Syncretism as Mixture and as Method
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Abstract

Among the several models in circulation today for the study of socio-cultural admixture, syncretism, although relatively neglected, remains the most promising one. With its rich history of meanings and debates, it offers a broad variety of applications from which Modern Greek can greatly benefit. This paper defines syncretism as the agonistic yet symbiotic coexistence of incompatible elements from diverse traditions, describes its purview, and explains its relevance for scholarship in a multicultural, global world.

Like all advanced interdisciplinary fields in the wake of poststructuralist theory, Modern Greek has been undergoing a large-scale “ethnographic” phase with a strong interest in studying the construction of collective identity and history. While earlier in this phase minorities became the exclusive center of militant inquiry, recently the range has broadened dramatically to include not just the oppressed or silenced but Others in general, regardless of their identity politics. In turn, notions of the Same have become far less monolithic or moralistic. Thus a far more intricate and inclusive picture of human interaction has been emerging. Comparative approaches still prevail, and for good reason, but they have acquired greater rigor as the old inside-out, us-them separatist dichotomies that marred progressive scholarship give way to a multiplicity of distinctions within complex categories. Furthermore, simplistic views of division have been challenged by a growing attention to transmutations occurring in borderlands. Indeed, borders (of lands, positions, forces, or identities) are increasingly seen as sites of mixture rather than separation.

Inspired by the pre–World War II avant-garde, early postmodernism understood comparison in terms of eclecticism and playfulness. Thus it advocated the ironic or jarring juxtaposition of disparate elements, the recycling of cultural debris through bricolage, the collagistic combination, the non-linear or inconsequential montage. That era rejected the modernist causality of “influence” and introduced the concept of “intertextuality.” Some twenty years later, late postmodernism, building...
on the critique of metaphysics in early postmodernism, understood comparison in terms of admixture and contamination. Thus it advocated a performative politics of identity, emphasizing mimicry, cross-dressing, passing, and other forms of border crossing and gender blending. Intertextuality was politicized too and turned into “appropriation.”

In the postmodern framework, historical and cultural formations are no longer perceived as closed and independent but constantly engaged in a complex traffic of ideas, forms, and practices. Lines between cultures become more interesting than origins or structures. “Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more ‘foreign’ elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (Said 1993:15). Following this new understanding of comparison, the last several years have produced many models of impurity and ec-centricity in an effort to help us “think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its own particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others” (32).

Such models of ec-centricity have allegorical potential. Understandably, they have elicited strong emotional and (auto)biographical identifications with their narratives. Still, their analytical capabilities seem rather limited, as indicated by the scant philosophical attention they have attracted so far. Furthermore, as expressions of postmodern multiculturalism, they have often led to separatist paths (pursuing a pure authenticity of experience) and in the end have served essentialist claims. “Diaspora,” for example, emphasizes dissemination and dispersion, rather than mixture, and carries certain strong ethnic (Armenian, Jewish, Greek) associations. “Creolization” has narrow disciplinary and geographical origins since it has been used by linguistics for certain languages in specific parts of the world and contexts of domination (Stewart 1999:42–44). “Mestizo,” “mulatto,” and the more popular “hybrid” present similar, if not greater, problems. The first two have had specific geographical applications and connotations, and they refer to the mixing of parentages and races. “Hybridity” comes from genetics and denotes gene combinations—the crossing of species, breeds, races, etc. Thus its origins lie in the theory of evolution, which partly explains its popularity within identity politics.

Edward Said’s model of “contrapuntal” comparison, with its rich musical resonance (combining simultaneously two musical lines), is more interesting because it avoids the organicist and syntheticist pitfalls of the other conceptions. However, it confirms their faith in a dialectical and teleological order (the ultimate enfolding of problematical elements within a higher, redemptive structure) when Said constantly
applies it to the binary metropolis vs. colony scheme. This may run against his better intentions. Indeed, since “we are dealing with the formation of cultural identities understood not as essentializations . . . but as contrapuntal ensembles” (Said 1993:52), we may need to look beyond oppositions, and especially ones that invite moralistic examinations (namely, liberationist accounts of resistance and restitution).

A more interesting model has been Roland Greene’s “new world studies,” where “the emphasis typically falls on discursive currents that move through several texts and traditions, on the inflection of one standpoint by another, and on transhistorical dialogues over formative new world issues carried out across differences of race, language, institution, and nation” (Greene 1998:88). This approach places its materials in a context that “emphasizes less their sheer authority than their participation in broad cultural negotiations that overgo linguistic and national boundaries” (88). Here “mutually critical standpoints are found to inhabit each other and to fashion new worlds” (91). What is limiting in this model is once again its reliance on the colonial vs. native model, on an approach with double consciousness that may be appropriate for the author’s interest in the American continent but would not transfer easily to other settings such as the Mediterranean. The model’s most promising feature, though, is the emphasis on world making. When Greene argues that “new world studies throws into relief the event or process of worldmaking itself as both a cultural and a critical procedure” (93), we can extend the sense of “new” to make it include any new world, beyond the Old/New World distinction, and view new world studies as indeed “the investigation of worlds and their making” (95), the exploration of “a plurality of worlds coming into existence” (101). We also ought to enrich this view with Cornelius Castoriadis’s notion of the “instituting society” (1989), which represents autonomous self-creation in history.

The oldest model for the study of socio-cultural mixture is the one that deserves the greatest scrutiny, namely, the syncretist view. Although it has a long and contentious history, when brought into the conversations on cultural studies it can make a substantial contribution in both epistemological and methodological terms. In many respects, the history of syncretist controversies is the prehistory of the current debates on multiculturalism. In turn, these debates can sharpen our understanding of what a syncretist approach has to offer. Indeed, with the emergence of mixture as a central concern for numerous domains, from scholarship to public policy, the time is ripe for a postmodern examination of syncretism.

Among the Modern Greek scholars preoccupied during the 1990s with phenomena of impurity, two have been explicitly drawn to syncretism,
anthropologist Charles Stewart in religious studies and cultural critic Dimitris Tziovas in literature. Stewart has focused consistently on the history of syncretist research, especially in race and religion, refining its scope and pointing to the pitfalls of past adoptions. Within his chosen disciplinary range, he has offered the widest possible context for a comparative study of the Greek case. Tziovas has ranged more broadly across terms and disciplines. Inspired by Homi Bhabha’s ideas of hybridity, ambivalence, and interstices, he has criticized the colonial politics of the binary logic of Greek studies in literature, anthropology, sociology, and other fields. As a way of transcending hierarchical polarities, he first proposed “to explore the hybridity of the Greek phenomenon more than its dualism; its ambiguity more than its single meaning” (1995:357). Later, he recommended a “hybridic or syncretic” approach, which would acknowledge Hellenism “as a cultural mixture and not something invulnerably unalloyed” (1996a:3). Expanding on this, he explained that this approach does not presuppose homogenization, fusion, or flattening of oppositions as much as accepting and highlighting them. Such an approach does not aim at organic synthesis as much as at multifarious mixture where the constitutive elements remain distinct and visible, functioning in a coordinated, interrelated, and above all dialogic manner. Therefore, it consists not in a static or linear but a dynamically flexible view with antithetical factors which tries to avoid as much as possible a polar or dialectical understanding of identity. (1996b:8)

What matters today are borders, distances, transitional spaces between cultures and their works. “The older bipolar, hierarchical models of comparative study give their place to the tracing of that ambivalent and ambiguous intermediate space where texts, genres, races, languages, and cultures converge and diverge, contract and mingle. . . . What is interesting today is transition as a process of mediation” (1999:7). Finally, in his latest paper (2001), Tziovas has offered a summation of his position, illustrated with several fascinating examples.

The timely views advanced by Stewart and Tziovas resonate with other scholars’ epistemological inquiries, such as the work of Margaret Alexiou on ritual, Giorgos Anagnostou on ethnicity, Eleni Bastá on architecture, Vangelis Calotychos on postcoloniality, Smaro Cambourelli on gender, Stathis Gourgouris on myth, Gregory Jusdanis on nation formation, Janet Hart on human movement, Rene Hirschon on refugees, Gail Holst on popular music, Yiorgos Kalogerás on immigrant literature, Martha Kliromonos on diaspora, Ioanna Laliotou on migrants, Artemis Leontis on topography, Andonis Liakos on historiography, Peter Mackridge on Solomos, Neni Panourgia on identity, Savas
Patsalidis on theater, Marianna Spanaki on women, Susan Sutton on place, Nanos Valaoritis on poetic language, and Karen van Dyck on translation. Clearly, the study of syncretism reflects the scholarly direction, intellectual quest, and cultural fermentation of our time. A more systematic and yet focused understanding of the term might give us an even better sense of its analytic capabilities.

The term “syncretism” refers to the cultural mixture of diverse beliefs and practices within a specific socio-historical frame; to the congruity of dissent within such a frame, despite differences of opinion; to the non-organic solidarity of heterodoxy which constitutes a collective worldview; to the forging together of disparate, often incompatible, elements from different systems; and to their intermingling and blending. Syncretism connotes not juxtaposition (the early postmodern idea of comparison) or fusion (the late postmodern idea of comparison) but mixing and mingling. It is by definition a cultural term that presents operations as inter-cultural and intra-cultural ones (since there is a possibility of syncretism within a culture and not only through contact among cultures).

In a vague sense, of course, syncretization is the process of culture itself. Some might also argue that we live in peculiarly syncretic times—witness, for example, the current scholarly fascination with interdisciplinarity. But it would be a gross generalization to suggest that all cultures are syncretic or that all culture does is syncretize, since that universalist claim would render the term meaningless. It would be equally wrong to neglect the strong anti-syncretic forces operating within cultures. Instead of defining all contact as syncretic, it might be more useful to see syncretism as a particular set of critical practices of translating, exchanging, and mingling that serve social groups at a certain period in time. At the same time, syncretism has a flexible meaning, offering a wide range of applications, since this process has been historically constituted and revised.

Interestingly enough, the word “syncretism” itself has a complex, shall we say, syncretic, etymological history. First, a Greek word originally used by Plutarch in the first century A.D. to convey how the quarreling Cretans reconciled their differences to ward off a common enemy (syn-kretizein), it came to connote the closing of ranks among those engaged in internecine strife before common enemies, and more broadly, the mixture of incompatible ideas or practices. When understood in political/humanistic terms (according to its original use in Plutarch and its return in Erasmus), syncretism is a positive notion of harmonization and solidarity—the balancing of diverse or opposite tenets and practices, especially when success is partial or the result heterogeneous.
Second, when used in theological arguments (especially during the seventeenth-century “syncretistic controversy” surrounding the efforts of the theologian George Calixtus for a united Protestant church), a new etymology of *syn-krasis*/co-mixing prevailed, and the term acquired the often disparaging meaning of artificial, illegitimate fusion; of betraying original principles; of attempting to secure unity at the expense of truth; of compromising eirenicism. But since at the time of the “syncretistic controversy” some of the interest was in peace (among warring Christian communities engaged in “tribal” strife), the word’s political connotations were not entirely lost.

Nor were they lost when, third, the term was adopted in mid-nineteenth century by the history of religion. That discipline understood it as the blending of elements from diverse religions into a single doctrine or cult, and used it in largely pejorative terms, since it too saw syncretism as a movement toward more unified heterogeneity (though not homogeneity); toward a more cosmopolitan and at the same time less polytheistic unification of deities, pieties, and rituals; toward pantheism (as opposed to monotheism).

Lastly, there is an eighteenth-century etymology that derives syncretism from the Greek *kratos*/power and could lead us to various federalist or republican directions in political theory.

A concept widely used in religious studies, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, theology, and political theory, syncretism refers to the alliance of incompatible movements and positions in opposition to a hostile one. In a syncretic situation, two or more forces declare a truce and agree to disagree against another force whose opposition allows for no agreement (Chinitz 1990). When there is pluralism but no fusion (such as amalgamation or synthesis), dogmas may accept a de facto co-existence in disagreement. Thus syncretism presupposes an agonistic interaction among incompatible systems of discourse and practice, out of an encounter involving strife. It refers to the incorporation of foreign elements from one system to another that cause contradiction and contestation. Syncretism is not the continuous hermeneutic process of reinterpretation. In fact, it constitutes a radical challenge to hermeneutic principles and procedures. When a system reinterprets and incorporates, there is less change since alien elements are accommodated. But when a system is confronted with incompatible elements, mere adoption is almost impossible. “What distinguishes syncretism, viewed in this manner, from the normal hermeneutic process which . . . traditions undergo, is that the new insights are incompatible with beliefs that are essential to the identity of a . . . tradition. . . . Syncretism denotes the adoption of beliefs which alter the essential experience and the central beliefs of a tradition” (Vroom 1989:34). Syncretism requires a major
adjustment to the hermeneutic horizon and method of the system itself. “Due to syncretism basic beliefs are reinterpreted in such a way that they a) are radically modified in their meaning and b) are no longer basic to the configuration of the belief-system. The original identity of such a configuration is thereby changed” (33).

Any particular case of syncretism is necessarily a temporary arrangement since the clash of contested meanings requires some resolution.

To describe syncretistic situations as temporary is to indicate that they are a situation of tension (whatever the various protagonists may say about harmony, toleration, etc.) and that they are to be understood entirely in terms of [system] dynamics. . . . To emphasize tension . . . should not be taken as an invitation to conclude that syncretism is altogether incoherent. A syncretistic situation is coherent even while demanding resolution. . . . [T]he elements involved in a syncretistic . . . situation need not necessarily be themselves all of [the same] origin but may include political, philosophical, [religious] and other . . . elements of all kinds. For the above reasons I would define syncretism as the temporary ambiguous coexistence of elements from diverse contexts within a coherent [systemic] pattern. (Pye 1971:93)

This raises the question whether syncretism refers to an operation or a result, a process or a structure. Since syncretism is always a transitional phase, it is probably better to study it as a process, without, though, refusing to look at it also as a temporary formation with several ambiguous features—“a composite of opposing tendencies rather than [a process] driven by a unicausal dynamic” (O’Neill 1996:144).

Accordingly, syncretism may be proposed as the comparative study that analyzes the agonistic yet symbiotic interaction among incompatible elements, looking at their various beginnings, times of arrival, intensity of participation, and ultimate fate. Rather than seeking the space where differences are conflated or celebrated, it examines both unities and dispersals, investigating the interrelation among competing forces as they converge temporarily at particular times and on particular terrains. “[T]he boundaries between the domestic or national, and the regional or international milieux, are replaced in this model by altogether more fluid transactional flows within and between the different levels and agencies . . .” (O’Neill 1996:85). This is what makes the model so dynamic. “The coexistence of conflict and consensus, flux and equilibrium, within this unique . . . system provides the key to understanding the variable, hybrid and indeterminate quality of the . . . integration project” (112). Syncretism offers “a model of integration that incorporates conflicting expectations and suggests a momentum driven by the competing impulses” (116) that constitute collective self-definition. The state of integration reflects both a creative tension and a
conditional equilibrium among the contending forces. In this way, society engages actively and creatively in self-instituting and world-making—in making new worlds come into existence or critically transform themselves. The investigation of syncretism shows how new worlds are produced and reinvented through clashes, negotiations, and alliances among forces.

Such a conceptualization becomes particularly significant in the study of national cultures. For the tendency today among scholars of multiculturalism, postcolonialism, and globalization theory is to renounce nationalism as a backward and inward-looking doctrine. Criticizing this narrow representation of nation-building, Gregory Jusdanis (2001) has shown that nationalism is itself a movement made up of many syncretic stages, which incorporates and rejects elements from both inside and outside, past and present, friends and foes, as it builds the national domain. Jusdanis convincingly presents the modern nation as both cosmopolitan and local, old and new, sometimes accepting while at other times resisting change. We can therefore bring a more complex view of the nation to bear on the study of worldmaking if we view national cultures generally as syncretic phenomena, constructed through processes of contestation, incorporation, rejection, and transformation of diverse elements taken from a variety of traditions for the purpose of creating an effective union. In this way, we can identify the simultaneous presence of the transnational in the national without falling into the trap of idolizing the global, the impure, the bastard, or the cosmopolitan in and for themselves.

Syncretism itself is neither “good” nor “bad.” It appears in particular moments during contact among cultures. It refers to transitional stages during which incompatible elements from diverse contexts co-exist agonistically within a coherent but ambiguous systemic formation. This understanding should also guard against thematization—a common mistake in cultural and social studies, which in the past has turned important notions such as writing, power, gender, and performance into the single self-reflexive theme of all culture or history. Syncretism should not be promoted as the main operation or cardinal theme of any human interaction.

This attempt at a sharper definition must conclude with two more cautionary notes about the elusiveness of syncretism. First, if and when historico-cultural developments produce a new arrangement and result in a new synthesis, the syncretic character of such developments is not communicated to subsequent stages. Synthesis occludes the syncretic process of the transitional phase that led to it. Second, syncretists rarely call themselves by this name (a view, incidentally, which should be taken into account as well). “Syncretists” are always branded opponents, for it
is the gatekeepers of orthodoxy and purity who raise the spectre of syncretism. “What the ‘syncretists,’ in Plutarch’s sense of the term, called a harmony, their opponents called a ‘hybrid’” (Moffatt 1951:155). This goes to emphasize that contesting is fundamental to syncretism, and therefore both views (one embracing, one denying it) deserve serious attention.

We can now move to describe briefly some of the important advantages that syncretism offers vis-à-vis other postmodern models of comparison.

(1) Because its scholarly origins lie in several disciplines, such as the history of religion, anthropology, and linguistics, the term possesses a valuable tradition of applications, debates, and examples in various fields, which gives it both historical depth and theoretical complexity. For example, syncretist approaches that have been applied to imperial, colonial, or polyethnic societies can help us understand that “the problems of cultural pluralism that have often been portrayed as those of traditional societies in the Third World, the ‘transitory ills’ of young nation-states, are in fact very much also the political issues of the modern, industrialized societies of the West today” (der Veer 1994:199). Syncretism fits well with postmodern interests in self-definitions of collective identity in that it explores heterodoxy underneath orthodoxy, the heretical at the center of the canonical, the peripheral at the heart of the central (Chung 2001).

(2) Because it has dealt with processes of indigenization, the history of syncretism incorporates another contemporary interest, the role of the native/local (including the post-colonial) not as an other/outside but as an active, creative part of, and participant in the mixture. Attention to syncretism turns the so-called politics of difference into an ethics of contestatory interaction since it focuses not on identity but on identification as a result of contentious contact. Thus we move from questions of nativism and authenticity not to celebrations of contamination, or to Buberian or Bakhtinian dialogue, but to an ethical acknowledgment of conflict. Syncretism is not about mere pluralism or diversity. Unlike hybridity, which can regress into an apotheosis of creole cultures and cross-breeding, syncretism does not glorify otherness but rather features competitive encounters of heterodoxy. An agonistic understanding allows us to refunction Plutarch’s original ethico-political coinage and recover the pre-theological, pagan stratum of a concept which, rather than sublating differences into monotheism, captured the Hellenistic and late antique ideals of a real heterogeneity of beliefs, practices, canons, genres, and dialects. In addition, it enables us to draw on Carl Schmitt’s friend-foe distinction (1990:26–27), since Plutarch himself says that one should be friends with a brother’s friend and
enemies with a brother’s enemy. Like the seventeenth-century religious controversy on syncretism mentioned above, debates about multiculturalism today try to settle the differences among competing cultural claims and establish shared principles of tolerance.

(3) As a non-holistic, non-static, non-conclusive condition, syncretism is counter-dialectical in that it does not involve synthesis, not even the impure fusion of hybridity. Its exploration contributes to what Said calls “the exposure and dramatization of discrepancy” (1993:33). Syncretism preserves individual characteristics of the combined beliefs while synthesis achieves the radical transformation of disparate cultural forces. It gathers in, while preserving a sense of diverse origins and modes. A syncretic study respects the complex tension among the mingling elements, stressing multiplicity, not singularity or dualism. In contrast to the dualism of border and postcolonial theory, with their hyphenated representation of exchanges between neighbors, syncretist approaches analyze interrelations among many forces as they converge on a certain terrain, helping us move beyond both divided and double consciousness. Working without an oppositional logic, it may not possess the allure of resistance, of anti-hegemonic struggle that theories of the subaltern exercise. Nor, to use Paul Gilroy’s phrase, does it deliver another “counter-culture of modernity.” The notion of syncretism retains the specific dynamic of inconsistencies or contradictions without either radicalizing or homogenizing the blending. It is the notion’s capacity to contain polyphony and draw attention to moments of inconclusive fusion that make it a useful tool for analysis.

(4) Syncretism has many sites and uses, and no particular moral or other color. Local uses that may aid self-definition. National uses that may help modernization. Collective uses that may contribute to the construction of origins. Colonial uses that aid domination. Personal uses that improve artistic creativity. Dogmatic uses that disparage other practices as heretic. Regional uses that resist homogeneity. Administrative uses that promote acculturation. Minority uses that appropriate majoritarian discourse and status. Socio-economic uses that aid development. Intellectual uses that discover common ground among schools of thought. Syncretism may entail resistance to outside forces as well as protest against local authorities. The history of the controversies surrounding syncretism also includes considerations of social policy, from colonial bureaucracy to social engineering, and therefore already incorporates discursive and institutional questions that attract a lot of interest today such as representation, surveillance, the panoptic gaze, the role of the intellectuals, cultural rights, affirmative action policies, and others.

(5) Furthermore, syncretism finds local uses in native theories of culture, and therefore contributes to the invention of traditions through
religion, literature, disciplinary research, and regional studies by folklorists, linguists, historians, and others. This intersection can enable us to discover what the locals believe about the syncretism of their culture—whether they embrace, advance, reject, hide it, etc. Thus this approach covers both syncretic assemblages and the ways in which attributions of syncretism are understood and negotiated by local and outside commentators.

(6) While they unfold, syncretic combinations are open-ended. Their development is not predetermined: they may evolve toward synthesis, or unravel in disarray. Accordingly, there are various gradations of syncretism and stages of mingling. Syncretism may remain in a state of creative or hostile symbiosis. It may move toward integration, acculturation, assimilation of one into another, or fusion of two or more. It may move toward fragmentation, collision, or dissolution. In general, syncretic processes may lead to equilibrium, synthesis, cohesion, or war. And of course there are active/open processes and past/finished ones. We ought to explore such possibilities without predetermining the outcome or seeking a teleological formula. Scholars “cannot always specify their field of study in advance, but must remain sensitive to the ways in which people negotiate and redefine the boundaries of their ideas and practices. Importantly, the fluidity and political contingency of such boundaries as ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ become part of the very subject-matter of syncretism rather than impediments to its study” (Shaw and Stewart 1994:10–11).

(7) As a list of possible combinations shows, from an epistemological viewpoint discussions of syncretism are rich in useful definitions and distinctions regarding cultural contact, which can be fruitfully used in most comparative studies. For example, the entry in Eliade’s Encyclopedia of Religion (Colpe 1987) lists the following presuppositions for syncretism: symbiosis, acculturation, and superposition; the following consequences of syncretism: transformation, disintegration, and absorption of elements; and the following parallel phenomena which may have had the same presuppositions but did not result in syncretism (and therefore should not be confused with it): synthesis, evolution, and harmonization. In general, we find a broad spectrum of processes and formations (from symbiosis to amalgamation, identification, metamorphosis, and dissolution), which can contribute to more detailed descriptions, better-defined approaches, and more meaningful exchanges. At the same time, there are many kinds of contact and degrees of tension. We therefore need to distinguish carefully among terrains and intensities of syncretic mingling.

(8) Syncretism allows us to focus on, and acknowledge, unique combinations, paradoxical mixtures, and original constructions. The
goal of this focus, though, should not be to disassemble minglings, isolate their components, show that they have been invented, and prove that mixtures are constructs. Over the last few years, there has been an increasing awareness that, just as colonial powers entailed the categorizing of people into essentialized ‘tribal’ entities with fixed boundaries (‘you are the Igbo’), anthropological hegemony now entails taking apart practices and identities which are phenomenological realities for those who use them (‘your tradition is invented’). In our enthusiasm for deconstructing syncretic traditions we may have invented another kind of intellectual imperialism. (Shaw and Stewart 1994:23)

Instead, those phenomenological realities should be respected as they often constitute noble, original, bold creations of the human spirit that contribute to a good life.

If at the outset we acknowledge the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences—of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures—there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and essentially separate status. Yet we would wish to preserve what is unique about each so long as we also preserve some sense of the human community and the actual contests that contribute to its formation, and of which they are all a part. (Said 1993:32)

A constructivist understanding of syncretism concentrates on transitional stages of dynamic mingling that eventually give rise to new worlds—for example, nations, governing systems, cultures, sciences, and literatures.

A syncretist approach hopes to overcome the inside-outside, giving-receiving dichotomies of traditional cultural study by emphasizing mutual relations (as opposed to one-way impact) and processes (as opposed to autonomous works). Instead of representing influence as a one-way path, proceeding from the metropolis to the margins, it shows the complexity of creation, including the capacity of the minor, the peripheral, and the postcolonial to activate their own considerable force in the socio-cultural sphere. It studies how elements are combined, reworked, or cast off, and evaluates what has been gained and lost in the process. It stresses the internal complexity of works, schools, or traditions. It highlights dynamism and tension more than assimilation (influence) and fusion (intertextuality).

In a sense, this approach is a comparative study done internally. Rather than seeing comparison as an external act bearing on individual works, institutions, archives, or traditions, it tries to uncover the com-
parative work that has already taken place during their emergence. Instead of looking for what a system or collectivity have borrowed from others, it identifies incorporated elements of other systems within its primary one. Contact (friendly, aggressive, or competitive) originates at the borders but is accomplished in the heartland.

In its most basic form, syncretism entails the study of contingent, experimental combinations that have been fundamental to the formation of new traditions and worldviews. Its advocacy does not mean that we should abandon everything we do and concentrate exclusively on it. Neither should it lead to its unqualified acceptance and uncritical pursuit. By suggesting that, at certain moments, cultures and regimes go through complex transitional phases of indeterminable fermentation, the hope is that, in addition to honoring synthesis in the form of historical invention or artistic achievement, we can begin to explore the syncretic formation of traditions, collectivities, schools, genres, or disciplines and their worldmaking creations.

In fact, the growing scholarly trend within Modern Greek Studies described at the beginning of this essay can also be observed in recent Greek artistic creations that have been constructing a new world right now before our very eyes. For example, syncretic currents are evident in today’s popular music, with its combination of elements from Armenian, Sephardim, and hip hop song writing; in gallery installations of wildly inventive mixed media; in movie making, where for decades Theo Angelopoulos, with his drastic interest in borders, has been cultivating the ground for films that explore “others” within Greece and beyond; in performance art, where modes originating in modern dance, folk ritual, and improvisation are extensively combined. Most conspicuously, syncretism reigns in historiographical metafiction—novels that self-consciously follow the transmutations of identity through different periods of local and global history and through transnational terrains that host a flow of populations and individuals across barriers that were meant to segregate them. This vast amalgamation of cultures has become the main horizon of postmodern Greek fiction. Within this horizon, people move across layers of borders, pass over frontiers of collective identification, traverse lands of origin and memory, inhabit several territories simultaneously, contest boundaries, and negotiate dividing lines.

Critical thought in Greece has begun to show appreciation for these, as well as older, artistic mixtures, though in an intuitive more than theoretical fashion. For example, P.D. Mastrodimitris and Pavlos Tzermias have looked at the Greek “synthesis” that often reconciled incompatible intellectual traditions over the last three centuries. Fragkiski Abatzopoulou has examined the inherent otherness of Greek ethnicity in literature.
Anna Kafetsi has discussed the “syncretism” of modernist art and Kostas Georgousopoulos the “creole” nature of theater, while in a series of essays Takis Theodoropoulos has been defending the right to (and pleasure of) multiple identities—Greek, European, Balkan, Mediterranean, etc. Examples can be easily multiplied, as they appear everywhere, from treatises to newspaper articles.

As Greece is changing very rapidly and global Hellenism in general is undergoing another major and bewildering transformation, it appears that the syncretist approach is ordained by the very historical moment. It appeals to many of us because it is dictated by our subject of study and also captures our own cultural experience. When we look “beyond the Acropolis,” as Tziovas admonishes, the first thing we see is that beautiful small church of St. Demetrius “Loumbardiaris” at the foot of the Philoppapos hill, whose architectural style and materials are a living monument to Neohellenic syncretism. The creative effort to forge a dynamic admixture of heterodox elements still shows, and stands. Heraclitean harmony holds.

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