The Political Thought of
Gemistos Plethon: A
Renaissance Byzantine
Reformer*

N. Patrick Peritore
University of Missouri

Modern modes of thought often have roots that reach back into earlier periods of history. Peritore presents an illuminating analysis of an early development of nationalist myth by Georgios Gemistos Plethon and its practical application as a means of national mobilization against the Turkish threat to the Byzantine Empire. Plethon, an important figure in the diffusion of Platonic ideas to fifteenth-century Italy, bases his proposals for radical reforms of class, military, taxation, penal, and economic structures on a prescient awareness of the persuasive power of nationalist ideology. In the present article the author examines the background, philosophic origin, and practicability of his proposals.

N. Patrick Peritore, assistant professor of political science at the University of Missouri-Columbia, teaches political theory and the philosophy of social science method. He has published articles in The American Political Science Review and other journals. Currently he is working on a book dealing with the dialectical critique of contemporary philosophy.

Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355–1452) is one of the greatest and most controversial political theorists produced by the Byzantine Empire. Born in Constantinople, Plethon studied the Neoplatonic and Arab-Aristotelian philosophies in Turkish Adrianople under the direction of Elissaius, a member of the Sultan’s literary circle. Exiled from Constantinople, he settled in Mistra the capital of the despotate of the Morea

* This research was funded by a Summer Fellowship from the Research Council of the Graduate School, University of Missouri-Columbia. An earlier draft of this paper was delivered to the Central Renaissance Conference of the Renaissance Society of America, February 24–26, 1977, St. Louis, Missouri.
(Peloponnese) and served there as president of the high court and advisor to the Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (r. 1391–1425) and his son the Despot Theodore II (r. 1407–1428).1

Plethon is an important figure in the diffusion of Platonic learning to the West. His circle of students included the future Cardinal Bessarion and Manuel Chrysoloras, and while a member of the delegation to the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–1440) he lectured on Plato at the palace of Cosimo de’ Medici and is thought to have been a prime influence on the foundation of the Florentine Academy. His treatise “On the Differences between Aristotle and Plato” spawned an extensive and enlightening international controversy whose most important product was Bessarion’s “In Calumniatorem Platonis.” His reintroduction of Strabo’s geography to the West may have indirectly influenced Columbus’s voyages. His political works influenced Thomas More’s Utopia (through Theodore of Gaza), comprised parts of Erasmus’s library, and were reprinted in Antwerp and England. Plethon’s contributions to Western learning were so well remembered that Sigismundo Malatesta had his remains reinterred at Rimini in 1465, his epitaph reading in part “prince among the philosophers of his time.” 2


His influence on the West would, however, have been even greater had not most of his posthumous *Treatise on the Laws* been burnt by the Patriarch Scholarios in an unfortunate act of censorship. The portions which remain show Plethon to have been an advocate of a Platonic-Spartan theocracy which resurrected the pagan Hellenic pantheon. Interpretation of this unusual fragment must await the editing of Plethon's intervening works on ethics, religion, history, geography, and the sciences which presently lay unattended in European archives.  

---


This paper will examine the early political theory of Gemistos Plethon as contained in his treatises "Advice to the Despot Theodore Concerning the Affairs of the Peloponnese," presented probably in 1416, and "Georgios Gemistos to Manuel Palaeologus Concerning the Affairs of the Peloponnese" presented in 1418. Platonist in style, Plethon's treatises


advocate a rational and sweeping program of reform designed to engage national mobilization against the Turkish threat, which was to sweep away the Eastern Roman Empire in the decade after Plethon’s death. Plethon’s treatises are of interest today because they demonstrate an early and visionary appreciation of the preconditions of nationalism and national mobilization. Such terms must be used with care. Properly speaking, nationalism was only incipient in late medieval history. Hans Kohn defines nationalism as “a state of mind, permeating the majority of a people [which] recognizes the nation-state as the ideal form of political organization and the nationality as the source of all creative cultural energy and of economic well-being.”

It is apparent that the economic, technical, and political conditions for the communication and popular acceptance of such a contemporary notion did not exist in the late Byzantine Empire. Instead of a fully evolved modern form of nationalism we possess in Plethon’s treatises an extraordinarily prescient call for a “mass nationalist movement” based on a national myth and intended to bring about a social mobilization to meet the threat of Turkish invasion and inaugurate the “dynamic process whereby pre-national peoples enter into political community with their fellows.”

Thus, in support of the thesis that Georgios Gemistos Plethon deserves a place in the history of political thought for his early explication of the myth of nationalism and for his analysis of the socioeconomic basis of that mass mobilization which could give the myth objective efficacy, this paper will examine the philosophical origin of his proposals and their


feasibility given the current situation of the Palaeologan Empire. This examination will proceed under three heads: Plethon’s nationalism, his Platonically structured reforms, and his protectionism for economic development.

I. Plethon’s Myth of Hellenic Nationalism

In the opening paragraphs of his treatise to Manuel, Plethon states the myth of Hellenic nationality in the form of a persuasive definition. “We are . . . the Greek race which you rule, as is witnessed by our language and traditional culture.” *(Esmen . . . Hellènes to genos hōs hē te phōnē kai hē patrios paideia marturei.*) 7 His claim was, in effect, that the Hellenes comprised a “race” united by language, traditional culture, and occupation of a discrete territory, the Peloponnese. This definition requires detailed analysis prior to consideration of the role and origin of the nationalist myth.

First, in using the term “Hellene” in his definition, Plethon was rejecting the universalist claims of Roman Empire and embracing a nationalist particularism. Prior to the Palaeologan revival the Byzantines commonly called themselves *Rhômaioi* or Romans, thereby asserting their status as continuators of the Roman world state. This claim was accepted alike by the Crusaders, who called the Empire Roumania, the Turks (Roumelia), and Arabs (Roum). Before the Fourth Crusade the term Hellene had been persistently used to denote a pagan, idolater, or gentile as opposed to “Christianos,” and the criminal charge of “Hellenizing” implied both heretical and seditious behavior. Ethnic particularism was not politically important within the Empire, the highest offices being open to men of “barbarian” extraction who acquired the requisite Greek language and Christian religion. Indeed, the very term “Greek” was introduced by the Franks and bore a pejorative connotation.8 Thus, Plethon’s term, Hellene, marked a reconceptualization of the Byzantine situation and may well serve to establish his position as an early theorist of nationalism. It is instructive to note that the Council of Constance, held between 1414 and 1418, the period in which Plethon’s treatises were delivered, recognized


in its caucuses four "nations" defined in the ad hoc manner commonly used in university organization.9

Second, Plethon amplified the national myth by calling the Hellenes a "race" or "genos" and claiming an ethnic continuity which was, as we now know, largely spurious. The inhabitants of Greece, ancient, medieval, and modern alike, were always a congeries of ethnic and linguistic strains. Like ancient Greece, the medieval Peloponnese had experienced a great deal of population mixture; from the ninth through the fourteenth centuries emperors had deliberately settled Slavs and Albanians to repopulate this war-ravaged region. The satire of Mazaris, written in Plethon's time, listed the distinct peoples occupying the Peloponnese as "Greeks" (including Hellenized Slavs), "Italians" (French, Catalans, and Sicilian Greeks), "Illyrians" (Albanians, Vlachs, Arvanito-Vlachs, and other Latinophone tribes), "Egyptians" (Gypsies), and Jews (resident since 168 B.c.). Since many Grecophone peoples had fled to the mountains, this ethnic mixture was, in fact, poorly assimilated or "Hellenized." However, despite the historical inaccuracy of Plethon's ethnic theory, it was revived during the Greek revolt of 1822 and finds qualified support among some contemporary Greek scholars.10


Third, Plethon maintained that the Greek language bore witness to the historical unity of the Hellenic genos, a proposition which certainly requires qualification. It is true, on the one hand, that more continuity exists between Classical, Koinē, and Demotic (modern) Greek than between Latin and its modern Romance derivatives. But, on the other hand, only the educated governing class could appreciate this philological tradition in that court circles utilized an affected and consciously archaic "Attic" style which differed broadly from the spoken Demotic Greek. An unfortunate schism developed between the rich popular literature of Demotic song, epic, and paroimia, and an increasingly stilted official literature. Thus appreciation of the linguistic heritage was a function of education and class position and therefore not a potential element of popular national consciousness, whatever role it may have played in mobilizing the elite. In the nineteenth-century Greek revolt this linguistic schism was reborn in the struggle between puristic (katharevousa) and popular (dēmotikē) Greek for the position of official language.

Fourth, Plethon's claim that the ancestral culture (patrios paideia) witnessed the national unity of the Hellenes was not self-evidently valid given the pattern of Christian suppression and selective reappropriation of the Classical heritage which obtained throughout Byzantine history. However, against the backdrop of the Lascarid-Palaeologan Renaissance, Plethon's idea gains weight as a reflection of the self-consciously archaising nationalist movement occurring in court circles. The literati of this period had begun systematically to reappropriate classical Hellenic culture as the ideational framework for resistance to both Frankish and Turkish assimilation. Archaeological excavations and the careful collection and study of ancient manuscripts created a resurgence of classical learning later diffused to Italy by fleeing Greek scholars and antiquarians. Unfortunately, the educated elite alone benefited from the liberating impact of classical culture, while the masses remained in their state of religious credulity.

The fifth component of Plethon's nationalist myth was the claim that the Peloponnesse, the cradle of the Hellenic genos, had been continuously

occupied by Hellenes and was one of the points of origin of both the Roman and Constantinopolitan populaces. Beside its historical connections, the Peloponnese was to Plethon both fruitful and easily defensible given its topography and the recent fortification of the Isthmus of Corinth which in effect converted it into an island. Plethon's interest in the Peloponnese stemmed from his profession as tutor to its despot Theodore II Palaeologus (r. 1407–1428). The Despotate of the Morea (Peloponnese), an appanage of the Byzantine state, was created in 1262 and extinguished by the Turks in 1460. With some justice Plethon emphasized the rich history of this peninsula, the central landmass of both the restored Empire and of contemporary Greece. His reform proposals concerned a Morea recently subdued and reorganized, and were intended to revitalize its defensive and economic potential. For this reason an encomium of the Peloponnese opened the treatise and justified the concrete measures which followed.

What was the function of Plethon's nationalist myth? It can be argued that his treatises were designed to crystallize nascent nationalist sentiments current among the court intelligentsia in order to provide an ideological framework for popular mobilization. In the analogous case of early modern China, mobilization of the intellectuals preceded that of the masses, and arguments rehearsed in learned treatises later sparked popular ferment. A similar dynamic, and lag, in the diffusion of national consciousness seemed to be operative in the Byzantine situation. As Frederick Hertz noted,

In spite of the strong national consciousness and excessive pride of the Greek educated classes, however, it is doubtful how far there was a Byzantine nation. The population showed great difference in language and traditions.... Byzantine history is filled with revolutions and civil wars in which frequently parties invoked the help of foreign invaders without any regard for national interests.

Plethon's national myth in theory united the court elite with the peasant-soldier class against the "feudal" lords and monasteries, major power

16. Hertz, *Nationality*, p. 112. Cyril Mango argues, regarding the Late Empire, that "expressions of hellenism during these two or three centuries were largely rhetorical... they were confined to a very small circle of intellectuals and had no impact on the people. The handful of Byzantine neohellenists was eventually integrated into the broad stream of the Italian Renaissance...." "Byzantinism," p. 33. G. I. Bratianu, "'Démocratie' dans le lexique Byzantin à l'époque des Palaeologues," in Anon., *Memorial Louis Petit* (Bucharest: Institut Français d'études Byzantines, 1948), pp. 32–40.
blocs opposing rational mobilization for self-defense. Nationalist ideology could potentially have provided a common purpose for such an effort. By calling the Hellenes a *genos* united by language, ancestral culture, and common territory, Plethon anticipated those "objective bonds" which comprise the sufficient if not necessary conditions for nationality according to Hans Kohn.17

Thus, Plethon's myth is not to be judged in terms of its historical veracity but rather for its potential as a unifying article of political faith. For, as Ernst Cassirer argued, the objectivity of a myth lies neither in a metaphysical nor in an empirical-psychological "reality" which stands behind it, but in what myth itself is and achieves, in the manner and form of objectivization which it accomplishes. It is objective insofar as it is . . . one of the determining factors by which consciousness . . . creates a world of its own in accordance with a spiritual principle.18

Plethon's nationalism found its vehicle not in the Palaeologan Empire, but in the Hellenic revolt of 1821–1830. The reason for its failure in his time must be sought in study of his specific reform proposals and their feasibility given the social conditions of the Peloponnese.

II. Plethon's Reforms—National Mobilization on a Platonic Basis

The major portions of Plethon's treatises expound sweeping reforms of the socioeconomic and military structure of the Peloponnese. The central theme of these reforms is the rational mobilization of all socioeconomic and political factors in order to create a centralized, autarchic, and defensible territory.

The reform proposals are for the most part specific and practical, and their Platonic derivation is clear. In the manner of Byzantine intellectuals and as the greatest Platonist of his time, Plethon claimed to draw his insights from the wisdom and political practice of the ancients.19 This tendency was reinforced by his position as advisor to the Despot Theodore and the Emperor Manuel, a situation comparable to Plato's relationship to Dionysius of Syracuse. Plethon had given Plato's abortive political effort much consideration in his historical compilation "On the History

of the Hellenes after the Battle of Mantinea” and would in his own time attempt to replicate Plato’s intention “to exchange tyranny for a Spartan regime, and to decorate the fatherland with more clement and just laws...” 20 In the treatise addressed to Manuel, Pleton offered to administer his own program of reform. “If you should command me to put these things into practice, I will undertake these public services even if no one else would have the courage. I promise to organize and consolidate the affairs of the Peloponnese in action according to the plan which I have already set forth in words.” 21

The parallel in historical situations is reinforced by theoretical similarities. Like Plato, Pleton preferred monarchy to oligarchy and democracy because it provides the most noble laws and efficient administration. Neither oligarchy nor democracy promote the public good (tōn koinēi sympheronōtōn) because of the irrationality introduced into legislation by private interests, popular ignorance, and the struggle between rich and poor. 22 Like Plato’s monarchy Pleton’s, far from being conservative, was a force for social reform insofar as it required the ruler to act as a lawgiver. As Pleton noted, “There is no other cause of a polity’s faring well or ill than the excellence or weakness of the way in which its constitution (politeia) has been established.” 23 Impressed by the urgency of the Empire’s situation and encouraged by Manuel’s successful campaign against the Moreote nobles and rapid construction of the Hexamilion (a defensive fortification of the Isthmus of Corinth), Pleton proposed further rectification of the affairs of the Peloponnese through sweeping royal action. 24

If Manuel II Palaeologus was a highly accomplished littérature and man of affairs, his son Theodore more closely approximated Plato’s recalcitrant pupil in his love of pleasure. Pleton’s passionate exhortation to Theodore is in effect a Platonic disquisition on the morality and responsibility of the ruler and as such forms part of the Fürstenspiegel tradition. Pleton contrasted moral and immoral rulers and lawgivers, from Herakles to Nero, recalled the greatness of the Hellenes and lamented their current decline, and quite pointedly compared the lordly

20. Dalla Bona, Istorie, p. 19, my translation. Almost the entire first book of this compilation is devoted to the Syracusan episode.
yet plain eagle to the vain and worthless peacock.25 He did not fail to draw the lesson from his historical and natural examples: “One should, on every occasion, provide laws for the polis which are not only excellent, but also effective [kuriôn]. Ineffective laws are neither excellent nor of the least use, and laws become effective only through the virtues of the rulers. . . .” 26 There are two forms of life, argued Plethon, differentiated as to their object: pleasure or the good. A mixture of immortal soul and mortal body, man is either drawn by his opinions toward the soul and thus strives for the good, or succumbs to the animal part of his nature, and through the pursuit of pleasure is rendered evil.27 Borrowing an analogy from the Gorgias (521e) Plethon warns Theodore that he will act the part of a doctor, dispensing disagreeable if necessary advice, rather than acting the part of a cook who destroys the body politic by serving its cravings over its needs.28

Plethon’s most radical and complex proposal is definitely Platonist in implication. Like Plato in the Republic or Laws, Plethon was concerned to begin radical restructuring of the polity on a tabula rasa. He therefore proposed royal confiscation and redistribution of land to the working peasantry.

The judgment should be added to what has already been said that by nature all the land is equal and common to those dwelling on it; no one should lay claim to any part of the land as private but whoever wishes to plant should go where he will, build a house and plow as much land as he is willing and able, and each shall be master of this much land on condition that he occupies it and does not neglect to work it. No one will pay rent nor be troubled or annoyed by anyone other than those who have previously taken the land through work according to the law of common property which fits the case. Then if he should be of the Helot class, a third of his produce is taken for the common fund as we said and he is to be troubled no further, having once and for all discharged his debt. But if he is a soldier or some other among those serving the state through their acts, he shall pay no taxes but rather do the service to which he was appointed.29

26. Ibid., pp. 129.7–129.10.
27. Ibid., pp. 126.7–126.23. Compare Peri Aretôn in Migne, Patrologiae, columns 865–882, where the division between the irrational and rational portions of the soul becomes the basis for further development of a systematic ethics incorporating the four Platonic virtues and a great deal of Stoicism, as well as a genetic psychology.
Given Manuel's recent victory over the Peloponnesian Dynatoi, or landlords, Plethon optimistically concluded that this necessary condition for the creation of a Platonic system of classes could immediately be realized.

There are historical antecedents other than the Platonic for this proposal. For example, it closely paralleled the revolutionary program of the Hellenistic Spartan kings Agis (264–241 B.C.) and Kleomenes (263–219 B.C.) which Plethon, who lived only a few miles from medieval Sparta, examined in his histories. The Spartan Kings' redistribution of land and debt cancellation resembled Plethon's homesteading of "nationalized" land by peasants freed from feudal duties and bonds. The Spartan expansion of the army and citizenship rolls was approximated in his "pairing" of farmers and soldiers and their rotation of functions. The Spartan restoration of the "Lycurgan" lifestyle, considered by Plethon to be unrealistically harsh, found an echo in his advocacy of simplified living and sumptuary laws to restrain the extravagances of the wealthy.30

But the third and most concrete influence on Plethon's proposal for distribution of land to the tiller was the historical condition of Byzantine land tenure. A quick sketch of this issue may illuminate Plethon's proposal.31 The Byzantines continued the Roman practice of settling troops...


as peasant fighters on the borders of Empire (limitanei, foederati, akritai), and under the increasing pressure of Slav and Arab invasion the emperors, beginning probably with the Emperor Heraclius (610–641), extended the practice into the open lands within their own borders. Thus was inaugurated the Thematic system in which approximately 60,000 small estates were created for Greek, Slavic, and Armenian soldiers to guarantee their participation in border defense. The “picked men” of this group, armed, self-supporting, and ruled by the local chief, provided the core of the Byzantine army. Economically, thematic soldiers ranged from poor peasants to yeomen and petty gentry, but all maintained a minimal inalienable estate. According to E. H. Kantorowicz, the system was highly successful. “In addition to being more economical, the theme system created a reliable peasant militia which was willing to defend its property, which drew from the soil both its livelihood and the means for waging war, and which, on top of all that, even paid some taxes to the state.”32 However, certain factors favored encroachment on thematic lands by the large landlords (dynatoi, archontes). The adoption of the expensive plate armor of the knight (kataphract), corrupt and excessive taxation, the need for mercenaries in the capital, extensive famine, and the accession of the pro-aristocratic Comneni (1081–1185) were factors promoting the re-emergence of latifundia, although a fully developed feudalism never took root in the Empire due to the peculiarities of the grant in pronoiia. Pronoiial grants were estates or estate revenues for the life support of individuals serving the emperor. Their number and size were controlled by the emperor’s decrees, they were held only at his pleasure in return for services rendered, and subinfeudation was prohibited. This legal form could not be the basis of a truly feudal localism although the emperor’s ultimate right to control and reapportion pronoiiai depended on his military and financial strength and the political situation. Thus, when the aristocratic party prevailed, the emperor tended to grant


Exkousseia or special immunities from taxation, rights to farm taxes, and rights to settle foreigners, refugees, or vagabonds as serfs. The possibility always existed of the dynatoi abusing their privileges, and the emperor's right to revoke and dispossess them was but inconsistently exercised.

In order to counteract the influence of the military aristocracy, the Ducas dynasty (1054–1081), with church support, created a bureaucratic court aristocracy through pronoia grants. The Frankish conquest and partition of the Empire in 1204 superimposed western feudal relations on the Greek pronoia although the two modes of tenure were distinguished at law. Most importantly, during this period in the exile Kingdom of Nicaea, the Lascarid dynasty revived the peasant army (although mixed with mercenary contingents) and strict regulation of pronoia. The ascent of the Palaeologan dynasty to the Nicaean throne, however, meant a reversion to aristocratic control. “Michael Palaiologos abandoned the strict control that the emperors of Nicaea had exercised over pronoiai and great estates. To ensure the success of his usurpation, he was forced to buy the support of the most influential sections of society. The privileges of monasteries and of the great aristocracies were confirmed and extended.”

From their position of weakness the Palaeologan emperors could not reverse the “feudalizing” tendency even after their reconquest in 1261 of Constantinople and the Peloponnese.

Plethon's proposal was written after Manuel II had subdued the Moreote landlords and reclaimed royal rights over the Peloponnese. As a bureaucrat, jurist, and philosophical royalist, Plethon was hostile to the landed aristocracy and suggested confiscation of their estates. Because the land therein lay fallow while many peasants remained unemployed, he maintained, labor alone should give title to land, and the largely idle landlords should be forced to “accede to the common good.”

It is likely that through these means Plethon intended to fuse the highly diverse peoples of the Peloponnese into a unified fighting peasantry on the basis of population mixing, homesteading, and the development of a correspondence between the private interest in land and the common interest in survival of Empire. To this end he proposed the "introduction of the opinion" that the land is equal and common to all dwelling on it according to nature.

33. Angold, Exile, p. 141.
gram of land redistribution bears the imprint not only of Platonic philosophy but also of the earlier and relatively successful "Thematic system." Recent research has thrown our knowledge of Byzantine land tenure into a state of flux, and thus this connection between Plethon's desire for redistribution and the thematic system must remain an intriguing hypothesis open to further investigation.

In another controversial passage, Plethon attacked the power of the monasteries, one of the major obstacles to his program of redistribution and resettlement. He argued that the monks ("Philosophers") perform no public services in return for the public money which supports their "dronelike leisure." Thus their public support should be cut and their property taxed so that they must, through cultivation of their own considerable resources, become self-sufficient. "Much is needed for state affairs and even the whole of the treasury scarcely suffices for the common security. Then why in the world do we place this swarm of drones before the common good—those who do 'spiritual observances' and lie about—why should they profit so greatly rather than those doing many services for the public?" 

Despite the harsh language Plethon's proposal was surprisingly moderate, probably in view of the great residual political and economic influence of the Byzantine monasteries. Lavishly supported by state and personal bequests, the monasteries promoted a broad range of welfare services. However, the monks also led socio-religious factions and did not hesitate to utilize sedition and riot to gain their ends. The monasteries, already owning one-third to one-half of the total arable land of the Empire and at least one-fourth of the Peloponnese, continued to confiscate peasant freehold through fraudulent litigation, corruption of officials, and economic pressure, but most usually left the land uncultivated or tilled it in a most desultory fashion. While many emperors fought monastic oppression of the free peasantry, generating a series of Novels beginning in 935, the power-weak Palaeologans had little choice but to allow their encroachments.

Thus, Plethon's monastic policy was necessarily circumscribed by a realistic appraisal of the Palaeologan's power. By restricting state support and private bequests, and through direct taxation of an unspecified variety, he hoped to engender monastic cultivation and self-sufficiency, increasing thereby the funds available for state purposes. It must be noted that Plethon recognized the non-monastic clergy as civil servants worthy of modest public support. His hostility extended to the professed quietism of the monasteries rather than to the hierarchy of the Orthodox church, which would later serve as the vehicle of popular national sentiment during the three hundred years of Turkish domination.

In summary, influenced by Platonic philosophy, the Hellenistic Spartan tradition, and Byzantine land policy, Plethon recommended to Manuel a massive confiscation and redistribution of land through a policy of home-steading which extinguished all title but that gained through work. Plethon ultimately desired to mobilize, through this resettlement, the cultivators who had fled oppressive "feudal" exactions, and to free idle land for the production of social, economic, and military self-sufficiency.

Class and Military Reform. Based on his critique of the Peloponnesian defense system, Plethon's treatises advocated the functional specialization of social class and adoption of a modified Thematic system of military provision. Farmers and shepherds playing the part of soldiers are neither trained nor armed sufficiently to defend the peninsula from the mass of fierce and disciplined Turks, he argued. Long campaigns removed them from their proper economic function thereby casting them


Plethon argued for a civil religion in his address to Theodore, sounding a theme which would prove central to his later *Laws*. He argued that public and private accord on at least three religious tenets is necessary for public morality and, it would seem, national unity. The first tenet is that God exists, the second that he is concerned with human affairs and governs even minor conduct, and the third that his governance is absolutely just and unaffected by rites or sacrifices. Lampros, *PP*, pp. 125.3–126.7. In the *Laws* Plethon drops his Christian mask and reveals himself to be a pagan determinist. The *Laws* is a draft of a theocratic state based on mixed Platonic-Stoic institutions, a detailed code of moral regulations, and a complex and richly developed state cult geared to a luni-solar calendar. His Neoplatonic "Hellenic" theology is designed to provide the religious unity needed for national regeneration, and is composed of a hierarchy of four decades of gods and titans (including "demons") which serve as anthropomorphic representations of the Forms which govern the cosmos. See remains of the text in Alexandre, *Lois*. Plethon's political use of religion antedates More, Campanella, and Machiavelli (*Discourses*, 1:chap. 11–15) and makes the loss of the political portions of his ms. all the more lamentable.
into debt and depriving the state of taxable productivity. Because their fighting is defensive, they cannot be compensated properly with booty.

Plethon also opposed mercenary levies supported by a hearth tax because he considered the tax ruinous and foreign troops corrosive of “Hellenic” mores. It was also vain to suppose that mercenaries would sacrifice themselves for Hellenes. Inevitably they would crumble under attack and thus no savings would be realized because native reserves would still be needed as reinforcements.40

Plethon’s insight into the conditions of national survival may have been partly attributable to his residence among the Turks. For he saw, as did few of his contemporaries, that the Turkish armies were unified and animated by a national and religious idea, and that the Empire’s strategy of defending itself with “barbarian” mercenaries was no longer viable. His criticism was sadly prophetic. The Turks breached the Hexamilion and raided the Peloponnese in 1423, 1446, and for the last time in 1460. The ineffective resistance of the mercenaries and irregular peasant contingents quickly crumbled in the face of the Turk’s discipline and artillery.41 In effect, then, Plethon’s remedy was a return to the thematic system rationalized to ensure peasant autonomy from oppressive exaction and to preserve continuous agriculture even during periods of warfare. However, the creation of a “thematic” free peasant army animated by a national idea required complete restructuring of the class system according to Platonic ideas of functional specificity. Arguing, with Plato, that the division between classes exists in nature, Plethon ridiculed the confusion of functions by comparing the qualities of the warhorse with those of the donkey, stressing thereby the unsuitability of each for the other’s task.42 The best laws assign “to each part of the city and of the people” their proper function and strictly punish nonfeasance.

The first and most necessary part (anankaiotaton meros) of the state is the productive class, which he designates Helots. This class is composed of primary producers: farm laborers (autourgikon), farmers (geôrgôn), and shepherds (nomeôn). The second class is composed of craftsmen (démiourgikon), merchants (emporikon), and tradesmen (kapélikon) who create, transport, and sell the goods necessary to life. The third or ruling class (to archikon phylon) is composed of the emperor or Basileus,

42. Lampros, PP, pp. 132.4–132.12.
the hierarchy of military commanders, and the local headmen or notables (koruphaios).48

Because there was a shortage of manpower in the Peloponnese, Plethon proposed a unique system of functional rotation or "yoking" (suzugias) designed to overcome a major shortcoming of the Theme system, the neglect of agriculture during campaigns. In the first case, where the peasantry lacked martial skills, a clear division of function would obtain and soldiers would be supported by assignment of a fixed number of Helots: one Helot per foot soldier, two Helots per knight, and three Helots per Archon (officer). The soldier, receiving provender and weapons from his Helots by agreement, would thereby be free to remain with the standards.

I would say that these Helots should be assigned to the soldiers, to each footman one, to knights two, so that each soldier will not be hindered by labor from fighting, being provisioned by the Helots either by means of private or common property or however they may agree to complete the labor to acquire weapons with which to fight and the means to remain wherever they may be ordered.44

In the second case, where most of the population is capable of bearing arms, the duties of fighting and farming a common allotment should be rotated between two men. "In some places soldiers and Helots will be differentiated because not everyone is useful as a soldier; but where the greatest number seem fit for soldiering I would order these into pairs because this common yoking together is necessary so that in turn one can work the common stock of both while the other fights." 45

Because he believed the safety of the state to rest on the allegiance of this soldier/producer class, Plethon advised reform of the bureaucracy to eliminate oppressive practices, such as the use of unfair weights and measures, and to eliminate the merchant class from ruling positions, their financial interests being incompatible with fair governance.46

Functional division of classes also implied renovation of the complex and oppressive system of taxation current in the Empire. First, each class must bear a different relation to the fisc. The producers provide basic goods and services. The merchant class is to be prohibited from mixing

43. Ibid., pp. 119.20–120.14, 254.15–255.3.
44. Ibid., pp. 256.5–256.11.
its interests in rulership. The ruling class, including the army, should engage itself neither in commercial enterprise nor production and is to be paid in provender (sitēsis), wages (mistroi tis), and honors (geras).\textsuperscript{47} Second, Plethon distinguished three modes of taxation which could be applied to the Helot class. The first type, corvée labor (angareia), he rejected as shameful, slavelike, and excessive. The second, a fixed monetary contribution (takto chrēmaton horos), was unfair because it was not based on ability to pay, because it was difficult to apportion fairly, and because payment was difficult in view of the seasonal nature of agriculture. The third type of taxation, fixed portion of produce (hē \ldots rhētē tôn gignomenon moira), Plethon’s opinion, smacked the least of slavery and was the fairest and easiest to bear being automatically apportioned to the size of each year’s harvest and thus the peasant’s ability to pay. Of the taxes in kind collected from the Helots, one-third should be returned to the Helots for recapitalization and profit, one-third allotted to the capitalist class, and one-third to the support of the rulers.\textsuperscript{48} A small number of Helots may be assigned as servants or pages to high ecclesiastical and military officials, but Plethon contended that such luxury expenditure must be kept to a minimum, so that the state’s concerted effort can be focused on national self-defense.\textsuperscript{49} Plethon’s enlightened critique of Byzantine penology, which punished many minor crimes with mutilation or death, was predicated partially on the notion that prisoners should be mobilized to perform the necessary corvée labor for the national good.

It seems to me a better penalty, both in the interests of the constitution and most profitable to the community, to use these [criminals] to labor at rebuilding whatever is necessary; laboring to fortify the Isthmus and other places, so that neither will it be thought necessary for soldiers to persist in these labors, unless in emergencies, nor again that the above mentioned taxpayers supporting this [construction] through their contribution (which equals the whole debt they owe to the community), be troubled by this additional corvée.\textsuperscript{50}

In summary, Plethon advocated adoption of functionally specific Platonic classes within the setting of a reformed thematic system. Resettlement of peasantry on confiscated estates was intended to create a solidarity

\textsuperscript{47} Lampros, PP, pp. 120.18–121.19.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., pp. 122.18–123.14, 253.17–254.10. For the allocation of the moieties see pp. 123.15–124.4, 254.11–256.4.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., pp. 132.19–133.11.
economic base for the support of a "national" army. By yoking the Helots and soldiers and simplifying taxation, the most prominent abuses of the themata—oppressive taxation and the neglect of farming during wartime—would have been removed. Further, confiscation of the great estates, denial of monastic privileges, and reform of the bureaucracy would have eliminated three factors hindering the mobilization of resources and population for defense of the Peloponnese against Turkish aggression.

III. Plethon's Protectionist Economic Reforms

Plethon's economic recommendations were based on the presupposition that the Peloponnese, a rich producer of raw materials, could be rendered economically self-sufficient. If sumptuary laws restrained the court's penchant for foreign luxury goods, only iron and weapons would logically need be imported.51

In order to eliminate debased foreign coinage as the domestic exchange medium, Plethon advocated a quasi-barter economy, utilizing payments in kind in lieu of coin-taxes, restraining the use of coinage in domestic trade, and limiting imports to those exchangeable for cotton.

Likewise, one should not omit the unnatural condition of the coinage as something to be reformed. It is certainly foolish to utilize these bad foreign bronze coins, which bring profit to others and much mockery to ourselves. . . . If the taxpayers would contribute goods and not coins, and those taking from the treasury would take payment in kind, this would contribute much it would seem to our efforts. Less coinage would then be necessary and for exchange among ourselves any currently circulating coinage should suffice. . . . Certainly this land does not seem to need so many imports from abroad, necessitating so much coinage, except iron and weapons. It is easy to exchange cotton for these so that it would not be harmful to refuse to honor this base foreign coinage.52

Further, the Despotate should control imports and exports through selective duties. No import duties should be charged on necessary goods,


52. Lampros, PP, pp. 262.14–263.7. See Sabba P. Spentza, Hai Oikonomikai kai Dēmosionomikai Apopseis tou Pléthonos (Athens: n.p., 1964); and Demosthenes I. Danielide, Hē Neohellēnikē Koînōnia kai Oikonomía (Athens: G. Samaropoulos, 1934) which were unavailable to me at the time of writing.
but both the export of goods needed for domestic consumption and the import of luxuries should be hindered by heavy tariffs. The revenues realized through these measures would, according to Plethon, help defray diplomatic expenditures: ambassadorial display, tributes, and bribes. Domestic industry would further be encouraged to develop the rich resources of the peninsula if dependence on foreign goods and currency was limited.

This protectionist policy demonstrated insight, unusual for its time, into the economic preconditions of national autarky. As Plethon noted, the Peloponnesian, properly cultivated, was potentially a rich economic base for defensive mobilization. In his time it exported cereals, fruits, vegetables, fine Malmsey wine, fibers, and extract products such as gum, oil, honey, and wax. Unexploited iron veins existed in the Eurotas Valley. The Despotate since 1348 had been a financially autonomous principality supporting itself through taxes on land, capital, imports, inheritance, and income, as well as special levies and corvées. Plethon's single tax, yoking, barter, and trade control may well have led to economic development of the region. However, European imperialism, a phenomenon beyond the limited medieval understanding of economics, intervened to ruin Plethon's calculations. For Venice controlled the major ports and thus the trade of the peninsula (Coron, Modon, Corinth, Argos, Patros, Nauplia) and also engaged in smuggling, counterfeiting, piracy, and confiscation of tariffs and duties. Thus, the growth of a native commercial middle class with developmental capital was effectively checked by Italian profiteering. The Byzantine state was further weakened economically by incessant civil war, tributes to the Turks, feudal oppression of the peasantry, and monastic encroachment on the land.

Plethon's advocacy of a barter economy was also designed to halt circulation of debased and counterfeit Ducats, Florins, and Tournois. Venice and the other European powers had introduced these debased media of exchange by prohibiting import of the raw precious metals which would have allowed the Greeks to coin Hyperpyra. This base foreign

coinage bled the area of domestic treasure reserves.\textsuperscript{56} In return for native labor, raw material, and gold outflow, the Italians "dumped" their surplus and luxury production in the Peloponnese, effectively undercutting native industries. Further, through balance of power politics, the Italians rendered control of the unruly feudal lords virtually impossible and wreaked havoc with Greco-Turkish diplomatic relations. Thus, Plethon's proposals for the generation of economic autarky, though highly prescient given the state of medieval economic knowledge, were beyond the \textit{de facto} powers of either the emperor or the despot.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{IV. Conclusion}

Gemistos Plethon deserves a place in the history of political theory as one of the earliest proponents of the myth of nationalism and as a visionary reformer capable of articulating a program of reforms sufficient to give the myth objective socioeconomic and political form.

His nationalism, although quite modern in its denomination of the Hellenes as a \textit{genos} united by language, ancestral culture, and common territory, is clearly a political myth designed to unify the court elites with the military, commercial, and producing classes and to neutralize both Christian ideology, at once quietistic and divisive, and the "feudalism" of the unruly landlords.

His policy of distributing land to the producers and his attack on monastic prerogatives were probably intended to revive the yeoman-warrior class of the older Thematic system. On this productive and unitary basis Plethon intended to erect a functionally specific tripartite class system comprised of primary producers, tradesmen and merchants, and a military ruling class under the command of the emperor. By consolidating the superabundance of taxes and duties into a single tax, one-third of the annual produce in kind, and by "yoking" the soldiers and farmers in a relation of interdependence, Plethon sought both to support a professional national army and to provide for continuous agriculture. Further, to ensure popular support, he proposed to reform the tax-farming bureaucracy and the harsh penal system.

Through sumptuary laws, control of imports and exports, and domestic barter, he hoped to eliminate European control of the Peloponnesian economy and to create the conditions for the accumulation of native capital and autarchic economic development.

Although foreign pressure and internal collapse prevented the imple-


\textsuperscript{57} Zakythinos, \textit{Despotate}, \textit{ii}:244, 266–269.
mentation of his ideas, Plethon's theoretical achievement should not be minimized. Indeed, his fertile mind would later spawn, in the Nomôn Syngraphe, a detailed constitution, civic religion, and code of laws, based on Platonic-Stoic ethics and intended to create a Hellenic pagan theocratic state. This work of the 1440's was prevented by his enemy's censure from taking its rightful place beside More's later Utopia (1516) and Campanella's City of the Sun (1602). The possibility exists, however, of reconstructing much of Plethon's intent by relating his moral, philosophical, theological, and early political treatises to the fragmentary remains of his complex posthumous work.

Indeed, the entire field of Byzantine political thought, although copiously documented with a rich body of political chronicle, administrative-legal works, books of advice to and by kings, commentaries, literary works, and theoretical treatises proper, remains lamentably unexplored. Classically trained political theorists will find ample rewards in the study of a culture in continuous possession of the Hellenic-Christian tradition, a culture which in its thousand year history transmitted the fruits of this tradition to the Arabic, Slavic, and Western worlds and which was capable of inaugurating a renaissance at the moment of its extinction.