

OUR THINKING

The bicentennial of the Greek Revolution coincides with contemporary world revolts and renewed struggles against the colonial legacies of white supremacy, nationalisms and racial capitalism.

Today, statues and monuments honoring white supremacists and slave traders are being spectacularly defaced around the world, while long-standing demands for reparations and abolition of the police are being powerfully rearticulated. Black Lives Matter protesters, indigenous activists and social movements from Palestine to South America are not just calling out British imperialism and the American racist legacy but seeking to dismantle the edifice of the West built on the backs of “the wretched of the earth”. Inspired by these struggles, the initiative Decolonize Hellas prompts an urgent (re)viewing of the place of modern Greece in relation to geographies and genealogies of European colonialism.

The Greek nation-state has long been described as the “cradle of Western civilization” and “birthplace of democracy,” its 1821 uprising lauded as the first national revolution in Europe. In these formulations, Europe and the West are assumed to be synonymous with progress, rationality, justice and freedom. Yet, for decades now, anticolonial struggles and decolonial/postcolonial theory have pointed to capitalist exploitation, nationalist divisions, genocidal violence, white supremacy, patriarchy, antisemitism and Islamophobia as the essence — indeed the very material and ideological basis — of Europe.

Greek national independence thus marks not only a break with the Ottoman empire, but also the beginning of a long process of appropriation of narratives and practices already in the service of the European “civilizing mission.” The establishment of the new state set in motion multifarious acts of ethnic cleansing, creation and policing of minorities, denial of identities and violent homogenization, often based on the pathologization of Ottoman religious, linguistic and cultural diversity and coexistence. Initially this unspeakable violence targeted populations that did not fit into the religiously purified Christian Orthodox nation-state, but later spread to subjects considered dangerous or deficient on other grounds, such as linguistic register, cultural background, political beliefs, gender identity and sexual orientation.

The initiative Decolonize Hellas will foreground the ambivalent and reciprocal relations between the Greek nation-state and Europe’s colonial genealogies. While Greece has been analyzed in the past as a “colonial scheme,” “crypto-colony” and, recently, as a “debt-colony,” it is urgent to foreground the role of “Hellas” in co-constituting the European colonial project.

dēcolonize hellás

By “Hellas,” we denote an assemblage of ideologies (various Hellenisms) and institutions, materialities and imageries, policies and technologies, bodies and populations, identities and affects, within and beyond the timelines and borders of the Greek nation-state (Ellada).

“Hellas” as the West’s construction of an idealized image of Ancient Greece has been central to shaping European modernity — as well as to legitimating the existence of a “Modern Greece.” Classicism’s values, aesthetics and evolutionary hierarchies have been used to justify Western superiority and rationalize European conquest and enslavement around the world. “Hellas,” though, also encompasses the Christian and religious underpinnings of supposedly “secular” Western traditions and the diachronic

use of Greece as a buffer zone, cultural frontier and bulwark between Christianity and Islam, East and West, capitalism and communism, “civilization” and “barbarism.”

To Decolonize Hellas thus means to expose the colonial genealogies fueling the orientalism, balkanism, xenophobia, racism, homophobia and sexism articulated in its name. By attending to the active reshaping of “Hellas” through emergent, emancipatory and creative forms of belonging, though, we also hope to inspire the activation and documentation of experiences and practices, memories and movements, genealogies and relations often marginalized, trivialized and rendered unnarratable in dominant memorial and interpretive frameworks, thus opening pathways to more inhabitable and inclusive futures.

Ὀὐρανὸς διμς

Decolonize Hellas aspires to be a nomadic platform of academics, researchers, public scholars, artists, activists and civil society actors that contributes to the global decolonize movement. We are committed to developing a sustained, broad and effective conversation about the long-standing effects of colonialism, racism and xenophobia in Greece and the world, in dialogue with decolonizing movements in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Global South, as well as in relation to global movements for indigenous and refugee rights.

- ▶ Through collective research, working groups, public events, publications and teach-ins, Decolonize Hellas aims to open a reflective public space for exchange and experimentation that might reframe important research that has already been done on these topics and make connections across disciplinary and institutional divisions.
- ▶ Decolonize Hellas aims to assemble new research horizons, novel activist methods, and organize events around three thematic clusters that represent in our view the most crucial domains of the collective work, thought and mobilization: Nation & Race, Memory & Monuments, Cosmopolitanisms & Cosmopolitics.
- ▶ We aim to connect the upcoming bicentennial of Greek independence to an ongoing global discussion on (settler) colonialism, orientalism/balkanism, eurocentrism, white supremacy, patriarchy, racial capitalism, transnational capital circulation and global governance leading to an international symposium “Decolonizing Hellas: Imperial Pasts, Contested Presents, Emancipated Futures 1821-2021,” planned for October 2021.