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### Greek crisis foreseen: the future in migrancy

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## GREEK CRISIS FORESEEN: THE FUTURE IN MIGRANCY

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### ABSTRACT

*I discuss the impact of migration on the contemporary politics of culture in Greece. I use the term politics of culture in the broadest sense possible in order to include both official policies as well as everyday practices of meaning production. I focus on the ways in which migration is conceptualized and thematized around notions of community, gender, and future expectations. The article presents the findings of a collaborative research project that was conducted in the period 2004-2007. Discussion is based partly on original research and partly on theoretical elaborations of the interrelation between foreignness and nationalism. The findings of original research are revised in the light of the current context of political, economic and cultural crisis and political debates that the later has instigated. Analysis focuses on the study of the migrants' emergent horizon of expectations and of the role that imaginary futures play in the formation of subjectivity.*

Keywords: *migration, cultural politics, gender*

### 1. CULTURAL POLITICS

This paper addresses themes that are part of a broader engagement with the analysis of the impact of migration on cultural politics in contemporary Greece. I use the term “cultural politics” in the broadest way possible. I do not wish to constrain my reference to official policies only. On the contrary, I want to stress the need for a reflection on the impact of migration on wider processes of meaning production in Greek society. I focus specifically on how the movement of populations redefines our understandings of

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community, gender positionings, and notions of the future. The combined use of the terms “culture” and “politics” is intended as a constant reminder of the fact that processes of meaning production are always negotiated and contested in the sphere of politics, both at the level of official politics and at the level of everyday practices and action.

The ideas and arguments presented in this paper have a twofold origin. Firstly, they are derived from a consistent intellectual engagement with the issues concerning migration, foreignness and nativeness in the context of contemporary cultural politics in Greece. Secondly, the argumentation is grounded in the findings of a collaborative research project that was conducted at the University of Thessaly on “Gender Dimensions of Migration in South-eastern Europe”. The ideas and research findings presented below were thus formulated from 2004 to 2007, the period that immediately preceded the outset of the great fiscal crisis in Greece. Revisiting these findings and ideas from the standpoint of today’s devastating experience of deep economic, cultural and political crisis is a greatly challenging task, not only because the crisis is gradually and systematically altering our prevailing operating analytical and interpretational frameworks in ways that often are not even easy to acknowledge but also because the forms of migration in Greece and impact of population mobility on social relations and public debates have changed.

The grounding hypothesis that lies behind this paper is that migration in Greece in the 1990s and 2000s was related to two analytically distinct and, possibly, separate spheres of cultural politics. The first sphere concerned the ways in which the movement of populations radically redefined the national imaginary of native Greeks—meaning here the ways in which we understand ourselves as political/national subjects with a specific historical formation and a particular common future. The second sphere concerns the migrant communities themselves and the ways in which the migrants understand their own “us” as foreigners—as well as natives—in Greece, in their countries of origins, and in Europe.

Regarding the first sphere, I will present briefly some sketchy thoughts in order to illustrate and describe my grounding hypothesis, the conceptual as well as political frame within which I analyze the intertwining of migration, foreignness and nativeness in contemporary Greece. Concerning the second sphere, I will reflect on some findings of the collaborative research project “Gender Dimensions of Migration in South-eastern Europe”.

The overarching question that lies behind this twofold approach concerns the extent to which these two spheres of politics develop in isola-

tion or in relation to one another. How is the communication between the two worlds achieved, claimed, troubled, perturbed, or enabled? The initial hypothesis that put me on this track of thought is that these two spheres develop symbiotically but separately. This particular aspect of the experience of migration remains unexplored. Despite the need for more primary research, it is vital to acknowledge the significance of the problem and its centrality for the current political and academic debates over migration in Greece and in contemporary Europe.

*1.1. "We the Greeks" and migration: Thoughts on the first sphere of cultural politics*

During the last two decades, Greece—like many other European countries—has experienced a sharp accentuation of radical forms of racism. The reasons for this accentuation are historical and political and we should not thus naturalize them as inevitable phenomena. In Greece, the formation of the core of these racist dispositions can be traced to around the late 1980s, in the context of the sudden and massive arrival of foreign workers, mostly in the countryside, on the one hand, and in the surge of Greek nationalism during the military and political developments in the Balkans on the other. The Balkan wars of the 1990s, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the political mobilizations and debates around the creation and the naming of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the rapid processes of EU integration and structural adjustment created the political conditions that enabled the emergence of intense forms of nationalist politics in the public milieu. The consolidation of these nationalist fantasies was realized, initially, through a direct targeting of migrants and, secondly, through their wide diffusion in large social groups across the political spectrum. The racist infiltration of popular and youth culture, official policies, including educational practices, collective dispositions and the common sense was rapid and thorough. The formation of the “we the Greeks” *vis-à-vis* the population movements that have marked the region of southeastern Europe since the early 1990s was determined by three important processes: the nationalist targeting of migrants during the 1990s; the naturalization of racism through the propagation of a distorted and false notion of “multiculturalization” in the media and mass culture; and the central role of gender-specific attributes both in the formation as well as in the naturalization and diffusion of racist discourses and practices.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For a more extensive argumentation on this point, see Laliotou, 2009.

But what about the cultural worlds of migrancy itself? How are migrant subjectivities constantly formed and reshaped within this context? And how are these processes communicated within migrant communities, households and everyday common lives? Some of these questions were addressed in the research conducted within the context of the “Gender Dimensions of Migration in Southeastern Europe” project.

### *1.2. Understanding the practices and implications of transcultural communication*

The research project aimed at examining migration as a gendered experience through the life stories of male and female migrants from Albania and Bulgaria to Greece. The city of Volos was the main field site. The research was based on semi-structured life stories and on fieldwork carried out in Volos and various locations in Albania and Bulgaria. We conducted sixty interviews with male and female migrants from Albania and Bulgaria. The interview schedules were diversified according to thematic field and age group. Our research was centered around specific thematic clusters that concerned expressions of migrant subjectivity in relation to labor practices, memory and historical culture, and transcultural communication.

One of the main issues addressed in the interviews and in the subsequent analysis concerned the ways in which migrant subjectivity is formed through practices that enable transcultural communication. As many prior studies have shown, the migrant subject’s sense of individuality and collectivity acquire new meanings as people organize their lives among multiple levels of interaction, actual or imaginary.<sup>2</sup> How do concepts of individuality and collectivity, as well as family structures, acquire new meanings, here or in the liminal space between here and there? In what forms and ways? What can youth cultures tell us about new ways of negotiating migration narratives? For example, to what extent do young migrants redefine forms of belonging, experiences of racism, and transnational social structures? What is the role of interpersonal relations, feelings, lifestyle preferences and socialization practices?

One of the first findings of the interviews is that transcultural communication is multidirectional and multilateral. Communication does not take

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2. The bibliography on importance of transnational networks and bonds in the formation of migrant subjectivity is very rich. For an extensive survey of this bibliographical area, see Pothiti Hantzaroula, *Μετανάστευση, Φύλο και Εργασία*, <http://extras.ha.uth.gr/pythagoras1/images/downloads/bibliography.pdf>

place only between the two obvious poles: the migrant community and the recipient society. On the contrary, communication includes exchanges between the migrant and the family, the migrant and the country of origin, the migrant and other countries where compatriots or members of the extended family reside (i.e., cousins who migrated to Italy, etc.), or the migrant and migrants of different national backgrounds, etc. These different axes of communication, which also offer an indication of the many diverse levels of sociality that the subjects pursue, are performed within personal and intersubjective relationships on the level of everyday life. The mechanisms and strategies of communication are very complex and include multiple levels of meaning production. Communication is conditioned by coherent structural forces but also by internal contradictions and ruptures.

Age and gender seem to be very important parameters as well as signifiers of cultural exchange and intersubjective communication. As the interviews indicate, age differentiation has a great impact on the formation of communicational communities and practices. Younger interviewees have more complex demographic and social profiles than the older ones. Migrant youth are different from their parents in terms of the spaces of socialization that accommodate them, and the ones which they, in turn, appropriate. They appear—or at least they present themselves in such a way—to have greater access to the Greek public sphere, while at the same time they seem to maintain the separation between the public (Greek) and the private (migrant) sphere of activity at the level of everyday life. Young migrants operate within communicational fields that are more closely related to various practices of popular culture, while references to the importance of new technologies (i.e., satellite television, internet, and mobile telephony) in establishing transnational networks of exchange appear as common sense on the part of the interviewees. Interestingly, younger interviewees seem to develop strong, functional, and conscious bonds with their country of origin. These bonds are materialized through summer vacations in Albania and Bulgaria and acquire meaning in everyday life through technological channels of communication that render distance—geographic as well as cultural—not an obstacle but, to the contrary, an advantage to contact by choice.

## 2. HORIZON OF EXPECTATIONS

Migration is a future-oriented activity. People's decision to move and relocate themselves and sometimes their families is grounded on aspirations, hopes, and expectations for a better future. Mobility and relocation presup-

pose the possibility of envisioning an alternative future. This envisioning is possibly transformed by the very experience of migration, as transcultural exchange enables the emergence of dynamic horizons of expectation. In any case, exploring the migrants' horizon of expectations offers a great insight into the formation of subjectivity. Subjectivity is also a future-oriented process in the sense that the ways in which people conceptualize themselves as subjects always include some degree of forward thinking in the form of future projections of present-time desires, fears, and expectations.

Indeed, the interviews that we collected and analyzed in our research project offer very powerful insights into the formations of an articulate horizon of expectations. Expectations are formative of the migrants' subjectivity in relation to the various levels of exchange that they occupy in their everyday lives. The interviews are very rich in indications on how migrant notions of the self are organized around conceptualizations of the future. As it was more or less expected, young interviewees express their expectations for social upward mobility which, in some cases, take the form of critique against the previous generation—mostly their parents. What is more important, however, is to explore further and analyze the morphology of this horizon of expectations and to contextualize it historically and culturally in relation to people's present as well as to their past. In what follows, I will read through some of the interviews in order to explore how migrant subjectivity is expressed through an emergent politics of hope. Alongside this exploration of hope, I will offer some suggestions on how gender emerges as a key concept around which the future is thematized. The great majority of the interviewees thematize gender roles as one of the main areas where political change, cultural transformation, social integration, generational differentiation, control, resistance, future expectation, and subjective potential are all materialized.

The emergent horizon of expectations can be traced if we point out some of the main features that the interviewees attribute to their future. I will refer to seven nested features: each one presented as an internal element of the previous.

### *2.1. Ordinary people, ordinary future*

Migrant interviewees across age and gender differences imagine their future through dreams about upward social mobility, improving their living conditions, becoming homeowners, having a family, safeguarding a better future for their children through education, getting a better job, making a

career, etc. These are ordinary people, having ordinary expectations about their future. Thus, in order to understand what is migrant about the migrant horizon of expectations, one has to analyze how this ordinary future is thematized *vis-à-vis* the specific experience of mobility.

## 2.2. *Returning to the country of origin*

(Bulgaria or Albania) seems to be a common plan for the future, although it is more prominent in the case of older migrants. Planning the return to the homeland is materialized through the building of a house back home, financed through the earnings of work in migrancy. As Elli put it:

“Me in five years ... In five years I think I will have my own house in Bulgaria, they are already preparing it for me, half of it is already finished, I will have my house and then I am thinking of getting married and making a family and I want to have a son ... a healthy child ... which means that I do everything for him. To have something for him ... for the child and the husband. [I do it] only for those who will be with me forever, until I die. That is, I think, what I want.” [Elli, MET155,156]

She also stresses that she wants her new house in Bulgaria to be in the city and not in her parents' village. Elli's plans for the future involve creating the conditions for not being alone, for having her own people around her—not her existing relatives, but the imaginary family of her own choice. She wants to return to her homeland, but not to the place where she comes from but to the city of her choice, a place where she has never lived before. The future is here imagined as a direct opposite of the present, while the later is represented as a void, an absence in relation to the future. The future is invoked as a symbolic remedy for the maladies of the present. Projecting security, sentimentality, togetherness, and agency into the future is for Elli a way to justify the lack of material and emotional resources that mark her present life in Greece.

## 2.3. *“Social acknowledgement: dignity and respect”*

One of the reasons that the interviewees give when asked why they want to return to their homeland in the future is for “dignity and respect”. This is the case for Sokratis, who wants to return to Albania in the future because he feels that the contribution of Albanian labor to the development of Greece is completely underestimated by Greeks. To the question “what are



your plans for the future”, he responds directly with a reference to racism in Greece.

“I do not want to stay here in Greece, I want to return to Albania, to find a job ... I do not have a problem with the people here; it just that ...the Greeks are ... you know, there are good people who welcome you into their homes and offer food ... but for me ... I do not get any respect. This is what I like, to show respect to the other person, not to look at him like that ... they should not look at you as “the Albanians”, because you can find bad people everywhere, but here they always blame the Albanians, all the worst jobs are for the Albanians, now the Greeks should respect that ... because Greeks wouldn’t do those jobs ... Greeks use machines, while Albanians dig with their hands. I don’t see any Greek working ... they work for themselves. They should respect that ... [the Albanians] work for Greece and they offer something, right? To the economy; take the Olympic Games, for example ... [Greeks] should show more respect” [Sokratis, MET160]

Demanding respect is a dominant feature of this interview and it is present in many other interviews as well. Asking for respect in a response to the question about future plans indicates that social justification is a constitutive element of the migrants’ horizon of expectations and it has to be taken into consideration when we attempt to explain the insistence on returning to the homeland as the ultimate goal of the migration process. This issue should also be explored comparatively, to establish whether it is as prominent in other countries of migrancy. For example, the same interviewee insists that the best period of his life was when he lived briefly in Britain—a place where he would also like to return if he had a choice—because, according to his testimony, foreigners enjoy greater respect there. As he put it, “one does not need to hide that he is Albanian in Britain.”

#### *2.4. Pride*

Studying and obtaining a higher education and college degree is another expectation expressed by parents as well as by younger interviewees. The idea of higher education as a means of social mobility is salient among migrants of lower and middle social classes. What is particular in the case of migrants, especially those coming from Bulgarian, is that they dream of returning to their country of origin in order to enroll at university. This is case for Dafne [MET 148, 149], who wishes to study to become a veterinarian, but in Bulgaria and not in Greece. Dafne has lived all her life

in Greece; her parents migrated when she was very young. Returning to Bulgaria seems to her like an interesting adventure, like living abroad. She studies music, she attends a music high school and she has visited Bulgaria on school trips. Dafne presents herself as an exemplary case of successful integration in the host country. Even though she does not like to differentiate herself from her classmates and she presents her school life as very rewarding and ideal, she nevertheless explains how during her school trip to Bulgaria she enjoyed the respect she received from her Greek teacher and classmates on account of her ability to speak Bulgarian and, thus, help them to communicate, etc. A great part of Dafne's account of her future plans is dedicated to the expression of her pride in her country of origin, a choice that we need to interpret in relation to the previous reference to the quest for dignity and respect.

### 2.5. *Insecurity*

Interviewees often express a sense of insecurity regarding their future in Greece. Recurrent references to the possibility of anti-immigration policies being introduced as a result and in the context of the war against terrorism indicate the impact that post-9/11 public discourses on security in Europe have had on the formation of migrant subjectivities [Manolis, MET 134]. As Anieza put it:

“I do not make many plans. But I am an optimist. I don't make plans because I'm afraid with all the terrorism now, I fear a lot that maybe they will pass a law...the European Union, a law against immigrants. I am very afraid of that. I believe that they won't do such a thing, but that they're going to make some very strict rules. Rules that will make things very difficult for us here in Greece, we the migrants, I mean...” [Anieza, MET99-100]

Insecurity for their well-being in Greece is expressed in many cases and in various ways. In some cases we encounter a generalized feeling of insecurity, as in the case of Marko from Bulgaria:

“-How do you imagine yourself in five years from now?  
-I imagine myself up at my home in Bulgaria...with my family...the family that I will create...to have a job...I hope that there will be jobs now that we are becoming part of Europe...to have jobs and be OK. That is how I imagine my future...for the present I am not sure...I want to go back to my city, to know that this is home. Here I am afraid, I am afraid to go out for a coffee...I am afraid here, I am afraid I will meet the wrong people. Because

I have heard many stories about meeting the wrong people...and drugs and I am very afraid to get involved. My father is also worried about me...whether I am OK, whether I have problems...not to get involved with the wrong people...I would feel safer at home...here I am afraid because there are many foreigners in Greece...from Albania, Romania, black people from Nigeria... there are many different people...you don't know what's in the other person's mind ... what the other person wants to do to you...[Marko, MET97]

In some cases we encountered a resistance to future planning, especially in situations where the levels of anxiety and insecurity about day-to-day affairs were heightened, as in the case of Stefka from Bulgaria who refused to plan for the future. As she put it:

“No, I can't. Because sometimes I think that this and that will happen in such a way. And then what comes is different. So now first I'll see what's coming and then I will say I will do that, that or the other, and whatever doesn't happen, I'll just let it be!” [MET112\_Stefka]

### *2.6. Insistence on established gender roles*

As creating a family seems to be a constant element of future plans, gender roles become a signifier of the “things to come”. Interviewees often stress that gender roles have changed because of the conditions of migration. Arranged marriages are no longer the rule. Men as well as women seem to believe that migration and life in Greece are changing gender roles, mostly those of women. What is interesting in terms of future plans is that most migrants seem to prefer to marry people from their own community. Personal relationships with Greeks are considered dangerous since there is a general understanding that such a marriage would not be easily accepted by the Greek side of the family and thus the union could be a source of problems, anxiety and feelings of rejection and discrimination. Although there are many references to relationships—mostly with Greek women—future planning of families does not include Greeks.

### *2.7. Racism: “The hate will be forever”*

Many interviewees, especially Albanians, recognize that racial hate is a main characteristic in the relationship between Greeks and migrants. As Natassa puts it:

“There shouldn't be so much hate. We also have lots of racism. We hate you and you are racist towards us. We are not perfect either, I admit it. We

also have lots of hate, but you have lots of racism. This shouldn't be like that. We all eat and talk together, we have friendships and relationships... but even for minor reasons, we turn our backs to each other...It's a pity... And the state is to blame. More than anything else...that is what I think... this has influenced me a lot." [MET101,102\_Natassa]

As far as the future is concerned, there is a general understanding that racism will not disappear within their lifetime.

"- Don't you think that things are bit better now?  
- No matter the improvement, to a great extent hate will remain...maybe for the children of my children it will go away, but for as long as we are here, hate will exist" [MET101,102\_Natassa]

The persistence of racism is part of the migrant horizon of expectations, conditioning many other aspects of future plans, visions, desires, and projections.

### 3. AFFECTIVE POLITICS OF HOPE

The analysis of the emergent horizon of expectations indicates that the migrant field of cultural politics is complex, contradictory, and dynamic. This understanding is a necessary condition for the undermining of an unproductive concept of integration that, for many decades, has defined the research as well as the policies that concern the history of migrations in the western world. As this preliminary approach has shown, the supposed integration of foreign migrants in Greek society—a prominent argument used by natives—co-exists with a general sense of insecurity, a new structure of feeling that does not allow migrants to envision their future in Greece.

It is important here to stress that these interviews were conducted in the period prior to the outbreak of the Greek fiscal crisis. In fact, the 2004–2007 period was one of post-Olympic Games national pride, self-confidence, and optimism. Yet, in the same period the migrant sphere of cultural politics was marked by a generalized insecurity and inability to envision a satisfying and safe future in Greece. The interviews are in a sense prophetic as they indicate that, seen from the migrant point of view, the social fabric of Greek society appeared fragile and untrustworthy.

The migrant horizon of expectations in Greece was marked by a general feeling of insecurity. Indeed, insecurity has become a widespread form of governance in contemporary post-industrial societies. In the era of neo-liberalism, precarity has become a determining condition of contemporary

life, an administrative logic that “wants no reduction, no end to inequality, because it necessarily toys with hierarchical differences and governs on the basis of them” (Lorey, 2010). Already in the period of Greek national self-confidence and prosperity, precarity had become an organizing political concept for migrants in Greece as it regulated the politics of hope within the migrant cultural sphere (Neilson, 2008).

The future that the migrants envisioned was determined by how they conceived their position within Greek society. What they described was not a forward-looking, progressive future, as it did not entail the vision of a change in social relations and the subject’s position within them. It was not a conservative future either, as it did not include the return to a supposedly lost Eden.<sup>3</sup> Quite differently, the migrants’ horizon of expectations uncannily foresaw many of the elements of the crisis that native Greek society is experiencing today. The politics of hope that emerges in the interviews is different from classic migrant narratives of the future in previous historical periods. Contemporary migrant visions of the future are not grounded on the idea of progress and do not idealize life and social structures in the country of reception as more advanced in relation to the home country. Migration is not seen as a form of liberation from the constraints of life in the homeland. The interviewees’ vision of the future presents a rupture with well-known modernist narratives of dislocation, liberation, and progress in the new land.

Based on an articulate realization and acceptance of one’s own insecurity, the emergent horizon of expectations indicates that the subjects have responded to precarity through a retreat to the affective world of relationships, real or imaginary friendships, everyday life dignity, self-respect, and fellow recognition, etc. Feelings of nostalgia, despair, and loneliness mark this precarious politics of hope which often develops into an almost regressive politics of self, a politics of affective resistance (Clough, 2007).

Recent research has started to address the impact of precarity on subjectivity. Regression is often highlighted as a main process through which subjectivity responds to the emerging conditions of generalized subjectivity (Nilges, 2008). This regression has two main characteristics. Firstly, it often entails a nostalgic longing for previous historical eras (i.e., an idealization of a paternalistic conceptualization of Fordist state and labor politics, or of a pre-migration, pre-1989 socialist regime in the case of mi-

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3. On the difference between progressive and conservative visions of the future, see Mannheim, 1936.

grants from Eastern Europe). Secondly, gendering is recognized as a major field of negotiation in the process of precarious subjectivity formation. Seen from this perspective, gender does not only operate as an analytical concept or a research parameter, but as a powerful nexus around which social relations, the understanding of heritage, and the politics of hope are articulated.

More targeted research is needed in order to perceive and analyze the currently emerging politics of precarious subjectivity. Vacillating between regression and affective resistance, migrant subjectivity is currently transformed under the pressure exercised by the policies of deregulation, austerity, and the neoliberal adjustment of social relations. We need more knowledge, critical analysis and comparative cross-European exploration of the ways in which migrants conceptualize their future as well as the future of their countries of origin, new destinations, and Europe. The exploration of this theme is vital at the level of academic research as well as that of policy making.

Since the interviews presented in this paper were gathered, much has changed in the cultural politics of migration in Greece. Many migrants from Eastern Europe and the Balkans have been forced by the fiscal crisis to leave Greece. New populations from the Middle East, and South and South-East Asia have arrived in the country in dramatically increasing numbers. Seeking a passage to Europe, these people are in fact trapped in a country that is financially devastated, socially eroded and culturally perplexed. Gathering in the decaying historical centre of Athens and other cities, men, women and children experience the harshest form of precarious existence, caught in the limbo of Europe's contemporary economic crisis, cultural turbulence and political devolution. As Greece is currently being transformed into a European buffer zone, one cannot not wonder if there is any sensible—or justifiable—way in which the “wretched of the earth” can be perturbed from pursuing by any possible means the fulfilment of desires, expectations, and hopes for safer and more liveable future. Their horizon of expectations needs to be accounted for if we are to attempt to envision a post-catastrophic future for Europe and the peoples who inhabit it.

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