

A Point of View: Why the row between Greece and Germany is like a lovers' tiff

24 July 2015 | Magazine



The eurozone stand-off resembles a romance gone sour, says writer Peter Aspden.

About 30 years ago, while on vacation in Greece, I travelled to the ancient theatre of

Epidaurus to see a comedy by Aristophanes called *The Knights*. Two things made a striking impression. First, the size of the audience, which nearly filled the 14,000-seat arena. *The Knights* is not even one of the playwright's best-known works. Yet here were families with small children, many of them making day-trips from Athens, happy to sit on uncomfortable seats of cracked stone for a couple of hours to listen to the comedian's 2,500-year-old jokes. The second element of surprise came when the play started. In British theatres, once the curtain is raised, we are used to decorous behaviour and respectful silence.



But there was none of that here. In keeping with the broad comedy of the production, the audience heckled, fidgeted and generally made its feelings known throughout the evening. At one point, a character in the play insulted a sausage-seller with whom he was arguing: "You possess all the attributes of a demagogue," he said, "a screeching, horrible voice, a perverse, cross-grained nature and the language of the market-place. In you, all is united which is needful for governing." The audience laughed, and then erupted in applause, lustily cheering the satirical barbs. It recognised that nothing really changes. Politics was, and always will be, full of ignoble characters. And we need constantly to be on our

guard against them. I often think of that timeless summer evening, and especially so during the last few years, which have seen Greece lurch from one political crisis to another, with the kind of tragic buffoonery that the ancients would have recognised and turned into the most vicious of satires.

Two-and-a-half thousand years is a long time, but modern Greeks understand the absurdity, and the mendacity, of the political world better than most. Democracy, politics and philosophy may all be Greek words, but so are cynicism and hubris. The western world is, of course, in thrall to the legacy of ancient Greece. It knows that modern Greece is an entirely different affair, a country mired in the arcane ways of Byzantine culture and the kind of practices that are justly criticised by incredulous onlookers - petty corruption, clientelism, party patronage. All of these have played their part in bringing the country to its knees. But even Greece's sharpest critics cannot ignore that everything that is held most dear to them has its origins in the stone alleyways of Athens, overlooked by the most harmonious building ever built, and resonant with the impassioned philosophical debates of more than two millennia ago. That is why Greece matters today. That is why many find it inconceivable that it should be ejected from any kind of European union, currency, political or otherwise, cast aside from its more sensibly managed neighbours. Greece dominates headlines in a way that Ireland or Portugal never will. Symbolism matters. And sentiment too.

- Peter Aspden is the Financial Times' Arts Writer

I often think that the hostility between Greece and its harshest current antagonist Germany, for example, is best seen as a furious tiff between former lovers. German culture, from the 18th Century onwards, has been obsessed by the Greeks. Not the messy, rambunctious Greeks who struggle to come to terms with the niggardly strictures of double-entry bookkeeping, but the contemporaries of Pericles and Socrates, who first raised the most important existential questions regarding the human condition. The

hugely influential German historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann was typical in his florid veneration of Greek art. In his 1764 text *The History of Art in Antiquity*, he praised Greek sculpture and architecture for their "noble simplicity and serene greatness".

Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768)



- The son of a shoemaker, Winckelmann became a great antiquary and many regard him as the founding father of modern Classical archaeology
- Author of the influential work *The History of Ancient Art* (Dresden, 1764) - which was crucial in raising the status of ancient Greek art

The British Museum

Greece (or rather the idea of Greece, for Winckelmann never actually got around to visiting the country) was a symbol for everything the modern world lacked - purity, grace, aesthetic perfection. The rest of Europe followed the German lead. In a frenzy of imitation, that would become known as neo-classicism, it built buildings to look just like the Parthenon. Those scholar-conquerors who did manage to set foot on Greek soil found rich pickings with

which to fill their museums back home. For by now, Greece was under Ottoman rulers who cared not one loukoumi if those old pieces of stone in the centre of Athens were being taken away by well-spoken aristocrats with dubious letters of authorisation.



A frieze which forms part of the Parthenon Marbles on display at the British Museum

But eventually Greece, as is its way, rebelled. Once more capturing the spirit of the times, this time revolutionary rather than nostalgic for antiquity, in 1821 it overthrew its occupiers, and became modern Greece. And modern Greece was nothing like the country that had been idolised by Winckelmann and his fellow intellectuals. It wasn't noble, it wasn't simple, and it certainly wasn't serene. It danced to Anatolian melodies. It smoked from hookah pipes. It stayed up until the small hours. And, irony of ironies, Europe fell in love with Greece all over again. This time it was the industrious working and middle classes of the post-war continent who became literally intoxicated by the otherness of Greece. The beginnings of package tourism showed them that there was a different attitude to life, one which celebrated spontaneity and sensual surrender.





Zorba (Anthony Quinn) teaches Basil (Alan Bates) a traditional Greek dance

Think of 1964's Oscar-winning *Zorba the Greek*, whose eccentric hero teaches an uptight English intellectual how to shed his inhibitions with a few slovenly dance steps on the beach. Think of Shirley Valentine, swapping dismal housewifely duties for spiritual reinvention and naked swims with a horny fisherman. Think of the notorious Rhodes resort of Faliraki, in which the inhibitions of north European teenagers are struck down every summer by the arrows of Eros, with indecent lack of discrimination.

It has been quite a journey, this love affair we all have with Greece. And like all turbulent love affairs, it has left some serious metaphysical baggage behind. When Greece's critics, and especially Germany, complain today of a stubborn nation that refuses to leave its lax ways behind, is there not a feeling of betrayal in the air? Why can't modern Greece be more like the ancient Greece we so adored, it seems to ask. And when the Greeks make sarcastic references to the overbearing demeanour of Germany's politicians, do we not sense an underlying, deeply-repressed wish to be, well, just a little more Nordic in their approach to life? They have the sea, the sun, the olives - would a touch more organisation not make their lives easier?





In the seemingly interminable discussions over Greece's financial crisis, we often hear hackneyed references to the "European ideal", as if it is some fixed table of values that establishes clear boundaries over our behaviour to one another. But it isn't. The skirmishes between Greece and Germany are nothing less than a battle over what that European ideal should be. Like those magical Socratic dialogues, it is an existential debate. Is it more important to be fun-loving, high-spirited, contemptuous of material things? Or do we choose the way of rigour, discipline, efficiency? The answer, of course, is to find a balance between those extremes. But where to draw the lines?

Last summer, I had lunch in a beach-side taverna on the island of Ios, which I had last visited when it was a hippy haven in the 1970s. I asked the proprietor if he accepted credit cards, because I wanted to treat the family to the freshly-caught, and expensive, fish that was proudly displayed on the counter, but I was short of cash. Sorry, he said, he didn't do credit cards. But I could pay him tomorrow. Tomorrow was no good, I replied, because I was leaving the island, and couldn't return to the beach in time. No problem, he countered once more. If I left the money with a friend of his who ran the tobacconist opposite the port, that would be fine. But what if the ATM wasn't working, I asked anxiously? He laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. "In that case, lunch will be on me!" Hospitality - xenophilia - is the most prized of attributes in Greece. And tax evasion is one of its most self-defeating. I have thought about that restaurant and its owner many times over the past few months. He didn't seem to care very much about whether he received his cash from me, or not. In the event the ATM was working, and I found the tobacconist. But I couldn't help wondering, as a dutiful northern European, if the money would ever be declared on any kind of tax return. Was it an act of generosity, or dishonesty? Or both? And where on earth do you put that on an accountant's balance-sheet?