenic") character:

Athens is the birthplace of western civilisation—the city where democracy was born—and we’re sure we won’t forget that when we’re watching the Olympic Games (Athens 2004).

Such weighty expectations alarmed the ATHOC agents. Angelopoulou-Daskalaki revealed the innermost Greek concerns in a media briefing in 2002. "The Greek people have been planning for this homecoming for more than 100 years", she argued (Greek Embassy, Washington DC, 14 September 2002). The "homecoming" rhetoric presents Athens 2004 as a burden that Greece has to carry under the gaze of powerful Judges, such as America. The burden is generated by Greece’s "imaginary modernity" (Chambers 1990, p. 17): a peculiar modernity that advocates American and other Western "progressive" discourses of security, but remains imaginary insofar as it looks backwards to a Hellenic past, the essence of Greek nationalism.

ATHOC’s need to sustain "imaginary modernity" was intensified by the feeling that an ever-present authority, a fictional Europe or a fictional West, is judging Greece’s performance (see BBC Sports). It is true that the Greeks had to fight hard to secure the Games. The legacy of the disastrous Greek campaign of 1990
for the Centennial Olympics was seen at home and abroad as a result of ineptitude and commercial backwardness. The 1997 election was equally difficult, and when Greece appeared to be the winner, Greek media transformed the news into a national celebration. Nevertheless, ATHOC’s frequent references to IOC’s “panoptic” surveillance of the preparations stood as a reminder of the discourse on Greek ineptitude. The ATHOC website advertised the progress made on security and infrastructural preparations. Press releases reported on the “need for speed” (OIOC, 8 November, 2002), and quoted Dr. Jacques Rogge, Chairman of the Coordination Commission, who insisted that “time is critical” and Greece must keep “on track” (OIOC, 25 August, 2000; 16 February, 2001). The scepticism about Greek competence is nicely captured in the words of Denis Oswald, Rogge’s successor in 2001:

IOC’s priority is to ensure the Athens organisers and Greek government provide the venues and services required to allow the athletes to compete at the level they expect. This is the bare minimum, but we should expect more from these Games on their return to their birthplace. [...] Each and every delay has the potential to diminish the legacy these Games could provide for Greece and Olympic tradition (OIOC, 28 September, 2001).

The criticism is subtle. We have to consider the quote alongside accusations of Greek inefficiency that are more directly linked to discourses about the preservation of Hellenic heritage in order to realise the extent of the damage. For example, ATHOC’s plan to construct a 50,000-seat canoeing and rowing centre at the location of the famous battle of Marathon was met with brutal criticism, especially in Britain. John Carr, reporting from Athens, reminded us of the significance of the Hellenic battle of Marathon against the Persians as “a monument of the European heritage” (News and Opinions). The debate is concerned with Greece’s ability to safeguard its Hellenic heritage and is informed by the self-same Western hegemony already examined. The issue was considered as a manifestation of “Athenian Olympic vandalism” when reporters, academics and other literati joined Carr and turned the debate into a referendum on the return of the “Elgin Marbles” to Greece (see News and Opinions and The Times, 22 February 2001). The conflation of the Olympic with the Elgin debate exposes a labyrinthine colonial discourse that still pursues the “Neohellenes”. Both the argument that the marbles belong to the history of Bloomsbury Museum and that the Greeks would not know how to conserve them anyway (see the website of The British Committee for the Restitution of the Parthenon Marbles) prove how contemptuous Britain is of Greece. There is insufficient space to discuss this question at length. I will only mention that ATHOC’s anxiety to excel for the sake of any imaginary or real “West” stopped here. From that point on the Olympics were seen by ATHOC as an opportunity for the British Government to prove how “generous”, “just”, “internationalist” and “progressive it really is” (Parthenon 2004). British generosity was invoked for a sole purpose, the return of the Elgin Marbles to Athens, where they belong, just in time for the Olympics. Thus, ATHOC presented their return as an act of giving a gift, even though the gift itself
allegedly "belongs" to the recipient. The truth is that the Greek state feels gratitude to no "usurper" of its "heritage" and that it is using the trope of generosity for a different purpose. "Generosity" was central to ATHOC’s Olympic discourse and shed light on Greece’s essentially anti-Western counter-hegemonic movement. Official Greek counter-hegemony was constructed upon the idea of an unpaid debt—only this time Greece was not the one who had to answer for its shortcomings.

Part II: Reciprocity and Symbolic Power

Giving Gifts: Universalism and Recognition

Let us examine the case that official Greek commentators made for the Olympiad of 2004. They based it on two arguments: (1) the Olympics are part of Athenian Greek heritage, and (2) Greece had to wait for over 100 years to host them. Both arguments (which appeared repeatedly on ATHOC’s website and in political or media commentary) are references to the moral economy of giving. They were addressed to external audiences, both imaginary (the "West", "Europe") and real (IOC members), and functioned as reminders of an unfinished reciprocal cycle. We can translate the Greek argument as follows: (1) the Hellenic forefathers gave the "West" and "Europe" civilisation; (2) their descendants demand the long-delayed reciprocation for this kindness. The first part of the argument repeats the Hellenic-Orientalist discourse, whereas the second part interprets and contests it.

Before elaboration, it is necessary to stress that I do not disregard the importance of Olympic commercialism for ATHOC, the city of Athens and the Greek state. Once the bid was successful, the Internet bristled with Greek invitations to businesses, tourist and other transnational organisations to invest in Greece (see for example the establishment of business networks on The Business and Investment World of Greece). But I maintain that the moral discourse outlined above is also present in such networks (significantly, one of the official 2004 sponsors, Alpha Bank, currently follows the same strategy of promotion on its own website; see Alpha Bank). This invites us to examine the close-knit relationship between the economic significance of the Olympiad and the norm of reciprocity (the duty to reciprocate) that Greek state agents invoke. Perhaps moral and market economies are regulated by different laws: the marketisation of Hellenic Greekness in the context of 2004 could easily be regarded as the functionalisation (de-symbolisation, to follow Berking’s terminology (1999, p. 127)) of the West-East system of reciprocity that Greek agents try to promote in their Olympic case (see also Douglas & Isherwood 1979). Marcel Mauss’ seminal study of the gift (1954) already presents the de-symbolisation of gift-giving as the symptom of modernity (Ardener 1989). However, we must recall that "relations within markets and capitalist organisations also have a moral-cultural dimension" (Sayer 1999, p. 65). In the context of Athens 2004 the moral dimension of
exchange is grounded on the unanimously accepted value of Hellenic culture. Greek agents mobilised the "situational value" (Appadurai 1986, p. 5) of Hellenic culture by making available to the "civilised world" products that have an emotional appeal. This appeal can be explained by reference to the idea that Olympiad-related products retain the "spirit" of the alleged cultural donor of humanity (see also Sahlins 1974, p. 169), Greece. A very good example of this is the Athens 2004 Olympic mascot. During the competition, ATHOC set a series of standards and prerequisites the mascot had to fulfil. We note that alongside mundane, economic, criteria (such as "electronic replication potential" of the proposed image), the mascot ought to:

- Be the Athens 2004 ambassador to the world
- Reflect the Athens 2004 vision and values
- Reflect the values of Olympism
- Be unique
- Promote the Image of Athens and Greece (Athens 2004)

Indeed, the chosen mascots were two dolls (Athena and Phevos) that embodied all these ideals. "Their creation was inspired by an ancient Greek doll", the official 2004 website informs us. "Their names are linked to ancient Greece. And yet the two siblings are children of modern times. [...] Phevos is the name of the Olympian god of light and music, known as Apollo. Athena [is] goddess of wisdom and patron of the city of Athens". In this way, Phevos and Athena represent the link between Greek history and the modern Olympic Games. The website provides an extensive history of these dolls and illustrations of the original religious idols by which they were inspired (Athens 2004). The Hellenic heritage is thus re-appropriated by modern Greeks, who assert their modernity through a shadowy antiquity. For the Greeks what is marketised has an uncontested universal appeal and symbolic meaning.

It is important to note that here the Greek logic does not transcend the structurally determining symbolisation that characterises the capitalist system (Sahlins 1976, p. 210) but counter-poses to this system a pre-capitalist logic of exchange. In other words, the dolls hold together a Greek counter-hegemonic narrative with obvious moralistic undertones, simply translating it into economics. The exchange-value of the 2004 mascot becomes a reminder of the Hellenic "gift" of civilisation to Europe, a non-rationalised form of giving. Phevos and Athena perform the function of a "judge", which demands from the "civilised world" the recognition of Greece as a benefactor of humanity. Greek persistence in interchanging Western economic and Greek cultural capital could be regarded as a indication of what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld termed poniria (Herzfeld 1985, p. 25, 1991, p. 52): a crafty, "low-cunning" attitude the Greeks display in their interaction with "outsiders"/foreigners which historically originates both in their market-oriented relationship with the West and their resistance to their Ottoman colonisers.

Herzfeld's astute analysis explains a certain aspect of the Greek Olympic discourse because it points to its origins. In the context of the late capitalist
economy, the Hellenic ideal acquires for Greeks the status of a "scarce resource" (Appadurai, 1981) whose exchange-value is maximised through a discourse on reciprocity. This, however, is precisely what takes us beyond Herzfeld’s analysis of poniria as counter-hegemony, and into the domain of reciprocity-as-recognition. Despite their protests, Greek state agents worked hard to present the world with an excellent event. The aim of the managing director of ATHOC, Kostas Bakouris, was to "demonstrate fiscal responsibility" and to work against "the rather dubious reputation of Greece". "We Greeks see [Athens 2004] as a national project”, he explained in interviews (Greece: Government, Telecommunications, Tourism). It would be easy to follow the postmodern argument here, and read this statement as Greece's attention to superficial duties—to assume, in other words, that "the struggle for recognition takes place entirely at the level of appearances, in which there is no distance between recognition for looking good and for being good" (O'Neill 1999, p. 80). Yet the coupling of moral imperatives with "fiscal responsibility" is quite an interesting move by Bakouris, and demonstrates that what we have to examine are not the rules of the market economy that the Greeks must follow, but the ethical presuppositions on which Greek actors operated. We also have to examine the argument in its reverse form—that is, by placing the Greeks in the position of the recipient. If the Olympics are a "gift" that periodically circulates in the community of nations, their "donation" to Greece is a form of recognition by an international community. The idea of "giving" generates a number of non-contractual responsibilities (on which contractual relationships are based, after all) on the part of the recipient. Olympics-as-gift institutionalise the relationship of Greece with the rest of the world, while at the same time they formalise norms of reciprocity. This means that Greek state agents are currently tied to a number of obligations in the eyes of their "donors". It is interesting that the acknowledgment of their debt is coupled by assertions in which even their duties as gift-recipients is contested.

The Route to Eden: Giving, Sacrifice, Power

Alvin Gouldner pointed out that the norm of reciprocity is present in relationships of equality insofar as reciprocation involves recognition (Gouldner 1960, 1973). Contrariwise, he argued, in any kind of power relationship only one side is burdened by duty whereas the other enjoys rights. This kind of relationship, which Gouldner called complementarity, does not involve recognition of the weak party by the powerful—and the inverse would be ridiculous, since in relationships of power the weak party’s recognition of the strong cannot be reciprocated. Gouldner’s analysis calls upon the Hegelian dilemma of the master-slave relationship in which recognition becomes impossible (but see also Yar 2001, p. 292). I will claim that in the Olympic context the relationship of Greece with an imaginary "West" is much more complex than the Hegelian one. This happens because Greece’s election as the Olympic host by the IOC is a unique occasion of recognition that fails to place Greece in the position of the grateful recipient.
The situational role of Greece in this Olympic system of "gift"-circulation is very peculiar, if we take into account that Athens is the only city in which the role of the host and the hosted merge. Since, unanimously, the birthplace of the Olympiad is Athens, Greece can freely claim that it was hosting its own culture. This was acknowledged by the Greek Embassy in Warsaw thus:

Greece realised that these Games will become the "mirror" of itself abroad and for the next seven years Athens will become the centre of earth since the whole world is watching (Greek Embassy, Poland).

The tautological nature of the Orientalist-Hellenic discourse is exposed in a neat way—the Games become a "mirror" of Greek culture. This internalisation of the Hellenic project, which fostered Greek identity since the institution of modern Greece, bears the mark of an ecumenical nationalism: a nationalism that promotes the exclusivity of the "nation", but is predicated upon universalised ideals ("Hellas is the birthplace of civilisation"). The official Greek recourse to this appeal during the 1990 and 1997 IOC host elections is revealing, because it functioned as chastisement of those who cast doubt upon the Greek ability to deliver in 2004. Who could be a better host than the guest, so to speak?

The absurdity of the debate does not divest it of its power. If giving belongs to the domain of the moral economy, we should examine it both as an economic and a moral phenomenon. My coupling of moral and economic norms does not support their confusion, but their dialogical relationship. Because of that, alongside my take on reciprocity as recognition, I follow Stephen Gudeman's (1986, pp. 37–43) analysis of economy as culture. For the purpose of my analysis I will consider "culture" as the domain of representation that cannot be separated from the moral-cosmological order it conveys. As Gudeman argues, economic models are extensions or replicas of specific cosmological orders. We cannot simply assume that economies are divorced from cultural contexts, because they borrow from all domains of social and cultural life to construct their web of rules and regulations. The capitalist idea of providential economy, the Weberian contribution to sociology (Weber 1985), is a particularly interesting example of economics-as-culture that Marshall Sahlins (1996) diligently analysed. I will begin by observing that likewise, the official Greek rationale of Athens 2004 draws upon the Christian Orthodox cosmological order that promotes the idea of giving as a regulative mechanism in relationships.

My hypothesis opens a dialogue with that of the most incisive analyst of Greek culture, Michael Herzfeld. According to Herzfeld, Greek cosmology was articulated partially as a response to the Western narrative of modern Greece's cultural decline. Greeks viewed themselves (as Westerners viewed them) as a fallen culture, an idea that was symbolised with the help of the religious myth of the Edenic fall (Herzfeld 1987, p. 37). More specifically, the conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the "infidel Turks" was retroactively explained by Greeks on the basis of the sinful Byzantine iconoclastic rivalry, a disagreement on whether Christians should worship religious icons or the idea of God that was reflected in them. This line of argument appears (albeit rather underdeveloped)
in the work of some Greek historians. For Chassiotis for example, even Greeks under the Ottoman "yoke" began to believe that the fall of Byzantium was God’s punishment (Chassiotis 1981, pp. 63-65). It is somehow strange, however, that even then Greeks managed to foster a self-image as God’s elect who may have been tried, but would eventually be absolved.

One might argue that the legend of "the chosen" played a consoling role during the period of Ottoman rule, becoming something like the morality of the Nietzschean slaves (Nietzsche 1996, pp. 4-5, 111): by dreaming of an imminent post-colonial destiny as the "chosen", proto-Greek communities lived in a protective self-denial of their subjection. But the redeeming element of this narrative compels me to move away from the dooming aspects of the Edenic rationale. I believe that in the crypto-colonial context of the post-liberation period, the legend of the "chosen" helped Greeks to claim symbolic superiority vis-à-vis their Western patrons. The game that the Greeks played is commonly known as hermeneutics, an actual case of re-interpretation of a historical narrative. The narrative of the "chosen people" presented a surplus of meanings, "allowing the production of new statements" that kept a distinctively Greek culture alive (Kearney 1984, p. 38). In the post-liberation version of the "chosen" the Byzantine Greeks became a "nation" (note how the idea of the "nation" was projected back to the pre-Ottoman past) that had suffered in the hands of the Turks because the "West" (an imaginary entity and a category which did not exist at the dawn of the modern ages) did not assist Greek Byzantium in its defence against them. Significantly, in this case Byzantium was seen by Greeks as a benefactor of the civilised world, because it held back the Turkish "tide" for just long enough to reduce Ottoman power and increase Western defence. When the Byzantine Empire fell, all its scholars fled to the West, bringing the "lights of civilisation" to its "unrefined" populations, and reviving Hellenic "Greekness" in the form of a Renaissance. Again, the narrative pays disproportionate attention to the importance of Greek cultural capital, implicitly juxtaposing it to Western economic and political capital. The narrative is still being perpetrated in the work of certain Greek academic scholars. We read for example in the seminal study of Byzantium by the byzantinist John Karayannopoulos that:

The safeguarding role of Byzantium was invaluable. Even those who contested the Byzantine contribution to the shaping of Western European civilisation in the past, agreed on one thing: that the empire worked as a fortress (of civilisation). [...]  

Because, as an English historian [Steven Runciman] correctly argued, if Islam had used the Balkans as a military base, it could have invaded Central Europe earlier than the Turks. Moreover, without Byzantium, the Arabs of Africa could have reached and devastated the coastal part of Italy. (Karayannopoulos 1993, p. 469)  

The endorsement of the thesis by another great western byzantinist, Runciman, adds to the reliability of Karayannopoulos’ argument. Note that in all these cases Greece has a destiny to fulfil—a clear connection between the romantic notion
of the Volksgeist’s mission of self-fulfilment (Liakos 2002, pp. 31-32) and Aristotelian teleology. Neo-Hellenic thought bears the stamp of Aristotelianism, because the idea of a Greek civilising mission alludes to a teleology that underlines Aristotle’s metaphysics. Like all “things,” the Greek nation carried within it a telos, a purpose and an end, which was its very essence (the Aristotelian usia) that justified its existence (Aristotle, I 1924, Book B, ch. VIII, 198b-199b). We must bear in mind that Greek culture was strongly influenced by the German romanticism of Herder. Herder’s belief that every nation had its own, unique Geist (spirit) and its special mission (De Zengotita 1989, pp. 86-89) assumed ecumenical proportions for Greeks through the Orientalist-Hellenic discourse (Dimaras 1983, pp. 419-425). Put simply: not only did the Greeks end up believing that their nation was unique because of the Western appreciation of Hellenic culture. They also convinced themselves that the rest of the civilised world was just a Hellenic replica and by extension a replica of modern Greece, the self-appointed offspring and heir of Hellenic culture (see also Herzfeld 1997, p. 102).

The image of Greece as a benefactor of humanity finds discursive uses in the domain of contemporary politics. The PASOK government of Kostas Simitis proudly stated on many occasions (such as during last decade’s American bombardments in Serbia and after Greece’s recent ascendance to the EU presidency) that Greece’s destiny is to assume the role of a righteous, humanitarian arbiter. The rhetoric of Christian benevolence is also being re-cast into the same old mould of “Hellenic civilisation” with the help of foreign political agents. Five years ago, US President Bill Clinton gave a speech on Greece’s laudable role in the Balkans, especially after the country’s suffering during the ”bloody struggles of the 20th century”. This is, according to Clinton, a new version of civilisation, a humanitarian attitude that Greece and the US share. The endurance of pain alludes to a deeper understanding of human suffering and transcends even the magnificence of ancient Greek civilisation, according to Clinton—a very shrewd use of the Greek value of suffering, which I am trying to explain here. It is significant that the Greek News Agency proudly displayed this quote in an on-line article (Athens News Agency).

We can add more occasions to our list, pointing out that the trope of suffering and endurance rises above political parties and convictions. A similar argument was made in 1993, this time by the conservative (“New Democracy”) government of Kostas Mitsotakis. Finance Minister Stephanos Manos insisted that Greece had a leading cultural and economic role in the Balkans as an arbiter because it was the only country with recognised EU membership. This role, which demands responsibility according to Manos, was elaborated with constant recourse to the rhetoric of “burden”. Manos was partially demonstrating how much Greece has to “suffer” in order to both justify its European identity and protect other countries. To expose how the argument reappeared during the 2004 Olympic preparations, I will examine an article by Achilles Paparsenos, Press Counsellor of the Greek Embassy in the United States. The article is entitled “Greece: a Leader in South-eastern Europe” and debates Greece’s importance in the region. Paparsenos ties domestic progress in economy and infrastructure to the Olympiad of
2004, mentioning that Greece has a major, though difficult, "stabilising role in the Balkans" which is endorsed and recognised at least by the US (Greek Embassy, Washington D.C., Press Office). Like Manos, Paparsenos uses the trope of suffering and attaches it to manifestations of political responsibility that is happily acknowledged by the global economic superpower.

Nowhere is the rhetoric of the "burden" better reflected than in the "Olympic Truce" project of former Foreign Minister, George Papandreou. The establishment of the Olympic Truce Foundation and of the International Olympic Truce Centre in July 2000 promoted international commitment to noble athletic competition and what Juan Antonio Samaranch, former IOC President, called "the search for durable solutions to all conflicts destroying peace around the world" (Invgr.com 2003; Greece Now 2003). The reference to "peaceful solutions" originates in the uses of the so-called ekecheiria, a Hellenic sacred truce with warring city-states whose role was to suspend conflicts and assure fair and safe participation of the athletes in the ancient Olympic Games. Papandreou initially signed an Olympic Truce book in 2001 together with Ismail Cem, the Foreign Minister of Greece's historical enemy, Turkey. The symbolic significance of this act is unambiguous: it demonstrated that Greece was ready to assume a humanitarian "burden" by sacrificing its political interests in the altar of peace. We will not place this in the context of Balkan micropolitics, but in the wider context of American global domination: Papandreou’s involvement in the Olympic Truce aimed to "open the way for peace in certain regions". Significantly, in 2003 Papandreou reminded his audience that the IOC-sponsored initiative "[was] being promoted with the full co-operation of the United Nations" (Greek Embassy, Washington DC, 3 December 2003). Against the bloody background of the post-war reconstruction of Iraq, this message is anything but innocent: it ties a romantic Olympic idea(l) to Realpolitik visions, as Papandreou himself admitted (Greek Embassy, Washington DC, 3 December 2003). The whole process unveils the "Greek martyr" as a rather sharp player in the international political arena.

We can just begin to recognise structural similarities in the discursive tropes of nineteenth-century nationalism, current academic discourses on Byzantine civilisation, and recent debates upon Greece’s political identity and role in Europe. The idea that underpins them is constitutive of Greek cosmology and is informed by a strong association between giving (giving civilisation, offering services), suffering (the political rhetoric of the "burden" is instructive) and recognition of responsibility. In state discourse, the notion of giving is rationalised; contrariwise, academic and nationalist discourses describe unconditional giving of culture in emotional terms. This is congruent with, indeed constitutive of, the Christian Orthodox value of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity’s salvation. The most powerful metaphor of sacrificial giving is the post-liberation narrative of the fall of Byzantium for the salvation of the West, a crystal-clear transcendence of the dooming Western narrative of the Original Sin.

This argument is entirely explicable given the circumstances. The fact that a supra-historical “Greece” gave plenty without demanding return for so long is
homologous to a rule that defines the unique case of the "host". Hosting involves the practice of unconditional giving (on the part of the host) and unconditional taking (on the part of the guest), "which evokes the inverted complementarity of the guest situation" (Berking 1999, p. 88). By undertaking the burden of the 2004 Olympics, the Greeks re-played their sacrificial narrative of redemption. What was redeemed in this case was a unique sense of their national community—a community that is "imagined" (in Benedict Anderson’s terms (1991)) in the same way by both Greeks and the West.

Giving unconditionally and reminding others of it is not an act above suspicion, of course. We could liken ATHOC’s and the IOC’s conflicting mentalities to Georges Bataille’s general and restricted economies of exchange respectively (Bataille 1988). In the general economy of exchange, unconditional giving is synonymous with sacrifice, a form of symbolic power that cannot be contested. One may rightly argue that Greek demands from others to recognise Hellenic giving violate the rule of reciprocity: you don’t offer unconditionally only to demand back fiercely. This attitude, however, is not irrational or incongruous with modern Greek national politics. It is explicable on the basis of the impossibility of Greece’s actual recognition as a civilised state, equal to those with "more progressive" economies. The economic and political capital that Greece is currently receiving from the EU and the US, and the cultural capital that it allegedly gave to humanity are not identical—they cannot buy, to use the metaphor of transaction, Greek equity. The symbolic construction of complementarity in the Greek discourse of the "Western debt” remains thus the only other option. Because the Greek state cannot receive full recognition, state agents demand symbolic reciprocation and a return of the Hellenic "gift". This discrepancy illuminates the place of Greek poniria in Greek disemia, a double-sign system that supports the co-existence of two conflicting moral codes. More specifically: on the one hand, it is immoral to demand a return of "gifts". Like Christ, one ought to give everything and ask nothing back. But the practicalities of everyday exchange, the idea that humans are “fallen angels”, after all, who fail to live up to Christian expectations, allow space for "cunningness". Poniros may be, literally speaking, the Devil in Greek culture, but it is also a social skill. To cheat means to defeat your opponents in everyday life. Undoubtedly, the official Greek argumentation on Athens 2004 drew upon this disemic system to support the return of the Olympics to their "cradle". This may explain why the most conservative Greek political circles, notably the right-wing New Democracy Party, revived the idea of

Bringing the Olympics back to their homeland as a way of putting a stop to the graft that has come to be associated with the act of moving the Games from one country to another. (The Christian Science Monitor, 24 February 1999)

This bears a striking resemblance to the case that Greece is making for the Elgin Marbles: heritage belongs to its “legitimate heirs” and not to those who have the economic power to claim it. The proposal highlights the uses of “structural nostalgia” even by the Greek state itself. According to Herzfeld, structural
nostalgia is the longing for a return to a time immemorial, "an age before the state for the primordial and self-regulating birthright that the state continually invokes" (Herzfeld 1997, p. 22). The concept can, however, be stretched so as to embrace and interpret the Greek state's collective recall of a primordial and self-regulating right to what the celebrated Greek forefathers owned. It is also symptomatic that, although New Democracy's suggestion that only Greece should organise the Olympics henceforth was dismissed, a number of other suggestions reproduced its underlying principle. The most obvious replay of structural nostalgia was ATHOC's obsession with a "Cultural Olympiad" 2001–2004 (Cultural Olympiad). The project was directed by the Greek Ministry of Culture, and aimed to draw attention to the significance of the host's cultural profile. This might have been "a secondary issue" for other hosts, but it was "the essence of the Olympics for Greece" (Cultural Olympiad), according to the Hellenic Cultural Heritage, the specific organisation that dealt with the event.

It is our ambition to make the Cultural Olympiad a permanent institution based in ancient Olympia. It will be a custodian of the ideals of peace, fair play, creativity, and the universality of man. The Cultural Olympiad, working closely alongside the International Olympic Committee and the Athens 2004 Committee, is linked to UNESCO, the UN, and all the countries of the world. It is in this context that the International Foundation of the Olympiad was set up in 1998 by Juan Antonio Samarang [sic], Federico Mayor, and the Greek minister of culture Evangelos Venizelos. Back in November 1997, the summit meeting of UNESCO unanimously welcomed co-operation with the Cultural Olympiad organised by Greece, while the Foundation was given official approval in early 1999.

The Cultural Olympiad goes beyond any kind of festival, according to the Ministry of Culture, because it transgresses national and cultural boundaries and highlights the "symbolic significance" of cultural festivities. The rhetoric presents all the signs of structural nostalgia: the call for a return to the "essence" of the Olympics, namely "culture", is a battle that the Greeks fight against contemporary economic forces with which they cannot compete. Despite the threat of sacrifice by modern capitalist exchange, the nature of official Greek reaction does not change: economics must not precede or supersede culture, the only sphere of human activity in which Greece retains its autonomy and self-respect.

Conclusion

Things come full circle if we reconsider Benjamin’s meditation on progress. Benjaminian progress points out that the identity of modern Greece is constituted through the collection of history’s debris and fragments and their piecing together. The "fragments" of Western Orientalism, economic dependence, and political contingencies used by Greek actors define the past of their nation’s relationship with Europe and the West. However, the way they are pieced together highlights the manner in which Greeks define the future of this relationship. The rhetoric that official Greek actors use, depicting the Olympic Games as
both heritage and as a universal value that changes hands in a system of reciprocal services, is the best possible example of this process.

I began the paper by relating the phenomenon of Orientalism to the case of Neohellenic identity formation. I have explained that the Western (often Western European) narrative, which made ancient Greek civilisation the cradle of European modernity, derided modern Greeks as unworthy of their Hellenic forefathers. However, I have argued that in the context of Athens 2004 Greek state agents use this narrative of European modernity in a completely different fashion as a resistance mechanism. Their belief is that by right of heritage Greece ought to be reciprocated by the West for what the Hellenic forefathers offered to humanity: the "gift" of "civilisation". The argument is based on the presentation of the Hellenes, ancient and modern, as unconditional donors of the West by analogy with Christ's self-sacrifice for humanity. Within the framework of 2004, Greek actors presented the very idea of the Olympics, with its universal appeal and its Hellenic roots, as a more concrete version of the gift of civilisation.

At this point I identified a tension in the Greek 2004 discourse that can be likened to Benjamin's conviction that the angel of progress remains stranded between past and present. On the one hand Greek state agents see in the IOC's return of the Olympics to their birthplace a recognition of their national(ised) culture by an international community. On the other hand, however, they know that this consent does not necessarily guarantee the recognition of Hellenic symbolic capital in political or economic terms (and therefore modern Greece's treatment as equal to powerful Western countries). Consequently, certain Greek actors violate the principle of donation by "asking back" for the Olympics, on the grounds that they comprise the Greeks' "usurped" culture. Both attitudes (recognition of the Hellenic Olympic "gift" and its re-appropriation/demand for a permanent return) meet the same ends, as they redeem Greek culture from the hell of Oriental backwardness and permit its passage into "civilisation". It is somehow ironic that the very act of Greek self-redemption signals a process of self-recognition. For what it is worth, official Greek discourse on Athens 2004 articulates a version of identity that keeps the "Neohellenic" imagined community alive.

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