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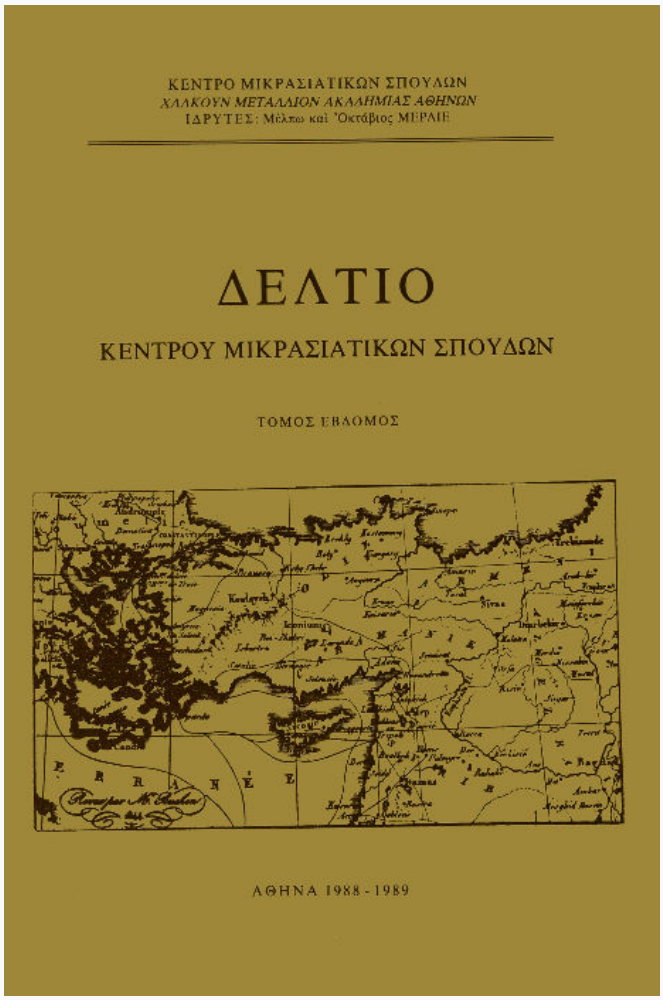

Renee Hirschon, Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus

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doi: 10.12681/deltiokms.199

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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Allen, P. S. (1988). Renee Hirschon, Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus. *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών Σπουδών*, *7*, 325–327. https://doi.org/10.12681/deltiokms.199

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Εκδότης:** EKT | **Πρόσβαση:** 12/10/2024 07:03:01

Renée Hirschon, *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe: The Social Life of Asia Minor Refugees in Piraeus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. xx + 280 pp. Cloth.

This elegant ethnography is an important work for at least three reasons. First, it is the only complete published ethnographic account of a Greek urban community. Second, it provides valuable information on the experience of Asia Minor refugees in Greece; and third, it contains a wealth of ethnographic data which has validity for much of Greece and thus complements and supplements standard works such as *Vasilika; Honour, Family and Patronage;* and *Portrait of a Greek Mountain Village*. In addition, it is well organized and superbly written. Although it is not an analytical work and offers no theoretical breakthroughs, it contains a number of unique and illuminating observations. In particular, Hirschon's discussions of the symbolic meanings of actions and objects are full of insight and logic.

Hirschon also pays close attention to language and its meanings. Many words and phrases, and at least part of almost every quotation, are rendered in both English and Greek, providing readers with a command of the language a more precise understanding of the utterance. Hirschon also quotes many proverbs to illustrate various attitudes and values, thus adding texture and color to her text. There is an almost total absene of jargon in this book, even to the extent of excluding fundamental anthropological terms. Yet the relevant information is there and patterns can be easily discerned.

The focus of this work is the small, densely populated neighborhood of Yerania, part of a larger refugee settlement known as Kokkinia, a northern suburd of Piraeus. In 1972 when Hirschon conducted the bulk of the research on which the book is based, most residents were refugees (or children of refugees) from the Asia Minor disaster of 1922/23. The majority came from the less well-to-do element of the Asia Minor community and most remained poor in the half century since their resettlement in Greece.

Hirschon systematically describes the pertinent aspects of life in Yerania —economic, political, religious, social, and cultural. Her thorough and detailed account is based on an extended residence in the community in the early 1970s as well as on subsequent visits through the mid-1980s. The book reflects the careful and meticulous nature of her participant observation and her fine survey and sampling techniques. Understandably Hirschon's emphasis is more on the women's world and their activities and attitudes, but this is hardly a fault.

Hirschon addresses a number of questions, chief among which is how the refugees adapted to their losses and displacement and eventually settled into a new environment. How was the fabric of society and culture held together under such difficult circumstances? Hirschon argues that central to the refugees' ability to adapt were their self image and sense of collective identity. She explores the manifest elements contributing to the development of this identity, stressing especially the roles of religion and memory. She also cites the persistence of fundamental cultural values relating to the family and housing as being critical to the successful adjustment of the refugees. Many lesser issues are addressed along the way, such as how families have adapted to poverty, overcrowding, the ambivalence of other Greeks, the demands of the dowry system, and the like.

Despite the fact that these are refugees and descendants of refugees (and Hirschon takes every opportunity to emphasize this), what is described here holds true for most urban Greeks, especially those of limited means, since many urban Greeks are refugees of some sort —migrants from the countryside; and even if the circumstances under which they came to the cities of Greece were different than those of the Asia Minor refugees, their urban experience has many parallels. This is particularly true in the realm of social relations —interactions among kinsmen, neighbours, and strangers. On the other hand, marriage arrangements, religious practices, sex roles, aspects of the developmental cycle, and certain basic values described here have more universal validity in Greece, transcending rural/urban differences and even cutting across class lines. Only in minor details are many of these practices and values specifically characteristic of the Asia Minor refugees.

It is really only in the initial chapters and the discussion of identity where the uniqueness of this community is distinguishable, and Hirschon handles this especially well. Chapter sud-headings like, «Strangers at Home», convey a keen sense of the dislocation experienced by the refugees. Hirschon does an excellent job of placing these people in the context of their historical and cultural traditions, elaborating on their cultural heritage and examining their relationships with other Greeks. She explains how feelings of collective superiority among the Asia Minor refugees helped counteract an ambivalent reception by native Greeks, and how memory served both to preserve elements of a former identity and help create a new identity and a «meaningful environment» in their adopted homeland.

Written more than a decade after the author's initial fieldwork in the neighbourhood, this is a well thought-out ethnography. Not only does this time lapse give Hirschon a more mature perspective on her subject, it also allows her to take advantage of the wealth of relevant literature that has appeared since her fieldwork. And it allows for more chronological depth. Hirschon continued to visit the community after her fieldwork there and kept in touch with some of its residents.

It is also noteworthy that although Hirschon has published a plethora of articles on this community, the book is not merely a collection of these articles; rather it is a highly coherent document which stands alone and very much apart from these articles. Although she cites these publications in the book and uses certain ideas expressed in them, she goes well beyond them, both in scope and content.

In no sence is this a reflexive work, yet the author is not invisible. Hirschon does not hesitate to use the first person singular and there are occasional anecdotes relating to her fieldwork. Still, we never get a good sense of how she fit into the community and overall there is an absence of the personal element. A few case histories are provided to illustrate certain points and back up various assertions, but no individuals or personalities emerge. A good map and a selection of black-and-white photographs help give presence to the community, and some excellent house plans illustrate well the various modifications undertaken by residents to accomodate additional households in the small flimsy structures provided by the government for the refugees.

One of the most significant contributions of this work is the symbolic analyses Hirschon offers. She is particularly concerned with the symbolic dimensions of physical space, both inside houses and out. The most frequent binary opposition invoked is that of open/closed, one that often parallels the inside/outside distinction in Hirschon's analyses. She repeatedly returns to the symbolic categories of open and closed to bring meaning and relevance to actions and values.

All in all, this is an excellent book. It is accessible to professionals and non-professionals alike and should find appeal outside of Greek studies as well since it makes a fundamental contribution to the field of urban anthropology.

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