

Bentham and the Greek Revolution: New Evidence

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Bentham and the Greek Revolution: New Evidence

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The standard account of the reception of Bentham's political and legal ideas in Greece during his short and finally frustrating involvement in the Greek struggle against the Ottoman rulers in 1821 is succinctly summarized by Rosen and Burns:

Bentham's manuscripts were received by the Greek legislature "with expressions of deep-felt gratitude", but it was doubtful that Bentham's writings would find a translator or be published in Greece. The few items of Bentham which appeared in print (none was longer than a few paragraphs) were the result of the efforts of Stanhope and J. J. Meyer, the Swiss editor of *Ελληνικά Χρονικά* [Greek Chronicle], utilizing printing presses brought from England.¹

This is not the place to deal with the reasons Greek dignitaries had for paying lip service to Bentham, praising publicly on the one hand the paramount political significance of his work, and refusing to take seriously even the less controversial and more conservative parts of it on the other. But it is reasonable to assume that the ill-fated effort to disseminate his ideas in Greece partly explains the unusually harsh words Bentham used against the Greek people and their cause in a letter to Simon Bolivar.²

This assessment is not absolutely accurate, since there was a jurist, politician and scholar, Anastasios Polyzoides (1802–1873), who, judging from his publications in 1824 and 1825, could be described as a follower of Bentham, and one who succeeded—under conditions extremely hostile to any scholarly activity—in presenting more or less accurately, but always in a favorable light, a fragment of Bentham's ideas. Polyzoides is a historical figure not unknown to the Greek public.

¹ *Constitutional Code*, vol. 1, eds. F. Rosen and J. H. Burns, Oxford 1983 (*The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham*), p. xxxi.

² Letter 3208, *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham (CW)*, vol. 12, eds. L. O'Sullivan and C. Fuller, Oxford 2006, pp. 142–44.

He is regarded as a paragon of judicial integrity and individual courage for his determination (along with his fellow-judge Tertsetis) not to concur with the death sentence of the legendary military leaders of the war of independence, Kolokotronis and Plapoutas, who had been falsely accused of conspiracy to overthrow the government by the Bavarian Regency in 1834. Polyzoides, who presided at the Court, was harassed by the police, lost his job and ended in jail, but his sufferings were not in vain: Kolokotronis and Plapoutas were finally pardoned. However, little is known of his earlier Benthamite period.

When the revolution broke out in 1821, Polyzoides interrupted his studies in Berlin to return to Missolonghi and offer his services not in the battlefield, where they would not have been of much use, but as a public functionary and a man of letters.³ He was involved in the drafting of the Constitution of Epidaurus, and he became personal secretary to Alexandros Mavrokordatos, the head of the executive branch of the Provisional Government. In 1823 he was sent unofficially to London to assist Deputies Orlandos and Louriotis in their efforts to secure the loan that was desperately needed by Greek authorities to cope with the ever-increasing expenses of war and state-building. We do not have much information regarding his stay in London, but he must have come across Bentham's ideas perhaps through his association with Edward Blaquiere (1779–1832) and other Philhellenes.⁴ In contrast to Orlandos and Louriotis, he is not mentioned by Bentham in his correspondence on Greek issues, so we can assume that either Polyzoides never met him in person, or at least that he did not manage to catch the philosopher's attention.

What we do now know is that Polyzoides published a translation of a Bentham's essay in Meyer's newspaper *Ellinika Chronika* [Greek Chronicle] to which he gave the title *Peri Demosiotitos* (On Publicity) and added a forward of his own in the form of a letter to the editor.⁵ The original text he used was the third chapter of Bentham's *Tactique des assemblées législatives suivie d'un traité des sophismes politiques* (1816).⁶ Here Bentham argues that the body politic should

³ In this paragraph I draw from the following Greek sources: K. Gardika, 'Anastasios Polyzoides and the Greek Revolution', *Mnemon*, i (1971), pp. 23–52 and S. Alexiadis, *Anastasios Polyzoides (1802–1873)*, Komotini, 1980.

⁴ For Bentham's involvement in the long discussions concerning this loan see F. Rosen, *Bentham, Byron and Greece: Constitutionalism, Nationalism, and Early Liberal Political Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, chapter 6.

⁵ The translation was published in four consecutive issues: n. 80 (1 October 1824), n. 81 (4 October), n. 82 (8 October), n. 83 (11 October).

⁶ For the English version of the text see *Political Tactics* (CW), ed. M. Jones, C. Blamires and C.

have access to the proceedings of parliamentary assemblies, which in his time were kept secret from the general public. This topic provides him with a great opportunity to build a robust defense of freedom of information and to stress its significance for both democratic citizens and their representatives. Polyzoides in his own forward praises Bentham, maintains that his arguments are sufficient to silence the supporters of secrecy in public affairs, and points out the Greece cannot but adopt all the relevant publicity promoting practices followed by the ‘enlightened’ nations.⁷

Coming now to the reasons underlying his choice in selecting this particular text, the following hypothesis seems plausible: Col. Leicester Stanhope (1784–1862), Bentham’s disciple and Philhellene, could have suggested the text to Polyzoides. As Stanhope states in his memoirs, when he was in Missolonghi, he had commissioned the translation of several articles on publicity, which appeared in his eyes as an aspect missing from Greek public life.⁸ Given the lack of qualified men for this job in the area, Polyzoides would have been an obvious choice. Nevertheless, even if Stanhope had not assigned the translation of *Peri Demosiotitos* to Polyzoides, the former’s departure from Greece in the summer of 1824 prevented him from learning about its publication and this is probably one of the reasons why this text has passed unnoticed until now.

A year later Polyzoides published a handbook, the first part of which bears the title *A General Theory of Administrative Systems and especially of the Parliamentary One*.⁹ This text is crucial for the study of the reception of liberal and democratic ideas in revolutionary Greece, since its author wholeheartedly endorses constitutional representative democracy as the form of government that promotes happiness and safeguards liberty, and sees it as being in accordance with the dictates

Pease-Watkin, Oxford, 1999, pp. 29–41.

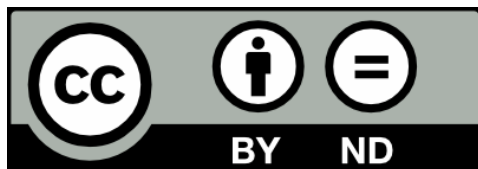
⁷ N. 80 (1 October 1824), pp. 3–4.

⁸ ‘The most important measure to impress on the public mind in Greece is publicity. To this end, I have caused many articles on the subject, to be translated for insertion in the *Greek Chronicle*’. L. Stanhope, *Greece in 1823 and 1824; Being a Series of Letters, and Other Documents on the Greek Revolution, written during a Visit to the Country*, London, 1824, p. 86. His efforts to make Bentham and his ideas visible were moderately successfully as he managed to publish only three short relevant texts, most of them unsigned. Mavrokordatos apparently was not very enthusiastic with Stanhope’s project and he was conjuring up various excuses to prevent the appearance of these articles. See Stanhope, *ibid.* pp. 50, 55, 61, 86, 89–90. For Stanhope’s activities in Greece see Rosen, *ibid.*, chapter 8.

⁹ The full title is *Θεωρία γενική περί των διαφόρων διοικητικών συστημάτων και εξαιρέτως περί του κοινοβουλευτικού: μεθ’ ην έπεται πραγματεία σύντομος περί των ειρηνοποιών και ορκωτών κριτών της Αγγλίας, κατά τους αρίστους Γάλλους και Αγγλους συγγραφείς*, Εν Μεσολογγίω, 1825. The second part of the book is about the selection of juries.

of reason. He favours the direct election of representatives by the people in frequently-held elections; he dismisses any financial requirements for parliamentary candidates, and he claims that the size of legislatures should be proportional to the size of the land under their jurisdiction.¹⁰ In addition, he eulogizes freedom of the press and expression in general, which is described as a necessary precondition for the attainment of any cultural good.¹¹

This work is written in an unmistakably utilitarian spirit. The numerous references to Bentham, the author's admission that Bentham's penal theory is almost complete, as well as his central position that the aim of law is to achieve the pleasant mental states people mostly desire bear witness to this.¹² In brief, despite his limited influence, Polyzoides can be regarded as the first scholar who introduced Bentham to Greek letters. Bentham would be glad to learn that eventually he had found one intellectual ally who managed to convey into Greek either verbatim, or more liberally, a tiny portion of his immense work.¹³



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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 60-67, 69, 50-51. We should bear in mind that Polyzoides was neither a trained philosopher, nor had he access to everything Bentham had published. Thus, we should be not very critical of him when, in discussing the content of law (p. 49, footnote), he says that laws should make evident what is compatible (or incompatible) not only with truth and human nature but with a Platonic idea of justice, a suggestion incongruous with Bentham's empiricism. This is the only point where Polyzoides digresses from his straightforwardly utilitarian line.

¹³ Admittedly, there were two Greek correspondents of Bentham who were sincere and well-intentioned: the jurist Theodoros Negrus and the eminent Greek enlightenment scholar Adamantios Corais. However, Negrus's early death put their exchange of views about a new civil code to an abrupt end, and Corais finally abandoned the project of supervising the translation of *Constitutional Code*. See letter 3100, *The Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham (CW)*, vol. 11, ed. C. Fuller, Oxford, 2000, and letters 3119 and 3124, *Correspondence (CW)*, xii. See also P. M. Kitromilides, 'Jeremy Bentham and Adamantios Korais', *The Bentham Newsletter*, ix (1985), pp. 34-48.

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