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# The Predicament of the Greek Diaspora

## Economic Crisis, Immigrant Radicalism and Greek-American Ethnic Identity

Comments on the documentary *Taxisinidisia, Greek American Radicals - The Untold Story* (directed by Kostas Vakkas), based on the archival research carried out by historian Kostis Karpozilos)

Despina Lalaki

Translated by Nicholas Levis

“New Wave of Greeks Flocking to Astoria.” It was recently and with this title that the *New York Daily News*<sup>1</sup> made widely known a reality that has confronted the neighborhood’s residents for some time now. Economic crisis in the Mediterranean countries, and more specifically in Greece, is driving a new surge of immigration to the New York borough of Queens. Journalist Kristina Bogos—herself the descendant of Armenian and Greek immigrants—interviewed young Greeks who recently arrived looking for employment in Astoria, the primary Greek neighborhood in the United States since the Second World War. In addition, Bogos spoke with shopkeepers who on a daily basis receive walk-in requests for work as well as phone queries from jobseekers still in Greece. According to the “urban myth” that the story seems to confirm, the more recent Greek immigrants are of a high educational level, often with some scientific training. However, what ensues from the journalist’s research is that these young people bear the marks of the social regression caused by Greece’s financial crisis. As they are obligated to work as waiters or salespeople, and for the most part outside the realm of their professional training, their arrival to the United States also signifies their transition, temporarily or not, from the middle class to the working class.

The article, which *Ethnikos Kirikas (National Herald)* – the only daily Greek-language newspaper in the United States – republished in its entirety in both its Greek and English editions, roused much interest. However, a careful reading of an accompanying editorial by *Herald’s* publisher Antonis Diamataris suggests that the same article was also a source of irritation. Once again it challenged the image of Greece so carefully constructed by the diaspora, while it also exposed the diaspora itself for drawing upon this same image in order to configure its own identity. The need to restore or at least to conceal this rupture between reality and the diaspora’s imaginary, which according to Diamataris “has created a serious problem of identity among the American-born generations”<sup>2</sup>, is reflected in his following comment: “Most Greek-Americans we are happy that there is a new wave of immigration. We enjoy the warmth of the presence of other Greeks in the neighborhoods and cities in which we live.”

The impoverishment that the recent economic crisis has brought to Greek society has also put the Greek-American diaspora into a terrible predicament as the community already since the early 20th century has undertaken great efforts to reconcile its ethnic identity with the demands of Americanization; a kind of Americanization based on the fundamental values of the middle-class and on “whiteness” and in contradistinction to working class consciousness or the labor movements. This same predicament was easy to observe during the discussion that followed the recent screening of the documentary, *Greek American Radicals - The Untold Story*,<sup>4</sup> at the Stathakion Cultural Center in Astoria. Several comments from the audience such as, “A Greek can never be communist,” or, “Greeks, either in Greece or in New York, were never communists” made obvious the provocation inherent in the history of Greek-American radicalism as told in the documentary, which runs from the era of mass immigration to the United States at the start of the 20th century until the years of McCarthyism and the integration of the immigrant community into

the “American dream.” The documentary constitutes a challenge to the established historical narrative—both that of the Greek-American diaspora and that of the “mother” country—according to which the ideology of Hellenism is incompatible with the ideology of communism and working class consciousness.

However, according to the archival research carried out by historian Kostis Karpozilos, on which the documentary directed by Kostas Vakkas is based, the Greeks in America were by no means absent from labor movements and trade union action, especially during the period of the great economic crisis of 1929. In fact, in many cases they had a leadership role as members of the Communist Party. As suggested by the term *taxisinidisia*—a variant on “working class consciousness” coined by the same Greek Americans, which provides the film’s title in Greek—and as the documentary explains analytically, the history of the social and political integration of the Greeks into the wider American society is more complex than put forth by the mainstream historiography and by no means did it follow a single ideological path.

### **The “Forgotten People” rush into history’s center stage**

In the opening scenes of the documentary and through a letter from Panos Harissiadis to the newspaper *Democratic Voice* (*Δημοκρατική Φωνή*), the “Polytechnio Generation” in New York discovers the unknown history of a whole generation of Greeks or Greek-Americans, who had been radicalized during the period of the great economic crisis of the 1930s. A few moments later, Kostis Karpozilos sums up the surprise: “Greek communists in America? Impossible!”

The idea for this movie production originated precisely in this surprise, and in more recent meetings of friends and comrades of the anti-dictatorial struggle in New York City, among whom were the producer of the documentary Frosso Tsoukas and the historian Karpozilos whose research revolves around issues of Greek immigration, the history of labor movements in the United States, and the sociopolitical transformations during the years of the Great Depression.

The archival collection of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) at the Library of Congress in Washington, the Historical Archives of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the archives of newspapers such as the *Ethnikos Kirikas*, *Atlantis*, *Forward* (*Εμπρός*), the *Greek American Tribune* (*Ελληνοαμερικανικό Βήμα*), the *Voice of the Worker* (*Φωνή του Εργάτου*) and the literary magazine *Pioneer* (*Πρωτοπόρος*) published by the Greek Workers Educational Federation, and archival collections of members of the Greek American left available at libraries from Sacramento to New York preserved the history of *taxisinidisia* and of the people who lived it. By no means was it an arbitrary choice to begin the film with the letter from Harissiadis, one of thousands of Greek immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island in New York in 1916. The voices and personal histories of the people tied to the social struggles and labor movements of America comprise the movie’s backbone. As Eric Hobsbawm wrote after all in choosing to open *The Age of Empire* by describing the circumstances of his parents’ first meeting, people’s personal lives are excellent material not only for writers but also for historians.

The journey of Panos Harissiadis—from his arrival in America in 1916, his radicalization and decision to join the CPUSA in the 1920s, his leading role in the Greek department of the CPUSA and, finally, his deportation in 1952 during the McCarthyite prosecutions—summarizes and delimits the documentary, chronologically as well as thematically.<sup>5</sup> The film’s first part, however, revolves around earlier labor actions, spontaneous uprisings and organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World, spotlighting leading figures who emerged from within the circles of earlier immigrants, among them Louis Tikas. Originally from Crete, he was the lead organizer for the multiethnic strike at the southern Colorado mines in 1913, which after its violent suppression has been known ever since as the Ludlow Massacre.

Up until 1910, eighty percent of Greek immigrants to the United States are workers, “parts of this enormous machine that produces the world-famous American dollars,” as the newspaper *Atlantis* characteristically writes at the time, while this percentage will not dramatically change until after the end of the Second World War. By 1917, when the winds of revolution also reach American shores, dozens of “language federations” have been set up by the

Socialist Party of America, while the same year *Organization (Οργάνωσις)*, the first Greek-language Socialist newspaper and organ of the party's "Greek department," sees circulation in Cincinnati. The same year the Greek Socialist Union is founded in New York and soon after the *Voice of the Worker (Η Φωνή του Εργάτου)* begins publication, inaugurating, as the documentary informs us, a long tradition of revolutionary publications directly associated with the organizational transformations of the Greek left.

The breakup of the Socialist Party in 1919 leads to the rise of the Communist Party USA, which becomes the object of state repression as ideologically hostile to the American ideals. The immigrants who cluster around the party are targeted and in many cases deported from the country. During this period, however, a new Americanization process is set into motion—one based on terms of class and not ethnicity. Greek American educational associations and organizations will lead in this effort by organizing lectures and cultural events as well as producing publications and translations, balancing ethnicity with their new American class identity. John Poulos recounts characteristically his father's aversion to the Greek bourgeois school of the time, which he abandoned by jumping out of a window, and his conflict with the parish priest who called him a "devil." This new *taxisinidisia* (class consciousness) will soon come into a rupture with the "American dream" as embodied during the 1920s via access to new consumer goods and social mobility but also the new world of entrepreneurship and mass culture. At the same time, a number of other Greek American organizations such as AHEPA (American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association), direct exponents of the need to have Greek ethnicity recognized in American middle-class terms, will turn openly against the CPUSA and every form of radicalization.

### **Breaking with the "American Dream"**

The crisis of 1929 however marks the beginning of a new period of working class movements, radicalization and, by American standards, unprecedented trade union organizing. The documentary's images of uprising and the narratives of people wretched by the economic crisis of this period are harshly revealing: "Unemployed all winter I have only worked four weeks. I owe plenty here and there, behind one year on the rent. This month of March, the landlord will kick me out with nine children. Where do I go? Don't have a nickel. The only way for me is the road, and be it off the beaten path," writes a newspaper reader. The murders of protesters, among them also Greek-Americans like Steve Katovis in New York and Nick Kontourakis in San Francisco, signal a new era of ruptures and of relativization of any ethnic unity in workplaces such as those of the fur market, one of the primary Greek industries of the era. At this point the refrain of "Which Side Are You On" – which side are you on boys? Which side are you on? – , underlines both the tenor of the times and the intensity of the conflict.<sup>6</sup>

"The forgotten people," as Karpozilos explains in the film, rushed into the center stage of history and played a decisive role in the transformation of the economic and political circumstances of the age. If the mainstream historiography of the country and the period recognize protagonists only in theorists like John Maynard Keynes, or in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *Greek American Radicals* reconstitutes our historical memory on the basis of the collective struggles and systematic efforts of precisely those "forgotten people"—the workers, the unionists, the protesters and the strikers who redefined the terms of industrial labor, of democracy, and also of American identity beyond the ethnic divisions that had so often been used by the "feudalists of capital" to foment racial and national rivalries and conflicts.

As the film goes on to tell, the work of the American left will in fact cross the borders of the United States to join in the broader international anti-fascist Popular Front during the Spanish Civil War, while the Greek American left will also go on to cooperate with a wider political spectrum of democrats and liberals, through the ranks of the Greek Democratic Union, against the influence of the Metaxas dictatorship on the Greek communities. The more general rhetoric of the antifascist struggle, especially during the course of the Second World War, will be eventually incorporated into the official historical narrative of the American struggles for democracy; to the trenches of the Spanish Civil War, however, will hasten primarily members of the CPUSA and the trade unions, among them hundreds of Greek-American volunteers.

The expectations prompted by the wartime alliance of the United States with the Soviet Union met a definitive end with the Cold War and the period of McCarthyism. The defeat of the Communist-led National Liberation Front (EAM) in Greece and the subsequent persecutions of Communists, the public McCarthyite trials and expulsions that terrorized and fractured American society, also served to assure the later suppression of the history which is recounted in *Greek American Radicals*.

### **What Does History Do?**

It was almost expected that screening this documentary in Astoria would provoke reactions, in particular from the followers of Golden Dawn who have recently appeared in the Greek American community. Drawing political legitimacy from Golden Dawn's entry into the Greek parliament, they have often taken to provocative public displays of their neo-Nazi insignia. During the film's May 25, 2013 premiere at the Stathakion Cultural Center, some of its apparent New York members took seats among the audience, under the watchful eyes of the event organizers, and waited patiently until the end of the screening, apparently in the hope of videotaping their intervention and episodes that would offer shocking evidence of the violent character of the communist ideology and its exponents. The megaphone they produced and attempted to use was the tipping point, as they had presumably intended; it was also the cause of their immediate expulsion from the hall.

What exactly is Golden Dawn's stake in a presentation of historical interest; what prompts such fury over events so far removed from the present?

The history told in *Greek American Radicals* takes down or at any rate challenges the official ideological construct on which the Greek American ethnic identity is based. It deconstructs the political myths that constitute the dominant ideology of this identity. The history of the Greek diaspora in America, much like other national or ethnic histories, is based at least as much on memory as it is on oblivion.

In psychoanalytic terms we could say that *taxisinidisia* – class consciousness that is, as reference point for ethnic identity – has been generally silenced or suppressed from the community's collective historical consciousness because it constitutes a trauma—a cultural trauma in this case—as the result of a long series of representations and socio-semantic definitions.<sup>7</sup> The struggles of the working class, and both the Left and communism as their ideological exponents, have been systematically structured and internalized as destabilizing threats for the bourgeois nation, especially in the case of the United States. The repression of the trauma, however, its denial, practically guarantees its reappearance, if and when the social structures or the collective imaginary, in the composition of which it has contributed, are challenged. This reappearance can assume an extreme character and be expressed as neurotic or psychotic symptom, or find expression in a series of negative feelings such as anxiety, fear, humiliation or guilt. The reactions of Golden Dawn members as well as the categorical denial of any connection between Hellenism and communism have precisely this kind of character.

*Greek American Radicals* and the under publication book by Kostis Karpozilos with the same title from Crete University Press confronts us with exactly this trauma – although he does not, however, use trauma as an analytical tool. Recent historical research has pointed out the silences of the official historiographic narrative with regard to ethnic Greek-American identity, the inner breaches, clashes and also the role of middle-class consciousness in the process of integration—meaning the Americanization of the Greek immigrants<sup>8</sup> —and the overcoming of their racial ambiguity.<sup>9</sup> But until now the likes of Nikos Kourkouliotis and Mike Pappas, who fought as volunteers with the anti-fascist front in the Spanish Civil War; or the Poulos brothers, Constantine who was a journalist with EAM and John a Trotskyist writer and unionist; or Yiannis Bacharas, an organizer with EPON, the youth league of EAM, and Kostas Lekkas, a fighter with the EAM-led partisan army ELAS, both of whom immigrated to the United States following the war only to become objects of interest for the FBI, until the former was expelled to Poland, had not been the subject of historical research.

In the midst of the economic crisis, the movements of social radicalism and the stories of the people told in *Greek American Radicals* offer many opportunities for comparison, to probe for analogies if not for proposals and ideas for the future. However, is *this* what history is; a recipe book, a road map with which we can chart our future course? Is that what history *does*? Is the reckoning with old ideological certainties by means of studying and documenting history's unknown aspects, another way to seek alternate routes or different lessons? Or does history simply do *nothing*—as Marx wrote<sup>10</sup> and as Karpozilos reminds us in his recent review of the book by Antonis Liakos, *Apocalypse, Utopia and History; the Transformations of Historical Consciousness*<sup>11</sup>—dominating instead over our imagination so as to limit the dynamics of the utopian thought, as Liakos holds?

Our reckoning with history, the continuous revisiting and deconstruction of old historical certainties refers to psychoanalytic processes, to return to the above discussion regarding collective cultural trauma. Historical and psychoanalytic work both are based on what we would call—employing a rather overused term—*creative destruction*, and are inextricably bound with the concept of conflict and the emotional destabilization that it entails but also with that of the new, the future. Individual as well as collective freedom pass inevitably through exactly these processes of rupture and deposition—decisive in the change and shaping both of personal-individual and also of collective-historical consciousnesses. Only through a dialectical engagement with history can we demolish the idols of the past and take hold of the challenges ahead of us.