

GEORGE PREVELAKIS

# WHO ARE WE?

## THE GEOPOLITICS OF GREEK IDENTITY



Translated from the Greek by  
IOANNIS PETROPOULOS

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PUBLISHING

10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200 210 220 230 240 250  
Stadia Olympica

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OF GREEK IDENTITY

Athens 2017

ISBN: 978-960-9490-43-6

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1<sup>st</sup> edition in English, June 2017

**Production: KERKYRA Publications – economia PUBLISHING**

Translated by: Ioannis (J.C.B.) Petropoulos

Edited by: Maro Prevelaki

Publication coordinator: Efi Andrikopoulou

Layout: Katerina Adami

Art Design & Cover: George Lamaris

The photograph on the cover (G. Prevelakis, ‘The Mani, 1979’) was featured on the programme of *N’ oubliez pas mon pays*, a special event devoted to Greek poetry (Paris, October 2001) that was organised by student members of the Sorbonne’s *Atelier Théâtre*.

**Distribution:**

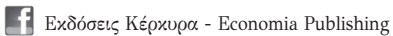


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IOANNIS (J.C.B.) PETROPOULOS



To France,  
homeland and refuge for freedom and reflection

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## Translator's Foreword

GEORGE PREVELAKIS' book, originally published in Greek in April 2016, was already something of a scholarly prophecy in early November of the same year. As the author states in his introduction: 'New geopolitical realities, internal and external, cause worries in Samuel Huntington's America. But Greeks can and should face these with self-confidence and optimism; but before they do this, they must renew the answer to the question "Who are we?"'

Who *are* the Greeks? Peculiar Westerners, 'truants' of the West, as Prevelakis describes them. Yet Greece—or rather 'Hellenism' as a *sui generis* civilisation—is also the constituent element of the West and more than that, the property of humankind. The answer the author offers to his question is of relevance and arguably helpful to present-day Greeks, trapped as they are in an incoherent, demeaning 'crisis of definition and destination' (to quote the author). Who the Greeks are also strikes at the heart of European identity.



The term Hellenism (*hellenismos*) was at first used in the post-Hellenistic world to denote the imitation of classical Greek idiom and language in general. In contemporary Greek the term can mean ‘Greekdom’ (abstractly); it can also be roughly analogous to ‘Americanism’ as understood in North and especially Latin America. Prevelakis gives ‘Hellenism’ a specialised spin, invoking it figuratively as a cultural sediment or residue containing elements from various experiences, including the experiences of the West. If Hellenism is indeed universal—a choice and achievement open to all women and men worldwide, as Prevelakis urges—this is because it underwent successive incarnations from the Hellenistic period and the Roman Empire through the Byzantine period, the Renaissance in the West, and the Ottoman period in the East. This sediment accumulated over *la longue durée*. To delve into the complex cultural realities of ‘Hellenism’ involves the author in nothing less than a sweeping historical overview informed by geography. Physical space becomes a determinant, together with crisscrossing networks—local and long-distance—connecting centre and periphery across the centuries, and serving as conduits of products, troops, ideas, ‘iconographies’, and culminantly, ‘identity’. Identity (‘Who are we?’) moreover presupposes manifold ‘circulation’ in a territory or territories, sometimes overlapping, sometimes far-flung and discontinuous, sometimes (I might add) notional or imaginary. It is actually ‘iconography’ according to Jean Gottmann, one of Prevelakis’ key methodological exemplars: the sum-total of references and symbols binding a people and defining their territory. Identity—‘Who we are’—boils down to geopolitics. A people carry their multifarious symbols with them in space. Bearers of Hellenism have done this whether as culturally versatile, multi-lingual *Romioi* (Christian subjects of the Ottoman Sultan) or as uni-dimensional, hampered citizens of the modern nation state of Greece.

Prevelakis’ analysis begins, like modern Greek identity, essentially

in the Ottoman period, ranges across pre- and post-Westphalian Europe and its globalised avatar, and returns, nostalgically but pro-treptically, to a reminder of Ottoman days. Crisis-ridden Greeks – Prevelakis' compatriots (and mine)—can escape the 'crisis' (now into its eighth year), he argues, once they realise that the postmodern global world quite resembles the maze-like, reticular (i.e. interlaced with networks) structure of the Ottoman Empire (the contrary of the neat, monochrome Westphalian world). Making the best of their past, reviving old habits such as their tendency to form durable diasporas and their role as middlemen between East and West, Greeks must revert to the notion of pre-modern territoriality. They need only rise above the shortcomings of their dysmorphic nation-state, without necessarily leaving Greece, and forge new networks of local and transnational dimensions. Many of these networks will be multicultural, heterogeneous, discontinuous in space. The small, stifled Greek world can become globally enlarged and meaningful. The way out for Greeks today is, *inter alia*, to adopt new models of education especially at the community level. Perhaps most important, if language and literature are bearers of civilisation, Greeks must attend to both; their language (like Kemalist Turkish) has been diminished and deformed by ideological trends and obsessions since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prevelakis offers numerous other insightful proposals in the concluding part of the book. And well he does. Greeks have always been resilient, and they have every geopolitical and cultural reason to be hopeful.

Ioannis (J.C.B.) Petropoulos  
*Democritean University of Thrace &*  
*Center for Hellenic Studies-Greece*  
*Harvard University*

Nafplion  
28<sup>th</sup> January 2017

## FOREWORD

by Antonis D. Papagiannidis

FOR many years now, the recurring question ‘Who are we?’—concerning the deeper identity and sense of belonging of a people with a long history—has haunted public debate in Greece. Indeed, issues of identity have always tended to override choices regarding integration in specific groupings, the European Union being the last such choice. Deeper currents of the sense of belonging lead Greeks to make political choices -sometimes straightforwardly, sometimes under the impact of underlying forces; society makes political choices, and economic options simply follow. The consequences of such an approach can be detected in the negotiating tactics and choices adopted when the country and its people were swept into the vortex of a crisis that—since 2008—has exploded every analytical certainty and dictated most policy choices.

With the sharp, prudent eye of someone observing space as the

backdrop to History, George Prevelakis views us Greeks as we confront our own identity. He demonstrates the sophistication and analytical rigour of a geographer and geopolitical thinker and, last but by no means least, the experience of someone who has had to explain Greece and the Greeks extensively abroad. He places at the disposal of the reader useful and thought-provoking analytical tools. He guides us through Greek myths that have recently been collapsing; he sheds light on contradictions and historical continuities; he discovers and brings out internet communication as a tool for the diaspora. All in all, he provides us with instruments by which all fears can be overcome and oversimplifications set aside.

It is in this complex nexus between Greece and the Greeks in historical time and space that the particularity of Greek identity acquires its essence: not by imposition, but rather through diffusion and pervasiveness. In this way identity is 'translated' into something capable of surviving the pressures of the global system of our time. Odysseus has shown the way: endurance and tenacity (if not stubbornness) are needed to survive the ebb and tide of History. Redefinition and discovery are necessary, too.

Prevelakis leads the discussion of 'Who are we?' His question 'Who have we really been?' translates into 'Who would we like to be /Who could we be tomorrow?' A singularly Greek quest, that.

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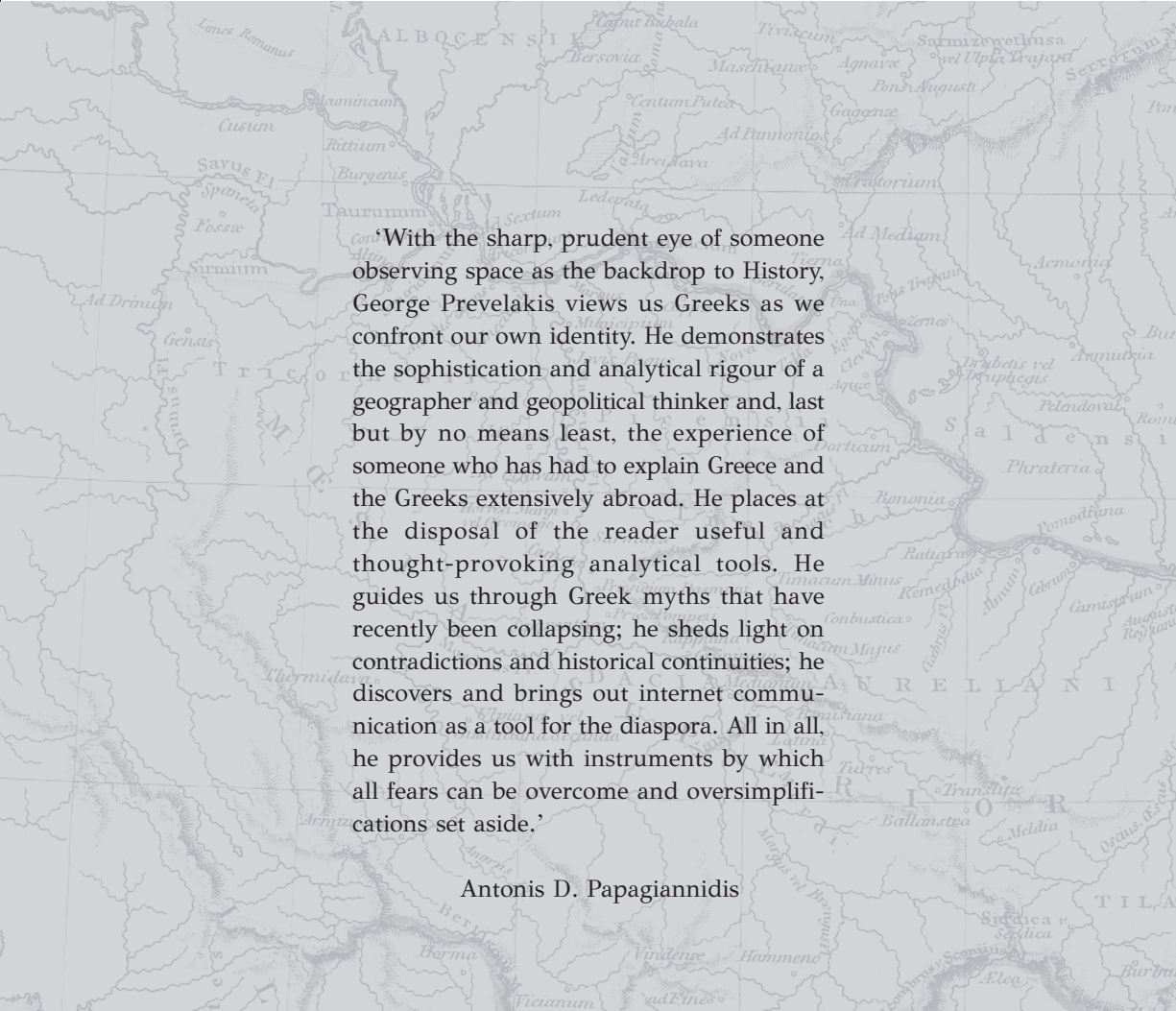
*WHO ARE WE? - The Geopolitics of Greek Identity*

WAS PUBLISHED BY KERKYRA PUBLICATIONS - ECONOMIA PUBLISHING

PRINTED AND BOUND BY ALFA PACK

IN 800 COPIES

IN ATHENS, JUNE 2017



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publications

 **eco  
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PUBLISHING

ISBN 978-960-9490-43-6



9 789609 490436