The spirit of Greek Nationalism: 
the Greek case 
in the light of Greenfeld’s conceptual framework.

Introduction

In this paper, I will try to give an outline of the basic questions in my research project, my fundamental hypotheses and directions. I will use the theoretical framework provided by the recent works of Liah Greenfeld on Nationalism and Modernity to interpret the nature, the transformations and the goals of Greek Nationalism. Two hypotheses will be tested:

a. Nationalism, while having certain common characteristics for all nations, varies in its form from nation to nation and from time to time. The idea of the Greek Nation emerged in the late 18th century in the minds of a small group of intellectuals and has, since then, not only been diffused –or imposed- on the population but has also changed its meaning, type and nature throughout the 19th and part of the 20th centuries.

b. While paying excessive attention to “objective” social structures and conditions, social scientists often marginalize the importance of the –by definition subjective- values and ideas that determine, not peoples’ conditions but their goals, motivations and purposes. My theoretical premise is that these goals are ultimately more important to understand social behavior than material conditions –and cannot be derived or deduced from these.

Nationalism is a form of consciousness, a way of understanding one’s identity and one’s fundamental goals. It is both a worldview, the definition of the nature of one’s
community of belonging, and the definition of a set of collective goals which vary from nation to nation and from time to time. It is, I will argue, the definition of these goals, contingent upon the particular people who define them and the reasons of their adoption by the nation, which explain the areas of strength, weakness and achievements of States. I will use this premise to the Greek case.

**The theoretical problems of nationalism**

Although a nation can share the same language, religion, customs, territory etc., all these elements put together—or any one of them—do not make up a nation. They may define the identity of a community. Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an imagined community, and stresses the constructed—and often imposed by force—character of such common elements as language, religion etc. In Anderson’s view, nations are imagined communities which result from the changes introduced by Modernity. It is therefore not the existing “ethnic” characteristics that make up the nation but the emerging nation which selects and constructs the elements which will be imposed upon the whole community as distinctive national characteristics. Against the Modernists, the primordialist view stresses the importance of ethnic communities (distinguished by ethnic characteristics such as language), for the development of a nation. However, while arguing about the scope and importance of ethnic characteristics in the formation of communities, both these theories seem to miss the crucial question: what makes a community—any community—a nation?

In fact, there have always been communities during History, and since any community has to define itself by certain—arbitrary—characteristics, all historical communities were imagined communities. Some of them were based on religion, others on territory, others on language. But what distinguishes a nation from all these communities?

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Greenfeld’s theory

For Greenfeld, the definition of a nation does not include any consideration of ethnicity. The specific characteristics of a community –ethnic or not- are not related to this community being a nation or not. The core idea of nationalism, i.e. what distinguishes a nation from any other kind of historical community, is its political philosophy. Nations can be based on language, as in Greece, on religion, or nothing of these, as in Switzerland. But all nations share the core principles of nationalism, namely popular sovereignty and equality. Nationalism is a form of consciousness, a worldview. In a nationalistic worldview, the ultimate foundation and source of all legitimacy derives from a people defined as the nation. Transcendence, orders etc. are ultimately dependant on the arbitrary decision of the people. This means, first of all, that a nationalistic worldview is necessarily secular. Even when religion functions as a national characteristic, or when Constitutions are made in reference to a specific religious dogma, theology is seen as ultimately independent from the political sphere. The second important characteristic of nationalism is the alleged equality of all the members of the nation. The word “nation” was used in France to designate the elite, in opposition to the populace. Nationalism meant the extension of the “nation” to all the inhabitants of France, and therefore the symbolic elevation of every citizen to the rank of the elite. Therefore, nationalism defines a community of equals, and stands in opposition to previous forms of consciousness, such as in a community of orders, for instance.

This elevation of the people to the rank of the elite creates a feeling of pride, which is related to one’s belonging to the nation. This peculiar feeling, once the exclusive possession of the higher social ranks, becomes available to every one.

The historical question –because it is a historical question- is therefore the following: why and how does a particular community evolve into a nation? Why and how does the elite accept to share its higher status with the populace? And unless we suppose that identities are mere reflections of structural changes and can be deducted logically

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and *a priori*, this is a historical question. It is the question of the emergence of this particular and unique form of consciousness that we call nationalism.

**The story of nationalism**

Nationalism first emerged in England, in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. At the time, nothing could predict it.

It was what we call a historical accident – a new image of the world, which emerged in the minds of some individuals. However, people do not simply decide to change their identity or worldview, neither does this identity reflect their objective situation. The people who created English nationalism were members of the English aristocracy, at a time when the rise of the Crown challenged their privileges. The experience of the English aristocracy in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century was a status inconsistency, i.e. the experience of a contradiction between the image of themselves and their position on the one hand, and on the other hand their experiences from the outside world. Nationalism appeared to them as a form of answer to this anomic situation. The political legitimacy would not derive from the King but from a people to whom they belonged. This new identity seemed preferable to the identity crisis they were experiencing.

Protestantism, with its insistence on the importance of individual reading of the Bible and the possibility for every person to understand theological questioning, was used by the first nationalists to promote a much more radical view: namely that every person was powerful enough to decide on matters of politics –and perhaps even religion. By the mid 16\textsuperscript{th} century, England was a nation. Being a protestant or a catholic country appeared ultimately less important than the identity of The Queen of England –whether she was English of French. Thomas More’s trial shows the tragic destiny of those who remained faithful to the old idea of the *Respublica Christiana*, while the political consciousness of England had changed.

English nationalism is individualistic. This means that the nation was perceived as a total of individuals, equal in their common possession of reason. National pride was built upon this idea, and this explains the sustained development of scientific activity which started in England in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century as a mater of national prestige. National
prestige was also sought in other spheres, such as economic growth, which started very early in England, and quickly transformed this country into the biggest economic power in Europe.

For more than two centuries, nationalism existed only in England, and England was the only nation. The nationalistic worldview was then imported, in the 18th century, in France, Germany and Russia, all of them becoming nations as well. The reasons why every one of these countries adopted a nationalistic worldview are particular to each one. In every case, however, nationalism was introduced by certain people—or a social class—who experienced some kind of identity crisis, usually linked with status inconsistency. In France, for instance, the adoption of nationalism by the local nobility came after two centuries during which French aristocracy, while keeping their name, were being robbed of all their privileges by the growing royal power. On the contrary, in Germany, nationalism was rather introduced by middle class intellectuals.

When introduced into another country, nationalism is transformed and adapted to the specific conditions of the situation.

In France, the collectivity defined as nation was perceived not as a total of individuals but as a collective being, possessing a sort of consciousness and will as a whole. This view is philosophically expressed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

When introduced in Germany, the idea of the nation changed again. The nation was perceived as a unique people, defined in ethnic terms, as a community of language and culture. The German case shows us also a phenomenon which will be extremely important in other cases of nationalism. The idea of a nation is usually accompanied by an imitation of the nation which serves as a model—French used England, Germans and Russians used France. As the new nation is seen by its members as potentially equal to the model, and national pride is linked with competition, inability to compete successfully often leads to feelings of resentment and frustration. Resentment, in turn, might lead to a complete change of attitude towards the model, which ceases to be seen as something desirable. Depending on the case, the model might then be considered as an inadequate realization of its ideas: for instance, though France admired England for the freedom of its citizens, resentment led to the idea that liberty in England was in fact a fallacy and that true liberty existed only in France. The most extreme reaction to
resentment is a “transvaluation of values”, in which values initially associated with the model are seen as not desirable, and replaced by their opposites. For instance, German resentment led to a transvaluation of values in which reason, initially admired, became associated with decadence and decline.

**Types of nationalism**

To sum up: Nationalism is a new form of consciousness which emerged in England in the 16th century. It is the image of one’s identity as member of a sovereign community of equals. Nationalism is gradually adopted by other countries, and the adaptation to the new situation changes its original meaning, so that a nation ceases to mean a sovereign people and acquires the significance of a unique people. Greenfeld classifies nationalisms into three major types, using two criteria. The first is the nature of the community: the nation can be understood as a sum of individuals, as in England or, later, the United States; or as a collective being, as in France, Germany, Russia. In the first case, nationalism is individualistic; in the second, collectivistic. Greenfeld argues that collectivistic nationalisms, because of their potential disrespect for the particular individuals, may lead to authoritarian governments. The second criterion is whether citizenship is understood in civic terms, as in France, or in ethnic terms, as in Germany or Russia. In the latter, national pride derives mostly from the idea of one’s sharing the ethnic characteristics of one’s nation. There are three types of nationalism: the individualistic-civic type, as in England, the United States, and a few other countries, but a minority in the world; the collectivistic-civic type (for example France); and finally, the collectivistic-ethnic type, in most of the nations in the world.

**Goals of nationalism**

For Greenfeld, nationalism is the major component of modernity. Spheres or activities associated with modernity acquired a sustained development only with nationalism. One of these spheres is science, which was developed and institutionalized for the first time in the 17th century in England, because considered as a matter of national
pride. Another sphere is economic growth. The growth of English economy was directly linked to the national identity and to the association of economic growth with national prestige. The spread of economic growth to other countries was due, according to Greenfeld, to the international competition among nations in the economic sphere. It is significant, in this respect, that countries that chose economy as a realm of competition grew sometimes in a spectacular way, even if they did not possess any infrastructure or natural resources. Such is, for instance, the case of Japan. On the contrary, countries like Russia, possessing a huge economic potential, never developed a competitive economy. This is due, for Greenfeld, to the fact that these countries associated their national prestige to other spheres of activity, such as territorial aggrandizement for instance, and not to economics.

**Questions opened**

Greenfeld’s theoretical framework opens a new set of questions for scholars of nationalism. The fundamental question, when dealing with the emergence of nationalism in a specific country is the following. By whom was the idea of the nation imported and why? In other terms, what were the motivations of these agents, what needs did this idea fulfill? In most cases, the situation which opens a certain social group to the national idea is some kind of identity crisis, usually a feeling of status inconsistency. The second question concerns the country which served as a model, and the type of nationalism which was adopted. In France, for instance, the model was England, and the type of nationalism was individualistic; however, internal situations in France led to its transformation to a collectivistic mode. The third question concerns the goals set by nationalists, the areas from where national pride was derived. Such areas could be economic development, territorial aggrandizement, literature or even religious accomplishments. Finally, the degree of success or failure in these goals defines the possible resentment, frustrations and a resulting aggressiveness against the countries initially seen as models.

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The Greek nation: an imported idea

In the Greek case, not only was the idea of the nation as a sovereign community imported from the West, but also the particular form that it took in the Greek case. In fact, the national idea, the image of a sovereign community, was first introduced in the Ottoman Empire by Rhigas Ferraicos. His political program, his mentioning of a sovereign people (*autokrator laos*) cannot misguide: Rhigas was a nationalist, even though he was probably not a Greek nationalist. Only the fact that nationalism is commonly associated to ethnicity make scholars see Rhigas as a pre-national figure. Rhigas’ nationalism would encompass all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. Had it succeeded, it would probably not have led to an ethnic nationalism, based on language, blood or religion. But this is not more a problem than the absence of any shared ethnic characteristic in the Swiss –and arguably the American- case. However, Rhigas’ model did not work, and Greek nationalism emerged from different sources. In fact, the image of a Greek Nation, of a sovereign community, was linked to a specific people in the Ottoman Empire. However, this people did not actually exist. Hellenes, a community of the past, was brought back to life in a legendary form by the classicists of Western Europe. During the Byzantine and most of the Ottoman Empires, despite some notable exceptions, the term “Ellin” meant usually pagan, and was used as an accusation in a Christian environment. A revendication of Greek identity and philosophical heritage appeared from time to time; in the thomist party of the 14th and 15th centuries; in the neo-platonism of George Gemisthos Plethon; in the attempts of a synthesis between Greek Antiquity and Christianity in the 18th century. But these movements were, on the whole, rather marginal, and did not associate Hellenism to a particular people considered as its carrier. During the Ottoman period, the greek-speaking Christian subjects belonged to the *rum millet* and derived their identity mostly from their religious belonging.

Perceptions of Greeks in the West
In the West, however, the term Greeks was used to designate Christian Orthodox subjects: for theologians of the Roman Catholic Church, it was an implicit accusation against a Church which, together with the Greek tongue, was accused of having kept elements of ancient Greek paganism. The various theological works published in the West under such titles as “Against heresies of the Greeks” leave no doubt as to the significance of this term: Greek was a negative definition of Eastern Christians. After the Fall of Constantinople, Greeks had, in their collective imagery, similar negative connotations as Muslims. For some Western theologians, schismatic Greeks were seen as traitors, and thus even worse than muslims. Interest for Christian Orthodoxy rose with Protestantism. For the first time, Christian Orthodoxs were seen as a Christian community, which could join sides with either Protestants of Catholics. The “Greek Church” thus became a focus of interest for Catholic and Protestant missionaries, and, in the collective imagery, Christians were clearly dissociated from the rest of the population of the Ottoman Empire. But the real change in the formation of the idea of the Greek nation came in the 18th century, under the combined influence of neo-classicism and nationalism in Britain and France. Classicism brought Ancient Greece to the fore once again, and made journeys to the Greek land frequent. On the other hand, once England and France developed a national consciousness, they could not perceive the world in another way than composed of nations like themselves. For the first time, it seemed natural to raise the question: what had remained of the Ancient Greek nation? Where were its descendants? It seemed natural that these were to be found in the same geographical area, and that they would be recognizable by language and culture. The hypothesis that nationalism might not apply to the Ancient Greek case, or that centuries of History had changed peoples’ forms of consciousness did not strike their minds. And since Ancient Greece was the model of many Western nationalists in their fight for freedom, it was almost natural that the descendants of these Ancient Greeks were seen as the nation par excellence.

The first Greek nationalists
Therefore, the image of a Greek nation kept enslaved by the Turks was created in the West much earlier than in the Ottoman Empire. It was adopted by certain intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire, who had the chance to study in Western Europe and, therefore, brought these European ideas in their homeland. The motivations of this first Greek nationalist class are to be found in the experiences of these people who, once in the West, suddenly realized how the West considered them: they felt all the pride associated to the glory of Ancient Greece, of Plato and Aristotle, of whom they were recognized as the direct descendants. In fact, the West saw these young students as the representatives of the intellectual elite of the Greek Nation. And yet, there was, strictly speaking, no such nation. At a quick look at those people who were supposed to constitute the Greek nation, the Greek-speaking orthodox population of the Empire, Koraes was struck by their absence of national consciousness and knowledge of the Greek language. The population of the Empire did not conceive themselves as a sovereign people because such an idea was unconceivable at that place and time. Therefore, the first national priority for Koraes was not the struggle for political independence but for intellectual and cultural elevation. In other terms, Koraes wanted to show to the West that this nation, of which he was seen as a representative, really existed and deserved admiration. Koraes therefore experienced a sense of personal dignity and national pride as being one and the same thing.

The efforts of Ypsilanti for an uprising of the Orthodox population against the central government were of a much different nature. Although there were certainly references to the Ancient Greek heritage, the main reference for this Revolution was the support of Russia in a general uprising of all the Christian populations kept under a Muslim rule. In other terms, Ypsilanti continued the old Russian policy of using the Orthodox populations of the Empire to expand its influence and control. In these uprisings, references to the sovereignty of the people, or to ideas of self-determination, were more rare.

We know that what we call Greek Revolution was in fact a complex phenomenon, a mix of Greek Revolutionary ideas, of religious uprising and social conflicts between brigands and notables. The intervention of the West and the creation of the Greek State would give to Greek Nationalism a concrete form –at least for a while.
The Greek civic nationalism

The first Greek Nationalism was civic—and not ethnic. Greek citizenship was awarded to any person born in the Greek State and believing in Christ. But the faith in Christ was not conceived as an ethnic distinction, as the national characteristic of a people, but rather as a way of putting forward the religious beliefs of the people and finding a way of uniting people who were living in the Greek state but were divided by language, social class etc. Greek Nationalism was also individualistic and not collectivistic. I have not found, as in the French case, images of Greece as a collective body, as more than the total of its individuals, The only such images come from western Europe, such as Delacroix’s painting of Greece as a woman emerging from the battlefield.

The model of Greek Nationalism was France, England and Germany. The idea was that an imitation of Western Europe was natural for Greeks, because that would indirectly lead them back to Greek Antiquity. The cultivation of Ancient Greek, the neoclassicist architecture, the reshaping of administrative divisions to fit the Ancient Greek model proved one thing: Greek Nationalism was adapting itself to the ideal image which Western Europe had of Ancient Greece: in fact, as in a theatre, Greek Nationalists were recreating Ancient Greece on a national basis. For Western Europe, as well as for many Greek Nationalists, that was enough. In the beginning, such goals as territorial aggrandizement or, especially, ethnic considerations such as the liberation of the remaining Greeks of the Ottoman Empire, were secondary.

The Great Idea, put forward by Colettis in the 1830s, did not immediately acquire its famous and well-known sense of conquest of Constantinople. It meant, at first, an organization of the country in order to become culturally homogeneous. Later, Colettis used the term “Megali Idea”, but it was not clear whether that meant the recreation of the Byzantine Empire on a Greek basis of just the annexation of some parts of the Balkan area by the Greek State. In any case, it is difficult to know whether the Great Idea corresponded to a specific nationalistic vision of things. Probably it did. But it most certainly provided a unique solution for the canalization of violence from within the country to the outside. The Great Idea transformed the threatening brigands into national
soldiers and gave them a cause, in the same way that the Crusades gave a cause to all the violent elements of Western Europe and, by directing that violence to the East, kept it out of Europe.

**The ethno-collectivistic turn: from Paparrigopoulos to Communism**

The real change in the nature of Greek nationalism came in the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Two elements are responsible for this change. First, the limited successes of the Greek state and a feeling of betrayal from the Great Powers. Second, the pressures exercised from members of the Greek-speaking populations of the Ottoman Empire, who were initially excluded from important positions in the Greek administration and were not allowed entrance in the nation. Last but not least, the violent introduction of German phyletic nationalism came as a form of challenge of the very existence of the Greek nation, through Falmereyer’s work. More than an identity crisis, Falmereyer made Greeks realize that Europe was more and more understanding nationalism in ethnic-and not in civic-terms.

How did these elements combine in the Greek case? The feelings of exhaustion, of failure and betrayal from the West developed a movement of rejection. This rejection of the West focused on the idea of a specific and unique Greek identity, which was incompatible with a total imitation of the West, and which had to find its own way. Like in Germany or Russia, frustration led to rejection. The pressure of the “Eterochtones”, i.e. Greeks who were not citizens of the Greek State, raised the problem of the integration of people who were not citizens of the Greek State. A new definition of nationality was needed. Falmereyer’s work provided the form later adopted by this new construction. This is not the end of the list. An insistence on the Ancient Greek heritage was felt as anti-religious. In fact, all the references of the Greek Orthodox Church, such as the Byzantine Empire, were condemned and seen as centuries of tyranny and obscurantism. Therefore, the popular reaction against the elites often took the form of religious movements. For instance, people would not tolerate a monarch (Othon) who would not be Christian. Orthodoxy became a weapon against people who destroyed the Orthodox monasteries to create Churches following a Western model.
The solution to all these contradictions, and the new form of Greek nationalism was the work of Constantine Paparrigopoulos. Paparrigopoulos is in himself a splendid illustration of the use of social sciences and especially History in the service of national ideology. This is not unique in Greece, not even in the Balkans. Post-Revolutionary French historiography did not evolve out of a scientific curiosity for the past, but under the need to rationalize and give meaning to the brutal choc of the French Revolution, and legitimize it.

Paparrigopoulos’ Greek Nation is, above all, historical. Its identity is its history, or, rather, the Greek Nation is to be understood as the moving force of History in the Balkans. The Greek Nation has always had a mission of advancement and civilization. For Paparrigopoulos, the Greek Nation is not exclusively linked to a particular national characteristic, be it language or religion. In fact, the remarkable thing is the way the author copes and maintains the unity of the nation through History, while accepting the fact that race, religion, language, and even the consciousness of the nation, have changed in time. He sees the nation as a mystic entity surviving through various transformations. It is also interesting to point out that, in his Preface, although he starts speaking about the Greek Nation, this term gradually fades out and most of the author’s text deal with the notion of Hellenism. It is as if, little by little, the Nation disappeared; as if the actual people who make the national community do not matter, as if the role of these people was ultimately subordinated to the power of this mystical force which he calls Hellenism. With Paparrigopoulos, we therefore observe two changes. First, although none of them acquires exclusive importance, it is clear that ethnic elements are introduced as criteria of Greek nationality. Secondly, the actual individuals who make up the nation become insignificant: they are but pawns, instruments of a collectivity, the Greek nation in its alleged historical unity, which is finally self-conceived as an instrument of a quasi-divine and impersonal idea, Hellenism.

With Paparrigopoulos, the liberal and civic idea of the Greek nation is replaced by an ethnic nationalism. His ethnic definition of nationality will lead, in 1922, to the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey, not on the basis of free choice but on the basis of religious belonging. The collectivity which makes the Greek nation is
finally subjugated to an abstract and a-temporal idea: Hellenism. One may call this idea Hellenism, Greek civilization, or Helleno-Christian civilization, the form stays the same.

There will be another transformation of Greek nationalism during Greek History: communist ideology rejects the abstraction of such ideas as Hellenism and refers to the Greek people. Communist ideology is also collectivistic, i.e. it also focuses not on the actual individuals who make the nation but on a collective individual, the collectivity per se, which is the ultimate source of legitimacy. This collectivity does not derive its legitimacy from its historical past, or from an Ancient idea, but from its orientation, for History as future. In other terms, this collectivity is also the instrument of History, as destined to suffer and starve for the ideal collectivity which will emerge and exist for the future generations. A civic-individualistic nationalism will however reemerge in the 1950s and the 1970s.

**The changing goals of Greek Nationalism**

The achievements of the Greek nation depend on the changing goals of Greek nationalism. These goals are in turn dependent on the type of nationalism adopted and the vision of the place of the Greek nation in the world. Let us take a few examples.

In the first decades of the Greek State, the principal effort of the state and the Greek intellectuals was to promote ancient Greek language and culture, to establish the idea that the new Greek State is the legitimate heir of Greek Antiquity and its inhabitants the descendants of the Ancient Greek thinkers and artists. Emphasis was given to the cultivation of Ancient Greek language, to the development of Universities, to the promotion of literacy among all citizens. The second goal was, of course, the creation of a modern state, i.e. a state similar to the States of the Western Nations, since these were the models of Greek nationalism. The relation between the citizens of this new State and the “Greek” subjects of the Ottoman Empire was seen as a relation of conflict, not of brotherhood.

The transformation of Greek nationalism into an ethnic type changed the orientation and goals of the State. Since nationality was defined in ethnic terms, co-religionist hellenophones of the Ottoman Empire were brothers waiting to be liberated by
the free Greeks of the Greek State. And since ethnic attributes were objective proofs of one’s belonging to the Greek Nation, propaganda was seen as a legitimate way to convince these populations that their nature led them to the Greek Nation rather than to the rum millet of which they were still members.

Economic growth was never seen, as in England, Germany or Japan, as a goal in itself, as a matter of national prestige for the Greek nation—at least not until the 1950s. Economic growth has always been dependant on—and sustained by—other goals, such as the development of a strong army for the purposes of the Great Idea or the creation of infrastructures inside the country in order to unify and modernize it.

**Conclusion**

The spirit of Greek nationalism, its nature and its goals, changed at least three times during its History. Greek nationalism was born as a civic and individualistic movement. Its primary focus was freedom, and the way to achieve it was the adoption of the western image of Ancient Greece. It was transformed once in the mid-19th century, into an ethnic-collectivistic type, whose primary goal became territorial expansion. Although expansionism ceased after the Defeat of 1922, Greek nationalism remained ethnic and collectivistic, at least until the 1950s.

Economic growth occurred in Greece during the periods when Greek nationalism viewed economy as valuable for the nation. This happened mostly after 1922, but did not constitute a sustained goal. Greek nationalism is not focused on the economic sphere, although it has valued many times in the past. One could mention Venizelos’ economic efforts after 1922, Caramanlis’ “evimeria”, or the recent mobilization of the Greek nation for the entry into the “eurozone”. This interrelation between nationalism and the economy will be the primary focus of my research project. It is hardly studied by economists, and usually neglected by scholars of Greek nationalism. By examining periods of economic growth in Greece, I will try to test whether the Greek case confirms Greenfeld’s hypothesis that nationalism is, indeed, the “spirit of Capitalism”.